

# FASTING

## A GUIDE FOR FASTING

Material adapted from a sermon by Steve May

The comedian Gallagher used to ask, “Why do they call it a fast when it goes by sooooo slow?” Many can relate to that. Fasting does seem to bring the movement of time to a standstill. Of all the disciplines it is, in some ways, the most difficult because it requires a level of self-denial that’s beyond many of us. There are no hard-set rules for biblical fasting, but there are some guidelines we can follow. Let’s take a look at them.

## AVOID IMPROPER MOTIVES

What are motives for fasting? It’s possible to fast for the wrong reasons, as God said in Zechariah: *“When you fasted and mourned in the fifth and seventh months for the past seventy years, was it really for me that you fasted?”* (Zechariah 7:5)

Don’t fast to impress someone. This is what the Pharisees did. Jesus said about them, *“When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting.”* (Matthew 6:16)

Don’t let health benefits be your primary motivation. Sometimes people say, “I’ll fast, and I’ll get closer to God, and maybe I’ll lose some weight in the process.” Maybe so, but in my experience, fasting is a lousy weight-loss strategy.

Don’t be afraid to fast because of health risks. If necessary, consult your health professional. What should be our primary motive for fasting? Simply put, to connect with God on a deeper level. As John Piper said, “Christian fasting at its root is the hunger of homesickness for God.” You fast to get closer to God. To be more specific, let’s look at five good scriptural motives for fasting.

## FIVE SCRIPTURAL MOTIVES FOR FASTING

### 1. TO HEAR FROM GOD

*“While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.”* (Acts 13:2)

During a time of fasting, the leaders of the church heard from God. This is why church leaders should commit to fasting together. It’s also why you personally should commit to fasting. When you fast, God speaks to you.

## 2. TO INTERCEDE FOR OTHERS

*“When they were ill, I put on sackcloth and humbled myself with fasting.” (Psalm 35:13)*

Do you want to add a new element of power to your prayers for others? Go without food. It proves to God, and to yourself, that you mean business. A friend of mine went on an extended fast because his son was going through a divorce, and he didn't want it to happen. I asked him, “Do you really think you can change your son's attitude by not eating?” He said, “No, a fast won't circumvent my son's free will. But I am praying that God will intervene in their family situation in such a way that my son will come to his senses. And I'm praying that his family will have the strength to deal with his decision. And I'm praying that I will deal with my son with wisdom and grace – not frustration and judgment that I feel right now.” You can't fast to change others, but you can fast to ask God to intervene in someone's life.

## 3. AS AN ACT OF REPENTANCE

*“Nothing's going on in the place of worship, no offerings, no prayers....nothing. Declare a holy fast, call a special meeting, get the leaders together, round up everyone in the country. Get them into God's sanctuary for serious prayer to God.” (Joel 1:13-14)*

Maybe this has happened in your life – you've forgotten that you need God. One way to express heartfelt repentance is through the act of fasting. I want to make it clear: fasting doesn't earn you forgiveness, or get you forgiven faster or more thoroughly than you would experience otherwise. Fasting does however, help you come to grips with your sin. It helps you to see sin for what it really is. It helps you to see sin as God sees it. Fasting intensifies the act of repentance, so to speak, so that you understand more about the ugliness of sin and the beauty of God's mercy.

## 4. FOR STRENGTH AND DIRECTION

*“Paul and Barnabas appointed elders for them in each church and, with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord, in whom they had put their trust.” (Acts 14:23)*

When Paul and Barnabas appointed elders in the church, they fasted for wisdom and guidance in choosing the right men. They also fasted, presumably along with the elders, for strength for these men to perform their duties effectively. If you don't know the right decision to make, fasting will help you discover God's wisdom. If you know the right thing to do, and need strength to do it, fasting will help you experience more of God's power in your life.

## 5. AN ACT OF WORSHIP

*The gospel of Luke says this about a woman named Anna: “She never left the temple, but worshipped night and day, fasting and praying.” (Luke: 2:37)*

Fasting is an act of worship. A friend told me that he often fasts on the weekend – all day Saturday and Sunday morning – in preparation for the worship service. He said fasting helps him keep his focus on God. These are five scriptural reasons for fasting. Now, let's look for a moment at the methods of fasting.

## METHODS OF FASTING

Fasting is like walking – it doesn't require a great deal of training or explaining. You just don't eat. However, there are some guidelines that are good to follow.

## 1. START WITH A 24-HOUR FAST (6-HOUR FAST)

Richard Foster, author of *Celebration of Discipline*, recommends beginning with a noon to noon fast. This way, you skip two meals. You eat lunch on Monday, for example, and then you begin your fast. You skip dinner and breakfast and you end your fast with lunch on Tuesday. If you've never fasted before, this is a good place to start. I recommend doing it once a week. From there you can move to a three day fast, and then to a seven day fast.

## 2. DRINK LIQUID

The Bible does reference a total fast (i.e. no food, no water), but those are rare expectations. When you fast, you need to drink liquid. I drink water and green tea, but not coffee or coke. Some people drink juice during a fast. It's a matter of preference, but you do need to drink a lot of liquid.

## 3. TAKE A WALK

When I get hungry, drinking some water and taking a ten minute walk helps alleviate the hunger pains.

## 4. RESUME YOUR EATING HABITS CAREFULLY

If you fast only one day, you won't notice much of a difference. But when you fast three or seven days, you want to be careful with your first couple of meals. I wouldn't recommend breaking a fast with a bag of Doritos or a bowl of chili. Your first meal after a fast should be soup or something mild.

## 5. EVERY MONTH, FAST FROM SOMETHING

In addition to fasting one day a week, I recommend fasting each month from something special. Daniel describes a fast in which, *"I ate no choice food; no meat or wine touched my lips..."* (Daniel 10:3)

I recommend that each month you choose to fast from something – one month pizza, the next month ice cream, the next month Mexican food, and so on. This is not a huge sacrifice in that it forces you to go hungry, but it is one more small sacrifice that helps you keep your focus on God. I do this now, and I find it to be helpful. I encourage you to try it.

## FINAL SUGGESTIONS

Jesus used the phrase, "When you fast," not, "if you fast." God wants fasting to be a part of our spiritual discipline. I hope that today you will decide to implement this practice in your Christian walk. I will close now with three tips for more effective fasting.

### 1. FOCUS ON JESUS WHEN YOU FAST

I will confess that the first time I fasted I didn't think about Jesus; all I thought about was food and how hungry I was. Needless to say, it wasn't a very effective fast. The next time, during my 24-hour fast, I made it a point to think about Jesus. I thought about the Christmas story, his temptation in the wilderness, his teachings, his miracles, his passion, his death, and his resurrection. I made it a point to focus on Jesus during my fast, and not surprisingly, I drew closer to Him.

## 2. DON'T BE LEGALISTIC

Don't be legalistic about the "fine print" of your fast, and don't look for loopholes. It's not an international treaty; it's an act of spiritual devotion. If you go on a three-day fast and you fail half-way through, don't give up. Don't beat yourself up—just pick up where you left off and keep going. Remember, the purpose of the fast is not just to go without food. The purpose is to help you connect with God on a deeper level.

## 3. EXPECT RESULTS, BUT NOT IMMEDIATELY

Usually, I don't reap the benefits of the fast until later. Fasting has brought me into a closer relationship with God; fasting has enabled me to experience more of God's power, and fasting has improved my prayer life – but these aren't changes that took place at the snap of a finger. There have been times when I have ended a fast thinking, "It didn't work this time. I didn't accomplish what I wanted to accomplish." But a week or two later, I realized, "God has done work in me that I didn't recognize at first." God will move in your life as the result of a fast, but you need to be patient. You may not see it immediately. Jesus said this about fasting. "*Your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.*" (Matthew 6:18)

## CONCLUSION

We talk a lot about grace. Salvation is a gift of God, not the result of our good works. Our purpose for fasting is not to persuade God to love us more. Our purpose is to not manipulate him into doing our will. Our purpose in fasting is to connect with him on a deeper level.