

# The Practice of Fasting



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## WELCOME

Welcome to the Fasting Practice. Fasting was a normal part of the Jewish culture from which the church was birthed. Jesus fasted (Matthew 3:13). The early church fasted (Acts 13:3, 14:23). By the first century it had become the practice of Christians to fast every Wednesday and Friday. It was so common and normal for Christians to practice fasting that the fifth century bishop Epiphanius wrote, "Who does not know that the fast of the fourth and sixth days of the week are observed by Christians throughout the world?"

Similar to essential disciplines like prayer or the reading of Scripture or church on Sunday, fasting was simply one of the things that practicing Christians did. After all, Jesus began his mission with 40 days of fasting. And he said, "Follow me." It makes sense that we would follow his example and incorporate fasting into our discipleship to Jesus. And yet, very few followers of Jesus in the modern West fast at all.

There are lots of reasons that fasting has fallen out of practice for Christians in America. We have food in abundance, we are under the constant influence of food advertising, we confuse appetite for hunger, and we think of spirituality as something for the mind, not the body.

Over the next three weeks, we will explore several reasons why followers of Jesus fast. And the reason that stands at the heart of them all is offering ourselves to Jesus. Fasting is a practice that helps us get in touch with our hunger for Him. And when that hunger is not there, fasting is a practice to help awaken the latent hunger for God within us.

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## INTRODUCTION

### WHAT IS FASTING?

Fasting is going without food for a period of time. While Christians often use fasting as a synonym for abstinence or restricted eating, strictly speaking, fasting means going without any food. For this reason, strict fasting is usually done for short periods of time (1 to 3 days).

However, for our 3 week fast at the beginning of the year, we are guilty of using fasting in the broad sense - as abstinence or restricted eating. Our tradition here at the River during these three weeks is to:

1. unplug from the digital world by abstaining from personal use of phones, computers, video games and TV (see Appendix 1)
2. restrict our eating to two small, simple, nutritious, unseasoned meals per day; eliminating all comfort food, junk food, desserts, alcohol and soda).
  - *if you find 3 weeks of restricted eating too much of a burden, consider selecting Wednesday and Friday as fast days (for the 3 weeks) where you have no food during the day and eat a simple meal that evening.*

### A FEW PRACTICAL TIPS

1. Set a food plan ahead of time. The goal is to keep it simple. If you plan out a meal and cooking schedule (where you can prepare several meals in advance and just heat them up), this will greatly reduce the time and energy surrounding eating.
2. Set a specific time and place to meet with the Lord during your fast. The goal of fasting is to offer ourselves to God in prayer.
3. Keep a journal. This will help position you to hear from God during this time and also provide a reference later.
4. Drink lots of water.
5. Get plenty of sleep.



Offer ourselves  
to God

## OVERVIEW - WEEK 1

*We love Him and long for Him. And then fasting rises up as a new way of saying earnestly with our whole body what our hearts feel: I hunger for you, O God. - John Piper*

The ultimate aim of fasting is to get in touch with your hunger for God. Hunger is the state of wanting or needing something you do not have. When we fast, we awaken our body and soul to its deep yearning for life with the Father. We become able to say with Jesus, "I have food to eat that you know nothing about." (John 4v32)

At the time of Jesus, it was the practice of the Jewish people to fast twice a week - on Mondays and Thursdays. However, early Christians changed the fast days to Wednesday and Friday. Why? Because Wednesday was the day Jesus was betrayed and Friday was the day he was crucified. It was a way to embody what the new testament writers called "participating in the sufferings of Christ."

Christians did not fast because they disliked the body or disliked pleasure. They fasted out of a genuine desire to be with Jesus. And the pattern Jesus modeled was that the path to life in the kingdom came by laying down your life - death to self is followed by life in God. Fasting was a way to involve the body in this dynamic.

The basic idea is to use the hunger your body experiences as an opportunity to direct your thoughts toward desiring God. New Testament scholar Scot McKnight calls fasting "body talk," a way of praying with your body - God, I hunger for you, I want you, I need you.

Your body is a part of who you are. It is common in some traditions to think of the soul as the immaterial part of you that continues after death. The soul is what matters, the body not so much. But in the Bible, the soul refers to your whole person including your body. You do not have a soul, you are a soul. The body is important - the resurrection confirms this! We are not invited to just give our hearts to Jesus, we are invited to give our whole self, including our body, to Jesus (Romans 12:1-2).

Although Jesus assumed His disciples would fast, He did not command or require it. You do not have to fast. You are invited to participate in a practice in which followers of Jesus have experienced the Father's reward - Jesus Himself.

## WEEK 1 PRACTICES

During our fast, we invite you to incorporate some of the practices we learned in 2024 (prayer, solitude/silence, and simplicity). For **prayer**, we are using the Apostle Paul's recorded prayers from his various letters. We will also practice **silence** each morning for 3 minutes (or longer if you are able). And for **simplicity**, we encourage you to simplify one room or closet in your home.

### Mornings

- **Breath prayer.** (See Appendix 3). Start with 1 minute of breath prayer
- **Silence.** Set a timer for 3 minutes. Practice quieting your mind and thoughts. Focus on being in the presence of God and at peace. If you can do longer, go for it!
- **Pray the Scripture.** Below is a schedule for this week. Read the Scripture then read it again, this time as a prayer to the Lord.
- **Give Thanks.** End your prayer time by giving thanks for at least 3 specific things in your life that you recognize as gifts from God.

### Mid-Day

- Recite the Lord's Prayer slowly as your own prayer. (*Set an alarm if necessary to remind you to take this small break to pray*)

### Evenings

- Select one room or closet in your home to simplify this week (See Appendix 4)
- Recite 1 Timothy 6:8 and Philippians 4:12-13 as prayers

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**Monday:** Ephesians 1:15-23

**Thursday:** 2 Timothy 1:3-7

**Tuesday:** Ephesians 3:14-21

**Friday:** 2 Corinthians 1:3-7

**Wednesday:** Colossians 1:3-14

**Saturday:** 1 Thessalonians 3:9-13



**REFLECTION**

Trevor Hudson, a scholar on spiritual formation, has said, "We don't change from our experience, we change when we reflect on our experience."

Take some time this week to reflect on your experience.

- What was your experience of fasting like? Where did you feel resistance? Where did you experience delight?

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Starve the flesh,  
feed the spirit

## OVERVIEW

*Restrain from gluttony and thou shalt the more easily restrain all the inclinations of the flesh.* - Thomas à Kempis

The flesh is a biblical way of referring to that warped part of us that is bent towards sin. As John Mark Comer puts it, the flesh “is the instinctual drives in our body for things like food, sleep, sex, self-preservation and instant gratification that have overpowered our will and bent our heart away from love, and turned it in on itself. But it’s also more immaterial drives too - our desires for security and safety and affection and esteem and power and control.”

Your body is good. It is part of who you are. It is God’s design that your body be a temple for His presence - a home where your spirit and His spirit are one (1 Corinthians 6:29-20). However, the disease called sin turns many of our physical and emotional desires into what St. Augustine called “disordered desires.” Christianity is not against our bodies, it is for our bodies. Our fight is against the flesh.

For example, gluttony is the first of the “seven deadly sins” on purpose. Because Christian thinkers have long said that an undisciplined appetite has a domino effect across all the areas of our life. [On Screen: Saint Leo the Great (A.D. 400-461)]

They especially noted the connection between gluttony and sexual immorality. That the

capacity to steward our body’s natural drives for food and sex in a healthy way, rise, or fall, together.

## WEEK 2 PRACTICES

For **prayer**, we will practice the 3 types of prayer; Gratitude, Lament, and Intercession. We will continue the practice of **silence** each morning for 3 minutes (or longer if you are able). And for **simplicity**, we encourage you to review your budget for this year and consider how to simplify it.

### Mornings

- **Silence.** Practice quieting your mind and thoughts. Focus on being in the presence of God and at peace.
- Pick one of the three prayer types each day (don't pick the same one every day):
  1. **Gratitude.** What are 3 things you see as gifts in your life? Give God thanks for each one.
  2. **Lament.** Pick a lament Psalm from Appendix 5 and use it to talk to God about a problem in your life, the life of someone you know or within your community.
  3. **Intercession.** Write down the first 5 things that come to mind; whether a person or situation. Then pray to God for each one.

### Mid-Day

- Take a moment during the day to pause and pray. Quiet your thoughts. Focus on God's presence with you.

### Evenings

- **Simplicity:** Review your budget for the upcoming year. What change can you make to simplify/reduce your budget this year. Consider using a portion of your savings to help someone in need or support a charity.
- Recite 1 Timothy 6:8 and Philippians 4:12-13 as prayers





Stand with the  
poor

## OVERVIEW

*Is this not the fast that I choose: to release the bonds of wickedness, to undo the ropes of the yoke, and to let the oppressed go free, and break every yoke?*

*Is it not to break your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into the house; when you see the naked, to cover him; and not to hide yourself from your own flesh?*

*Then your light will break out like the dawn. - Isaiah 58*

This section of Isaiah is fascinating. The people ask Isaiah, “we are fasting, but it is not working. God is not answering our prayers. Why?” And God responds through the prophet that the reason God is not listening is because they are fasting for self serving purposes only. They want God to answer their prayers for themselves, but they have no concern for the things God is concerned about - the injustices within their own communities.

Biblically speaking, love for God cannot be separate from love for neighbor. How can we offer ourselves to God and not also offer ourselves to our neighbors, especially those in need? Christians have used fasting as a practical way to stand with those suffering injustice - especially the poor.

Fasting helps in a few ways. First, the hunger you feel, that is so discomfoting and difficult, is just a normal experience for most people in the world. Fasting can help put us emotionally in touch with those who regularly go without food not by choice. Second, the money and/or time we save can be used to help or serve others.

It is amazing and wonderful how much our relationships revolve around food. Gathering and food just naturally go together. You may notice that your relational connections diminish slightly during fasting because you do not have food to gather around! In that sense, fasting is an opportunity to temporarily refrain from some normal relationships in order to affirm a relationship with people who have not.

In addition to prayer, we encourage you this week to find a way to help or serve those in need within our community.

## WEEK 3 PRACTICES

For **prayer**, we will practice lectio divina and listening prayer. We will continue the practice of **silence** each morning for 3 minutes (or longer if you are able). This week we add an additional practice of standing with the poor in a practical way.

### Mornings

- **Silence.** Practice quieting your mind and thoughts. Focus on being in the presence of God and at peace.
- Read Scripture using **Lectio Divina**. See Appendix 6
- **Listening Prayer**. See Appendix 7

### Mid-Day or Evenings

- Use the money or time you are saving to help others. Here are a few ideas:
  - provide a meal to a family in need inside of our church or outside
  - make a donation of money or groceries to a shelter
  - donate coats, gloves, mittens, socks to shelters
  - contact a nursing home to see what they need
  - call social services in your town to see if there is a family who could use help
  - offer skills to help a family in need (plumbing, carpentry, etc)
  - contact your local food pantry to see what they need
  - ask friends and family if they know someone who is in need and meet that need
  - donate gently used clothes, toys to a place that gives them to the needy for free



**REFLECTION**

Take some time this week to reflect on your experience.

- What was your experience like?

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## APPENDIX 1

Unplug and enjoy a digital detox!

One of the best things you can do for your spiritual formation is to periodically unplug and detox from the digital world. Although you may be required to use technology in your job, we invite you to unplug from all personal use of phones, computers, digital games, TV and social media.

The benefits of doing so are well documented: improved mental well being, increased focus and productivity, improved social connections, reduced stress, better sleep and an increase in time for other activities.

1. **Unplug your TV.** Use the free time you will have in other ways. Pray. Read a book. Do a project. Have friends over. Start a new hobby.
2. **Cut off the unnatural appendage on your body - your phone.** We often compulsively need our phones with us and are constantly checking them - unnecessarily. During these 3 weeks, break the habit of having your phone with and on you. When home, put it in a different room and do not check it. Practice leaving your house without your phone (yes, you can do it!). Practice not looking at your phone for at least 1 hour after you wake up. Practice turning your phone off and putting it away at night.
3. **Take a break from all media.** No social media and no news. Almost everything you consume on media has nothing to do with your life. The rest of the world will still be there in 3 weeks.

## APPENDIX 2

### THE LORD'S PRAYER

*(Matthew 6:9-13)*

Our Father who is in heaven,

Hallowed be Your name.

Your kingdom come.

Your will be done,

On earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread.

And forgive us our debts

as we also have forgiven our debtors.

And do not lead us into temptation

but deliver us from evil.

For Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.

**Or use a wonderful paraphrase of the Lord's Prayer created by Dallas Willard**

Dear Father always near us,

may your name be treasured and loved,

may your rule be completed in us-

may your will be done here on earth in

just the way it is done in heaven.

Give us today the things we need today,

and forgive us our sins and impositions on you

as we are forgiving all who in any way offend us.

Please don't put us through trials,

but deliver us from everything bad.

Because you are the one in charge,

and you have all the power, and the glory too is all yours-forever-

which is just the way we want it!

## APPENDIX 3

### BREATH PRAYER

*"Let your memory of Jesus combine with your breath - then you will know the profit of silence." - St. John Climacus*

In Hebrew, the word for spirit and the word for breathe are the same word (ruach) - for breathe represents life - and so the Spirit of God is like the breathe of God giving life. Since the 3rd century, christians have used the God-ordained process of breathing to attune themselves to God's Spirit and presence. Modern science has caught up and shown that deep, slow breathing calms your nervous system and helps center your mind. Try the following:

- Find a quiet place to pray and sit in an attentive, but comfortable posture
- Set a timer for 3 to 5 minutes
- Breathe deep and slowly (at least 5 seconds inhale / 5 seconds exhale)
- Relax, become present in the moment and then open your mind to God
- Combine a word or phrase with your breathing, repeating it as you breath. Or focus on a mental action with each breathe cycle. For example:
  - "Lord Jesus Christ" (inhale); "have mercy on me" (exhale)
  - "The Lord is my Shepherd" (inhale); "I shall not want" (exhale)
  - "In Christ alone" (inhale); "my soul finds rest" (exhale)
  - Breathe in the peace of Christ... Breathe out worry, fear, anger, guilt, or shame.
  - Breathe in Christ's love... Breathe out his love for another person

## APPENDIX 4

### SIMPLIFY A ROOM

Pick a room in your house, or your garage, or a storage closet or your wardrobe closet and simplify it. Take everything (and I mean everything, no matter how big or small) and put it in one of 5 piles.

**Giveaway:** items to give away to a friend, a neighbor (perhaps via a group like Buy Nothing), or to Goodwill.

**Sell:** items in good condition you'd like to sell.

**Throwaway or recycle:** for items beyond repair or further use.

**Wait:** this pile is key. For sentimental items or things we think we "might need" in the future, put them away in a box or bag in a closet and put it out of sight for a set period of time, perhaps 3-6 months. If at any point you want something, go get it out! Revisit the box when time is up, and you may discover the items are easier to give away.

**Keep:** whatever you feel is useful, beautiful, and has a purpose in your life as a follower of Jesus.

For some great tips, I recommend you check out **Joshua Becker** (Becoming Minimalist) on YouTube. He has lots of short videos with ideas on how to de-clutter and simplify. Here are a couple of examples of his videos:

[9 Simple Ideas to Thin Out Your Closet](#)

[8 Easy Steps to a Minimalist Bedroom](#)

## APPENDIX 5

### Individual psalms of lament

Psalm 3, 5-7, 13, 17, 22, 25-28, 32, 38, 39, 42, 43, 51, 54-57, 59, 61, 63, 64,  
69-71, 86, 88, 102, 109, 120, 130, and 140-43

### Corporate psalms of lament

44, 74, 79, 80, 83, and 89

## APPENDIX 6

### LECTIO DIVINA

A good friend of mine once told me, “you have to slow down to catch up to the Holy Spirit.” I have found these words to be true. We often think or act as if God has to adjust to our busy schedule. But the opposite is true. We must slow down and find rest in God’s presence. It is a gift we must learn to receive.

Lectio Divina is latin for “divine reading.” It is an ancient practice of slowly reading Scripture as you prayerfully look for God’s word to you. It was first written about by Origen, an early church leader born in the 2nd century. It became a regular practice in the monastic orders from the 6th century onward and is still a popular practice within the contemplative tradition of Christianity.

The practice of Lectio Divina follows the following structure:

- Read***            Read a passage of Scripture (usually a psalm, a teaching of Jesus, or a passage from the New Testament). Read it slowly and prayerfully. Look for when a word, phrase, idea or emotion stands out to you.
- Reflect***            Pause and meditate on what stands out. What about it is drawing your attention. Why is it resonating with you? Why the emotion?
- Respond***            Now invite God into your meditation. Talk to Him about your reaction, thoughts or feelings. Ask Him for additional insights.
- Rest***                Take a few minutes to stop thinking and talking and just rest in God’s love and His word to you.

## APPENDIX 7

### LISTENING PRAYER

Listening prayer is the practice of learning how to quiet your inner thoughts to make room to hear God's voice. This is one of my personal favorite practices. It is also one of the most difficult because the human mind is fast and busy and works furiously to fill the void of silence. And the world we live in only magnifies this problem.

Listening Prayer has these basic steps:

**Breathe.** Start with a few minutes of deep breathing. Focus on clearing your mind. Some like to simply pray "Jesus" or "Come Holy Spirit" as they breathe. I like to focus on my breathing as representative of taking in the life of Jesus by the Spirit.

**Quiet.** Sit in silence for a few minutes. This is generally the hardest step as our thoughts try to force their way into our attention. (Tip: bring a notepad with you and write down intrusive thoughts until they stop). Ask God for help in silencing your thoughts.

**Ask God to speak to you.**

**Listen.** Remember, the Spirit has direct access to your mind and your imagination. He may speak in a variety of ways, including a thought, a Scripture, a word, a phrase, an impression, a picture in your mind, a vision (like a little movie in your mind), a song, or a feeling/emotion.

**Test.** Because this is a highly subjective experience, it is particularly important to test what you hear against Scripture and to share it with those in your church community.

If you do not hear anything, don't worry or condemn yourself. It is ok. Just give thanks for God's presence and keep practicing until you do sense God speaking in some way.



## APPENDIX 8

### EXAMEN

Examen is the practice of prayerfully reflecting on the events of the day in order to detect God's presence and discern his direction for you. It is designed to help you learn to detect God in every moment through the people, interactions and events you experience.

There are many variations on this practice, but the basic outline is:

- **Become aware of God's presence.** Take a minute to quiet your thoughts and focus on God's presence with you.
- **Review the day with gratitude.** Think about the people, connections and events of your day. Where was God in these? What good things can you give thanks for?
- **Pay attention to your emotions.** What kind of emotions did you experience this day? Why were you experiencing those emotions? What might God be saying through them to you?
- **Choose one feature of the day and pray from it.** Pick one thing from your day and pray about it with God.
- **Look toward tomorrow.** Think about your day tomorrow. How do you feel or think about it? Ask God to help prepare you for the day.

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