



LIFE GROUP SERMON NOTES

“1st Things 1st: Focus, Formula, Fasting”

Sr. Pastor James Lowe – Jan. 5, 2014

WARM-UP (10-15 minutes)

Choose a question below to answer, or ask another. *No right or wrong answers.*

- What's an unusual food that you've eaten?
- What's your favorite food?
- Have you ever fasted before? If so, how did it go the first time you fasted?

WORD (10-15 minutes)

Sermons can be heard online at bethelbrentwood.org/media.

Matthew 6:33 AMP *But seek (aim at and strive after) first of all His kingdom and His righteousness (His way of doing and being right), and then all these things taken together will be given you besides.*

We must beware of failing to do this. Sometimes we are impatient, not willing to wait upon God for his direction, provision, or answer. Other times we can fall into the trap of doing all the right religious activity, but in a rote fashion without our hearts being fully engaged. Other times we can be preoccupied with valid needs and concerns, such as family, finances, fitness, and food, but fail to keep God as our highest priority.

Psalms 37:4 ESV *Delight yourself in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart.*

As intimate as a married couple in love can be with one another, there is an intimacy with God available to all who earnestly seek him that is qualitatively and experientially superior.

Sometimes we can get discouraged because it seems that it is too difficult to lay hold of God. Sometimes God's presence seems to experientially withdraw from us, leaving us feeling as though we are in a spiritual wilderness. It may not be due to his displeasure with us, but instead be due to his desire to draw us after him in a greater and deeper way. Hosea 2:14 reads, "Therefore, behold, I will allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak tenderly to her."

In general, we have the portion of God that we actually desire. The depth of our hunger and diligence of our seeking God is responded to proportionately by God.

FOCUS

Matthew 6:5-6 ESV *“And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.”*

God himself must be our desire and focus. We must designate a place and times to seek God. This will help us to practically ensure that God himself remains the highest priority in our lives.

FORMULA

Matthew 6:7-9 ESV *“And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. Pray then like this: “Our Father in heaven...”*

We must learn to pray according to Jesus' instruction, which lays out God's priorities and concerns. God's name, kingdom, and will should become our first priority in prayer. Then our material and spiritual needs should be addressed; and not only ours, but also the needs of others. We must choose to be willing to put him first in all things. And above all, we are to know him as our Father, and not merely our Ruler.

FASTING

Matthew 6:16-18 ESV *“And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.”*

We should fully expect God to faithfully keep Jesus' promise that when we fast, he will reward us. Fasting is neither commanded in a legalistic way in the New Covenant, nor is it optional. Instead, Jesus assumes we will fast out of a genuine desire to seek God. The early church fasted as evidenced in the documents of the New Testament; e.g., Acts 13:1-3. We too should fast as they did and as Jesus expected.

If we will put God and his kingdom first in our lives, if we will deliberately focus on him and his will, if we will pray and fast as Jesus has instructed, then we can fully expect that our Heavenly Father will respond and reward us in meaningful and profound ways that both glorify him and bless us and others.

PERSONAL APPLICATION (10-15 minutes)

Choose an item below to discuss, or introduce another related topic for discussion.

- What has been effective in the past to help you focus in a special way on God and his kingdom?
- Have you learned to use the Lord's Prayer as a template for prayer? If so, how has it helped you?
- What do you want to seek God about during our upcoming week of prayer and fasting?

PRAYER (10-15 minutes)

Pray for any of the following, as well as any other requests you may have.

- That God would guide us as a church and as individuals into our time of prayer and fasting.
- That God would reveal himself to us afresh during this time.
- That God would speak to us during this time, so that we might know his will and be able to direct our lives to do the things which are especially important to his plan and purposes for us this year.