

Imagine a guy is out with a woman on a first date. You are sitting in a semi-crowded restaurant watching them have a conversation. Imagine that you are somehow able to know that during their conversation, he's subtly looking around at others, hoping that they admire how he looks. He's hoping they're jealous of who he's with. You can see that his attention has slowly started to fade from his date to those around him, and ultimately, himself. This isn't about her, but about how he is being perceived.

How would you feel about this guy? How would his date feel if this was discovered?

How often do we do things that some would deem as "selfless" when in reality there is quite a bit of selfishness in our actions? Maybe you've noticed this even as you pray? Have you ever prayed in a group and felt the need or burden to say something really smart or insightful so that people would think more of you? Who is the prayer actually for in this case? Have you ever prayed to God alone, but found that you "self-congratulate" for holy sounding or poetic words? Who are you praying for in this case? For some reason, we crave for approval and appearances even when it comes to our relationship with God. It's another show.

Matthew 6:5-7

"And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words..."

...When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to men that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you."

God isn't calling you into a relationship where you simply **do** things for Him all of the time. God is looking for a relationship that is an actual relationship. He wants to spend time with you, He wants to know you and you to know Him. And the disciplines He has given are there to help that process along. But when we do those things (communication, fasting, bible reading etc...) with the desire to impress someone else, or even feel impressive to ourselves, when we do those things for reasons **other** than investing in your relationship with God, it cheapens it, because it points our energy at ourselves. In a lot of ways, Christianity would be a lot easier if it was the practice of following rules and regulations. Those things are measurable and achievable. If that were the goal, it would make sense to pursue "bragging rights". But when there is a relationship involved, pursuing someone else's approval for your pursuit of God isn't unlike cheating...

Spend some time today with God where no one can observe. Feel no need to draw attention to your time or talk to anyone else about it. Additionally, try and only thank God for who He is, while praying for others. Not that it's a bad thing, but out of discipline, refuse to pray for yourself and see what happens. Spend your time pointing your energy away from you. Remember, relationships take work, particularly in the beginning. First dates can be especially awkward. But in the end, if you can lift up the other higher than yourself, they can change your life...

week six

Tuesday

The hope is that many (most?) in the Crosspointe community will step into the challenge to fix a time of prayer and fasting into their life. This will have daily, weekly and monthly connotations to it.

Spend sometime today getting familiar with the regularity with which the Bible speaks of fasting. Spend time reading how Anna "worshipped night and day, fasting and praying" at the Temple (Luke 2:37). John the Baptist taught his followers to fast (Mark 2:18). Jesus himself fasted for 40 days (Matthew 4:2). The church of Antioch fasted together before they sent Paul on his first mission trip (Acts 13:2) Paul and Barnabas spent time in prayer and fasting as they chose elders (Acts 14:23).

Then,

Figure out what the discipline of prayer and fasting would look like in your life. Start small if you'd like, and then let it grow into a full-grown discipline that's part of the pattern of your living.

Ask God now to help you creatively begin implementing a pattern this week, and invite anyone you follow Christ with (your LifeGroup, a Bible Study, etc) so they can help you (even join you!) along the way.

When you're the pastor, there's an unspoken expectation that you're always the designated pray-er, regardless of the event. Furthermore, expectations are high that it's going to be a 'great prayer'—one that moves people, inspires people, and draws all who hear it closer to Jesus. Frankly, that's a lot of pressure. And the temptation is to make it sound especially lofty and spiritual.

Jesus says, "And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full." (Matthew 6:5)

When I was much younger, I remember thinking how arrogant and off these particular hypocritical religious leaders must have been. Now though, while there's never a justification for it, I can definitely see where that temptation gets birthed and how it can warp into behavior that on this side of history just seems deplorable.

So how do you battle against that?

While there's no formula, here's a few things I try to remember and keep in front of me when I pray:

- 1) The prayer Jesus offers as a model or structure for prayer (traditionally known as the Lord's prayer) is only 4 sentences itself. So, while there's no pressure to make it short, there's no pressure to make it long either.
- 2) I try to be cautious about feeling the need to offer information about circumstances to God. He already knows. However, there are many times when I do feel the need to express how I feel about particular situations simply to vent or pour my heart out to my Father. That's an important part of building trust in any relationship. I simply try to not let it cross over into the information dump.
- 3) Spending time listening is critical. I think many of us can default to this mindset of, "when I'm done talking, I'm done praying." But from my experience, listening is where intimacy, and challenge, and inspiration are found.

And what I've discovered through the years, is that as I've practiced these disciplines and awareness in my private prayers, the same heart and values have translated into my more public prayers as well.

So, may you enter into this day, all the more committed to free yourself from the pressure to put on any show meant to impress, and rest in the beauty of Jesus' invitation to be real.

“A workers appetite works for him, For his hunger urges him on.” Proverbs 16:26

Fasting, praying, simplifying and silencing; these are all ways that we make sure we are driven by proper appetites.

It's impossible to not desire. If you achieved a level of *desirelessness*, you would either *desire* that state and work at remaining that way, or *desire* something more or less than that state and take action, or you would cease to exist for lack of wanting to exist at all. Humanity left void of desire is incomprehensible. You must desire if you are to go on living another second. Desire, hunger, appetites; those are not the issue.

Let's not pretend that getting rid of desire is the goal. It's the managing of them. Because whatever appetites are aimed at, it either controls you or you control it. There is no middle ground.

This is why Paul said **"Everything is permissible for me—but not everything is beneficial. Everything is permissible for me—but I will not be mastered by anything"** (1 Corinthians 6:12 NIV)

It's not merely about whether things are permissible, or okay, or good or bad. It's about being able to stand over it, having conquered it. Because, whether it's food, cravings, sexuality, or even your own words...if you don't master them, you will serve them. And even good things can become evil when they slip out from underneath your disciplined mastery.

In your own words, write an honest prayer below to God about what controls you, or seems to seek control over you, and what you want him to help you do about it. In the coming days and weeks of increased pursuit and discipline of Christ, come back to this prayer and evaluate the progress you and your Heavenly Father have made.

"How many poor can be filled by the breakfast we have this day given up?" ~Augustine

**"Blessed is he who even fasts in order that he may feed a poor man."
~attributed to Jesus by Origen (185-253 CE).**

"...taste nothing but bread and water on the day you fast. Then estimate the cost of the food you would have eaten on that day and give that amount to a widow or orphan or someone in need....The service done in this way will be good and cheerful and pleasing to the Lord." ~Shepherd of Hermas 56:7-8 (110-140 CE).

Should you fast one meal a week, and then calculate the savings, you may find yourself with a couple hundred more dollars in one year. How much could you, or you and 10 others, do with such sudden surplus? What kinds of truly amazing things could God do in us when we allow all these pieces to begin to overlap. Gentleness and forbearance, honor, purity, forgiveness, grace, generosity, prayer, fasting, discipline. Imagine all of these components from just this much of the Sermon on the Mount beginning to come together in and through your life.

We can't ever forget that the Kingdom of God is about people. People loving and caring for people. Friends, neighbors, enemies, haves, have-nots...discovering the overwhelming power of self-sacrificial love.

Dream God's dream this morning for yourself, and for those you journey with, and for those that your love and discipline and intentionality toward the Kingdom will undoubtedly transform. Take one step today, and as you take, recognize that in one year, this step could have been yet another way the planet knows its Savior more.

God, thank you for inviting me, and all of us, on this journey behind your son. Thank you for not conducting interviews or for pretending to be evaluating resumes. Instead, God, you look at us in our state of brokenness and seeming hopelessness, and you invite us to follow you into becoming something else entirely. God help me to discipline my undisciplined mind, to master my unbridled appetites that so often drag me through my day. Help me to train my whole self to desire you and your way. Help me to focus all my energies on you- not in some hyper-spiritual monk life, but in the sense that I want to pour out love and courage and patience and peace in every area of my life. Show me how this is accomplished in the smallness, and in quiet consistency. Show me how the rhythm of skipping food, of ducking out to pray and meditate, have the ultimate affect of helping me gain access to you and your power. Forgive me for every way I deny you my discipline because I've made you owe me an explanation first. Forgive me for letting my body and soul be at odds with each other, and with you. Help me bring my whole self under control, so that I can possess the ability to hand my whole self over to you. In the name of my great help, Jesus, I pray. Amen.