

## Spiritual Disciplines Series: Fasting

You learn something new every day! WRCoB 8.9.20

A few years ago, my wife, Barbara, and I were going through an exercise in saving money. We had the FiOS “triple play”. This is Verizon’s cable, phone, and internet service. For the purpose of saving money, we decided to drop the cable and phone service. We kept the Internet service and picked up Netflix for our TV watching. We both carry cell phones, so we don’t need the land line. We watch some TV, but not much, so we decided to subscribe to Netflix. And of course we kept Internet. This simple change cost half of what we were paying and it met our needs.

Our motivation in this exercise was to save money. But we actually received a surprise bonus in this change. When we watch network or cable TV, you also get commercials. Commercials are how broadcasters make their money. What you don’t realize is how intrusive commercials are to your psychological health. I’m not one to pay much attention to commercials, but about a month after we ditched our cable service (which includes commercials) I lost my desire to purchase ANYTHING. Even when I wasn’t paying attention, commercials were filling my mind with messages to buy things I didn’t need or even WANT.

Without even knowing it, I was filling my mind with messages that dictated my desires and undoubtedly, my behavior. How many things that you have bought throughout your life were actually “essential” and how many things were suggestions from the manufacturer? While it may be impossible to answer, a little reflection can reveal a lot.

The first 3 spiritual disciplines we looked at so far, are meditation, prayer and fasting. When we meditate, we focus on being present with God. When we pray, we communicate with God. When we fast, we create a hunger for God.

The next discipline and the last of the “Inward disciplines” is “study”. The purpose of practicing spiritual disciplines is a total transformation of the person. Actually, becoming the person we were created to be. We are aiming to replace our old destructive habits of thought with new life-giving habits.

The first 3 disciplines, all deal with connecting with God. Study, however, as Paul puts it, is “transforming ourselves, through the renewal of our minds.”

In Philippians 4:8, Paul writes, “**Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.**”

Why should we think on these things? What will that actually do for us?

As in my opening story, I did not think on those messages that were filling my mind, how much more powerful would it have been if I did?

I'll repeat something Pastor Dave read in a previous message. This is from the Chinese philosopher, Lao Tzu:

*Watch your thoughts, they become words  
watch your words, they become actions  
watch your actions, they become habits  
watch your habits, they become character  
watch your character, for it becomes your destiny.*

It all begins with your thoughts.

So focus your thoughts on:

**things that are true,**

**things that are honorable,**

**things that are just,**

**things that are pure,**

**things that are pleasing,**

**things that are commendable,**

**things that are excellent and**

**things worthy of praise.**

Paul is telling us, "Be intentional about what you are filling your mind with!" Fill it with GOOD things. Don't fill it with the BAD or WORTHLESS. You become what you focus on.

Focusing on THESE things will renew your mind and it will transform YOU!

In 2 Timothy 3:16-17, Paul writes

<sup>16</sup>All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, <sup>17</sup>so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.

From this, it's not much of a leap to say that Paul believed the scriptures ARE the very things we should be filling our minds with.

So how do we come to understand this vast amount of material we call the "Bible"? We study it.

We intentionally sit down and study. Of course we can't cover the entire Bible in a few days. When you were in high school or college, did you study a textbook in a single sitting?

Perhaps if you were a procrastinator and waited until the night before the final exam you did. But even then did you understand the material when you got done, or did you just remember enough to pass the test?

How we conduct ourselves in life is based on the thoughts we have and the decisions we make. As Christians, we try to live our lives according to our faith. But how can you know what your faith requires if you never study the very guidebook TO that faith?

There's a very popular phrase in Christian circles. WWJD - What would Jesus do?

This phrase is supposed to remind us to act just like Jesus in every situation.

So let me ask this question, how do you know what Jesus would do, if you never study what he did?

If the extent of your knowledge is what you hear on Sunday mornings in a sermon, there is probably a lot you don't know. A preacher's job is to tell you the good news of how God sent Jesus into the world to redeem us from our sins. How Jesus treated others. Some of God's expectations of us. And all these things are VERY important to know.

But a question needs to be asked about every sermon you listen to:

How do I know the preacher is correct? Sure I trust them to teach correctly, but how do I know for sure?

The only way I know to be sure, is to study it for myself. The preacher's words are very helpful and useful to gain understanding or perspective, but what does God want YOU to gain from the scripture?

When I am given the opportunity to preach, like today, I take it VERY seriously. I do my best to relay my understanding in my message as clearly and as correctly as possible. But don't

simply believe what I say because I do my best. Look it up for yourself and make sure I am not giving you false information! Or maybe it's not "false" information, but I am speaking through MY filters, and MY experience, NOT yours! What I say can fill out your understanding of the scripture, but it should not BE your understanding.

4 pieces to study:

1. Repetition
2. Concentration
3. Comprehension
4. Reflection

Let's look at each of these in more detail.

First is repetition.

Repetition is simply repeating something over and over ingraining it into your mind. The scientific name for this, "psycho cybernetics".

In one form of practice, it is the repeating of a phrase, over and over, telling your brain a specific message. For example, "I can't lose weight". Well, yes you can. It may be difficult for you, but you can. But some of us repeat this message, over and over, to ourselves. It doesn't even matter if you believe what you are saying. By repeating it day after day, your brain will take that message into your subconscious and you will begin to act it out in ways to support that message. So in this case, you may not change your diet, because you can't lose weight anyway. You won't exercise because you can't lose weight anyhow. You begin to sabotage everything you do, without even realizing it.

What if you told yourself "You CAN lose weight"? Keep repeating it to yourself, day after day. Your mind will begin to believe it and you will begin to change your actions that prevent you from losing weight.

I'm not here to tell you how to lose weight. This is just one example of how filling our minds with messages, good or bad, changes who we are and how we behave.

We see another practice of this in Jewish culture. During Passover, which marks the freeing of Jewish slaves from Egypt and travelling to the Promised Land, every family tells the story of "the Passover". By telling it over and over, it not only keeps the history from being forgotten, it

continuously reminds Jews of their special standing with God, and it build self-esteem and confidence.

The 3<sup>rd</sup> way we see this practiced is in commercials on radio or TV. Repeating the same message over and over gets into our subconscious and we begin acting out behaviors to support the message. We tend to buy things we don't need or even want, but we believe we should have them anyway. We don't even know why, we just do it.

All this said, **repetition**, such as reading the same scripture passage over and over, helps us begin acting out what it tells us.

The second piece in studying is "concentration".

In our society, we seem to fear silence. So we always have music playing, or the TV on "just for noise". At least that's what we tell ourselves. Many students will claim that they study better with music playing, though science disputes that claim. While music can improve your mood which makes studying easier, retention of material normally suffers.

Silence is the best environment to improve concentration. Being able to concentrate on what is being studied increases your efficiency of this task. Any other stimuli will distract our concentration.

If silence is new to you, it can be a distraction in itself. But with a little repetition and practice it will quickly become a good friend.

The third piece is "comprehension".

All of us have the experience of reading something over and over, and suddenly, its meaning just jumps out at us. Sort of this, "ah-ha" moment.

Too many people think they understand what they read, simply because they read it, and remember it. But remembering the words, versus understanding what the words mean are 2 completely different things. We may have to study the same thing many times before we actually comprehend it.

The final piece is “reflection”.

“Comprehension” defines **what** we are studying, but “reflection” defines the **significance** of what we are studying. How does what I just came to understand apply to the reality I live in?

Introverts have this one the easiest. AS an introvert, our basic job IS “reflection”. We are designed for it. On the other hand, extroverts will often struggle with this. So, if you are an extrovert, you may have to work at this one, but the goal is to become who God created you to be. God knows you may have to struggle, but the outcome is transformation. Being an extrovert makes other things easy for you, this just isn’t one of them.

Reflection is where all the meaning of your study will make sense. It will change your life.

So while those things are “pieces” of study, what are the actual steps to studying? Many people think that because they know how to “read”, they know how to “study”. But these things are not the same. Reading only skims the surface of material. Studying digs in deep.

So let’s look at the steps to studying, for today, the Bible specifically, keeping in mind the 4 pieces of study we just looked at.

The methodology to studying comes in 3 steps.

1. Read it for understanding, what is the author saying?
2. Read it for interpretation, what does the author actually mean?
3. Read it for evaluation, what does it mean for ME?

Most of us want to do the 3<sup>rd</sup> reading first. We read the passage and try to determine what it means for me right away. Why waste our time on the other two? But how do you know what it means for you, if you don’t know what the author is saying, or specifically what the author means by what they say?

So on reading of the passage, “Love your neighbor as yourself”, we can jump straight to the 3<sup>rd</sup> reading (what does it mean for me) and say, for me it means “treat others the way you want to be treated.” Seems simple enough.

So how do you want to be treated?

Well, I want people to be nice to me. I don't want them to say mean things. If I need help, I want them to help me. So I will treat people in this way.

And on the surface it seems to be how we should behave around each other.

So let's approach this same passage and actually "study" it from a 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> reading.

First, what is the author saying? As I read it, I am commanded to show the same love to others as I show to myself. Simple enough.

Second, what does the author mean? This takes a little more thought. As I read it, I believe the author is saying that I need to think about what does it mean to love myself first?

So, how do I love myself?

To me, loving myself means that I must be willing to face the parts of me I don't like. I accept that those parts are there and I am responsible for them. I understand that I am on a journey, and while I have not yet arrived, I see myself as having the potential to be a better person. I don't dismiss myself when I fail, but hold myself accountable to do better next time. I accept my failures, but don't excuse them. I forgive myself when I mess up.

In the 3<sup>rd</sup> reading, what does this mean for me?

To love my neighbor this same way, I see these same failures as in myself, but also the same potential, and accept THEM, WITH their faults. I don't dismiss them because they don't measure up to some bar, whether I do or not. I accept them, knowing they will mess up again. Not make excuses for their failures, but hold them accountable acknowledging that I am no better. It's actually less about behavior, and more about the other person as a whole. We can continue on with how does this fuller understanding get acted out, but I'm not here to do that today.

In studying the scripture this way, we arrive at a far deeper meaning to what Jesus is telling us. Not only will our behavior towards others improve, but our entire outlook and attitude will improve as well. Without the first 2 readings, we may change our actions or our behavior, but we don't really change ourselves.

**Acting** righteous, and **being** righteous are 2 completely different things. We can all **ACT** like a good person and do the right things, but transformation is required to **BE** a good person. THEN acting like a good person is no longer an **ACT**.

Studying the scriptures is how we “renew our minds and be transformed”, as Paul would say.

I challenge every one of us to take the journey to transformation.

If you haven't started that journey yet, take the first step. Begin your study.

If you have already begun, continue on, perhaps even step up your pace.

God's desire is that we **ALL** become the people we were created to be.

**Will you do your part?**