

FORMED BY FASTING



**the way of consecration
in a world of compromise**



Passion Creek
CHURCH

**Formed by Fasting:
the way of compromise in a world of consecration**

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WHY FAST?

For centuries, followers of Jesus have included the practice of fasting in their weekly rhythms and routines.

In the scriptures, God's people would fast to move His hand, to demonstrate their grief, to discern His will, and to purify their hearts (Dan. 9:3, 2 Sam. 1:12, Ezra 8:21, Psalm 69:10). In the gospels, every time Jesus taught on fasting, He seemed to assume it was something His disciples would do; they're never told to fast, but they are told how to fast (Mat. 6:16-18, 9:15). Jesus Himself fasted, most notably for forty days straight right before starting His public ministry (Luke 4:1-2).

The early church continued this practice by fasting together as a community every Wednesday and Friday.¹ Alongside prayer, scripture reading, and generosity, fasting was a core discipline and the primary way the church would practice justice — followers of Jesus would take the food they'd normally eat in a day and give it to the poor and needy in their community.² To put it simply, the discipline of regularly abstaining from food has always been a rich and central part of discipleship to Jesus. Until today.

Centuries later, fasting has become a lost practice. Most people think of fasting as a dietary fad, an outdated ascetic practice, or a discipline reserved only for the most "elite" Christians. Few of us Christians in the West fast regularly (if at all), and when considering ways to grow in our discipleship to Jesus, we often think about Bible study, prayer, or small groups before we think about fasting.

But according to the scriptures, we are physical, embodied beings, not just “brains on a stick” (1 Cor. 6:15-20).

As Dallas Willard writes, “...the new life in Christ simply is not an inner life of belief and imagination, even if spiritually inspired. It is a life of the whole embodied person in the social context.”³ At some point in our lives, we face problems and confront sins that another small group or more knowledge about the Bible can't solve. So, we fast.

The practice of fasting is abstaining from food for a set period of time to say no to cheaper desires and yes to deeper union, to confess your need and contend for your neighbor.

Like scripture reading or prayer, it's a normal spiritual practice. But it's one that unifies our whole selves, not just our minds, around Jesus. Fasting helps us uncover deep-rooted sins, respond to monumental life events, discern the will of God, and amplify our most desperate prayers.

Historically, fasting has always involved food.

When people “fast” from things like social media or TV they're actually practicing the discipline of abstinence, which is still a good practice! But to fast from food is to practice an embodied form of abstinence. To deny our bodies physical food for a set period of time is to mirror our deeper, spiritual hunger for God. Fasting from food targets our impulses and redirects our bodies to God in a way that simply abstaining from media can't.

A Quick Note...

For some of us, fasting brings up painful memories, thoughts, or reminders of our broken bodies. Those who have dealt with medical issues, illnesses, or eating/body disorders may find the idea of fasting too daunting, painful, or even offensive.

Rather than ignoring this reality, we want to name it and offer some suggestions on how to engage with this practice as a part of the community.

Our invitation is simple: consider what you can do to participate, rather than focusing on what you can't do.

As we always say, these practices are a means to an end. Our end goal is to become people who look more and more like Jesus, both inwardly and outwardly. We don't want to become people who fast just for the sake of fasting. Keeping this in mind, if you're physically unable to abstain from eating, here are some suggestions that would allow you to participate in this practice with us:

- **Only give up eating one meal a week rather than fasting for a full day.**
- **Limit your diet to only whole, healthy, and necessary foods.**
- **Cut out unnecessary snacking, or “grazing.”³⁴**
- **At the very least, if refraining from meals or limiting certain foods is physically impossible and medically unsafe for you, consider the practice of abstaining from things like media, social media, or other forms of entertainment.**

Consider prayerfully what God might be inviting you to do in order to engage with the practice of fasting with us.

Whatever that looks like for you, we hope you find ways to engage with this practice alongside your church community rather than abandoning it altogether.

In this guide, each week will have a different focus on fasting.

First, we'll fast to learn how to say "no" to cheaper desires that distract and distort our souls. Then, we'll fast in order to say "yes" to experiencing deeper and more intimate union with God. Third, we'll fast in order to make ourselves aware of our need for God by fasting and confessing sin. Last, we'll fast and contend for God to save our lost neighbors.

Our desire is that fasting moves from being intimidating to life-giving, and by practicing fasting in community, you're able to deepen your union with God and relationships with others.

TO SAY “NO” TO CHEAPER DESIRES

Most of us in the Western world have become so accustomed to indulgence that we rarely experience real starvation. Our cravings can easily be satisfied with a quick trip to the grocery store or fast-food chain. Or, if that's still too inconvenient, we can have our food brought directly to our doorstep. And while convenience and commodity can be a blessing, they can also be damaging.

St. Augustine once wrote that we fast “Because it is sometimes necessary to check the delight of the flesh in respect to licit pleasures in order to keep it from yielding to illicit joys.”⁵

In other words, when we have no rhythm of both feasting and fasting, our souls become imbalanced. We get used to having our cravings met and begin to live default lives of indulgence. As we weaken our ability to say “no” to our appetites, we also weaken our ability to say “no” to other impulses. From fast food, candy, and snacks to instant media, information, and even pornography, we live in an age where the answer to our impulses is just a walk, drive, or click away.

And this is destructive to our souls.

Among the many fruits listed in Galatians 5:22-25 is self-control.

Practicing self-control by saying “no” to our instant desires allows us to slow down before gratifying our flesh so we can discern where these desires truly come from (Gal 5:15-16). This ability to deny our cheap desires, the desires that pull us away from God, is like a muscle. The more we work it, the stronger it gets. And the stronger our self-control gets, the more we can use it against deep-rooted sin and temptation.

Fasting is a simple way of limiting our physical bodies so that our cheap, sinful desires can be restrained.

When we fast, we’re slowly weaning ourselves off of the pleasure principle, we’re seeing what’s truly in our hearts, we’re re-ordering our desires, and we’re learning to draw on the power of God to overcome sin.⁶ Fasting trains us to “put to death what belongs to [our] earthly nature” as Paul instructs in Colossians 3:5 and allows us to redirect our whole selves back to God.

Practice: Fast at least one time this week

The practice this week is simple: choose a specific day to abstain from food. This could be one meal this week, two meals this week, or a whole day (sunrise to sundown) of not eating. Here are some tips to help you fast:

1. Pick a day that works for you.

Ideally, choose a day that you can stick to each week during this practice. The early church would regularly fast on Wednesdays and Fridays, for example. If you'd like to follow along with our church, Passion Creek will collectively fast on Wednesdays and Fridays.

2. Start small.

If you've never intentionally fasted before, consider starting with just one meal this week. The goal is to incorporate fasting into your regular weekly rhythms and practices, so don't bite off more than you can chew. Figuratively.

3. Try to fast on a day that you're the least busy or hurried.

The goal of fasting is to redirect your heart, mind, and body toward God. This goal is somewhat defeated if mealtime is simply replaced with distraction, hurry, or busyness.

4. Stay hydrated by drinking plenty of water.

If you're a coffee drinker or someone who consumes caffeine daily, make sure to have a cup of coffee or two to avoid caffeine headaches.

The goal this week is to practice saying “no” to your immediate impulses by saying “no” to food.

When you feel a pang of hunger or when your appetite flairs up, redirect your mind to God by offering a short prayer. Ask Him to help you “make no provision for the flesh to gratify its desires” (Rom. 13:14).

TO SAY “YES” TO DEEPER UNION

In Matthew 9, a few of John the Baptist’s disciples meet Jesus and ask why His own disciples don’t fast. Jesus responds by saying, “Can the wedding guests be sad while the groom is with them? The time will come when the groom will be taken away from them, and then they will fast” (Matt. 9:15).

One reason we fast is to say “no” to cheap desires, but equally important is learning to say “yes” to deeper union with God.

We fast because Jesus isn’t physically here with us now, but we still deeply long for intimacy with Him. Like wedding guests waiting for the bride and groom to come and start the wedding celebration, we too are waiting for Jesus to come and bring Heaven and Earth together fully. While we wait, we fast.

Though God is with us now through His Holy Spirit, we often live our lives too distracted by indulgence and infected by sin to be truly aware of His presence. But our deepest longings can’t be satisfied by indulgence or sin, and we can’t ignore these longings by distracting ourselves. To satisfy these soul-level desires, we need God.

Pastor and author John Piper writes, “[Fast-ing is] a cry with our body, not just our soul: ‘I really mean it, Lord! This much, I hunger for you. I want the manifestation of you yourself more than I want food.’”⁷

Fasting is a way to connect the deepest longings of our hearts to the pain of our bodies. When we fast, we're saying that our cheap desires are counterfeits that actually point to deeper longings only God can satisfy. Like the Psalmist in Psalm 63, we declare to God that our need for Him runs as deeply and intensely as the pain our bodies feel when we need nourishment.

More than we want food, we want God Himself.

Practice: Fast and Pray

The practice this week is to fast the same day(s) you fasted last week, but this time you're going to use your fast to redirect your heart to God. Here's how to do that:

1. Choose one or two days to fast this week.

You can abstain from one meal a day, two meals a day, or abstain from all food from sunrise to sundown.

2. During your normal mealtime, pray.

Use the time you'd normally spend cooking, eating, or grocery shopping to pray and ask God to help you become more aware of His presence in and around you. Focus on centering yourself on God in prayer rather than giving yourself away to other distractions. Fasting loses some of its power when we replace eating with indulging in other distractions.

3. Memorize John 15:5-8.

Consider reading this short passage each morning this week, or during the time you'd normally spend cooking, eating, or grocery shopping. Make an attempt to memorize it and use it as an anchor during the meals/days that you fast.

4. When a hunger pang comes up, use this breath prayer.

Praying this prayer redirects your physical hunger and your spiritual hunger toward God: "More than I want food right now I want You."

The goal of this practice is to slowly become more aware of God's presence in and around you and to say "yes" to God's desire for deeper union with you by focusing your whole body on Him.

As you fast this week, try to resist the temptation to analyze or critique your experience. You might feel closer to God after your fast, or you might not. However you feel during or after your fast, the goal isn't to manufacture a feeling. It's to submit your whole self to God and see what He might do.

TO CONFESS YOUR NEED

Fasting is hard.

By now, you've likely experienced the pain of resisting your body's impulses. The reason fasting is difficult is because it's a form of self-denial. We suddenly become aware of our weakness, frailty, and imminence. It's a reminder that our bodies need sustenance to survive, and without food, we'll eventually die.

But just like our bodies need food for life, our souls need God.

We are powerless to accomplish our deepest desires and weak when it comes to uprooting the deepest sins in our lives. We all have needs that only God can meet — prayers we need answers to, sins we can't overcome, and decisions we need God's will revealed for. When we fast, we demonstrate this need with our bodies.

In Ezra 8, Ezra is leading the exiled Israelites back to Jerusalem. It's a dangerous journey, and Ezra is worried about what might happen to him and the rest of God's people on the way there. So, after he gathers everyone together, he has them fast. By fasting, they amplify their prayers to God and show that, as a community, they need God to deliver them safely back to their home (Ezra 8:21-23).

Fasting makes us aware of the transcendent.

It's a regular reminder that humans are wholly incapable of saving or sustaining themselves. We need something outside of us, more powerful than us, more capable than us, to save us from our sins. Just as Paul writes in Colossians 1:17, all things are held together by Jesus, not by us.

Fasting makes us aware of our need and dependence on God alone.

Practice: Fast and Confess Your Sins

Fasting is so powerful, and so ignored, for the same reason: it reveals what's truly underneath the surface of our souls.

Many people get more irritated, impulsive, or “hangry” when they go without food for too long. This is even more reason why fasting should be a vital discipline for followers of Jesus.

1. Choose one or two days to fast this week.

Again, you can give up one meal each day, two meals, or abstain from food completely from sunrise to sundown.

2. During your fast, pay attention to what comes to the surface.

When you abstain from eating, your mind and body will wander toward other forms of immediate gratification and often, sin. During your fast, are you reaching for your phone more often? Consuming more TV/media? Tempted to engage in sexual sin more intensely? Do you get more irritable or angry toward those around you? Take note of what your mind and body wander to when they're deprived of immediate satisfaction and offer these things to God in prayer.

3. Confess your need.

Whatever comes to the surface as you abstain from food, confess to God. Don't hide your compulsions, irritability, anger, or sin from Him in shame; He's seen it already. Instead, confess these things to Him and ask that He would heal your sin. If you have a need that you're holding

before God, use the time you would normally spend eating, cooking, or grocery shopping asking God to meet that need and answer your prayers.

4. When you experience a hunger pang, allow it to remind you of your frailty and dependence on God.

Thank God for being the one who holds things together, and ask Him that you become more aware of His providence in your life.

TO CONTEND FOR YOUR NEIGHBOR

One of the sharpest and most consistent criticisms God gives against His people throughout the scriptures is the sin of neglect. As God's people, the Israelites were chosen as a nation among nations in order to bring God's light to a dark world. God's people were always supposed to care for the poor and marginalized, and to bring the good news of God's Kingdom to the lost around them (Isa. 49:6).

But rather than care for them, they often neglected them (Isa. 1:11-17, Amos 5:11-12). When Jesus came to earth, His primary mission was to do the very thing the Israelites failed at: seek and save the lost (Luke 19:10).

The prophet Isaiah makes a powerful connection between fasting and contending for those in need. In Isaiah 58, God's people wonder why their prayers and fasts haven't been acknowledged by God. God's response is that they fast in vain; their focus is only on themselves while they neglect those in need around them (v. 3-4). Instead, God describes a holy and honoring fast as one that leads to care for their neighbors: "Isn't this the fast I choose: To break the chains of wickedness, to untie the ropes of the yoke, to set the oppressed free, and to tear off every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, to bring the poor and homeless into your house, to clothe the naked when you see him, and not to ignore your own flesh and blood?" (v. 6-7).

Author and historian Scot McKnight writes, “Fasting is body poverty — self-impo­verish­ment as a response to the impoverishment of others.”⁸

When we fast, we have an opportunity to direct our attention and our prayers away from ourselves and toward others. We use our bodies to cry out to God on behalf of those who have needs in our cities, communities, and neighborhoods. In our hunger, we identify with those who don't have food in abundance like we do.

We align ourselves with the poor and needy among us.

From those with deep physical, relational, and emotional needs to those who have the ultimate spiritual need: reconciliation with God through the power of the gospel.

Practice: Fast for the Sake of Your Neighbor

This week, our fast will be focused on contending for our lost neighbors.

1. Choose one or two days this week to fast.

Again, fast from one meal a day, two meals a day, or for a full day (sunrise to sundown).

2. During your normal mealtime, pray for your neighbors.

Use the time you'd normally spend eating, cooking, or grocery shopping in prayer specifically for the lost people you know. These could be friends, family members, co-workers, or your literal neighbors. Ask God to bring to mind people that He wants you to pray for.

3. When you experience a hunger pain, stop and pray for a neighbor.

Use these moments of hunger to redirect your heart and grow your empathy toward the lost people in your life.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Glimm, Francis X., Joseph M.-F. Marique, and Gerald G. Walsh, trans. "The Apostolic Fathers. Vol. 1"
- 2 Scot McKnight, "Fasting: The Ancient Practices."
- 3 Dallas Willard, "The Spirit of the Disciplines."
- 4 Jay W. Richards, "Eat, Fast, Feast: Heal Your Body While Feeding Your Soul."
- 5 Augustine, "The Usefulness of Fasting."
- 6 Practicing the Way, "The Fasting Practice."
- 7 John Piper, "A Hunger for God: Desiring God Through Fasting and Prayer."
- 8 Scot McKnight, "Fasting."

RECOMMENDED READING

God's Chosen Fast

by Arthur Wallis

A Hunger for God

by John Piper

Eat, Fast, Feast

by Jay W. Richards

Fasting

by Scot McKnight

The Celebration of Discipline

by Richard Foster

Fasting
reveals
what the
Spirit
must kill.