

# Fasting



Fasting is one of the least practiced and most misunderstood of the spiritual practices. We often think of fasting as prayer on steroids. Sometimes fasting is portrayed as a hyped up way to pray when we really mean business. It is even suggested sometimes that if you fast you're more likely to have your prayer request taken up by God.

The practice of fasting, like all the other spiritual disciplines, is first and foremost, an invitation to fully awake, fully alive.

Rob Moll wrote, "Fasting and all other spiritual disciplines are not simply reminders of other more important things. We may use hunger like a string tied to our fingers, prompting us to pray or consider the plight of the poor. But more importantly, spiritual disciplines shape us in deep ways. Because our brains—at the very least—mediate, process, and experience our spiritual lives, the disciplines can train us to become more attuned to God himself. Fasting then teaches and enables us to live by deeper truths and in accord with a deeper reality than the basic cravings of our bodies."

<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2012/marchweb-only/science-lent-fasting.html>

When we fast from food, we are called to become keenly aware of our relationship to food and to pay attention to our own hungers. When we fast from the comforts of our lives, the invitation is to stretch ourselves and become present to what happens when we don't have our usual securities to rely upon. Fasting forces us to deal with the "body" part of us as well as the spirit. We are integrated beings. What we think, how we feel, how we serve - these are all deeply intertwined with our bodies. If we want to serve God with our whole self we need disciplines in our life that deal with our bodies too.

Fasting can also serve as a mirror to our hearts and an appropriate tool for self-awareness. "Fasting is an opportunity to lay down an appetite—an appetite for food, for media, for shopping. This act of self-denial may not seem huge- it's just a meal or a trip to the mall-but it brings us face to face with the hunger at the core of our being. Fasting exposes how we try to keep empty hunger at bay and gain a sense of well-being by devouring creature comforts. Through self-denial we begin to recognize what controls us." (Adele Ahlberg Calhoun, *The Spiritual Disciplines Handbook*, p. 220.)

In other words, fasting allows us to "let go of an appetite in order to seek God on matters of deep concern for others, myself and the world." (Adele Ahlberg Calhoun, *The Spiritual Disciplines Handbook*. p. 216.)

Jesus assumed seemed to indicate that fasting should be part of the normal rhythms of our lives. In Matthew 6 he didn't say, "If you fast..." but "when you fast..." (Matt. 6:16-18)

Scripture offers many examples when fasting is appropriate:

- Ezra 10:6 – Mourning
- Ester 4:16 – intercession
- Daniel 9:3 – Prayer
- Joel 2:15 – Community
- Jonah 3:7 – Repentance
- Luke 2:37 – Worship
- Acts 13: 1-3 – Decrement
- Matthew 4:1-4 – Obedience

### **Misconceptions about fasting:**

- Using it as a technique or trying to bribe God into helping... or earn his favor (Isaiah 58:3-7)
- Using it for putting on a show, for the approval and applause of people (Matthew 6:16)
- Thinking fasting is "magic" and looking for an immediate "payoff"
- Turning it into a legalistic practice and judging others against your own "spirituality"
- In its most classical form, fasting is a whole-body response of grief to the way things are. Scot McKnight wrote, "The focus in the Christian tradition is not 'if you fast you will get,' but 'when this happens, God's people fast.'" In other words, we fast not as a way to get something in return, but as a natural response to the injustices in the world. Some Scriptural examples of reasons God's people fasted in the Bible are: loss in battle (Judges 20:26); relief from famine (Jeremiah 14:1-12; Joel 1:14); the death of a leader (1 Samuel 31:13; 1 Chronicles 1-:12; 2 Samuel 1:12); personal sorrow (1 Samuel 1:7-8; Job 3:24; Psalm 42:1-5); the sin of the community (Daniel 9:3-14; Nehemiah 1:4-7); personal sin (2 Samuel 12:16-23; 1 Kings 21:27-29).

In this way, fasting is a way our bodies express the deep longing of our souls in the face of brokenness.

- Falling into superficial religion by making fasting just a "spiritual" thing while ignoring practices of love, compassion and justice for the poor. In the face of our tendency to separate our practice of personal spiritual disciplines from God's preferential concern for the poor, God asks with stunning clarity, "Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—when you see the naked, to clothe him, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?" (58:6-7). This primary idea of connecting fasting and the poor in Isaiah

58 is more than metaphorical. In Isaiah, God isn't just saying you should fast to do something good for others. He is saying something more than that. God is saying he will ignore your fasting if you are treating other people unjustly.

The God who "upholds the cause of the oppressed and gives food to the hungry;" the one who "watches over the alien and sustains the fatherless and the widow" (Ps. 146:7, 9); the God "defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the alien, giving him food and clothing," is the same God who calls us to a life of radical holiness and commands that His people "seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow (Isa. 1:17)."

#### **Guidelines for fasting from food:**

- Do not fast from food if you are sick, pregnant (or nursing), or have other health issues like diabetes or cancer
- If you are new to fasting, start by fast for one meal instead of a whole day
- If you are looking to fast for a long period of time, consult a health professional/doctor before doing so
- Drink plenty of water and fluids

#### **What to do in the time you set apart for fasting:**

- Replace the time when you would normally eat with prayer and Scripture reading. The Psalms are a good place to start.
- Have access to a journal, writing down your thoughts, emotions, and feelings. Journaling your prayers and what God is speaking into your life.
- Offer your hunger to God and stay open and responsive to the Spirit's promptings.
- Relax. Be still and listen.

#### **Resources:**

- *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook* by Adele Ahlberg Calhoun (pp 218-222; 281-282)
- *The Celebration of Discipline* by Richard Foster (pp 47-61)
- *Sacred Rhythms* by Ruth Haley Barton (pp 78-90 talk about the role the body plays in spiritual disciplines)
- *The Spirit of the Disciplines* by Dallas Willard (pp 28-94 talk about the unity between our body and soul)
- *Fasting* by Scot McKnight