

*Fast, Pray, Give*  
Lessons: Matthew 6:1-20

So, the season of Lent begins – forty days between Ash Wednesday and Palm Sunday. It is the season when we think about the turn in the journey that Jesus takes toward Jerusalem. He knows that he will face opposition and possible defeat. But he also knows that he called to faithfulness more than to results. Lent is the time when we decide to turn into the road with Jesus and make it our road of faithfulness – to follow Jesus’ example and be called to faithfulness more than to results. Lent is “back to basics” – back to the heart of Christ’s commitment to us that costs him dearly, and searching the heart of our commitment to Christ and ask what cost we are willing to pay in the following.

Lent always reminds me of a T-shirt my daughter came home wearing from Mo Ranch “Mid-Winter” Youth weekend. It said, “The main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing.” Lent is the season where we move toward the main thing. As followers, we have no choice.

What is “the main thing” for us Christians? Jesus is God with us. He lived to show us who God is, and who we can become. The Evil in us and in the world killed Jesus, because Evil always wants to put an end to his goodness; and it wants to kill us, too.

God raised Jesus from the dead to defeat Evil - to show us that sin and death have less power than God and love. Resurrection shows us who Jesus still is who we will become – IF we trust him and WHEN we try to live like him.

We follow Jesus’ journey to Jerusalem and a cross so that we see just how much love and power God has to overcome the evil in us and in the world. By looking at who Jesus was in that journey – what he did in the face of Evil, how he kept faith and strength – we see HOW we become who God wants us to become. We become like Jesus by doing Jesus-things.

Today, Jesus tells us three practices in a Spiritual Fitness Program that will “fit us for life in his kingdom,” that will increase the rule of his love in our living, that will make us more like him. That is the goal: to be more like Jesus in our living. That is the main thing: In fact, when it comes to the “Christian life” – the life that is Christian – that is the ONLY thing.

We are here to worship, and the worship we give to God is nothing less that our lives in all our evil to become more like his life in all his love and goodness. It’s as basic as scriptures we hear all the time with the Prayer of Confession:

“If we confess our sins, God will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all living that is not Christ’s living.”

“If any are in Christ, there is a new creation. The old life is dead and gone; the new life is all new.”

What are the three things we need to practice to get fit for the new life? All three of them are practices that do not make sense, that are contradictory to our old life. All three of these **replace**

an old, bad habit with a new practice that God wants us to do repeatedly until we make a new, good habit and adds up to a new life.

*FAST – The first practice that can become a good habit in forty days.*

Fasting is not playing games – “not eating fish on Friday” or “giving up something I don’t like anyway.” There is no miracle diet that will get you in shape without you shaping up. There is no change without some changing.

Fasting is about changing eating habits. It is about giving our bodies a rest from the work of handling what we put in them. And more than that, fasting is about changing our eating habits to putting good food in them so that we can be good. Jesus says, “Fast. Quit putting stuff in your body that hurts you, and focus on being good to your body so that your body can love and work God better and longer.”

Fasting is about making it a regular habit to be good to your body.

WE – and I mean me – do not love God with all our heart when we do things that are bad for our hearts. When we live on “junk” food, we turn ourselves into junk. When we eat too much, drink too much, smoke, never exercise ... we wind up in bad shape – physically, emotionally and spiritually. We like ourselves less than God loves us.

Have you noticed how crazy we become when we want to keep doing things that we know are bad for us? We fool ourselves into thinking that God is some kind of co-dependent enabler for our bad habits. We use the “grace” of God as an excuse for bad habits - “Well, God loves me anyway.” Well, God looks the other way when I abuse the body God gave me. We must think God as crazy as we are.

“If we say we have no sin, we are just deceiving ourselves, and the truth is not in us.”

If we lie to ourselves and say we can’t stop abusing our bodies, then we are really saying that we don’t want God’s help or power to overcome our evil. A God who brings the dead back to life might have some real help for us when we try to stop what is making us sick or killing us. The truth is we don’t want the new life as badly as we want to hurt ourselves and Christ’s life within us. Use Lent as a “kick-start”: forty days is enough time to concentrate on ending a bad habit by replacing it with a good habit.

Lent is a time when we look at our own following and our own steps in the road to Jerusalem with Jesus. We cannot improve by looking at someone else’s progress or problems. I have looked at my life and habits this week. I’m tired of being tired and not breathing well. It is hurting me. I have not “fasted” to change the focus and do what is good for me. In Lent, I’m going to focus on being good to my body. I’m going to develop a different habit through the season and see what happens. I’m guessing that by Holy Week, I won’t be all holy, but I will be a lot better off physically than I have been. I’ll be able to serve Christ better than I have, and I’ll be able to serve you better than I have.

You can help me. Encourage some new habits in me. Don’t play co-dependent enabler by encouraging my bad habits. Don’t force those chocolate chip cookies on me. Hold me accountable to a promise I am making to you and to God.

Lent is time for each of us to focus on our own following and our own failing. I don't know what you might pick for a problem that can be helped by a fast and some change. If you want to do something, I'll be your cheerleader. I'll help you every way I can. I'll even pray for you in secret.

*PRAY. The second practice that can become a good habit in 40 days.*

Prayer is another habit that only works when we do it. I can't imagine how many books there are on prayer, and I am guessing there are a lot of people who have spent more time reading books about prayer than time actually praying.

Prayer is as big a thing as realizing that ALL our talking is something God is listening to... (There's a scary thought.) Prayer is as focused a thing as listening to the talking that God is trying to say to us.

I had a friend for a time named Ben Campbell Johnson. He is literally an expert on praying, because he has spent a lot of time learning to pray. He says that God is always speaking to us. God is the only one who can listen and speak at the same time. We just can't hear God most of the time, because we are always talking. We can't talk and listen at the same time. Ben suggests that we give God equal time by being quiet long enough to recognize God's speaking. God will keep telling us something we need to hear until we recognize it.

So maybe prayer is the habit of listening until we are "tuned." We pay attention to God's presence and voice around us, and then God can "direct our ways." Of course, that can be dangerous, because God may point us in some different ways. God might even give us encouragement and support with something like that bad habit we are trying to fast into a good habit?

Look how simple praying really is. Jesus gives us real help here. He doesn't just tell us to pray; he tells us HOW. Jesus gives us this short prayer that is really a ONE point prayer: "As in heaven, so on earth." The way it is with you, O God – make it the way with us.

God, make the world and my life as holy as you are.  
Make the your rule of love come  
May your will be done on earth (and in my life), not just in heaven.  
Give us all the food we need each day – no less and no more.  
Do not bring us to the times of trial.  
Keep us from evil – our there in the world and in ourselves.  
Everything is yours. We give it back to you.  
We live in your love, your power, your glory. Amen.

Notice that the prayer is all about making God's will our will, Christ's way our way, turning our old way and life into Christ's way and life, so that we look more like Christ and the world looks more like God wants it.

The prayer opens us up to listen, gives us God's direction for living: how God is working, what God is doing; how we can want what God wants and do what God does.

Prayer is NOT telling God all our troubles and telling God what God needs to do for us. Don't you think God already knows all that? Prayer is ASKING God what God wants, and listening to the ways that God ways we can help get it done.

*GIVE alms – the third practice that can become a good habit.*

This is the easiest practice, the one we can understand. We give a lot, and in a lot of directions. Jesus has a more particular kind of giving in mind. Giving *alms* was a “special offering” that everyone in Jesus’ time understood. It was not just tithes to the church, or additional offerings beyond that. Giving alms was giving to the poor. It was not an option. It was a duty.

Jesus was saying that giving to the real needs of the people who have nothing is good for us, too. We need to do more than just “count our blessings” and remember those who have too little. We need to meet their real needs instead of our imagined wants. Believe it or not, there are people who can't afford a storage unit and don't have a reason to own one. There are people who don't have a job and want one. There are people who don't have a house or a bed or a refrigerator to call their own.

We know about giving. We give to friends, and we give to ourselves all the time. As a spiritual practice, giving alms changes the direction of our giving. Jesus was just stating a fact: It really is better to give than to receive. The practice of giving alms is meant to change their situation because we change our situation. Giving alms means giving more than the leftovers of clothes we don't want anymore, or looking in the pantry for the food we have not used and can put in the box at the church. The spiritual practice of giving alms is making a habit of pulling the \$3 coupon for the Food Bank every time we check out at HEB, and realizing how little it adds to the total of our groceries.

This week, we look at pictures from Japan and realize they do not begin to show the devastation of lives and houses and work and play and safety and security. The tsunami is 100 times worse than Katrina. Something has to be done on a huge scale, too big for each of us. Governments could look at waste on lots of spending that is welfare for business or tax breaks for the rich or featherbeds for public servants, and turn them into alms for disaster victims or maybe even poor students in public schools whose best chance is a teacher in a classroom. People will more than they could ever spend could give alms to people with nothing to spend. People with three or four houses could sell an extra or two, and multiply them into houses for Japan relief this week. We can all think of something that someone else could do to change their lives by giving alms to the poor, so that they and the poor would be better of just like Jesus says.

But it's Lent. So it's not about anyone else and what they ought to do between now and resurrection. It is just about me, and you, and what Jesus is calling each of us to do as followers. Jesus is calling us to walk with him so that by losing our old lives we will have room for our new ones. Whether we have not-quite-enough to get by or we own the whole world, what have we gained if we lose the life Christ has given to us.

Love yourself for Lent. Give your old life away. Take on a new practice of fasting or praying or giving to the poor that will become a habit that changes the pattern of your life. Some things in the Bible are just too obvious: if we die with him we will be raised with him.