

Fasting

“Prayer needs fasting for its full growth... Prayer is the one hand with which we grasp the invisible; fasting, the other, with which we let loose and cast away the visible.” With Christ in the School of Prayer by Andrew Murray

What is Fasting?

Fasting is, at its core, the deliberate renunciation of the physical world to focus ourselves more intently on God. The practice of fasting can be expressed in a variety of methods, but it is most commonly understood in Christian tradition to be a set period of time without food for the purposes of prayer and seeking God.

Why Fast?

One of the first questions Jesus addressed when he mentions fasting is motivation. Why are you fasting? (Matt. 6:16-18) The context of Jesus' comments during the Sermon on the Mount fall within a culture where public expressions of religion were not just common, but expected. The question of whether or not you should fast was already answered in Jesus' day. Of course you'll fast; that was expected. Jesus jumped directly to the issue of motivation, “Why are you fasting?”

For our purposes, it might be even more helpful to ask, “Why should you fast?” After all, the self-absorbed culture we rub elbows with every day would struggle to understand why we would give up something as basic as food. We fast, not because we're commanded to or because it is expected of us, but because we seek to distance ourselves from our physical world and turn our attention fully on God. Our senses, both physical and spiritual, become dulled with the distractions around us. Think for a moment how much time and thought we will expend on our next meal. Paul warned of those whose “god is their stomach” ... who set their mind on earthly things. When we fast we are aligning our priorities and reminding ourselves that our “citizenship is in heaven” (Phil. 3:19, 20). Fasting is a very tangible and immediate way of taking control, albeit temporarily, away from our impulses, cravings, and expectations for immediate gratification. We fast to turn our face and our hearts to God.

What Fasting Is Not...

Since fasting is so often linked with intercessory prayer, it may be seen by some as a means of letting God know we're really serious about something so he'll hear us. As foolish as it may sound, we're really trying to bend God's will to our own. Such a motivation is a misunderstanding of both spiritual disciplines. We fast and pray so that we may align our selves with the mind of Christ, not because we're trying to get him to see our side of things. Prayer changes things, yes, but remember that the first thing it changes is us. Effective intercessory prayer and fasting is begun by the Holy Spirit in our hearts and is already in step with God's will from the moment we awaken to it.

Fasting is also not for the purposes of promoting or maintaining physical health, although there may be some physical benefit obtained from it. It is not dieting for spiritual reasons.

Finally, although there is mention in the Scriptures of public or corporate fasts, the practice is normally done in secret. It is not done for recognition or as a barometer of spirituality. That is why Jesus was so concerned about our motivation. This is not to say we cannot practice fasting as a part of a group or with others, but remember that fasting always centers on God, not ourselves. The corporate fasts found in Scripture were generally for the purposes of group repentance or petitions for God's guidance.

Practical Matters

- Like most of the spiritual disciplines, fasting is a skill we learn, not something we're gifted with. Grow into the practice gradually. Start with a short fast of one or two meals and see how your body responds to it. Make adjustments to both your fasting routines and your daily schedule to find what works best for you. Once you have experienced some success take on larger spans of time without eating. Taking on too long of a fast early on in your efforts may lead to discouragement.
- Although fasting is a *spiritual* discipline, it has very real *physical* affects on us. Beyond the expected hunger pains, some who fast may experience headaches, fatigue, and even bad breath! Providing there is not a more serious medical issue behind these symptoms, they are generally short-lived and are nothing more than our body crying out for the pampering we too often grant it. We don't have to put oil on our heads like Jesus mentioned to cover the fact that were fasting, but Altoids and other reasonable steps might help.
- Fasting is not for everyone. You may have physical limitations that prevent you from engaging in this discipline. If in doubt, consult your physician to be certain, but remember that fasting is quite simply a means of focusing more intently on Christ and his desires for us. If the fasting of food isn't possible for you, what else is Christ calling you to fast? What other distraction is there in your life that if you gave it up temporarily would allow you to turn your attention more fully on God?
- Fasting does not mean giving up water. The body must stay hydrated to survive, so keep up your fluid intake during a fast. You should probably consider giving up the Venti double-pump cinnamon soy milk latte during a fast, but you still need to drink fluids. Coffee and tea drinkers will probably have to consciously work on their daily routines prior to a fast. Sudden caffeine withdrawal can lead to severe headaches and detract from the experience.
- End a fast gradually with the right type of foods. Although 5 Guys Burgers & Fries might be all your thinking about after a day of not eating, you should break

a fast with milder foods, preferably with a concentration on fruits, vegetables and lower fat meats.