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FOR INDIVIDUALS OR SMALL GROUPS

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I am excited that we have made prayer a vital part of this year's campaign, but I have a fear. My fear is that we will talk so much about prayer that we are lulled into thinking that we are actually praying, when we're really not. Think of it this way: You walk into someone's house, and you notice that the door squeaks, the paint is peeling, the legs on their chairs are broken, and the windows are cracked and hanging off their hinges. Then you walk into their garage and see that is full of state-of-the-art tools, all gleaming, fresh out of the boxes. But you can tell from the state of the house that these wonderful tools have never been used. Tools are only good if they are put to use.

- **Fasting is not a means of seeking God's blessings, as much as it is a means of seeking God.**
- **Fasting is not a test for super saints, it is not a means of twisting God's arm, and it is not a magical formula for getting through to God.**
- **Fasting is feasting on the Lord. Looking to him for comfort, power, strength, guidance, forgiveness, and hope.**

Likewise, we have this incredibly powerful tool called prayer. But it will do us no good if we know it's there, but we keep it in storage, never pulling it out and applying it to our problems, concerns, relationships, and responsibilities. Prayer is the tool that God has given us to use on all the disrepair in our lives, in our church body, in our communities, in our country. I would urge you to use the experience of fasting to restore your focus and revive the power of prayer in your life. Feast on God during this important time.

3. **Fasting is a call to return to God.** (Joel 2:13) Israel's first need, like that of the prodigal son, was just to come home to the Father. God doesn't talk about the people's need for better plans, programs, or strategies. He is simply saying to them: You have been unfaithful to me. Come home.

Fasting helps to express, to deepen, to confirm the resolution that we are ready to sacrifice anything...to attain what we seek for the kingdom of God.

Andrew Murray

4. **Fasting is not about the externals.** In Joel 2:13, God says, "Don't tear your clothing in grief, instead tear your hearts." It is entirely possible to go without food and not have a true fast.
5. **Fasting is the response of a broken heart.** Why does Joel say, "Come with weeping, fasting, and mourning"? (2:12) Because repentance is the appropriate response when you have strayed. And, God is responsive. "He is gracious and merciful...not easily angered" (2:13). Somehow, God is drawn to the empty, broken, needy, and weak. As Jim Cymbala says, "God is attracted to weakness."
6. **Fasting is the humble response to immense responsibility.** Joel calls a solemn assembly. In verse 15 he says, "blow the trumpet...announce a time of fasting" and he urges everyone to get there – the elders, the children, the babies; he even says to get the bride and groom! Why? Because God's name and reputation were at stake (2:17). The people of Israel were being urged to enter a time of fasting, with the direct result that they would preserve God's reputation and glorify His name. That is an immense responsibility!

PLUG INTO GOD'S POWER

I'll tell you what a sobering thought to me is, as I think about 40 Days of Community. It is the thought that God has given us a sacred stewardship. He has allowed us to lead something much larger than ourselves or our church. With that comes great responsibility, because His name and reputation are on the line.

Let's not forget that the 40 Days of Community Campaign is not an end in itself. It is simply a way of putting people in touch with the life-changing power of God for their lives. We have a plan called 40 Days of Community, but we need the power of God in it. And, you don't program the power of God into something, you pray the power of God into it.

DAY OF FASTING AND PRAYER

By Pastor Rick Warren

WHAT IS FASTING?

Fasting is a spiritual discipline that is taught in the Bible. Jesus expected His followers to fast, and He said that God rewards fasting. Fasting, according to the Bible, means to voluntarily reduce or eliminate your intake of food for a specific time and purpose.

"When you give up eating, don't put on a sad face like the hypocrites. They make their faces look sad to show people they are giving up eating. I tell you the truth, those hypocrites already have their full reward. So when you give up eating, comb your hair and wash your face. Then people will not know that you are giving up eating, but your Father, whom you cannot see, will see you. Your Father sees what is done in secret, and he will reward you."

Matthew 6:16-18 (NCV)

WHY FAST?

There are many good reasons, and even health benefits, for fasting. However, our UNITED DAY OF FASTING AND PRAYER on 9/22/04 for the 40 Days of Community Campaign is for three primary reasons:

1. Fasting gives you more time for prayer. You can use the time you'd normally spend eating as time in prayer for what God wants to do among us during this Campaign. In the Bible, fasting is always connected with prayer.

"While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, 'Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.' So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off."

Acts 13:2-3 (NIV)

2. Fasting demonstrates the depth of your desire when praying for something. It shows you that you are serious enough about your prayer request to pay a personal price. God honors deep desire and praying in faith.

"Declare a holy fast; call a sacred assembly. Summon the elders and all who live in the land to the house of the Lord your God, and cry out to the Lord." Joel 1:14 (NIV)

"Even now," declares the Lord, "return to Me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning." Joel 2:12 (NASB)

3. Fasting releases God's supernatural power. It is a tool we can use when there is opposition to God's will. Satan would like nothing better than to cause division, discouragement, defeat, depression, and doubt among us. United prayer and fasting has always been used by God to deal a decisive blow to the enemy!

"So we fasted and prayed about these concerns. And he listened." Ezra 8:23 (Msg)

"God says, 'Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke?'" Isaiah 58:6 (NIV)

THE IMPORTANCE OF FASTING

Often in the Bible, God's people fasted immediately before a major victory, miracle, or answer to prayer. It prepared them for a blessing!

- Moses fasted before he received the Ten Commandments.

"Moses was there with the Lord forty days and forty nights without eating bread or drinking water. And he wrote on the tablets the words of the covenant--the Ten Commandments." Exodus 34:28 (NIV)

- The Israelites fasted before a miraculous victory.

"Some men came and told Jehoshaphat, 'A vast army is coming against you from Edom, from the other side of the Sea. It is already in Hazazon Tamar' (that is, En Gedi). Alarmed, Jehoshaphat resolved to inquire of the Lord, and he proclaimed a fast for all Judah." 2 Chronicles 20:2-3 (NIV)

When we decide to set aside time to fast, here is what I think would please the heart of God. Let's talk about this time of spiritual discipline not as a day of fasting, but a day of feasting – feasting on Jesus.

There is an orphanage in India where the staff and the children all fast every Friday. And you know what they call it? They call it their day of feasting on Jesus. And do you know what they do during their day of feasting? They pray for the American church. Now, that is humbling.

A CALL TO FAST

That is why the Lord says, "Turn to me now, while there is time! Give me your hearts. Come with fasting, weeping, and mourning."^[13] Don't tear your clothing in your grief; instead, tear your hearts." Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and merciful. He is not easily angered. He is filled with kindness and is eager not to punish you.^[14] Who knows? Perhaps even yet he will give you a reprieve, sending you a blessing instead of this terrible curse. Perhaps he will give you so much that you will be able to offer grain and wine to the Lord your God as before!

^[15] *Blow the trumpet in Jerusalem! Announce a time of fasting; call the people together for a solemn meeting.* ^[16] *Bring everyone--the elders, the children, and even the babies. Call the bridegroom from his quarters and the bride from her private room.* ^[17] *The priests, who minister in the Lord's presence, will stand between the people and the altar, weeping. Let them pray, "Spare your people, Lord! They belong to you, so don't let them become an object of mockery. Don't let their name become a proverb of unbelieving foreigners who say, 'Where is the God of Israel? He must be helpless!'"* Joel 2:12-17 (NLT)

1. Fasting starts with the spiritual leaders. Joel starts off his urgent call to a fast by saying, "Hear this, you elders." (Joel 1:2)
2. Fasting is often associated with a sense of spiritual desperation. Joel 2:12 says, "Turn to me now, while there is time!" Notice the sense of urgency and desperation.

- Fasting is not so much about food as it is about focus.
- Fasting is not so much about saying no to the body as it is about saying yes to the Spirit.
- Fasting is not about doing without, it is about looking within.
- Fasting is an outward response to an inward attitude and cry of the soul.

In the Bible, we observe the people of God fasting for a variety of reasons:

- They were facing a crisis
- They were seeking God's protection and deliverance
- They had been called to repentance and renewal
- They were asking God for guidance
- They were humbling themselves in worship

THE DANGER IN THE DISCIPLINE

But there is an inherent danger in fasting. It is the same danger that is found in the practice of any spiritual discipline. We can turn fasting into an end unto itself, rather than a means to an end. It can become merely an external practice without an internal passion. It can be reduced to a habit without heart. We see an example of this in Luke 18:12, where Jesus tells the story of a Pharisee who bragged to God in prayer that he fasted twice a week. Pharisees habitually fasted twice a week, usually on the 2nd and 5th days of the week. These two days happened to be the major days for the Jewish market. That meant the city was packed with farmers, merchants, and shoppers. Therefore, these days of public fasting would have the largest audiences. Jesus condemned the practice of fasting when it was done in such a way as to receive public adulation.

We have an ability to take that which is sacred, holy, and meant to draw us closer to the Father, and turn it into a merely mechanical, religious drill that we use to impress others of our spirituality. What was intended to draw us to God now actually distances us from God because we have perverted it. And God notices. He prompted the prophet Zechariah to ask the people and the priests of Israel, "During those seventy years of exile, when you fasted and mourned in the summer and at the festival in early autumn, *was it really for Me that you were fasting?*" (Zechariah 7:5 NLT Italics is mine)

A TIME OF FEASTING

When John Wesley spoke of fasting, he said "First, let it be done unto the Lord with our eye singly fixed on Him. Let our intention herein be this, and this alone, to glorify our Father which is in Heaven."

- Daniel fasted in order to receive guidance from God.

"So I turned to the Lord God and pleaded with him in prayer and petition, in fasting, and in sackcloth and ashes." Daniel 9:3 (NIV)

"While I was still in prayer, Gabriel, the man I had seen in the earlier vision, came to me in swift flight about the time of the evening sacrifice. He instructed me and said to me, 'Daniel, I have now come to give you insight and understanding.'"
Daniel 9:21-22 (NIV)

- Nehemiah fasted before beginning a major building project.

"When I heard these things, I sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven." Nehemiah 1:4 (NIV)

- Jesus fasted during His victory over temptation.

"For forty wilderness days and nights he was tested by the Devil. He ate nothing during those days, and when the time was up he was hungry." Luke 4:2 (Msg)

- The first Christians fasted during decision making times.

"While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, 'Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.' So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off."
Acts 13:2-3 (NIV)

TWO CAUTIONS

1. Remember that fasting is not "earning" an answer to prayer. God cannot be blackmailed by human effort. God wants to answer our prayers and He answers out of grace. Fasting simply prepares us for God's answer.
2. Fast only if your health allows it at this time. If you are able to do only a partial fast – do it in faith and God will honor your intentions.

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Do not become so caught up in praying for yourself and others that you forget about simply reverencing and praising God. True spiritual fasting focuses on God. Center

your total being on Him, your attitudes, actions, motives, desires, and words. This can only take place if God and His Holy Spirit are at the center of your attention. Confess your sins as the Holy Spirit brings them to your attention and continue to focus on God and God alone so that your prayers may be powerful and effective.

A renewed closeness with God and a greater sensitivity to spiritual things are usually the results of a fast. Do not be disappointed if you do not have a "mountaintop experience," as some do. Many people who have successfully completed extended fasts tell of feeling a nearness to God that they have never before known, but others who have honestly sought His face report no particular outward results at all. For others, their fast was physically, emotionally, and spiritually grueling, but they knew they had been called by God to fast, and they completed the fast unto Him as an act of worship. God honored that commitment.

Your motive in fasting must be to glorify God, not to have an emotional experience, and not to attain personal happiness. When your motives are right, God will honor your seeking heart and bless your time with Him in a very special way.

MAINTAINING NUTRITIONAL BALANCE:

There are many types of fasts, and the option you choose depends upon your health, the desired length of your fast, and your preference:

- A Water Fast – means to abstain from all food and juices
- A Partial Fast – means to eliminate certain foods or specific meals
- A "Juice" Fast – means to drink only fruit or vegetable juices during meal times

I know the prospect of going without food for an extended period of time may be of concern to some. But there are ways to ensure that your body is getting the nutrients it needs, so you can remain safe and healthy during your fast.

If you are beginning a juice fast, there are certain juices you may wish to avoid and certain ones that are especially beneficial. You may find the following daily schedule helpful during your fast.

- **5:00 a.m. – 8:00 a.m.**
Fruit juices, preferably freshly squeezed or blended, diluted in 50 percent distilled water if the fruit is acid. Orange, apple, pear, grapefruit, papaya, grape, peach or other fruits are good.

- **10:30 a.m. – noon**
Vegetable juice made from lettuce, celery, and carrots in three equal parts.
- **2:30 p.m. – 4:00 p.m.**
Herb tea with a drop of honey. Make sure that it is not black tea or tea with a stimulant.
- **6:00 p.m. – 8:30 p.m.**
Broth from boiled potatoes, celery, and carrots (no salt).

I suggest that you do not drink milk because it is a pure food and therefore a violation of the fast. Any product containing protein or fat, such as milk or soy-based drinks, should be avoided. These products will restart the digestion cycle and you will again feel hunger pangs. Also, for health reasons, stay away from caffeinated beverages such as coffee, tea, or cola. Because caffeine is a stimulant, it has a more powerful effect on your nervous system when you abstain from food. This works both against the physical and spiritual aspects of the fast.

Another key factor in maintaining optimum health during a fast is to limit your physical activity. Exercise only moderately, and rest as much as your schedule will permit (this especially applies to extended fasts). Short naps are helpful as well. Walking a mile or two each day at a moderate pace is acceptable for a person in good health, and on a juice fast. However, no one on a water fast should exercise without the supervision of a fasting specialist.

HOW TO FINISH YOUR FAST IN A HEALTHY WAY:

Most experts agree that breaking a fast with vegetables, either steamed or raw, is best. Your stomach is smaller at this point, so eat lightly. Stop before you feel full. Stay away from starches like pastas, potatoes, rice, or bread (except for "Melba toast"). Also avoid meats, dairy products, and any fats or oils. Introduce them slowly and in small amounts.

Extended fasts are not the only fasts which need to be ended with caution. Even a 3-day fast requires reasonable precautions. It is wise to start with a little soup – something thin and nourishing such as vegetable broth made from onion, celery, potatoes, and carrots – and fresh fruits such as watermelon and cantaloupe.

In terms of resuming any sort of exercise routine, the advice is the same. Start out slowly, allowing time for your body to re-adjust to its usual regime.