

FAST

Week #2 of a 6-Week Easter Series, "Prepare the Way"

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So a fourth grader celebrated his birthday on crutches, so he couldn't carry all the cupcakes in to celebrate with his classmates. His mom asked his sixth-grade brother, Noah, to help his brother carry in the cupcakes. And Noah said, *"I could; but I prefer not to."* And then the mom thought it was a good teaching moment, and so she said to Noah, *"What would Jesus do?"* And Noah said, *"Jesus would heal him so he could carry his own cupcakes."* [Congregation laughs]

So how many people love cupcakes and love food? Just love food? How many people love food? Italian food; Chinese food; Mexican food -- we just love food! And how many people love fasting? How many ... [Congregation laughs] Not quite as many hands go up! How many people grew up in a fast where they gave up something for Lent? Anybody? Most people, it was meat. Was it? Yeah; in my house -- I was one of 10 kids -- my mom picked meat. Every year! And I was a little carnivore; I loved meat. A meal was not a meal without meat. So I would whine and complain about not eating meat.

"All my friends aren't doing it!" "Doesn't matter; we're doing it." And so I would make suggestions like, *"Mom, why don't we give up broccoli or Brussel sprouts?"* [Congregation laughs] And one year I said, *"Hey, Mom, I'm giving up Lent for Lent; is that okay?"* [Congregation laughs]

And so sometimes we act like we're being deprived when we have to give something up. You know, like, it was some onerous task. And I think sometimes in our lives, when we have to let something go or give something up, that sometimes we have a hard time with that. It can feel like a difficult or challenging experience. We're not always joyful about it, even though it's a good thing.

We're in the second week of our Lenten series called "Prepare the Way." Lent is a season of spiritual preparation, marking the 40 days of fasting and prayer that Jesus went through to prepare himself for his ministry and his miraculous work. Those 40 days really represent the preparation we all need to create a spiritual foundation upon which we can have a breakthrough. That we can come forth with a greater version of ourselves and do something more amazing in our lives.

Last week we looked at the first practice of preparation, and that was to **"RETREAT."** And just to step back and pull back from life and the busy-ness and craziness to reflect; to renew; to recharge; to replenish ourselves. That when we retreat, it gives us the opportunity to create space and quiet. It gives us the opportunity to connect to our breath; connect to ourselves and our spirit; and it gives us the opportunity to be willing. To let go and be willing to do God's will.

Today we're going to look at the second practice to prepare ourselves for a breakthrough, and that is to **"FAST,"** which is to abstain from food or drink for a particular period. You know, the Bible has over 40 references of fasting and prayer: Moses; Jesus; Elijah; King David; Daniel; Ezra. I mean, it's a lot. And in every single case, everyone had a breakthrough. They "came forth" as a better version of themselves, with greater insight or wisdom or understanding or clarity on their guidance from God. They came forth as better leaders; better individuals.

Prayer and fasting is a spiritual practice that helps take us to our next spiritual level and to prepare us for a breakthrough or for something greater to come through us.

The Book of Matthew, Chapter 6, Verse 16 to 18 says ... Jesus says, *"Whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your hands, so*

that your fasting may not be seen by others, but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father will reward you."

And so what it's saying is: Fasting isn't easy, but we lose its benefit and the impact and the spiritual value of it when we moan and whine and complain as we move through it. And trying to show others what kind of sacrifice we're making; that does not give us the spiritual benefit. It is only when it becomes a personal mission and practice -- when we fully invest our heart and our spirit into what a valuable and important practice it is for us and our spiritual life -- that we can truly gain the benefits and value.

I read an article by Beth Janes and it was called "Eight Ways to Become a Happier You." And there was all kinds of research and experts in positive psychology. And they studied what makes people happy; what helps people reach their potential and live more fulfilling lives. They came up with eight traits. And the first trait ... self-control. Self-discipline. I know; I was disappointed, too. [Congregation laughs] You mean work?

And they did a study with college students. And they found that the ones who scored highest in self-discipline and self-control not only had the higher grades, but less depression; less anxiety; stronger social bonds; greater self-esteem; and they had fewer struggles with food.

In 2 Timothy, Chapter 1, Verse 7, it says this: *"God has not given us a spirit of fear and timidity, but a spirit of power, love and self-discipline."*

Self-discipline sounds like it's scary and it's hard; it's uncomfortable; it's not fun. But the truth is: It's empowering. It is, in fact, liberating. And it is the course and path if we truly want a breakthrough in our lives. It is truly the course and the path if we want to fulfill our purpose and our destiny.

Fasting gives us spiritual strength. It helps us focus. And it makes us more resistant to temptation. You know, when we abstain from food -- when we fast -- it's not so much about what we're giving up than what we're making room for. That's what it really is about.

Today I want to use the practice and, really, the principle behind fasting to show what we can do to have a breakthrough in our own lives, and to prepare ourselves spiritually for something greater.

So the first one is: We'll talk about **A FOOD FAST**. We love food! We love food! I know for me, you go to a restaurant, and I'm eating, and I was like, *"No; bring more! Bring more!"* I mean, if I ate at McDonald's, I'd be super-sizing it. [Congregation laughs] I'd be going for the Grand Slam, extra-large, super-deluxe all the time!

And the unfortunate thing is: Sometimes we use food, not just for fuel, but sometimes for comfort. Sometimes we self-medicate. Sometimes we stress-eat. I know I've stress-eaten before. And the unfortunate thing about this is that, in our country, I read an article and it says that overeating is an epidemic. That we don't just eat how much we need, we eat to excess, and it's not healthy and good for our bodies.

Do you know that when you eat a heavy meal, 65% of the body's total energy goes toward digesting that. You know, sometimes fasting is a good thing just to give our body a break. Just to help it be more efficient and be more positive in its use of energy. It helps us heal and recuperate and detox and repair.

And the other thing about fasting is: It really frees up some energy. It fills up physical energy and emotional energy and spiritual energy, as well. And we can use that energy as we make room and create more energy to go deeper in our meditations; to go deeper in our time of prayer.

I've mentioned several times about five or six years ago I did a 10-day silent retreat. And there was no speaking. There was no music; no writing; no reading; no exercising. It was just you and meditation time. And one of the instructions was that, for whatever amount you eat, eat only 50% of what you normally eat. So we had three vegetarian meals a day, and they recommended that you eat half of what you normally eat. For the people who had done it before, they only got two meals and a cup of tea for dinner. And I'll tell you, I don't feel any loss of energy or anything. In fact, I felt lighter; I felt clearer; I felt more focused in my prayer time and my intention time.

You know, there are all kinds of different ways to fast. There's intermittent fasting. I know some people who fast only on Tuesdays; one day a week; or you can go for five days ... Whatever way it works, it's really powerful. The clarity of our health -- it's cleansing; it's purifying; it helps our metabolism; reduces inflammation; our blood pressure. I mean, you could just go on and on about it. There are incredible benefits. And it frees up energy; it increases our energy, in fact.

And so fasting helps us with our self-control; self-discipline; and particularly self-mastery. And it helps us deepen our connection and our practice and our experience of God and brings forth a better life.

I invite every single one of us in the next week to figure out what is a practice of fasting that will work for us. Even if we just say, *"I'll reduce the amount I eat by 30%."* Just less food in us will actually give us more energy and help us to be more focused and go deeper in our connection and meditation with God.

The second thing we're going to talk about fasting is **A NEGATIVITY FAST**: fasting from negativity; abstaining from negativity.

Now, if I said to you, *"Which one do you think is going to be harder? Fasting from food or fasting from negativity?"*, how many would say negativity would be harder? Okay. And so I don't think ... I think every one of us thinks we're positive. And I would agree with this to a certain extent. But the thing is, we're probably more saturated in negativity and judgement and fear and criticism and worry than we sometimes let ourselves believe.

So here's an interesting thing. Every one of us is born with a negativity bias. The brain is hardwired to notice the negative. Because it's a survival thing. It's to check out: Is there trouble? Is there danger? So our brains naturally will weight negative experiences more than positive ones. So if you want to kind of get even, it isn't like one negative one and one positive. You actually have to do more positives, because we already start with a negativity bias. And then you add on what we do, and it makes it a little bit more fun.

So our tendency towards negativity creates neuropathways that create thought patterns. And they get triggered; and they get triggered; and they get triggered. Well, all those negative thoughts -- as you know, the power of our mind and thoughts affect our lives. So when we're thinking over and over negative thoughts, it has an influence on our level of peace and our health and relationships and happiness.

Now, the good news is that we can also develop more positive patterns in us, as well. And what we need to do is: Start by catching ourselves every time we get into one of those little spiraling things of negativity and just interrupt it. And sometimes, like, let's say we're beating ourselves up because we messed up and did something wrong. Sometimes, instead of just beating ourselves up about how bad we are, we can just say, *"You know; I did my best."* Talking to ourselves. *"I did my best. I'm going to learn from this. Next time I will do better."*

Some people do this; they hear themselves say something negative and they'll say, *"Cancel, cancel, cancel!"* Anybody ever have that experience? *"Cancel, cancel!"* So we do the cancel and then we say something. Now, one line I use a lot for myself is, *"This is not true."* Because a lot of things I tell myself

are not true! [Congregation laughs] They're stories! They're not real. You know, I always say that every human being engages in M-S-U: Making Stuff Up. [Congregation laughs] I don't always say "stuff"; I use another word. But I think you get my point. [Congregation laughs]

The great Mark Twain said, *"I've had a lot of worries in my life, most of which never happened."* Isn't that true? I mean, it is amazing, the negativity! We start with the bias and then our own stories and "making stuff up" creates more negativity than we realize.

So what we need to do is notice and catch ourselves, and come up with a phrase or line that works for you. So if you mess up: *"Well, I did my best."* Or things aren't going well: *"Everything will work out and be just fine."* You've got to find what works for you. Sometimes just saying, *"I'm a child of God and all is well"* or *"God means this for good."* Come up with a line or two that'll help you -- when you catch yourself -- to give yourself that one line. You know, to use it kind of like your anchor.

And so, the thing is: The more we can cut and interrupt those cycles of negativity, those pathways will get weakened. And then the positive ones will get stronger. And over time, the default will be more positive than the negative. I know it sounds simplistic, but this is powerful and it's important stuff. Because what we hold in our minds and our thoughts absolutely affects all aspects of our lives.

So if we want to fast from negativity, we need to pay attention to what we're saying about ourselves; what we're saying about others; and what we're saying about our lives. Because thoughts build momentum. You ever been negative, and you start whining about every single thing? And you're just on the road of "awfulizing" everything? Well, the same thing can happen. We can build positive momentum with our thoughts with practice, practice, practice.

So another important thing to help us have a negativity fast is to think of something you're grateful for. Then you can infuse that and incorporate that. And now, we can think, *"I'm happy in my life today."* *"I'm happy the sun is shining."* Or, *"I have a wonderful job."* *"I have great friends."*

It's good to think it, but it's better to think it and feel it. So think, *"I'm happy I'm alive today."* [Closes eyes and breathes in deeply] And feel grateful. *"I'm happy I have a wonderful house."* [Closes eyes and breathes in deeply] And feel grateful. *"I'm happy I have wonderful friends,"* and feel grateful for it. To think it is one thing; to think and feel it will deepen a level of positivity and extricate and dissolve the negativity.

So the negative fast looks like this: Catch yourself and interrupt any negative pattern; infuse some positive self-talk -- *"Everything is going to be okay; this is not true"*; and then, finally, think of something that you appreciate and are grateful for.

So the third fast practice is to have **A CLUTTER FAST**. Anybody got any clutter in their house? [Congregation laughs] Anybody have, like, a drawer or a closet or a garage that is so packed you are scared to even go there or open it? Anybody have one of those? Anybody got, like, a drawer that has a bag full of bags? [Congregation laughs] Or anybody have, like, some clothes or gym equipment or furniture that you never use, but you don't give it away? It's just still stuck in your house.

It is amazing how we hold on to stuff. It is amazing! Do you know one of the leading industries in this country is storage? *"Let's store our stuff!"* If you think of stuff as energy, we're storing and blocking and holding a lot of energy.

Catherine Ponder said, *"Clinging to the old prevents us from attracting the new."*

A father bought his daughter this new little piggy bank to teach her the value and importance of saving and building wealth. And the little girl ran around the house. And anytime she saw some loose change, she'd put it in. And then a few days later, the father brought home two new silver dollars and gave it to

her. And she went into her room and came back crying, and said, *"Daddy, it doesn't fit! It can't go in there!"* And so besides the nickels and dimes and pennies and quarters, the father noticed that there were washers and paper clips and buttons and toothpicks. And they were all so crammed into the space that she wasn't able to have the money in there, because all the other junk was blocking the way.

And it sounds silly, but we do that with our lives. We cram our calendars; we're so busy. I mean, everything! Our thoughts are crammed; our lives are crammed with so much stuff! And it just blocks the flow. It just blocks the feeling of happiness; blocks the opportunity for new ideas; new opportunities; new experiences; new relationships in our lives.

In his book, *Straight Talk ...* Everybody know Steve Harvey, the comedian and I think he's the host of "Family Feud"? He tells the story about when he was young; he wanted a new car. And his old car had actually died, but he loved it so much that he kept it on blocks in the driveway. And he was complaining to his mom that things weren't working out in him getting a new car. It had been one thing after the other. And then his mom said to him, *"Steve, get rid of the old car! It's not serving you; it's actually blocking you from getting a new car. So just let it go and open yourself to a new blessing."* He got rid of the car and things fell into place for him to get a new car.

So my question is: Where in your life are you feeling cluttered? Where in your life are things a little too crammed up? What are you holding on to? And what in your life is it time to let go? What area in your life do you need to create more open space and give some things away? Because it's an important thing!

Sometimes we think in life: Life gets better with addition -- add more; get more; want more. But sometimes it's subtraction. Life actually gets better by letting go; by releasing; by freeing ourselves; by simplifying.

You know, we all want better lives and we absolutely all deserve it. But we need to get to the place where we realize self-discipline, self-control and self-mastery really is part of the deal. Fasting, of course, doesn't sound like fun. But when you realize it's a discipline that's going to change and transform my life; help me to have a fuller and more abundant and joyful and meaningful life, then it seems like it should be more joyful.

A joyful discipline is what I think we need to apply in our lives. To me, fasting -- the abstaining of food; the abstaining from negativity; the abstaining from building clutter -- I really believe is a powerful transformational tool I think we should all use.

So this week utilize the second practice for freeing energy and making room, and to prepare us for a breakthrough. And that is: to **FAST**.

God bless you all!

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