

Articles on Fasting & Prayer

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Fasting for Beginners

Article by David Mathis

David is the Pastor at Cities Church in Minneapolis/Saint Paul, and adjunct professor for Bethlehem College & Seminary. He is a husband, father of four, and author of Habits of Grace: Enjoying Jesus through the Spiritual Disciplines.

Intro:

Chances are you are among the massive majority of Christians who rarely or never fast. It's not because we haven't read our Bibles or sat under faithful preaching or heard about the power of fasting, or even that we don't genuinely want to do it. We just never actually get around to putting down the fork.

Part of it may be that we live in a society in which food is so ubiquitous that we eat not only when we don't need to, but sometimes even when we don't want to. We eat to share a meal with others, to build or grow relationships (good reasons), or just as a distraction from responsibility.

And of course, there are our own cravings and aches for comfort that keep us from the discomfort of fasting.

Not So Fast

Fasting is voluntarily going without food — or any other regularly enjoyed, good gift from God — for the sake of some spiritual purpose. It is markedly counter-cultural in our consumerist society, like abstaining from sex until marriage.

If we are to learn the lost art of fasting and enjoy its fruit, it will not come with our ear to the ground of society, but with Bibles open. Then, the concern will not be whether we fast, but when. Jesus assumes his followers will fast, and even promises it will happen. He doesn't say "if," but "when you fast" (Matthew 6:16). And he doesn't say his followers might fast, but "they will" (Matthew 9:15).

"Fasting is markedly counter-cultural in our consumerist society, like abstaining from sex until marriage." Tweet Share on Facebook

We fast in this life because we believe in the life to come. We don't have to get it all here and now, because we have a promise that we will have it all in the coming age. We fast from what we can see and taste, because we have tasted and seen the goodness of the invisible and infinite God — and are desperately hungry for more of him.

Radical, Temporary Measure

Fasting is for this world, for stretching our hearts to get fresh air beyond the pain and trouble around us. And it is for the battle against the sin and weakness inside us. We express our discontent with our sinful selves and our longing for more of Christ.

When Jesus returns, fasting will be done. It's a temporary measure, for this life and age, to enrich our joy in Jesus and prepare our hearts for the next — for seeing him face to face. When he returns, he will not call a fast, but throw a feast; then all holy abstinence will have served its glorious purpose and be seen by all for the stunning gift it was.

Until then, we will fast.

How to Start Fasting

Fasting is hard. It sounds much easier in concept than it proves to be in practice. It can be surprising how on-edge we feel when we miss a meal. Many an idealistic new fast-er has decided to miss a meal and only found our belly drove us to make up for it long before the next mealtime came.

Fasting sounds so simple, and yet the world, our flesh, and the devil conspire to introduce all sorts of complications that keep it from happening. In view of helping you start down the slow path to good fasting, here are six simple pieces of advice. These suggestions might seem pedantic, but the hope is that such basic counsel can serve those who are new at fasting or have never seriously tried it.

1. Start small.

Don't go from no fasting to attempting a weeklong. Start with one meal; maybe fast one meal a week for several weeks. Then try two meals, and work your way up to a daylong fast. Perhaps eventually try a two-day juice fast.

A juice fast means abstaining from all food and beverage, except for juice and water. Allowing yourself juice provides nutrients and sugar for the body to keep you operating, while also still feeling the effects from going without solid food. It's not recommended that you abstain from water during a fast of any length.

2. Plan what you'll do instead of eating.

Fasting isn't merely an act of self-deprivation, but a spiritual discipline for seeking more of God's fullness. Which means we should have a plan for what positive pursuit to undertake in the time it normally takes to eat. We spend a good portion of our day with food in front of us. One significant part of fasting is the time it creates for prayer and meditation on God's word or some act of love for others.

Before diving headlong into a fast, craft a simple plan. Connect it to your purpose for the fast. Each fast should have a specific spiritual purpose. Identify what that is and design a focus to replace the time you would have spent eating. Without a purpose and plan, it's not Christian fasting; it's just going hungry.

3. Consider how it will affect others.

Fasting is no license to be unloving. It would be sad to lack concern and care for others around us because of this expression of heightened focus on God. Love for God and for neighbor go together. Good fasting mingles horizontal concern with the vertical. If anything, others should even feel more loved and cared for when we're fasting.

So as you plan your fast, consider how it will affect others. If you have regular lunches with colleagues or dinners with family or roommates, assess how your abstaining will affect them, and let them know ahead of time, instead of just being a no-show, or springing it on them in the moment that you will not be eating.

Also, consider this backdoor inspiration for fasting: If you make a daily or weekly practice of eating with a particular group of friends or family, and those plans are interrupted by someone's travel or vacation or atypical circumstances, consider that as an opportunity to fast, rather than eating alone.

4. Try different kinds of fasting.

The typical form of fasting is personal, private, and partial, but we find a variety of forms in the Bible: personal and communal, private and public, congregational and national, regular and occasional, absolute and partial.

In particular, consider fasting together with your family, small group, or church. Do you share together in some special need for God's wisdom and guidance? Is there an unusual difficulty in the church, or society, for which you need God's intervention? Do you want to keep the second coming of Christ in view? Plead with special earnestness for God's help by linking arms with other believers to fast together.

5. Fast from something other than food.

Fasting from food is not necessarily for everyone. Some health conditions keep even the most devout from the traditional course. However, fasting is not limited to abstaining from food. As Martyn Lloyd-Jones said, "Fasting should really be made to include abstinence from anything which is legitimate in and of itself for the sake of some special spiritual purpose."

If the better part of wisdom for you, in your health condition, is not to go without food, consider fasting from television, computer, social media, or some other regular enjoyment that would bend your heart toward greater enjoyment of Jesus. Paul even talks about married

couples fasting from sex “for a limited time, that you may devote yourselves to prayer” (1 Corinthians 7:5).

6. Don't think of white elephants.

When your empty stomach starts to growl and begins sending your brain every “feed me” signal it can, don't be content to let your mind dwell on the fact that you haven't eaten. If you make it through with an iron will that says no to your stomach, but doesn't turn your mind's eye elsewhere, it says more about your love for food than your love for God.

Christian fasting turns its attention to Jesus or some great cause of his in the world. Christian fasting seeks to take the pains of hunger and transpose them into the key of some eternal anthem, whether it's fighting against some sin, or pleading for someone's salvation, or for the cause of the unborn, or longing for a greater taste of Jesus.

Sharpen Your Affections with Fasting

David Mathis – *David is the Pastor at Cities Church in Minneapolis/Saint Paul, and adjunct professor for Bethlehem College & Seminary. He is a husband, father of four, and author of Habits of Grace: Enjoying Jesus through the Spiritual Disciplines.*

Intro:

Fasting has fallen on hard times — at least, it seems, among our overstuffed bellies in the American church. I speak as one of the well-fed.

Sure, you'll find your exceptions here and there. Some pockets even prize the countercultural enough to steer their vehicles into the ditch of asceticism. But they are vastly outnumbered by the rest of us veering toward the opposite shoulder. The dangers of asceticism are great — surpassed only by those of over-indulgence.

Our problem might be how we think of fasting. If the accent is on abstinence, and fasting is some mere duty to perform, then only the most iron-willed among us will get over the social and self-pampering hurdles to actually put this discipline into practice.

But if we are awakened to see fasting for the joy it can bring, as a means of God's grace to strengthen and sharpen Godward affections, then we might find ourselves holding a powerful new tool for enriching our enjoyment of Jesus.

What Is Fasting?

Fasting is an exceptional measure, designed to channel and express our desire for God and our holy discontent in a fallen world. It is for those not satisfied with the status quo. For those who want more of God's grace. For those who feel truly desperate for God.

The Scriptures include many forms of fasting: personal and communal, public and private, congregational and national, regular and occasional, partial and absolute. Typically, we think of fasting as "a Christian's voluntary abstinence from food for spiritual purposes" (Don Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines*, 160).

We can fast from good things other than food and drink as well. Martyn Lloyd-Jones says, "Fasting should really be made to include abstinence from anything which is legitimate in and of itself for the sake of some special spiritual purpose." But normal Christian fasting means privately and occasionally choosing to go without food (though not water) for some special period of time (whether a day or three or seven) in view of some specific spiritual purpose.

According to Whitney, fasting's spiritual purposes include:

- strengthening prayer (Ezra 8:23; Joel 2:13; Acts 13:3)
- seeking God's guidance (Judges 20:26; Acts 14:23)
- expressing grief (1 Samuel 31:13; 2 Samuel 1:11–12)

seeking deliverance or protection (2 Chronicles 20:3–4; Ezra 8:21–23)
expressing repentance and returning to God (1 Samuel 7:6; Jonah 3:5–8)
humbling oneself before God (1 Kings 21:27–29; Psalm 35:13)
expressing concern for the work of God (Nehemiah 1:3–4; Daniel 9:3)
ministering to the needs of others (Isaiah 58:3–7)
overcoming temptation and dedicating yourself to God (Matthew 4:1–11)
expressing love and worship to God (Luke 2:37)

While the potential purposes are many, it is that last one which may be most helpful to focus our thoughts about fasting. It encompasses all the others and gets at the essence of what makes fasting such a mighty means of grace.

Whitney captures it like this: “Fasting can be an expression of finding your greatest pleasure and enjoyment in life from God” (176). And he quotes a helpful phrase from Matthew Henry, who says that fasting serves to “put an edge upon devout affections.”

Jesus Assumes We’ll Fast

While the New Testament includes no mandate that Christians fast on certain days or with specific frequency, Jesus clearly assumes we will fast. It’s a tool too powerful to leave endlessly on the shelf collecting dust. While many biblical texts mention fasting, the two most important come just chapters apart in Matthew’s Gospel.

The first is Matthew 6:16–18, which comes in sequence with Jesus’s teachings on generosity and prayer. Fasting is as basic to Christianity as giving to others and asking from God. The key here is that Jesus doesn’t say “if you fast,” but “when you fast.”

Second is Matthew 9:14–15, which Richard Foster says may be “the most important statement in the New Testament on whether or not Christians should fast today” (Celebration of Discipline, 53). Jesus’s answer is a resounding yes.

Then the disciples of John came to him, saying, “Why do we and the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?” And Jesus said to them, “Can the wedding guests mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them? The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast.” (Matthew 9:14–15)

When Jesus, our bridegroom, was here on earth among his disciples, it was a time for the discipline of feasting. But now that he is “taken away” from his disciples, “they will fast.” Not “they might, if they ever get around to it,” but “they will.” Which is confirmed by the pattern of fasting that emerged right away in the early church (Acts 9:9; 13:2; 14:23).

Put an Edge on Your Feelings

What makes fasting such a gift is its ability, with the help of the Holy Spirit, to focus our feelings and their expression toward God in prayer. Fasting walks arm in arm with prayer — as John Piper says, she is “the hungry handmaiden of prayer,” who “both reveals and remedies.”

She reveals the measure of food's mastery over us — or television or computers or whatever we submit to again and again to conceal the weakness of our hunger for God. And she remedies by intensifying the earnestness of our prayer and saying with our whole body what prayer says with the heart: I long to be satisfied in God alone! (When I Don't Desire God, 171)

That burn in your gut, that rolling fire in your belly, demanding that you feed it more food, signals game time for fasting as a means of grace. Only as we voluntarily embrace the pain of an empty stomach do we see how much we've allowed our belly to be our god (Philippians 3:19).

And in that gnawing ache of growing hunger is the engine of fasting, generating the reminder to bend our longings for food Godward and inspire intensified longings for Jesus. Fasting, says Piper, is the physical exclamation point at the end of the sentence, "This much, O God, I want you!" (Hunger for God, 25–26).

Will You Fast?

More could be said (like check with your doctor about any health concerns), but this spiritual discipline is simple enough. The question is, Will you avail yourself of this potent means of God's grace?

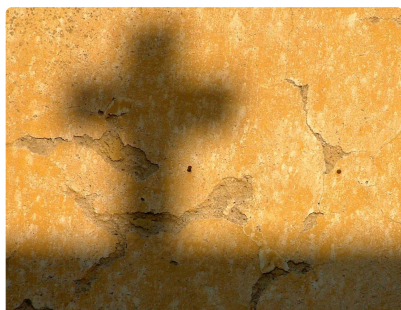
Fasting, like the gospel, isn't for the self-sufficient and those who feel they have it all together. It's for the poor in spirit. It's for those who mourn. For the meek. For those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. In other words, fasting is for Christians.

It is a desperate measure, for desperate times, among those who know themselves desperate for God.

Fasting

👤 Bill Gaultiere 📅 August 28, 2012 📁 Devotionals, Experiences For Groups and Retreats

🏷️ Tags: Fasting, Self-Denial



While fasting Jesus said, “My food, is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work” (John 4:34).

Fasting as a discipline for the spiritual life is a primary discipline of abstinence or self-denial. Properly understood, Fasting is Feasting (<http://www.soulshepherding.org/2009/08/fasting-is-feasting/>). Jesus shows us this and it’s why he taught us, “When you fast do not be somber, but be happy as you look to your Father in secret who will nourish and bless you” (paraphrased from Matthew 6:16-18).

Biblical fasting is not for physical health, but for prayer. The only way to understand the value of fasting is to practice it, looking to Jesus to help you.

Fasting Examples

The normal way to fast is to choose to go without food but drink plenty of water, perhaps for a 24-hour day. It’s important to know your body and learn about fasting before you begin a fast, especially with a longer fast of three days or more, because it can be dangerous to your health (e.g., if you’re diabetic or have digestive disorders). It’s especially important not to go too long without water.

Fasting just one meal or doing a partial fast are good ways to begin experimenting with fasting and they can be very effective. Partial fasts include limiting yourself to juices, abstaining from meat, eliminating sugar and junk foods, or eating significantly less than normal.

Also you can fast from things other than food, like media or shopping.

Fasting is About Prayer

The purpose of fasting is prayer. As you gain experience with fasting you will discover how dramatically it helps you to rely on God and to concentrate in pray. But the first order of business is to clear out whatever it is in your body and your life that is hindering your prayer connection to God. This is likely to be difficult! At first you may not feel that your fasting is helping you to pray.

Fasting is a purgative or cleansing discipline that surfaces inner sin, immaturity, and stress points. For instance, when you're learning to fast you're likely to have problems with hunger, fatigue, headaches, low frustration tolerance, or feeling deprived. You may discover that you've been relying on food — *more than Jesus* — to provide comfort, fullness, rewards, energy pick ups, or simply having something to look forward to.

Fasting and Prayer Experiments

To learn how to fast you need to not only read about it — studying the Scriptures and learning from spiritual mentors — you also need to *experience it personally*. Start small and to help you pray and rely on Jesus during your fast find some Scriptures to meditate on that relate to the purpose of your fast.

Here are some examples of how you might focus your prayers in a fast:

- Meditate on Hungry Heart Scriptures (<http://www.soulshpherd.org/2006/07/hungry-heart-scriptures/>) to

cultivate your hunger for God as you continually turn your thoughts from physical hunger to your deeper hunger for God and his Word.

- Use your experience of fasting to Watch and Pray (<http://www.soulshepherding.org/2010/05/watch-and-pray-before-you-slip/>) that in daily life you would rely on Jesus as your Source, not overeating, lusting, reacting in anger, using alcohol, overworking, judging other people, gossiping.
- Intercede in concentrated prayer for someone in need.
- Seek discernment from God about a decision.
- Practice relying on the Holy Spirit and not your natural energies and abilities as you preach, serve the hungry (physically or spiritually), or do your work for the glory of God.

Other Disciplines Related to Fasting

All of the main disciplines of abstinence in our Spiritual Disciplines List (<http://www.soulshepherding.org/2012/07/spiritual-disciplines-list/>) can be thought of as ways to fast from something: Sabbath (not being productive), Secrecy (not letting your good deeds be seen), Silence (not making or being around noise), Solitude (not being with people), and Submission (not seeking to have your way).

Additionally these Biblical disciplines of abstinence are related to fasting:

- **Chastity:** Abstaining from sexual gratification, even in marriage for a time, to be governed by God.
- **Sacrifice:** Forsaking a need or dream and trusting that God and his

provision are enough for you.

- **Vigil:** Going without sleep for a time in order to pray about a matter of urgent concern.

Additional Resources on Fasting

These resources will help you to better understand fasting from a Biblical perspective and how you can use this discipline to grow in the grace of Christ:

- “Hungry Heart Scriptures
(<http://www.soulshepherding.org/2006/07/hungry-heart-scriptures/> ?)“:
Soul Shepherding Bible Study
- “Fasting is Feasting (<http://www.soulshepherding.org/2009/08/fasting-is-feasting/>)“: Soul Shepherding Article/Class
- “Fasting is Feasting: a Scripture Prayer
(<http://www.soulshepherding.org/2010/02/fasting-is-feasting-prayer/>)“:
Soul Shepherding Experience
- *Unforsaken: With Jesus on the Stations of the Cross*
(<http://www.soulshepherding.org/store/unforsaken/>): 68 page booklet that will guide you on a prayer walk with Jesus and the ancient stations of his cross.

How Do I Take a Prayer Retreat?

9 key questions answered to help you meet with God.

Kevin and Karen Miller

How Do I Take a Prayer Retreat?

You may be wondering if you should spend extended time focusing on God, and how exactly you'd do that. Here are answers to the frequently asked questions.

Why would I take a prayer retreat?

1. Seeking God's face: You want time alone with God to get to know Him better (1 Chronicles 16:10-11).
2. Asking for understanding and guidance: You have a big decision, and you need God's wisdom and counsel (Psalm 73:24).
3. Bringing prayer burdens: Your heart is heavy, and you want to cry out to the Lord for help (Psalm 40:13).

We might add to this list: "4. Quieting your soul." Author Ruth Haley Barton tells of hitting a difficult time in her busy life. A wise person told her, "Ruth, you are like a jar of river water all shaken up. What you need is to sit still long enough that the sediment can settle and the water can become clear."

Does that picture describe you? Then you, like she, might recognize "an invitation to be still and know beyond my addiction to noise, words, people and performance-oriented activity."

What would I do on a prayer retreat?

No two people will organize a prayer retreat in the same way. There is no formula. Here are some options:

Pray: praise God, confess sins, lament, thank God for small and specific blessings in your life.
Listen: to praise songs, to nature, to the quiet.

Read: the Bible,

Fast: let your hunger lead you to God. Keep hydrated, though. You can keep up your blood sugar with juice or the limited diet of an Orthodox fast.

Nap: yes, your body needs rest, too. Napping on a prayer retreat is not cheating.

Move around: walk, kneel, stand, run, lie prostrate before the Lord.

Create: do an art project you enjoy. Or write your questions and prayers and needs--and what you believe God is saying to you.

If you want more structure for your prayer retreat, *Alone with the Lord: A guide for a personal day of prayer*, by Gordon T. Smith, lays out 4 simple prayer sessions during a day that runs from 8am to 5pm.

If I don't have a structure like that, how do I begin my day?

There is no one way, but you might start by talking to God about some of these questions--and listening for his response: What am I bringing into this retreat? What is my physical condition lately? What concerns and questions have been occupying my mind? What am I celebrating? What am I wondering about? Where do I hurt? Where have I seen God at work? What do I think God is inviting me into?

Many people feel that way, but most finish a prayer retreat thinking, "I wish I'd had more time." For your first retreat, try 2 hours or 4 hours. Then try a full day, from 8am to 5pm. Then try overnight.

Where would I go?

Some place with quiet, beauty, and some privacy. There may be retreat centers nearby. It should be a place that makes you feel alive, and that allows you to unplug from daily demands. If you can't afford a retreat center, or can't stand the thought of being alone, you might try a park, an arboretum, the chapel at school or university, or a corner in a library or coffee shop.

What if I'm not very good at hearing from God?

Most Christians are better at hearing from God than they think they are. Write down what you think you're hearing, and then share that with a pastor or mentor.

For guidance and encouragement, read Dallas Willard's *Hearing God* or Jan Johnson's *Learning to Hear God: a personal retreat guide*.

Do I have to unplug from email and Facebook?

Yep.

Can I bring a friend to pray with me?

Sure. Spend part of the day praying alone, and part of the day praying with each other.

What should I expect to happen?

- Lay down any expectation that you have "a really spiritual day" or "God will really meet you." You can tell the Lord what you need from Him, but go in with the primary goal to be close to Him. Don't expect dramatic, visible "results." Usually, prayer retreats have a quiet influence that may be more noticeable in days to come.
- If you go in open, listening, and desiring God, you will be met by God.

Kevin Miller is vice president of pastoral resources for *Christianity Today* and a teaching pastor at *Church of the Resurrection* in Wheaton, Illinois. Karen Miller is a leadership coach with *StrengthenYourLeadership.com*. This article first appeared on www.churchrez.org