



# FASTING

a practice guidebook

*“The greatest adversary of love to God is not His enemies but His gifts. And the most deadly appetites are not for the poison of evil, but for the simple pleasures of the earth. For when these replace an appetite for God himself, the idolatry is scarcely recognizable, and almost incurable.”*

*John Piper, A Hunger for God*

Fasting is out of vogue. It may be the most misunderstood, abused, and least used of all the practices of Jesus. However, that wasn't always the case. We see just about every major hero of the Bible fasting, and it's basically the first recorded event we have in the adult life of Jesus. It was part of the early church, practiced for many centuries. In fact, for much of church history, large numbers of people in the church fasted *every Wednesday and Friday*. It's not until recently that the church, at least in large numbers, has stopped fasting.

Of course, in a world driven by pleasure, luxury, and excess, that's not a huge surprise. The cultural around us pushes us to satisfy our desires, not starve them. The good things of God (like food, but certainly not limited to food) are enjoyed without limits, making gluttony and Sabbath-breaking two of the least talked about and most transgressed sins in modern Christendom. We have feasted without the recognition that the feast was to be balanced with the fast. In so doing, we have become controlled by the gifts rather than the Giver.

Fasting, maybe more than any other spiritual practice, is subject to many wrong motives. Whether weight-loss, body cleansing, time/money savings, or the like, fasting can easily be driven by the wrong thing. Therefore, this practice series will focus much less on the “how” (which is pretty straightforward anyway) and instead will have a steady focus on the “why.” This is true of both the short teaching series as well as this booklet. (You can find the teachings at [www.yorkalliance.org/sermons](http://www.yorkalliance.org/sermons)) The ideal way to engage these truths is within a small community who can journey with you. You'll find that this practice guide, while engaged individually, will be best utilized by an individual in community. Therefore, while there are certainly individual parts of this practice, you are also encouraged to engage them with your Discipleship Partner(s) as well as your Community Group.

The specific exercises in this booklet will stretch over the next three weeks. The first two weeks will be supported by Sunday morning teaching, while the third week will build on those teachings for a final aspect of this practice. These weeks will lead up to the Lenten season, during which a Lenten experience can be engaged. Some ideas for this experience are detailed at the end of this practice guide.

I have tried to cite specific ideas and quotations where appropriate. Beyond those citations, these exercises have been developed in heavy reliance on several sources: Fasting by Scot McKnight, God's Chosen Fast by Arthur Wallis, A Hunger for God by John Piper, Celebration of Discipline by Richard Foster, Spirit of the Disciplines by Dallas Willard, and the “Fasting” section of [www.practicingtheway.org](http://www.practicingtheway.org).

The weeks will be laid out as follows:

- Week One: To Feed on God
- Week Two: To Agree with God
- Week Three: To Commune With God
- Lenten Experience: A Chosen Fast

As you engage these exercises, let me encourage you at the front end to beware of the parallel temptations of legalism and license. Fasting can be a hotbed for legalism, making the apprentice of Jesus arrogant and self-righteous. It's to you Jesus says, “When you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites... anoint your head and wash your face, that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret.” (Matthew 6:16-18) However, the onset of hunger pains can also be a pathway to license, celebrating our “freedom” by satisfying every appetite of the flesh. It's to you Paul says, “I discipline by body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified.” (1 Corinthians 9:27)

Fasting is not a way to earn favor with God. It's not a way that you can make your prayers heard. It's not a trendy weight-loss plan or a cleanse for the health conscious. As we'll see, it's a pathway for us to feed on God, to agree with God, and to commune with God.

## Week One: To Feed on God

*“The flesh resists this daily humiliation, first by frontal attack, and later by hiding itself under the words of the Spirit (i.e., in the name of ‘evangelical liberty’). We claim liberty from all legal compulsion, from self-martyrdom and mortification and play this off against the proper evangelical use of discipline and asceticism; we thus excuse our self-indulgence and irregularity in prayer, in meditation and in our bodily life. But the contrast between our behavior and the word of Jesus is all too painfully evident. We forget that discipleship means estrangement from the world, and we forget the real joy and freedom which are the outcome of a devout rule of life.”*

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*

Bonhoeffer saw clearly the way that we fail to engage the lifestyle of Jesus, instead giving in to the deceptiveness of our flesh. In so doing, we eat—but we’re not truly satisfied. Jesus, in his interaction with the disciples after He encountered the woman at the well in John 4, said to them, “I have food to eat that you do not know about.” (vs. 31) Sadly, many of us still don’t know about it, even though it is readily available to us. He later explained, “My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work.” (vs. 34)

Foremost among the many spiritual benefits of fasting is learning to “eat” the spiritual food that Jesus has made available to us. When Jesus fasted for 40 days and 40 nights in the wilderness, Matthew tells us that “he was hungry.” (Matthew 4:2) However, the Scriptures don’t tell us that He was weak—we wrongly infer that. Instead, we see Him tempted by the enemy of our souls, and in one of His moments of greatest earthly *strength* He resists. Although He hadn’t eaten physical food, He had learned to feed on God, doing His will and being filled with His Spirit.

During this first week, we will seek to engage fasting from food and learning to feed on our relationship with Jesus. If you are unable to fast from food for some medical reason, other types of fasts will work, but a food fast is recommended if possible. Fasting has traditionally been from food and while other types of fasts can be powerful tools (see the Lenten Experience), food fasts have a special role in loosening our ties to the world and strengthening our connection to God.

1. Choose a period to fast, with 24 hours being a good starting point. If you are part of a Community Group, it’s recommended that you all fast at the same time, maybe starting with the evening of your meeting and stretching through lunch the following day, breaking your fast at dinner. Or you might choose a slightly longer fast, skipping three meals in one day and breaking your fast at breakfast the following day. On the other side, a “normal” fast within the Christian tradition is from sunup to sundown, skipping breakfast and lunch and eating a late dinner.
2. Most will choose a water fast, drinking only black coffee, tea with no milk or sugar, or water throughout. Others with less experience fasting may choose a juice fast, still gaining nourishment from juice but avoiding solid food. The choice is yours!
3. As you fast, each time you feel a hunger pang, think about food, or pass through a normal mealtime, use that time as an opportunity for prayer. Ask God to starve your flesh and feed your spirit. Consider using imaginative prayer to picture yourself drawing strength directly from God.
4. Consider journaling throughout your fast, keeping short records of your experience. Also, you may want to “feed” on the Word of God, reading regularly throughout the day instead of your meals.
5. As you meet with your Community Group or Discipleship Partner, process your experience and pray together.

### Questions for Community:

- How does this practice feel to you? Why do you think that is?
- What is your sense of God’s presence during your times of fasting? Did you experience Him in a different way?
- What’s an area of your life in which you would love to gain more freedom? Did you have a sense that fasting helped that or made it worse? (Sometimes flesh desires are worse early on!)
- How did you feel coming out of your fast?
- In what ways might this become a regular part of your spiritual journey?

## Week Two: To Agree with God

*“It falls on the shoulders of everyone, together, to respond to the needs of others by divesting ourselves of some resources for the common good. When God’s people look around and fail to see justice and righteousness and salvation and deliverance, and instead they see poverty and injustice, God’s people should respond [by fasting].”*

*“The Israelites were told to make their life uncomfortable for an entire day in order to bring their entire person into harmony with the gravity of sin and the need to turn from sin toward God.”*

Scot McKnight, *Fasting*

There are times that even the most intense spirituality (sometimes especially the most intense spirituality) results in a personal, self-centered faith that neglects the kind of community and society that God desires for His people. Isaiah 58 confronts this kind of practice and quite forcefully reminds us that God isn’t impressed with the *act* of our fasting, but He’s looking for the *heart* of our fasting.

Fasting as a spiritual practice is not intended to simply have an inward dynamic—the Scriptures call us to be outward in our fasting as well. When we experience hunger and the suffering of fasting, we are standing in solidarity with the poor and persecuted. When we miss the joy and satisfaction of a good meal, we experience the loss and grief that our sin causes to the life for which God has redeemed us. Fasting becomes a practice that trains our heart to agree with God’s way of seeing the world.

When our fasting extends outside the walls of our community to engage the poor, we reflect God’s heart for the world. When our fasting is paired with the sorrow and repentance that come from sin, we reflect God’s heart for one another.

1. Begin again this week by choosing a day and time for your fast. Engaging your fast along with your community has a powerful impact, but it’s not absolutely necessary. Choose a 12 to 24-hour period to fast (longer if you desire) and develop a plan for that time.

2. Take time during your fast to repent with intentionality. Don’t just do an inventory of known sin, although that’s a great place to start. Consider using some liturgical tools, such as the General Confession, to prompt your heart. Also, confess and repent on behalf of the church (locally, domestically, and globally) as well our country. A cursory reading of the newspaper or the website of any new outlet should give you plenty of material.
3. Set this time of fasting aside as a time to cry out in prayer for those who are suffering and experiencing injustice both in York and around the world. Consider doing a prayer walk through some areas of the city that you might not travel naturally as part of your daily routine. Ask God for His kingdom to come and His will to be done in York as it is in heaven.
4. Finally, calculate the money that you would be spending on food and drink if you would not have been fasting during this time and give that money to those in need. You might do that individually or choose to combine your money with that of the rest of your community. The goal is not to give it to the church, but to give it directly to those in need. Also consider serving with that organization during the time of your fast if possible.

### Questions for Community:

- Fasting together as a response to local, national, or global issues can be a powerful tie together for us as a community. Are there specific issues or concerns that move you individually or corporately in a way that you could respond with a fast?
- How might this fast make an impact on this issue either spiritually, materially/practically, or both?
- Have you considered fasting in response to your sorrow for sin, either personally or corporately? Why or why not?
- What are some areas of societal sin or injustice that capture your hearts and passions? How might this community step into those areas?

## Week Three: To Commune with God

*“The man who never fasts is no more in the way to heaven than the man who never prays... Fasting is a help to prayer; particularly when we set apart larger portions of time for private prayer. Then especially it is that God is often pleased to lift up the souls of his servants above all the things of earth...”*

*John Wesley, various sermons*

The mystery of fasting is really connected to the general mystery of prayer. Jesus clearly taught His disciples to understand the Father as approachable, loving, and responsive to their concerns and requests. We also understand God to be completely sovereign and unchanging. Prayer, particularly intercession, holds these two seemingly opposite realities in tension with one another.

Fasting, then, layers mystery upon mystery. The Bible teaches us that we are not simply spirits *in* a body, but that we are spirit *and* body. One aspect of fasting is that we are learning to pray with our whole being, spirit and body, not simply praying with our spirits. It’s like the great hunger that we have for answered prayer is not just in our heart and mind but moves into our body as well.

When we engage prayer through fasting, we are learning to engage our entire self in prayer. The intentional act of fasting, going beyond simply skipping a meal to take time to pray, creates internal intimacy with God. It’s like clearing out the room of your soul to give God more space to engage us. Because we are in relationship with God, we hear Him better when we are focused on Him with the totality of our lives—when the distractions are removed, we can hear better.

John Piper equates fasting to a “homesickness for God... Half of Christian fasting is that our physical appetite is lost because our homesickness for God is so intense. The other half is that our homesickness for God is threatened because our physical appetites are so intense.” The combination of these is the best explanation I know for how fasting impacts our prayer lives. Fasting is a way of expressing our hunger for God and eliminating the distractions that, at the same time, keep us from being hungry for Him.

1. Choose a day and time for your fast. Choosing to engage it along with your community has a powerful impact, but it’s not absolutely necessary. Choose a 12 to 24-hour period to fast (longer if you desire) and develop a plan for that time.
2. Specifically determine an area in which you are desiring to hear from God this week. Consider:
  - **Repentance, crisis, or grief** (all of which may have been part of last week’s exercise for you, but can be engaged again)
  - **Seeking to *change* God’s mind in a situation.** These are areas of deep intercession where you long to see reality change or you need to wrestle with God about something in your life.
  - **Seeking to *know* God’s mind in a situation.** This is setting aside time and energy to hear God’s thoughts about a decision, a pathway, a relationship, or a situation in which you desperately need to hear what God wants to happen.
3. As you fast, allow your hunger to prompt you to prayer. Along the way, listen for Him: write down anything you believe that you are hearing, even if it seems insignificant.
4. As you reflect on what you hear, consider whether it lines up with and undergirds the Scriptures. Consider asking someone from your community to pray with you over what you’ve heard and to give feedback. Then, as you determine what God has said, consider how you will respond to His voice and direction.

### Questions for Community

- How has your view of fasting changed over the course of the last three weeks?
- Did fasting make it easier or more difficult to hear the voice of God? Why is that?
- What has the Spirit revealed to you this week, and how will you respond?
- What are some ways that a practice like this could be part of your regular life rhythm?

## Lenten Experience: A Chosen Fast

*“Dear people of God: the first Christians observed with great devotion the days of our Lord’s passion and resurrection, and it became the custom of the Church to prepare for them by a season of penitence and fasting. Thereby, the whole congregation was put in mind of the message of pardon and absolution set forth in the Gospel of our Savior, and of the need which all Christians continually have to renew their repentance and faith. I invite you, therefore, in the name of Christ, to the observance of a holy Lent, by self-examination and repentance; by prayer, fasting, and self-denial; and by reading and meditating on God’s holy Word.”*

*“Invitation to the Observance of the Lenten Discipline”  
Book of Common Prayer*

One of the most common Lenten practices is directly tied to fasting. Christians and non-Christians alike choose to “give something up” for Lent—often something luxurious and attractive—in order to mark the season and in some instances, to pray. Whether meat on Fridays, chocolate or dessert, or caffeine in its various forms, there is a long-standing tradition of abstinence during the Lenten season.

Many Christians, particularly in recent years, have also found power in the *addition* of specific practices during the Lenten season. Practices such as increased Bible reading (the entire New Testament during Lent), generosity and simplicity (radically “cleaning out” possessions by 50% or more, selling them, and giving them to the poor), silence and solitude (spending 30 minutes a day in silence simply being in the presence of God and listening), along with many others have created powerful Lenten experiences.

The invitation this year is to develop a combination of both: abstaining from food or some other normal aspect of life while adding a specific practice to your life during this season. There are endless ideas and combinations that can be engaged, and because we are all different, there are unique practices that will have a powerful impact on each one of us. Therefore, the following suggestions are just ideas and that can get you thinking and praying about a Lenten practice that is right for you as we engage this season this year.

- **Coffee and Community:** Consider giving up coffee (or tea) for the season. If you do and are a regular drinker, be prepared for headaches and some other side effects as your body detoxes from caffeine! Also, consider adding intentional community to your life during this season: choose a night that you will have someone over for dinner (same people or different people each week), commit to an intentional conversation each week with a friend, etc.
- **Fasting and Feasting on the Word:** Continue the practice that you began for the last three weeks and fast at least one 24-hour period each week. During that time, increase your Bible reading. Consider either reading the entire New Testament during Lent or reading the four gospels four times each. Journal your thoughts and prayers as they are inspired by the Word or recognized through your hunger.
- **Social Media and Simplicity:** One popular “fast” in recent years is to fast from all social media, or non-essential/work-related internet usage. Consider combining this with radical simplicity—choosing not to purchase anything except for food and necessities and getting rid of significant amounts of clothing and other unnecessary belongings. You can then either donate them or sell them and give the money to those in need. The best part is that you can’t brag on Facebook!
- **“Daniel” fast and Discipline:** Another popular choice in recent years is the “Daniel” fast, based on the eating plan laid out in the first chapter of Daniel. Diet is restricted to fruits and vegetables with no added sweeteners or chemicals, although there are variations. You could choose to do this several days a week or for the entire time excepting Sundays. This can be combined with another discipline that has traditionally been a struggle for you: solitude and silence for extroverts, hospitality for introverts, practicing the Sabbath, etc.

These are just a few ideas—there are hundreds of possibilities. Consider praying intentionally about the practice that would be best for you to engage this year, and then joining with others in the practice. Even if you are doing different things, having partners in the journey is both helpful and encouraging! Make sure that your primary goal is not health or weight loss, but to journey more closely with Jesus through this season. Use the time and tools to draw your heart to Him. Journaling, discussion, and prayer should be key aspects to your Lenten experience.