

Chapter 10

Sharpen Your Affections with Fasting



Fasting has fallen on hard times—at least, it seems, among our overstuffed bellies in the American church. I speak as one of the well-fed.

Sure, you'll find your exceptions here and there. Some pockets even prize the countercultural enough to steer their vehicles into the ditch of asceticism. But they are vastly outnumbered by the rest of us veering toward the opposite shoulder. The dangers of asceticism are great—surpassed only by those of overindulgence.

Our problem might be how we think of fasting. If the accent is on abstinence, and fasting is some mere duty to perform, then only the most iron-willed among us will get over the social and self-pampering hurdles to actually put this discipline into practice.

But if we are awakened to see fasting for the joy it can bring, as a means of God's grace to strengthen and sharpen godward affections, then we might find ourselves holding a powerful new tool for enriching our enjoyment of Jesus.

What Is Fasting?

Fasting is an exceptional measure, designed to channel and express our desire for God and our holy discontent in a fallen world. It is for those not satisfied with the status quo. For those who want more of God's grace. For those who feel truly desperate for God.

The Scriptures include many forms of fasting: personal and communal, public and private, congregational and national, regular and occasional, partial and absolute. Typically, we think of fasting as voluntarily forgoing food for some limited time, for an express spiritual purpose.

We can fast from good things other than food and drink as well. Martyn Lloyd-Jones said, "Fasting should really be made to include abstinence from anything which is legitimate in and of itself for the sake of some special spiritual purpose."¹ But normal Christian fasting means privately and occasionally choosing to go without food (though not water) for some special period of time (whether a day or three or seven) in view of some specific spiritual purpose.

According to Donald S. Whitney, fasting's spiritual purposes include:

- Strengthening prayer (Ezra 8:23; Joel 2:13; Acts 13:3)
- Seeking God's guidance (Judg. 20:26; Acts 14:23)
- Expressing grief (1 Sam. 31:13; 2 Sam. 1:11–12)
- Seeking deliverance or protection (2 Chron. 20:3–4; Ezra 8:21–23)
- Expressing repentance and returning to God (1 Sam. 7:6; Jonah 3:5–8)
- Humbling oneself before God (1 Kings 21:27–29; Ps. 35:13)

¹D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1960), 1:38.

- Expressing concern for the work of God (Neh. 1:3–4; Dan. 9:3)
- Ministering to the needs of others (Isa. 58:3–7)
- Overcoming temptation and dedicating yourself to God (Matt. 4:1–11)
- Expressing love and worship to God (Luke 2:37)²

While the potential purposes are many, it is that last one which may be most helpful to focus our thoughts about fasting in this short chapter. It encompasses all the others and gets at the essence of what makes fasting such a mighty means of grace.

Whitney captures it like this: “Fasting can be an expression of finding your greatest pleasure and enjoyment in life from God.”³ And he quotes a helpful phrase from Matthew Henry, who says that fasting serves to “put an edge upon devout affections.”

Jesus Assumes We’ll Fast

While the New Testament includes no mandate that Christians fast on certain days or with specific frequency, Jesus clearly assumes we will fast. It’s a tool too powerful to leave endlessly on the shelf collecting dust. While many biblical texts mention fasting, the two most important come just chapters apart in Matthew’s Gospel.

The first is Matthew 6:16–18, which comes in sequence with Jesus’s teachings on generosity and prayer:

And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your

²*Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*, rev. ed. (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2014), 200–17.

³Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible* (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, n.d.), 4:1478, quoted in Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*, 214.

face, that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

Fasting is as basic to Christianity as asking from God and giving to others. The key here is that Jesus doesn't say "if you fast," but "when you fast."

The second is Matthew 9:14–15, which may be even more clear. Should Christians today still fast? Jesus's answer is a resounding yes.

Then the disciples of John came to him, saying, "Why do we and the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?" And Jesus said to them, "Can the wedding guests mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them? The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast." (Matt. 9:14–15)

When Jesus, our bridegroom, was here on earth among his disciples, it was a time for the discipline of feasting.⁴ But now that he is "taken away" from his disciples, "they will fast." Not "they might, if they ever get around to it," but "they will." This is confirmed by the pattern of fasting that emerged right away in the early church (Acts 9:9; 13:2; 14:23).

⁴Enough could be said about feasting as a spiritual discipline to warrant its own full chapter, but perhaps I can do even better by sending you to Joe Rigney's book-length treatment in *The Things of Earth: Treasuring God by Enjoying His Gifts* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015). Some readers might suppose that the overstuffed bellies of the American church hardly need any instruction on feasting, since we've grown so accustomed to it, while fasting is the discipline that is grossly underserved. It is true that fasting is largely overlooked and too often forgotten, but true feasting is also in decline through familiarity, overuse, and lack of spiritual purpose. When every day becomes a feast, no day is truly one. We have need to recover the spiritual significance of feasting together in faith—not simply indulging, but explicitly celebrating together, on special occasions, the bounty and kindness of our Creator and Redeemer. For the Christian, our normal daily consumption is to be characterized by enough restraint that feasting is something we can rise to on special occasions, by faith and in good conscience, rather than being the baseline of every day. Daily restraint both keeps our stomachs primed for times of fasting and makes possible a kind of special indulgence on feast days.

Put an Edge on Your Feelings

What makes fasting such a gift is its ability, with the help of the Holy Spirit, to focus our feelings and their expression toward God in prayer. Fasting walks arm in arm with prayer—as John Piper says, fasting is “the hungry handmaiden of prayer,” who “both reveals and remedies.”

She reveals the measure of food’s mastery over us—or television or computers or whatever we submit to again and again to conceal the weakness of our hunger for God. And she remedies by intensifying the earnestness of our prayer and saying with our whole body what prayer says with the heart: I long to be satisfied in God alone!⁵

That burn in your gut, that rolling fire in your belly, aching for you to feed it more food, signals game-time for fasting as a means of grace. Only as we voluntarily embrace the pain of an empty stomach do we see how much we’ve allowed our belly to be our god (Phil. 3:19).

And in that gnawing discomfort of growing hunger is the engine of fasting, generating the reminder to bend our longings for food godward and inspire intensified longings for Jesus. Fasting, says Piper, is the physical exclamation point at the end of the sentence, “This much, O God, I want you!”⁶

Will You Fast?

More could be said about the rich theology behind Christian fasting, but this habit of grace is simple enough. The question is, will you avail yourself of this potent means of God’s grace?

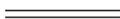
Fasting, like the gospel, isn’t for the self-sufficient and those who feel they have it all together. It’s for the poor in spirit. It’s

⁵ *When I Don’t Desire God: How to Fight for Joy* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004), 171.

⁶ *A Hunger for God*, rev. ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 25–26. For a more thorough treatment on fasting, see *A Hunger for God*.

for those who mourn. For the meek. For those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. In other words, fasting is for Christians.

It is a desperate measure, for desperate times, among those who know themselves desperate for God.



The Slow Path to Good Fasting

Chances are you are among the massive number of Christians who rarely or never fast. It's not because we haven't read our Bibles or sat under faithful preaching or heard about the power of fasting, or that we don't genuinely want to do it. We just never actually get around to doing it.

Part of it may be that we live in a society in which food is so ubiquitous that we eat not only when we don't need to, but sometimes when we even don't want to. We eat to share a meal with others, to build or grow relationships (which are good reasons), or just from peer pressure.

And of course, there are our own cravings and ache for comfort that keep us from the discomfort of fasting.

When You Fast

Fasting is markedly countercultural in our consumerist society, like abstaining from sex until marriage. If we are to learn the lost art of fasting and enjoy its sweet spiritual fruit, it will not come with our ear to the ground of society but with our Bibles open. Then, our concern will not be whether to fast, but when. As we've seen, Jesus both assumes that his followers will fast, and he promises it will happen. He doesn't say "if," but "when you fast" (Matt. 6:16). And he doesn't say his followers might fast, but "they will" (Matt. 9:15).

We fast in this life because we believe in the life to come. We don't have to get it all here and now, because we have a promise that we will have it all in the age to come. We fast from what we can see and taste, because we have tasted and seen the goodness of the invisible God—and are desperately hungry for more of him.

Radical, Temporary Measure

Fasting is for this world, for stretching our hearts to get fresh air beyond the pain and trouble around us. And it is for the sin and weakness inside us, about which we express our discontent, and long for more of Christ.

When Jesus returns, fasting will be done. It is a temporary measure, for this life and age, to enrich our joy in Jesus and prepare our hearts for the next, and for seeing him face to face. When he returns, he will not call a fast but throw a feast; then all holy abstinence will have served its glorious purpose, and be seen by all for what a gift it was.

But until then, we will fast.

How to Start Fasting

Fasting is hard. It sounds much easier in concept than it proves to be in practice. It can be surprising how on-edge we feel when we miss a meal. Many an idealistic new faster has decided to miss a meal and only found that his belly drove him to make up for it long before the next mealtime came.

Fasting sounds so simple, and yet the world, our flesh, and the Devil conspire to introduce all sorts of complications that keep it from happening. In view of helping you start down the slow path to good fasting, here are six simple pieces of advice. These suggestions might seem pedantic, but my hope is that such basic counsel can serve those who are new at fasting or have never seriously tried it.

1. START SMALL

Don't go from no fasting to attempting a weeklong. Start with one meal; maybe fast one meal a week for several weeks. Then try two meals, and work your way up to a daylong fast. Perhaps eventually try a two-day juice fast.

A juice fast means abstaining from all food and beverage, except for juice and water. Allowing yourself juice provides nutrients and sugar for the body to keep you operating while also still feeling the effects from going without solid food. (It is not recommended that you abstain from water during a fast of any length.)

2. PLAN WHAT YOU'LL DO INSTEAD OF EATING

Fasting isn't merely an act of self-deprivation, but a spiritual discipline for seeking more of God's fullness. Which means we should have a plan for what positive pursuit to undertake in the time it normally takes to eat. We spend a good portion of our day with a fork in hand. One significant part of fasting is the time it creates for prayer and meditation on God's word.

Before diving headlong into a fast, craft a simple plan. Connect it to your purpose for the fast. Each fast should have a specific spiritual purpose. Identify what that is and design a focus to replace your eating time. Without a purpose and plan, it's not Christian fasting; it's just going hungry.

3. CONSIDER HOW IT WILL AFFECT OTHERS

Fasting is no license to be unloving. It would be sad to lack concern and care for others around us because of this expression of heightened focus on God. Love for God and for neighbor go together. Good fasting mingles horizontal concern with the vertical. If anything, others should even feel more loved and cared for when we're fasting.

So as you plan your fast, consider how it will affect others. If you have regular lunches with colleagues or dinners with family or roommates, assess how your abstaining will affect them, and let them know ahead of time, instead of just being a no-show or springing it on them in the moment that you will not be eating.

Also, consider this backdoor inspiration for fasting: If you make a daily or weekly practice of eating with a particular group of friends or family, and those plans are interrupted by someone's travel or vacation or atypical circumstances, consider that as an opportunity to fast, rather than eating alone.

4. TRY DIFFERENT KINDS OF FASTING

The typical form of fasting is personal, private, and partial, but we find a variety of forms in the Bible: personal and communal, private and public, congregational and national, regular and occasional, absolute and partial.

In particular, consider fasting together with your family, small group, or church. Do you share together in some special need for God's wisdom and guidance? Is there an unusual difficulty in the church, or society, for which you need God's intervention? Do you want to keep the second coming of Christ in view? Plead with special earnestness for God's help by linking arms with other believers to fast together.

5. FAST FROM SOMETHING OTHER THAN FOOD

Fasting from food is not necessarily for everyone. Some health conditions keep even the most devout from the traditional course. However, fasting is not limited to abstaining from food, as we saw from Martyn Lloyd-Jones: "Fasting should really be made to include abstinence from anything which is legitimate in and of itself for the sake of some special spiritual purpose."⁷

⁷Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*, 1:38.

If the better part of wisdom for you, in your health condition, is not to go without food, consider fasting from television, computer, social media, or some other regular enjoyment that would bend your heart toward greater enjoyment of Jesus. Paul even talks about married couples fasting from sex “for a limited time, that you may devote yourselves to prayer” (1 Cor. 7:5).

6. DON'T THINK OF WHITE ELEPHANTS

When your empty stomach starts to growl and begins sending your brain every “feed me” signal it can, don't be content to let your mind dwell on the fact that you haven't eaten. If you make it through with an iron will that says no to your stomach but doesn't turn your mind's eye elsewhere, it isn't true fasting.

Christian fasting turns its attention to Jesus or some great cause of his in the world. Christian fasting seeks to take the pains of hunger and transpose them into the key of some eternal anthem, whether it's fighting against some sin, or pleading for someone's salvation, or for the cause of the unborn, or longing for a greater taste of Jesus.