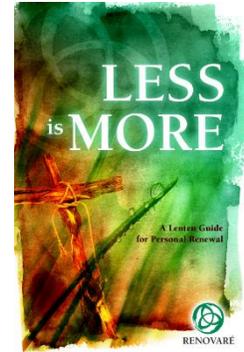


Less is More – Week Two

Fasting: Less Consumption/More Compassion

Lent 2023

This guide for group discussion is based on the Renovare resource, Less is More, written by Pastor Kai Nilsen with contributions from Richella Parham and Rachel Quan.



Opening Questions

- Was there something that you had to do without during the pandemic or at another time in life? What was that experience like? How did you adapt?
- As you thought about the practice of solitude from last week, what came to mind? If you had a chance to experience more solitude, how did it go? What did you discover?

Opening Prayer

This responsive reading comes from the opening song for Wednesday worship.

One: Come and find the quiet center in the crowded life we lead,

All: Find the room for hope to enter, find the frame where we are freed:

One: Clear the chaos and the clutter, clear our eyes, that we can see

All: All the things that really matter, be at peace, and simply be. Amen.

Introduction – Adapted from *Less is More: A Lenten Guide for Personal Renewal*

In a super-sized culture, when more is always better than less, fasting may be an important discipline to consider. When we fast, we abstain from consuming food for a given time. Though this discipline may seem antiquated, fasting encourages us to reflect on our habits and needs, reminds us of those who go without basic essentials each day, and finally, and most importantly, re-claims our dependence on our God — the provider of all good gifts for life.

Jesus' words in Matthew 6:16 serve as a guide to our motivation for fasting. "And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so to show others they are fasting." Fasting is never a tool for self-promotion. It is a discipline that helps you examine the patterns of your life that can control you, experience the pangs of hunger or doing without that grip the everyday lives of many, and enter anew into the gracious hands of your God, the Source of life.

Turning Toward God - Addition to *Less is More: A Lenten Guide for Personal Renewal*

When you think of “fasting”, chances are good that you think about staying away from food. It probably makes you think about the inconvenience and discomfort of not eating and the perseverance it might take. But fasting can be about many things besides food. You can fast from constantly checking emails or social media. You can fast from activities that create an overpacked schedule. You can fast from mindlessly watching television, shopping, or scrolling through websites.

At its core, fasting is about restraining from something to make more space for an awareness of God’s presence. It is about realizing how dependent we are on the things *we think are important*, instead of trusting God. It is about becoming aware of the things we take for granted or do mindlessly, to turn toward God. Fasting can also be about moving back from something so that we are reminded, again and again, to turn toward God for an increasing sense of trust, dependence, and awareness of God.

What Does the Bible Say?

In the writings of the prophet Joel, fasting and repentance (changing your life direction) walk closely together. When faith communities wanted to focus their attention on God, fasting was often a means to consciously claim what was standing in their way of trusting God and thrusting them back on the mercy and love of God.

Joel 2: 12-13a

Yet even now, says the LORD,
return to me with all your heart,
with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning;
rend your hearts and not your clothing.
Return to the LORD your God,
for he is gracious and merciful,
slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love...

The gospel of Matthew tells us, Jesus himself fasted for forty days in the wilderness prior to being tempted by the devil. And later, as a centerpiece for what we know now as the Lord’s Prayer, Jesus invites us to pray “Give us this day our daily bread”.

Matthew 6: 9-11

Our Father who art in heaven,
Hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come,

Thy will be done,
On earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread...

Questions for Reflection & Discussion

- What is “our daily bread”? What does the phrase “our daily bread” represent for you?
- What stands in the way of trusting God?
- How has your trust in God given you strength in difficult times?
- How do you give thanks to God for “daily bread” and all God provides on a daily basis?

What Do Others Say?

Our Guides

*Fasting helps us keep our balance in life. How easily we begin to allow nonessentials to take precedence in our lives. How quickly we crave things we do not need until we are enslaved by them. Paul wrote, ‘All things are lawful for me, but I will not be enslaved by anything’ (1 Cor. 6:12). Our human cravings and desires are like a river that tends to overflow its banks; fasting helps keep them in their proper channel. -Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline**

- What is out of balance in your life right now?
- Do your life patterns give life/build up or do they take away life/tear down?
- What fasts might be helpful for you to consider for a time? Television. Social Media. Shopping. What next step can you take now toward greater freedom in your life?

What Do Others Say?

Personal Reflections written by Pastor Kai Nilsen, Richella Parham and Rachel Quan.

When I was growing up, there was a weekly ritual in our family that I heard about but never questioned. Every Monday my mother would fast. All we knew as we gathered at the table, around a meal she cooked, is that we would ravenously descend on the prepared food and my mother would drink her water. “I’m fasting” she would say if anyone asked. For us, it simply meant more food. For her, the spiritual implications were deep.

One day, I finally asked, “Why?” Her response was simple and indescribably beautiful. My mom and a friend had been overwhelmed by reports of starvation sweeping across the African continent. The rhythms of their lives wouldn’t allow them to drop everything and journey to Africa. So, they simply did what they could, without fanfare, but with great faithfulness. They fasted every Monday, taking the money they would have spent on food and sending it to a relief agency, trusting that a life would be preserved by the simple gift of daily bread. Less consumption/More compassion.

Questions for Reflection & Discussion

- How does fasting connect us with the life of God? How does it connect us with the lives of others?
- When have you had to depend on others or on God for living each day? What did you learn about yourself, others, and/or God through the experience?
- The subtitle for this session is *Less Consumption/More Compassion*. How is fasting connected to compassion?
- There are many in our community and across the world who go hungry. Share the ways to “feed the hungry” that you know about or have taken part in.
- What rituals did your family have around meals? What can you do to remind yourself that food is not just fuel for your body, but a gift of God for your soul?

Faith Practice: Fasting - Adapted from *Less is More: A Lenten Guide for Personal Renewal*

If you are getting started with a fast or abstaining from something, be gentle with yourself. Pay attention to what you are experiencing and what you might be learning along the way. You might consider starting with something small or a short timeframe, especially if you haven't done this before. You could refrain from something for just a portion of a day, for example. If you need to end your fast sooner than expected, be kind to yourself – it's likely that you still experienced and discovered something new. What other possibilities can you think of for experiencing a “fast” besides food?

When deciding to fast from food, be sure to consider your physical health, your safety and the safety of others around you. For example, don't start a fast from food while driving across the country or on an especially intense day.

If you have not used fasting from food as a discipline in the past, here is a guide:

- Choose a day that would work best for you.
- Eat a good breakfast then fast (go without food) until the next day's breakfast.
- Water and juices can be used to keep you hydrated.
- During the day, pay attention to your body. When hunger pangs come, ask yourself, “What would I normally do to satisfy these hunger pangs?” “What patterns of my life do I create around eating?” “Are they healthy?” *(continued on next page)*

Faith Practice Questions:

- What do you think about this practice?
- What do you think is the core intention, or hope?
- What is helpful about the practice? What is challenging or difficult? What do you wonder about?
- What are some other ways to do this practice, keeping in mind the purpose?

- Expand your thoughts to others. Ask yourself “What must it be like for so many people to feel like this every day?”
- Focus your thoughts on God. Be grateful for the daily bread you receive. Offer thanks to God for providing in ways that you often take for granted

Closing Prayer

Share the date, time and location for the next gathering

Holy God, through your Son you have called us to live faithfully and act courageously. Keep us steadfast in your covenant of grace, and teach us the wisdom that comes only through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Come and Find the Quiet Center. Text: Shirley Erena Murray, (c) 1992 Hope Publishing Company. CCLI License #404667.

Less is More: A Lenten Guide for Personal Renewal by Nilsen, Kai, Richella Parham, & Rachel Quan. Renovare. 2013. www.renovare.org.

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Other Readings on Faith Practices

Seeds of Faith: Practices to Grow a Healthy Spiritual Life by Jeremy Langford

Sacred Rhythms by Ruth Haley Barton

Soul Feast by Marjorie J. Thompson

The Sacred Way by Tony Jones

Simpler Living, Compassionate Life edited by Michael Schut