

# The Spiritual Practice of Prayer & Fasting

## Fasting and Today

Fasting is often thought to be one of those religious practices that Jesus did away with in the New Covenant like animal sacrifice, or religious festivals. Yet a quick look over the New Testament quickly demonstrates fasting to be an enduring part of Christian practice.

The Sermon on the Mount is Jesus' fullest teaching for life in the Kingdom of Heaven. In Matthew 6 he calls us to 'practice our righteousness' in the secret place. Never indulge the impulse to parade your piety, it is meant for God's eyes alone.

He uses the three examples of giving, praying, and fasting: likely chosen in response to the most frequent expressions of Pharisaic hypocrisy. But importantly, he doesn't say 'if you fast', he says 'when you fast'. Jesus simply assumes fasting as a facet of Christian spirituality.

Similarly, when Jesus is asked why John the Baptist's disciples are fasting but his aren't, how does he reply? Not with an 'old is giving way to new' sort of answer. Instead, he tells them wedding guests don't fast while the bridegroom is still there, 'But the time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them; in those days they will fast.' (Luke 5:34).

Fasting is an important spiritual practice that:

- empowers our praying by turning to God with our whole self;
- expresses our deeper hunger for God through the physical hunger of our bodies; &
- spiritually trains us within the sinful world to live with self-control.

## Fasting and Prayer

Fasting can be practiced on its own, just as prayer can. Importantly though, fasting and prayer are often coupled explicitly and implicitly in Scripture. Prayer is an act of communion with God in our spirit, matched by fasting as an act of communion in our body. The communal worship of the early church is characterised by fasting and prayer (Acts 13:1-3), where we see that;

1. Prayer and fasting are intentionally practiced together in early Christianity.
2. Prayer and fasting are both part of worship.
3. Prayer and fasting are practiced communally in the church.
4. Prayer and fasting form the unique context for the Spirit bringing revelation.
5. Prayer and fasting are practiced by the church even after God speaks, simply as worship.

We offer a different dimension in prayer when we also intentionally seek God in fasting, because fasting captures the bodily desire, longing, and conviction, that we are articulating in our prayers. We are turning the whole of our self to God when we fast as well as pray. Our pleading with God with words and spirit is coupled with our pleading with God in our bodies. So, it is fitting that we would fast in circumstances where we are coming to God in great need, conviction, desire, or hope.

## Fasting and Hunger

We willingly experience the weakness of hunger (ever been hangry?), so that we might let our weakness become strength by choosing our greater hunger for God.

Jesus' teaching on fasting in Matthew 6 makes this clear. Fasting was a regular practice of Jewish spirituality, but the Pharisaic elites would fast in a way that was obvious to anyone watching. Jesus says they intentionally looked 'sombre' and 'disfigured their faces'. The Pharisees misused this practice by fasting for the praise of people. Jesus says they've received their reward.

Followers of Jesus are to be different. He tells us to wash our faces and apply oil so nobody will know. Believers fast for the Father and the Father alone. We keep our hunger private because it is a hunger devoted to God. Amazingly, as in giving and prayer, the Father sees our fasting and will reward us. He is pleased by our fasting.

Here we see an essential feature of fasting. Fasting is an act of devotion, worship, and praise to God. As the church worshipped through fasting in Acts 13, the 84-year-old widow Anna's unseen worship was marked by prayer and fasting (Luke 2:36-38). We can worship with our words, our prayers, and our actions. But fasting is a unique aspect of our worship.

We intentionally abstain from food and feel the physical pangs of hunger as an embodiment of our greater hunger for God. We deny ourselves physical food to feast on spiritual food that nobody can see (John 4:32). We hunger that we might turn our attention away from our physical need to our greater spiritual need.

## Fasting and Godliness

The embedded reality of fasting turning from physical hunger toward greater hunger makes it an essential means of growing godliness. If we hope to follow Jesus faithfully, self-denial must be at the heart of our discipleship (Matt 16:24-27).

Paul writes to his protege Timothy, 'For physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come' (1 Tim 4:8). Fasting is a unique practice from God for our training in godliness.

The physical self-denial required by fasting is our faith-based bench press, training the muscles of our self-control. We starve the hunger of the flesh to feed the hunger of the soul. We say no to physical desires (even good physical desires) in priority of our greater need for holiness.

Now, this sort of self-denial is not confined to only fasting from food. Paul calls us to sexual mutuality within marriage, 'except perhaps by mutual consent and for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer.' (1 Cor 7:5). There is a potency in prayer that comes from the self-denial of fasting.

Similarly, Paul speaks about his own desire to cultivate 'self-control' in his pursuit of Christ, saying 'I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself

should be disqualified' (1 Cor 9:27). Again, making an all-important connection between the reality of our body and our life with God.

So fasting, in addition to physically seeking God and accompanying our prayers, is a regular rhythm of self-denial, cultivating a holy character in our devotion to God.

## Fasting in Practice

Fasting may be one of the more pivotal pieces for our pursuit of spiritual renewal.

1. Our prayer and longing for renewal will find greater potency as we turn the attention of our whole self to renewal in fasting.
2. Our unseen dependence on comfort is revealed in full, and tackled as we train our self-control muscles for greater godliness.

## Fasting on Purpose

There is no limited list of purposes for fasting. But to help prompt occasions you might set an intentional fast, here's a short list:

1. Need: healing, provision, breakthrough.
2. Discernment: seeking clarity and revelation from God.
3. Longing: recognising our own drifting, or simply wanting to stoke the fire.
4. Repentance: expressing a weight of conviction when we sin that is more than words.
5. Power: upcoming ministry or evangelistic opportunities, significant obstacles to overcome.
6. Solidarity: standing with the poor and impoverished in hunger, and intentional prayer.

## Fasting as a Communal Practice

We're seeking to begin our Year of Spiritual Renewal with a week of prayer and fasting. The purpose is to turn our hunger to prayer as we long for God to meet us in spiritual renewal.

We can, and should, integrate fasting at points in our communal life together as appropriate. That might be church-wide, congregational family, or a smaller group like Connect. Don't just wait and consume what might come from the front. Do you have a deep longing, an essential prayer need, a unique life moment? Tap your Connect leaders, or pastors on the shoulder and ask whether the community might join you in prayer and fasting.

## Important Principles and Disclaimers

Two essential principles we must consider before we begin fasting:

1. Fasting is a practice of abstinence, not self-harm.
2. Fasting is primarily abstaining from food, but there are many good reasons why this is not appropriate.

Fasting is primarily abstaining from food, to turn the experience of physical hunger to cultivate a greater hunger for God'. So, if we are unable to fast from food for whatever reason we can try and replicate that same experience as best we can.

What might you abstain from that would create a 'pang' in its absence? There are countless options but here are a couple of ideas to get you thinking. You could fast from:

- Indulgences. Eat as simply as possible and turn that longing to God.
- Screens. Dedicate a time without digital media or entertainment to the Lord.
- Drinks. Abstain from those ritualised drinks like coffee or tea and turn those moments to prayer.

Here are some of the key circumstances where fasting from food might not be right:

*Eating disorders or an unhealthy relationship with food:* Everyone deals with food imperfectly (google 'gluttony' if in doubt). This ranges from diagnosable eating disorders to sub-clinical but significantly unhealthy relationships with food, to occasional emotional eating to feel good.

We can and do sin through eating: But it's important to see many of us suffer in ways that aren't sinful. Our relationship with food is a confluence of factors: genetic predispositions, familial upbringing, relentless advertising, cultural fixation on beauty and youth, past trauma, so on, and so forth.

So, if you experience a diagnosable eating disorder, or an unhealthy relationship with food/exercise/body that impacts you significantly? Please do not fast from food without first seeking medical approval, guidance, and instruction.

*Health concerns:* You may have a health condition, be receiving medical treatment, or following a diet for other important reasons that impacts what fasting might mean for you. In any uncertainty? Please do not fast food without medical consultation, or if it is at all dangerous.

*Any unintended consequences:* You may choose to persevere through additional discomfort, but if you experience something more significant, it is important to cease and consider the wisdom of fasting from food. Hear the principle clearly: fasting is about hunger not harm. Do not fast from food if you have any concerns.

**Do not fast from food if you have any concerns. Seek medical guidance, and additional wisdom where necessary.**

(This is a summary of a more detailed article that can be found in the Semester One Spiritual Renewal Journal for 2024).