

What Matters?

21 Days of Prayer and Fasting

WEEK #1 - YOU MATTER

Day 1 - You Matter - Made in God's Image

Genesis 1:26 (NKJV) "Then God said, "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness;"

My wife makes the best chocolate chip cookies in the world. They are big and fat and bursting with chocolate chips. Many have told her that she could make a lot of money by opening up her own cookie store. Others have developed a fondness bordering on addiction and have secretly tried to ferret out the recipe. But she guards that recipe like a top-secret government war plan. What's funny is the recipe is relatively simple. All that's needed is a little flour, salt, sugar, and some chocolate chips. Mix it all together. Place it in the oven. And you've got cookies.

God's recipe for humanity is even easier. He wrote it down in the first two chapters of Genesis. In chapter one it states that human beings were made in the image of God. Then in chapter two God describes the process. First, God takes a little dirt. Then, from the dirt, He forms a model. Finally, He pours in a little of himself. His breath, his soul or life force, entered the original man and he became a living being. That spark of the divine began and has sustained human existence from the beginning of time.

Unfortunately, when sin entered our lives it marred and darkened the image of God. However, the image can still be seen. It radiates from our occasional acts of kindness. It is seen in our various abilities to create. It is felt when we connect, even at a small level, with another human being. Therefore, each human being is extremely valuable, not because of their achievements, but because they uniquely bear the image of the divine. We are all individually stamped with the image of God. And as image bearers our value can never be diminished. No matter what we have done or what we have experienced, being created in the image of God guarantees our value.

Think about it

Do you see yourself as made in the image of God?
What does that mean to you?

Action Item

Take a \$5 or \$10 bill. Step on it. Fold it. Throw it. Punch it. Crumple it in your hand. Has the bill lost any of its value?

Day 2 - You Matter - God's Masterpiece

Ephesians 2:10 (NLT) "For we are God's masterpiece. He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, so we can do the good things he planned for us long ago."

When I was a child, one of my favorite games was the Parker Brothers board game Masterpiece. In the game, each contestant traveled around a circular game board in pursuit of paintings that were valued from \$0 to \$1,000,000. Unfortunately, when you purchased a painting you didn't know its true value until after you made your purchase. For example, you could buy Vincent Van Gogh's "Starry Night" only to find out that it was actually a forgery. In other words, it was worthless.

The Bible describes every single human being as a masterpiece created by God himself. Now, some people see their great worth, but they falsely believe they have created themselves. They take credit for their unique skills or talents and indulge themselves in the excesses their life provides. There is a famous proverb that says, "Pride goes before a fall, and a haughty spirit before destruction". Some of the scripture's fiercest warnings are for people who have made it in life.

Others carry around a sense of worthlessness because of negative input, personal failure, or an encounter with evil. They refuse to allow anyone to really get to know them for fear they will be found out for the forgeries they believe they are. But, you are not a forgery. Sure, you might be broken. Your life's canvas may be soiled by mistakes, or pains, or evil. You might not even like yourself. But, the great Master who designed the beauty of Niagara Falls and carved out the Grand Canyon is the same artist who created you. Right now God is admiring your beauty and desiring to reconnect with your soul.

Think about it

How do you see yourself? Masterpiece or forgery? Why?
What did God have in mind when He made you?

Action item

Masterpiece in the Greek language is "poema". Compose a poem about your life or about the life you want.

Day 3 - You Matter - One of a Kind

Psalm 139:14 (TV) "I am your unique creation, filled with wonder and awe. You have approached even the smallest details with excellence."

Last January we gave a strengths analysis assessment to the School of Ministry students. It was based on the book *Strength-Based Leadership* by Tom Rath and Barry Conchie. In the analysis, you are tested in 34 different areas. The chances of you having the same top 5 strengths as someone else are 1 in 278,000. The chances of you having the same top 5 strengths in the same order are 1 in 33,333,333. Remember, this includes just 34 unique leadership traits. Genetic science shows that each person has millions of different genetic combinations. One group of scientists recently calculated the chances of two people having the same genetic makeup is more than 1 in 70 trillion.

Why do I tell you all of this? Because one of the characteristics needed to establish value is uniqueness. The more unique something is the more valuable it is. For example, the Honus Wagner baseball card is the most unique trading card in existence. They believe there were less than 200 ever made. Its uniqueness has led to people paying millions of dollars just to obtain one. You are more unique than a Honus Wagner baseball card. You could say that after God made you, He broke the mold.

Now, your job is to discover and develop the unique gifts and talents God has given you. How? By focusing on your SHAPE. SHAPE is an acronym Rick Warren used when he wrote his book *The Purpose Driven Life*. In it, S stands for spiritual gifts. H stands for heart or what is your passion. A stands for abilities, what are you good at. P stands for personality, and E stands for experience. If you have never gone through a discovery process like this, sign up for our Discover Class today.

Think about it

What is the most unique thing you own? Have you ever thought of yourself as unique?

Action item

This week sign up for Discover class. If you have already taken Discover, find a self-analysis tool and take it. Some examples are Taylor/Johnson Temperament, Strengths Finder 2.0, Myers Briggs, DISC, etc.

Day 4 - The Bible Matters - Universal Standards for Life

Proverbs 16:11 (NLT) "The Lord demands accurate scales and balances; He sets the standards for fairness."

On February 7, 1904 a fire ravaged the city of Baltimore. The city's fire department was quickly overwhelmed. Soon, help started coming in from surrounding cities. Unfortunately, the extra manpower could do little to stop the progressing fire. The problem was a lack of universal standards. The firemen from the cooperating cities could not get their fire hoses to fit the hydrants in Baltimore. The lack of standardized equipment doomed the city. In the end, over 1500 buildings were destroyed and over

1000 buildings were damaged. The lack of standards plagued every U.S. industry, from construction to food. For example, there were eight different “authoritative” values for the gallon. This is no longer a problem today because of the creation of the National Bureau of Standards and Technology. These standards have created safer communities, trustworthy measurements, and increased prosperity.

The same way the NBST is the authoritative voice for standards in the United States, the Bible is the authoritative source that governs all human behavior. The Bible records standards for human relationships, righteous leadership, and even proper thoughts.

God’s Word does not guarantee an easy life, but it does offer a level of protection against self-inflicted fires and personal catastrophes that plague so many lives. Unfortunately, many ignore this book and set their lives on a path of destruction. Thankfully, it is never too late. When we embrace the Holy Book and closely follow its standards we can begin to heal our lives, bring peace to our communities, and thrive as God intended.

Think about it

Have you ever thought of the Bible as your SOP manual? (Standard Operating Procedures)

If you did, how would that change your reading habits?

Action item

Memorize Psalm 119:11

Day 5 - The Bible Matters - Roadmap to Success

Joshua 1:7 (NLT) “Be strong and very courageous. Be careful to obey all the instructions Moses gave you. Do not deviate from them, turning either to the right or to the left. Then you will be successful in everything you do.”

I grew up in Aberdeen, South Dakota. Every year we would take an exam called the Iowa Basics Test. Like the SAT, it tested our academic progress. The Iowa Basics had an unusual component that I haven’t seen in other tests. It tested map skills. During a parent teacher conference my sixth grade teacher, Mr. Arndt, told my dad I would never get lost. Apparently, even though I was only in the sixth grade, I had a complete and thorough understanding of map reading.

The Word of God is a map for life. God tells Joshua that if he follows the instructions in the Bible, he will have success in everything he does. Apparently, Joshua develops an understanding and commitment for God’s Word. For the rest of his life he experiences success and victory. Unfortunately, most people today are unfamiliar with the Bible. They wander through life guided by worldly philosophies, old wives tales, and

superstition. When their false roadmaps lead to brokenness and despair they act surprised.

The only way to get your life on track is to follow the instruction found in the Word. Paul tells us, "All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for showing people what is wrong in their lives, for correcting faults, and for teaching how to live right. Using the Scriptures, the person who serves God will be capable, having all that is needed to do every good work. (2 Timothy 3:16, 17 (NCV)) What are you waiting for? Grab your Bible and get on the road to success!

Think about it

Do you believe the Bible is God's word? On a scale of 1 to 10 how well do you know it? What can you do to raise your score?

Action item

Keep reading the 21 day devotional and make a commitment to read the Bible at least 5 days every week for the rest of the year. Consider enrolling in the School of Ministry.

Day 6 - You Matter - Ransom Paid

1 Peter 1:18 (TLB) "God paid a ransom to save you."

In 1996, Mel Gibson and Renee Russo starred in a movie titled "Ransom". In it, a bad cop, masterminds the kidnapping of the young son of a multi-millionaire. He then demands a \$2,000,000 ransom for his return. The movie follows many twists and turns, but towards the end of the movie the father refuses to pay the ransom, leaving his son.

The apostle Peter teaches that God loved you and I so much that He willingly paid a ransom to free us from the clutches of evil. Unlike the movie, nobody kidnapped us. We willingly left God's presence and ended up in the devil's pawnshop. Specifically, the Bible describes our departure as sin. Sin simply means missing the mark. So, when we behave, think, or talk in a way that is contrary to God's plan it is called sin. And everyone has sinned. What's scary is the penalty for sin is death. No one is ever good enough to reverse the curse that rests on humanity. Our only hope is for someone from outside of the human race to save us. God did exactly that! He sent his son Jesus Christ to die on the cross (sacrifice). He willingly came to Earth and took our place (substitution). Our debt was paid in full (redemption). The charges against us were nullified when Jesus was nailed to the cross (atonement). For all of these reasons Jesus has earned the right to be your Savior.

Think about it

How would you feel if someone you loved was kidnapped?
What would you do to get them back?

What do the words sacrifice, substitution, redemption and atonement mean to you?

Action item

What is an appropriate response to the sacrifice, substitution, redemption and atonement of Jesus? Respond!

Day 7 - You Matter - The Ultimate Price

1 Peter 1:19 (TLB) "The ransom he paid was not mere gold or silver as you very well know. But he paid for you with the precious lifeblood of Christ, the sinless, spotless lamb of God."

It's amazing what people are willing to spend their money on. Recently, Neiman-Marcus offered a \$64,000 advent calendar in their Christmas catalog. A new Lamborghini Veneno goes for nearly \$11 million. It's just a car. "When Will you Marry", a famous painting by Paul Gauguin sold for \$300 million. My head is spinning. Yet when these same people are asked to give money to a worthy cause the pump often runs dry.

Scripture teaches that you and I were an unworthy cause. There is nothing in our character deserving of redemption. The just penalty for our unloving behavior (sin) is a life separated from God (death). But God is full of mercy and grace. He understood that we were unable to save ourselves, even through our best efforts. He did everything Himself and paid the ultimate price. He sent his Son, Jesus Christ, into the world to offer his life as a sacrificial gift. Today's Scripture states that the actual cost was Jesus' blood. It wasn't money. It cost Jesus his blood. That may sound a little odd until you understand what it says in the Old Testament. The book of Leviticus teaches that the life or the soul is in the blood. So, Jesus literally offered His life or His perfect soul to buy back our imprisoned souls.

Think about it

What is your biggest purchasing regret?

Why does Peter describe Jesus' death as a ransom?

How does it make you feel to hear that someone was willing to die for you?

Action item

Think of something you really want to buy. Determine the price. Now, rather than purchase the item, give the money away.

WEEK #2 - PEOPLE MATTER

Day 8 - People Matter - Listen Intently

Proverbs 18:13 (GNT) “Listen before you answer. If you don't, you are being stupid and insulting.”

Listening is one of the most difficult things you will ever do. That's why the writer of Proverbs emphatically challenges us to listen before we answer. In other words, people are generally so self absorbed they formulate responses without really processing what is being said. No wonder the proverb calls them stupid and insulting. True listening, on the other hand, is others-focused. It is the setting aside of your preferences, biases, and presuppositions all for the purpose of truly hearing another human being. However, listening is more than the physical act of hearing. It is an act of generosity that involves the whole person. Ironically, the ears are not even the first step in listening.

Listening begins with a decision. A decision to give another person a “hearing”. This is why generosity of spirit is needed. Listening requires us to give our full attention to another human being as a gift. Attention is the focused perception of both visual and verbal stimuli. When we take this posture, our ears become open gates to hear what is really being said.

Next, we open our hearts. This involves both sympathy and empathy. Sympathy hears the pain in another person's words, but empathy goes even further. Empathy sees the situation the same way as the speaker, as if experiencing it with them. This requires entering actively and imaginatively into the other person's situation and trying to understand a frame of reference different from your own. This is not always an easy task. However, if you can do this, listening becomes one of the most loving things you can do. This is why David Augsburger wrote, “Being heard is so close to being loved that for the average person they are almost indistinguishable.”

Think about it

Are you a good listener? Who is someone you need to listen to better?

Action item

For the next 2 weeks, practice listening to people without formulating your response. Ask questions to clarify your understanding of what is being said.

Day 9 - People Matter - Invest Generously

2 Timothy 1:2 (NLT) “I am writing to Timothy, my dear son.”

I have many books in my library that were presented to me by Dr. Robert Goree. Robert was my father-in-law, mentor, and friend. He always wrote a special notation in

each book referencing a verse from 2 Timothy or noting our unique relationship as spiritual father and son. If you are blessed enough to find a mentor, you will find it is an evolving and empowering relationship. It often begins with the protégé just watching and listening. I oftentimes felt like one of the disciples learning from the master. Sometimes I would ask a question hoping to learn something, only to be asked another question in return. In the end, we became great friends. I am a much stronger person today because of our relationship. He died a number of years ago, but I will never forget the life he lived and the lessons he taught.

Second Timothy is the last book Paul writes before he dies. From the tenor of the book, we sense that Timothy is struggling in his life. Paul takes this last letter as an opportunity to encourage his young protégé. He reminds him of his calling and his Christian heritage. He challenges Timothy to resist fear and boldly proclaim the gospel. Paul acknowledges there are many challenges, but he tells Timothy that God's grace will give him strength to overcome. Finally, Paul asks Timothy to visit him in Rome. The relationship has come to mean just as much to Paul as it does to Timothy. And Paul realizes he will be strengthened by the encounter.

Do you have a mentor in your life? Is there anyone challenging you to become a better version of yourself? I am convinced that one of the most empowering things in life is a one on one relationship with a mentor. A mentor is someone who will encourage you, teach you, and hold you accountable. It must be someone you respect, and who is willing to spend some time with you. I challenge you to find this person, and you will see your strength grow.

Think about it

How would you describe mentoring? Do you think mentoring is important? Have you ever had a formal/informal mentoring arrangement?

Action item

Find a personal mentor or a mentee.

Day 10 - People Matter - Encourage Constantly

Proverbs 12:25 (TLB) "Anxious hearts are very heavy, but a word of encouragement does wonders!"

In an article about mentoring, from an online organization called "The Chronicle," dated September 13, 2015, I read that Clint Eastwood considered his grandmother a mentor. He is quoted as saying, "I've had many mentors in my life...my grandmother...was always encouraging. She always thought I was going to be something, when nobody else, including myself, thought I was going to amount to anything". If the "Dirty Harry" star Clint Eastwood needs a mentor, we all do!

In Second Timothy we discover another young man whose grandmother was his mentor. Paul reminds Timothy of his grandmother's faith and his own confidence in him. Timothy is a young leader at Ephesus, and it appears like he is having doubts about his calling and gifting. Paul sends this second letter to remind Timothy that he is more than qualified to handle the challenges that surround him. Paul strategically uses his words to inspire and build Timothy up. He tells him he is praying for him, and he challenges Timothy to walk in the strength God has provided. Twice, Paul calls Timothy his son to express his unbreakable commitment to him. Paul's words are not flattery, but heart felt truth used to repair Timothy's broken self-esteem. Everyone experiences periods of doubt and despondency. In those moments "Words spoken at the right time are like gold apples in a silver setting." (Proverbs 25:11 (CEB))

Think about it

Do you remember getting an encouraging word during a pivotal time in your life? How did it make you feel? Who do you currently get encouragement from?

Action item

Find five people to encourage. If you are married, make sure your spouse is one of the five. What can you say to inspire each person?

Day 11 - People Matter - Stand Faithfully

Ecclesiastes 4:12 (NLT) "A person standing alone can be attacked and defeated, but two can stand back-to-back and conquer. Three are even better, for a triple-braided cord is not easily broken."

The American rock band Train released their most popular song in 2010. It was entitled "Hey, Soul Sister." You might remember it as the song that was beautifully accompanied by a ukulele. The song sold over 6 million copies in two years and reached #1 in 16 different nations. What is a "Soul Sister" or a "Soul Brother" for that matter? I don't know what Train had in mind, but I'm referring to a deep and intimate friendship. A relationship that is based on more than just common interests. Proverbs describes people in these type of relationships as friends that stick closer than brothers.

I love the word stick because it refers to the constant reliability of the other person. The idea is that nothing can break you apart. If someone or something attacks you it is the same as attacking your friend, and together you will conquer the enemy. Then the scripture goes one step further. It says by adding a third person you are almost unstoppable. That was God's plan for the church. The church is supposed to be a group of people working together for the purposes of God. And when any kind of attack comes on one, it is an attack on the entire body.

Think about it

Do you have anyone you would consider a “Soul Sister” or “Soul Brother?”
Do you go to a church? Are you a member? Is membership important?

Action item

Call two of your closest friends and talk about life. Spend at least 10 minutes on each phone call. If this sounds difficult, write down ahead of time a few subjects that you can bring up while you are talking.

Day 12 - People Matter - Feel Deeply

Nehemiah 1:3-4 (NLT) “They said to me, Things are not going well for those who returned to the province of Judah. They are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem has been torn down, and the gates have been destroyed by fire. When I heard this, I sat down and wept. In fact, for days I mourned, fasted, and prayed to the God of heaven.”

A number of years ago, while playing basketball, I dislocated my middle finger. I remember the jolt of pain that shocked my entire system. Moments later a wave of nausea swept over me as I looked at the mangled finger on my left hand. My only thought was to stop the pain. I had to do whatever was necessary to alleviate my suffering.

In the book of Nehemiah, we find a young man enjoying life in the resort town of Susa. Although he is Jewish, he has risen to a high position in the Babylonian court. As cupbearer to the king he eats the best food, wears the best clothes, and lives in very comfortable quarters. His responsibility was to choose and taste the wine before it was served to the king to make sure that it was not poisoned. Early documents also reveal that the cupbearer could be the keeper of the royal signet, be in charge of administration of the accounts, and even serve as second to the king.

While Nehemiah is living the good life in Susa, he experiences a jolt that dislocates his heart. He discovers that his countrymen in Jerusalem are not doing well. His brother describes their situation as one of great trouble and disgrace. When Nehemiah hears about the pain and suffering, he is overwhelmed by compassion and spends days weeping and praying to God. In prayer, his cause is born. Nehemiah can’t stand by and do nothing. He must get involved. There are situations like this all around us. God is looking for people who are willing to get involved in something bigger than themselves. If you don’t know what to do, pray! It’s a dangerous prayer, because if you are serious, God will give you a dislocated heart.

Think about it

Have you ever dislocated a bone? How did it feel? What causes are you involved in?

Action item

How compassionate are you towards others? Are you familiar with the Desoto County Dream Center? How can you get involved?

Day 13 - People Matter - Serve Tenderly

1 Peter 4:10 (NLT) “God has given each of you a gift from His great variety of spiritual gifts. Use them well to serve one another.”

MASH was a television series that aired from 1972 to 1983. It was based on an American emergency medical unit in the Korean War. This group of people was composed of some very different personalities. There was Hawkeye Pierce, B.J. Hunnicutt, and Father Mulcahy. There was Colonel Potter, Radar, and Hotlips Houlihan. They were always playing jokes on one another and arguing over different political views and the war. However, there was always one thing that brought these characters together. It did not matter what particular argument was going on or what particular practical joke was being pulled, when they heard the sound of the choppers bringing in wounded, they always were united in the O.R.

The church is just like an operating room. It is the place hurting people come to have the Great Physician bring healing to their lives. You and I are gifted as spiritual nurses and doctors. We assist God when we serve hurting people. Our greetings, prayers, sermons and music all help God in ministering to various needs. The last thing we can have is fighting and division in our midst. Cooperation is the environment in which God's anointing flows.

Think about it

What spiritual gifts do you possess? How can they bring healing to the body of Christ and the world?

Action item

Join a “Dream Team”. If you have been serving for a number of years in one position, think about joining a different team or becoming a team lead.

Day 14 - People Matter - Live Loyal

Acts 2:42 (NIV) “They devoted themselves to . . . the fellowship.”

In the summer of 1978, my friend Roger and I spent many weekends driving around and singing to the soundtrack of the movie “Grease”. Whenever we would hear the song “Hopelessly Devoted To You” we would sing in our falsetto voices and dream of Olivia Newton-John being our Sandy.

One of the characteristics that marked the early church was its devotion to the fellowship. There was a genuine concern, dedication and loyalty to others who called themselves Christians. After Pentecost, they immediately went about the task of building a community. This devotion was so real that people spent most of their time together either in church or in each other's homes. In this context of community friends were found, needs were met, and the Kingdom of God grew.

Think about it

How do you express your devotion to the body of Christ?
Is today's church like the church in Acts chapter 2? Why or why not?

Action item

Go to Acts chapter 2 and list everything the early church was devoted too.
Are you devoted to the same things?

Week #3 - Prayer Matters

Day 15 - Prayer Matters - God Is Listening

Psalms 116:1 (GNT) "I love the Lord, because he hears me; he listens to my prayers."

How would you describe prayer? Too many people want it to work like Harry Potter's magic wand. You ask God for something and what you want magically appears. Unfortunately, God is not some cosmic Santa Claus. He is the awesome and mighty God of the universe who knows what we need better than we do ourselves. Others see prayer as a last resort. After trying everything and coming up empty, we turn to God and yell, "Help." And when God doesn't respond to our SOS, we harden our hearts to Him and to the possibilities of prayer. And then I hear others who say they just don't have the time.

Let me encourage you to make the time. Prayer is one of the most dynamic spiritual weapons in your arsenal. Prayer connects you to the presence and power of God. In Acts chapter 4 the apostles have just been beaten for preaching in the name of Jesus. After the beating they return to the church and start a prayer meeting. And in the middle of the meeting the building starts shaking. This is not some coincidental earthquake. This is a mighty and powerful God responding to their sincere heart's cry. The scripture goes on to say that God fills them with power so they can go out and accomplish their mission.

How do you get to this point? You need to spend time with God. The apostles spent 3 years following and observing Jesus. At one point they asked Jesus to teach them to pray. And what they learned wasn't some method. It was that prayer was necessary for

the health and development of the soul. I love what John Bunyan said in his book *Pilgrim's Progress*. He said, "prayer is a shield to the soul, a sacrifice to God, and a scourge to Satan."

Think about it

Why do you think there is such an interest in magic in our modern world?
Do you pray? Do you think prayer is worth the effort?
How do your prayers need to change?

Action item

Study the prayer of Jabez in I Chronicles 4:10. Pray each point over your life, the life of your entire family, and the Church.

Day 16 - Persistent Prayer Matters - God is Waiting

Matthew 7:7-8 (NLT) "Keep on asking, and you will be given what you ask for. Keep on looking and you will find. Keep on knocking and the door will be opened. For everyone who asks, receives. Everyone who seeks, finds and the door is opened to everyone who knocks."

Our third child is persistent. When he was 3 years old he started asking for a dog. Before every birthday and before every Christmas he would announce to the family his desire for a furry four-legged friend. I was against the idea, because I thought mom and dad would be doing all the work of caring for the dog. Finally, after 7 years of persistence, I gave in and we bought him a Bischon Friese in December of 2004. Trevor's dream became a reality.

James 4 tells us that we have not because we ask not. Ask God to reveal his plans for your life. Ask God to make his Word understandable. Ask God for direction, but when you ask, ask in faith. Without faith it is impossible to please God. A person of persistent faith will have no problem asking again and again. A person of persistent faith will come before the throne of God until they get a direct answer. A person of persistent faith will seek God's Word, good books, and wise counsel until they are satisfied God has spoken.

Think about it

Would you describe yourself as persistent?
Do you hear God speaking?

Action item

Memorize Matthew 7:7 and Hebrews 11:1.

Day 17 - Prayer Matters - Taste and See

Psalm 34:8 (NLT) “Taste and see that the Lord is good.”

Forrest Gump has to be one of Tom Hanks’ best movies. I still laugh at the scene where Bubba is explaining to Forrest all the different ways shrimp can be made. I laugh because I can relate. I was raised in Aberdeen, South Dakota, and I grew up on steak and potatoes. There are dozens of ways to do potatoes, maybe more. I’ve had mashed potatoes, baked potatoes, au gratin potatoes, scalloped potatoes, tater tots, McDonald’s French fries and many more.

But my life was changed dramatically when I married a California girl. Once I migrated cross-country, I was exposed to new and scary foods. The scariest was sushi. My wife tried to convince me that it was delicious, but it reminded me of bait. The phrase she kept using was, “taste and see.” Finally, one day I broke down and was pleasantly surprised. Today, it ranks as one of my favorite foods, and Robin and I are always looking for a new sushi restaurant to try.

The Psalmist challenges us to “Taste and see that the Lord is good.” Like Robin, his is the voice of experience. His soul has feasted on the goodness of God, and he exhorts us to do the same. But how do you feast on God? Again, the psalmist is most helpful. He describes the Word of God as food for the soul. He describes answered prayer as another way God fills the hungry soul. Praise, worship, and gratitude are all expressions that honor God and nourish your soul. I have to admit. My conversion to sushi was gradual. I started with rolls and worked my way up to sashimi (raw fish). When it comes to God, start with a book, a chapter a day in the Bible, going to church, or something that will give you a taste of His goodness. If you are looking for God, I guarantee you will find him. When it comes to God, I am reminded of the old Lays Potato Chip commercials, “nobody can eat just one.” One taste of the real God will keep you coming back for more.

Think about it

Are you stuck in any culinary ruts? Are you stuck in any spiritual ruts?
What do you need to do to taste the goodness of God?

Action item

Typically you see something before you taste it. However, David challenges you to taste first, then he promises you will see God. What part of the Christian life is God directing you to taste first? Do it!

Day 18 - Prayer Matters - Worship

Psalm 16:7-9 (GW) "I will praise the Lord, who advises me. . . I always keep the Lord in front of me. . . that is why my heart is glad and my soul rejoices."

During the 1970's there were two American music variety shows on Saturday morning television. The first was Dick Clark's *American Bandstand*. The other show was produced by Don Cornelius and was called *Soul Train*. I was always confused by the attention adoring fans gave to the musical guests. They would faint, fawn, and fight to get as close to their hero as they could. During concerts I would see these same fans raise their hands, light candles, and chant the star's name as if they were worshipping a god.

What I have since come to realize is that man was made to worship. And if we don't worship God, we will fill that void with our favorite football team, movie star, or American Idol. But worshipping anything or anyone other than God will always bring disappointment. Only God is worthy of our worship. And only the worship of God will bring health to your soul.

Worship is the result of revelation. We recognize some quality in God's divine character and we make a move toward God. We receive his grace, we sense his power, or we experience his forgiveness. As a result of the beauty of that experience we want to further engage God. It is a lot like asking someone to dance. You see them across the room, their beauty captures your heart, you courageously approach them to see if they will engage. God always says yes, and the dance begins. Scripture tells us that God inhabits the praise of his people. God will never turn us away. And as we enter this divine embrace our souls experience renewal, restoration and refreshing.

Think about it

Do you find it difficult to praise and worship God? Why?
Why does the Word say worship is good for us?

Action item

Worship is an expression of pure love. Think of at least 3 ways you can express your love toward God today.

Day 19 - Prayer Matters - The Fasting Boost

Matthew 17:21 (NKJV) "However, this kind does not go out except by prayer and fasting."

Matt 4:2-3 (VOICE) "Jesus fasted for 40 days and 40 nights. After this fast, He was, as you can imagine, hungry. But He was also curiously stronger."

Jesus didn't eat for 40 days, but the scripture says he got stronger. How? He feasted on God and His Word. The Bible says, "Blessed are those whose strength is in you, who have set their hearts on pilgrimage." (Psalm 84:5 (NIV)) This verse communicates the key to a successful fast. You might not be familiar with the word or the concept of pilgrimage. But for David and his countrymen, if they were away from the holy city of Jerusalem, they longed to get back inside her walls. Why? Jerusalem housed the Ark of the Covenant, and the Ark of the Covenant housed the presence of God. So, whenever they talked about a pilgrimage, the idea was to get back to the presence of God. This is where they felt safe. This is where they found security. And this is where they knew they would experience the blessing of their Lord. So, whenever we fast we should set our hearts on pilgrimage, a holy journey to find our spiritual Jerusalem. Fasting can lead us to God and reestablish our spiritual compass. Although our physical power might wane, this verse testifies to the fact that we will be blessed with Godly strength.

The next verse, Psalm 84:6 (NIV), speaks of the difficult journey we often take to get back into the presence of God. It states, "As they pass through the Valley of Baca". Baca means weeping, and this alerts us to the fact that during any pilgrimage there may be difficulties and trials that we must endure. Fasting can be difficult on your body. Some of the side-effects are headaches, weakness, hunger pains, and loose bowels. There also may be a frustration if you don't immediately see any results. Don't give up. As your body weakens, you will find yourself curiously getting stronger. God's strength will come in the form of a verse, an impression, a friend, or some other divinely inspired way. Practice God's spiritual diet and watch your strength grow.

Think about it

Have you ever fasted? Why? How did it make you feel?

Action item

Make plans to fast over the next 3 days. Don't do it alone. Do it with your church or a partner. Get information about the spiritual dimensions of fasting.

Day 20 - Prayer Matters - Beware of Shortcuts

Matthew 7:13-14 (MSG) Don't look for shortcuts to God. The market is flooded with surefire, easygoing formulas for a successful life that can be practiced in your spare time. Don't fall for that stuff, even though crowds of people do. The way of life, to God, is vigorous and requires total attention.

A few years back my son was playing a basketball game in Lincoln County, Nevada. My wife and I got a late start, so I decided to take a short cut. The first thing I noticed was how rough the road was. It wasn't paved. That should have been my first clue, but I was convinced that going this way would save us a lot of time. Finally, after about an hour on a gravel road we made it to asphalt. Unfortunately, after less than a mile of

smooth sailing we had to come to a screeching halt. Why? Because the road had been washed out. Later, after talking with someone familiar with the area, I found out that the road was washed out the previous year.

I love Eugene Peterson's paraphrase of Jesus' words in Matthew 7:13-14. In these verses Jesus describes the road to God as rough and challenging and the road away from God as smooth and paved. Because the road away from God starts off easy, most people choose to go that direction. But Jesus challenges us to choose the road less travelled. There are no shortcuts to God. There are no easy paths. Our spiritual brokenness assures there will be many distractions along the way. But God doesn't leave you without assistance. His Word acts like a spiritual navigation device. When we are tempted to take a shortcut or the wrong path, the Word warns us and helps us get back on course. Sometimes the length of the journey starts wearing us out. That's why God has given us the Church. The Church is like a NASCAR driver's pit crew. During the pit stop the crew serves a number of important purposes. They may give you racing instruction, make minor repairs, but most importantly they refuel you so you can complete the race. And don't forget your direct connection to God. Prayer enables you to speak directly to him in any situation. So, if you feel like you're lost, God promises not only to never leave you, but to get you to your final destination safely.

Think about it

Why do you think the road to God is so hard?
Are you trying to take a spiritual short cut?

Action item

Take the longest path to work today. As you travel, pray for God's direction in your life.

Day 21 - Prayer Matters - Communion Focus

John 6:55 (GW) "Jesus told them, I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never become hungry, and whoever believes in me will never become thirsty."

In *"The Power of Focus"*, a book by Canfield and Hansen, the authors communicate that if you focus on the right things, you will succeed as an entrepreneur. The same is true for followers of Christ. If we focus on his Word, prayer, worship, and the body of Christ we will succeed as Christians. In the genius of God, He created a sacrament that helps us to focus on all these things in one setting. That sacrament is communion. Communion is known by many names: the Eucharist, the Lord's Supper, the Lord's Table and a "love feast."

Unfortunately, communion has been taken for granted. For many it is a ritualistic obligation that has lost its meaning and significance. Many churches no longer highlight the taking of communion as a significant part of the service. But that is a big mistake. Communion is an opportunity to experience God in a deeply spiritual way.

During communion we are reminded of God's great love for humanity. The broken bread is a picture of Jesus's broken body that was sacrificed for you. And the cup of wine is a reminder of the price Jesus paid for your redemption. When we realize that it was our sin that placed Jesus on that cross, it drives us to our knees in sorrow and repentance. But we don't remain sad. Instead, we cry out in repentance and begin to understand why confession is good for the soul. A new sense of freedom and hope overwhelms our soul to such a degree that we break out in spontaneous celebration. In the simple act of eating the bread and drinking the cup we, receive Jesus Christ anew. So this memorial commemorating the death of Jesus becomes a celebration commemorating your new life.

Think about it

Would you describe yourself as focused?

Do you enjoy communion? What does the ceremony mean to you?

Action item

Join us tonight for 1st Wednesday where we will break the fast with communion. If you are unable to attend, have communion as a family or by yourself. Read I Corinthians 11:23-34 before you do.