

How We Grow: Implementing the Spiritual Disciplines

Week 2 - Fasting

March 24, 2024

I. Sharing Time

- A. How was your experience practicing the discipline of prayer this week? As you practiced throughout the week, did you notice or experience anything surprising, challenging, comforting, confusing, helpful, or encouraging? Invite your class to share with the people beside them, and then open it up for sharing with the class at large.

II. Teaching Time (*Teaching Video provided*)

- A. Teaching Narrative: This week's spiritual discipline we are studying as a church family is fasting. We find examples of fasting throughout the biblical narrative. It was a regular part of the Jewish culture in the first century and a central rhythm of the life of the early church. There are a number of examples in the Old Testament of the people of God fasting and praying as they sought to receive strength or guidance from the Lord (1 Samuel 7:6; Nehemiah 1:4; Esther 4:16).¹ We also find that the early church incorporated fasting as a part of their regular worship (Acts 13:2–3). And of course, we find that in preparation for His ministry, Jesus is led into the wilderness to fast for forty days.

There are a number of ways people define fasting that include fasting from food, pleasure, or some sort of technology or social media. However, biblical fasting is always connected to fasting from food or water and of course is tied to spiritual intentions. Fasting is an act of self-denial. Calhoun shares that it is “an opportunity to lay down an appetite—an appetite for food, for media, for shopping...Through self-denial we begin to recognize what controls us.”² Fasting trains our bodies to not get what they want. We deny ourselves in order to receive from God. Richard Foster shares, “In experiences of fasting we are not so much abstaining from food as we are feasting on the word of God. Fasting is feasting!”³ Dallas Willard reminds us that as we fast we are able to recognize

¹ Adele Ahlberg Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook: Practices That Transform Us* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 246.

² Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook*, 246–247.

³ Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth* (New York: HarperOne, 1998), 55.

our “utter dependence” on the Lord.⁴ It is he who sustains us—who keeps us going. He is the source of all of life—beyond food! And so as we fast, we are able to prayerfully recognize this dependence.

Jesus teaches us about fasting by reminding us to stay connected to the heart of the discipline—connection with and reliance on God. He teaches, “When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show others they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to others that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.” Fasting is not meant to bring you clout. It is not to be used to impress others or to get people to feel sorry for yourself. It is an act of submission and sacrifice and should always be connected to prayer. So instead of going out for lunch or going to the grocery store, take some time to walk and talk with the Lord. Or instead of picking up your phone recenter yourself toward the heart of God. We fast so we can feast on the Bread of Life.

- B. Here’s an initial question to discuss as a class: Have you fasted before? Create some space for your class to share about one another’s experiences with fasting.

III. Discussion Time (Questions Provided by Jason)

- A. Today’s message focused on the spiritual discipline of fasting. Many American Christians admit that they are unfamiliar with this practice. Do you believe we have under-emphasized fasting in modern church culture? What do we lose when so many of us are unfamiliar with this biblical practice?
- B. Last week we noted that prayer is simply keeping company with God. Building on that idea, Jason talked about fasting as “body prayer” and as “laying down an appetite in order to keep company with God.” What do you make of those descriptions of fasting? If you’re somewhat unfamiliar with fasting, do you find it helpful to think of fasting as praying with your body? Take some time to talk about these ideas. For those who are more familiar with the practice of fasting, what have you learned about God through your times of fasting?
- C. Read Matthew 4:4. Jesus quotes this line from Deuteronomy 8:3 while He is in the midst of a forty day fast. What do you make of this? We tend to think that fasting makes us weak. But Jesus fasts in preparation for the devil’s temptation. Is it possible that fasting makes Jesus stronger, rather than weaker? Rather than filling Himself with food, does it

⁴ Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1988), 167.

seem that Jesus feasts on the Word of God during His fast? What are the implications for us?

- D. Read Matthew 6:16-18. What distinctions does Jesus make between hypocritical fasting and legitimate fasting?
 - E. Read Philippians 3:18-21. What does Paul mean when he talks about those whose bellies have become their god? How does this tie in to fasting?
 - F. Jason said, "Fasting is important because it's about self-denial -- and self-denial is at the heart of the gospel." Discuss this idea together. How is self-denial at the heart of the gospel? What teaching from Jesus comes to mind here? How does Jesus live out denial of self?
 - G. Biblical fasting is about the temporary denial of food to the stomach. Think about other areas of our lives. Instead of fasting with our stomachs, what would it mean to fast with our ears? Our eyes?
 - H. Read Matthew 9:14-15. What does Jesus say about fasting in this passage? Does fasting help prepare us for the return of our King?
 - I. In "The Cost of Discipleship," Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes, "Jesus takes it for granted that His disciples will observe the pious custom of fasting. Strict exercise of self-control is an essential feature of the Christian life. Such customs have only one purpose -- to make the disciples more ready and cheerful to accomplish those things which God would have done." What do you make of this quote? What stands out to you as the most meaningful part?
 - J. Talk about some ways you would be willing to experiment with fasting this week. Would you be willing to fast through one meal? Or are you feeling a nudge toward another form of fasting (from media, from something else)?
- IV. Invitation of the Week (**Invitation Video Provided**): Choose one of these fasting practices and walk through it one day this week. You can either practice this discipline individually or within the context of one of your communities (with your spouse, family, roommates, or group of friends). Remember to stay connected to the heart of the discipline of fasting.
- A. Fast from food until sundown one day this week, focusing on offering yourself to Jesus.⁵
 - 1. Pick a day that works for you. Try to choose a day that provides an opportunity for you to really slow down to connect with God.
 - 2. If possible, pick a day to do this together as a community; this will help to encourage and enliven your practice. You can encourage one another, as you rely on the Spirit!

⁵This is adapted from John Mark Comer's fasting companion guide: <https://www.practicingtheway.org/companion-guides>.

3. Fast until sundown that day. Then eat a simple meal in gratitude. Drink lots of water to stay hydrated, and drink coffee if you'd like, but just have it black. Coffee is 99.9% water and will not keep your body from entering the fasting state.
 4. If a full day is too much for your body or soul, start smaller. Skip breakfast and break the fast at lunch or 3 pm. Remember: The goal is to make fasting a part of your regular life, not try it once or twice, hate it, and never try it again. Start where you are, not where you feel like you "should" be.
 5. In the time you'd normally be grocery shopping, cooking, eating, or cleaning, give yourself to prayer. Let your desire for food point you to Jesus as you open yourself to Him. The more time you can give to prayer and reflection and the less busy you are that day, the better. Make it your goal to slow down the day you fast, and be present to your body, and to God, as much as you possibly can.
 6. Resist the urge to judge your experience. Release thoughts like, "I liked it; I disliked it; I felt close to God; I didn't feel close to God." Just let the experience of fasting be what it is; and offer it to God in love.
 7. In your dedicated times of prayer, or each time a hunger pain comes, you may want to pray Romans 12:1–2, or simply, "God, I offer my body to you in worship. Please transform me."
 8. As you go about your day, just enjoy God's company and attempt to open your heart to him all throughout the day.
 9. Take time to reflect on the ways you experienced the Lord through this practice.
- B. Unplugging—An alternative for those unable to fast from food (***Invitation Video Provided***)
1. So often, one of the biggest reasons we are unable to experience the Lord is because of the way our mind and our body is distracted. Unplugging is a physical way that we can intentionally release one of those attachments. Here are a couple ways you can practice this discipline.
 - a) As a family, declare a time of the day that is technology-free. Dinnertime or evening and nighttime is a great option. You might consider keeping the family's phone in a central location to help hold each other accountable.
 - b) Another option is a media fast—social media, television, streaming, or video games. Allow each family member to choose what they would like to give up for the week or for a day.
 2. As you unplug, be intentional with your extra time as an opportunity to connect with God together and individually.

3. As you unplug, use the time you'd normally be using your cell phone or watching TV to give yourself to prayer. Let your desire for your device point you to Jesus as you open yourself to Him
4. In your dedicated times of prayer, or each time you want to look at your phone, you may want to pray Romans 12:1–2, or simply, “God, I offer my body and my mind to you in worship. Please transform me.”
5. As you go about your day, just enjoy God’s company and attempt to open your heart to him so He can transform you.