

FASTING

DISCIPLINE EQUALS FREEDOM, WEEK 4

I. OUR CALL TO DISCIPLINE

Proverbs 25:28

II. OUR MODEL FOR SPIRITUAL GROWTH

III. FASTING EXPLAINED

“Throughout Scripture fasting refers to abstaining from food for spiritual purposes...In scripture the normal means of fasting involves abstaining from all food, solid or liquid, but not from water” (Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 48-49).

“Fasting is when we hunger for God – for a fresh encounter with God, for God to answer a prayer, for God to save someone, for God to work powerfully in our church, for God to guide us or protect us – more than we hunger for the food God made us to live on” (Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines*, 216).

“A fast is the self-denial of normal necessities in order to intentionally attend to God in prayer. Bringing attachments and cravings to the surface opens a place for prayer. This physical awareness of emptiness is the reminder to turn to Jesus who alone can satisfy” (Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines*, 245).

“Fasting confirms our utter dependence upon God by finding in him a source of sustenance beyond food. Through it, we learn by experience that God’s word to us is a life substance, that it is not food (“bread”) alone that gives life, but also the words that proceed from the mouth of God (Matt. 4:4). We learn that we too have meat to eat that the world does not know about (John 4:32, 34). Fasting unto our Lord is therefore feasting – feasting on him and on doing his will” (Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, 166).

IV. FASTING IN THE BIBLE

Types of Fasting

Partial Fast

Daniel 1:12; 10:3

Absolute Fast

Esther 4:16

Acts 9:9

Ezra 10:6

Supernatural Absolute Fast

Deut. 9:9

1 Kings 19:8

Matt. 4:2

Corporate Fast

Lev. 23:27 Nehemiah 9:1

Joel 2:15 Acts 13

Purposes for Fasting

To strengthen prayer:

To seek God’s guidance:

To express grief:

To seek deliverance/protection:

To express repentance and the return to God:

To humble oneself before God:

To express concern for the work of God:

Ezra 8:23; Daniel 9:3; Joel 2:12; Acts 13:3

Acts 14:23; Judges 20

1 Samuel 31:11-13; 1 Samuel 20:34

Ps. 109; 2 Chron. 20:3-4; Ezra 8:21-23;

Jonah 3:3-10; 1 Samuel 7:6; Joel 2:12

1 Kings 21:27-29; Psalm 35:13

Nehemiah 1:3-4; Daniel 9:3

<i>To minister to the needs of others:</i>	Isaiah 58:1-9
<i>To overcome temptation/dedicate oneself to God:</i>	Matt 4:1-11
<i>To express love and worship God:</i>	Luke 2:36-37

V. FASTING IN THE TEACHING OF OTHERS

Advantages of Fasting

“Those who deny themselves will be sure to find their strength increased, their affections raised, and their inward peace continually augmented” (Bishop Wilson of the Isle of Man, cited in Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, 159).

“Persons well used to fasting as a systematic practice will have a clear and constant sense of their resources in God. And that will help them endure deprivations of *all* kinds, even to the point of coping with them easily and cheerfully. Kempis again says, ‘Refrain from gluttony and thou shalt more easily restrain all the inclinations of the flesh’” (Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, 167).

“More than any other Discipline, fasting reveals the things that control us. This is a wonderful benefit to the true disciple who longs to be transformed into the image of Jesus Christ. We cover up what is inside us with food and other good things, but in fasting these things surface. If pride controls us, it will be revealed almost immediately. David writes, ‘I humbled my soul with fasting’ (Ps. 69:10). Anger, bitterness, jealousy, strife, fear – if they are within us, they will surface during fasting” (Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 55).

“Fasting sometimes seems the only way to answer the ache in our hearts for the consummation of all things, for the time when we are at last with God and all things are restored, made new, and made right. Until the Bridegroom returns for His bride, he knows how these yearnings for him will incline our hearts, with the result that we ‘will fast’” (Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines*, 197).

Dangers of Fasting

“Without a clear biblical purpose, fasting becomes an end in itself. Every hunger pang only makes you calculate the time remaining until you can eat. Such thinking disconnects the experience in your mind and heart from the gospel and descends into the deception that perhaps your suffering will earn God’s favor” (Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines*, 199).

Practical Tips for Solitude

“Without a purpose, fasting can be a miserable, self-centered experience about willpower and endurance... In real life, here’s how it works: As you are fasting and your head aches or your stomach growls and you think, *I’m hungry!* Your next thought is likely to be something like, *Oh right – I’m hungry because I’m fasting today.* Then your next thought *should* be, and *I’m fasting for this purpose:* _____” (Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines*, 199).

“Although the physical discomfort is unpleasant – perhaps even painful – it is important to feel some degree of hunger during your fast. Your hunger helps you, serving as a continual reminder of your spiritual purpose. For instance, if your purpose is to pray for your spouse, then every time your stomach growls or your head aches, your hunger reminds you that you’re fasting, which in turn reminds you that you’re fasting for the purpose of praying for your spouse – and then you pray. So throughout your fast, every time you feel hunger – whether you are working, driving, talking to someone, sitting at the computer, walking, or whatever – you are reminded of your purpose, in this case to pray for your spouse. As a result you will be prompted by your hunger to pray for your spouse far more often than you would have otherwise, which is exactly what you wanted to do” (Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines*, 200).

TRAINING PLAN

“Discipline means taking the hard road – the uphill road. To do what is right. For you and for others. So often, the easy path calls us: To be weak for that moment. To break down another time. To give in to desire and short-term gratification. Discipline will not allow that. Discipline calls for strength and fortitude and WILL. It won’t accept weakness. It won’t tolerate a breakdown in will. Discipline can seem like your worst enemy. But in reality it is your best friend. It will take care of you like nothing else can. And it will put you on the path to strength and health and intelligence and happiness. And most important, discipline will put you on the path to FREEDOM.”

–Jocko Willink, *Discipline Equals Freedom*, 27.

Circle the Level of Engagement You Are Committing to This Week

All four are good choices, and you don’t need to pick the same level every week.

First Steps:

- Practice #1 **OR** #2 of the “Spiritual Exercises” listed at the bottom of page 6 of this handout (remember to follow the “Guidelines for Fasting from Food” on pages 5-6 of this handout).. When you are done, reflect on your experience. How was it challenging? How was it valuable?

Hit Harder:

- Practice #1 **AND** #2 of the “Spiritual Exercises” listed at the bottom of page 6 of this handout (remember to follow the “Guidelines for Fasting from Food” on pages 5-6 of this handout). When you are done, reflect on your experiences. How was it challenging? How was it valuable?
- During this series we will process our experiences in discussion with another person or a small group of people. Sometime this week, meet up with one person discuss your experiences and encourage one another. Consider including people who are not part of our church as well. *Use Discussion Guide #3* below to guide your conversation.

Hard Core:

- Practice #1, #2, **AND** #3 of the “Spiritual Exercises” listed at the bottom of page 5 of this handout (remember to follow the “Guidelines for Fasting from Food” on pages 5-6 of this handout). When you are done, reflect on your experiences. How was it challenging? How was it valuable?
- During this series we will process our experiences in discussion with another person or a small group of people. Sometime this week, meet up with one person discuss your experiences and encourage one another. Consider including people who are not part of our church as well. *Use Discussion Guide #3* below to guide your conversation.

Beast Mode:

- Practice #1 but instead of fasting from just one meal this week, **EITHER** fast from a meal on 3 separate days this week **OR** choose one day to practice a 24hr fast (remember to follow the “Guidelines for Fasting from Food” on pages 5-6 of this handout). Additionally practice #2 and #3 of the “Spiritual Exercises” listed at the bottom of page 5 of this handout. When you are done, reflect on your experiences. How was it challenging? How was it valuable?
- During this series we will process our experiences in discussion with another person or a small group of people. Sometime this week, meet up with one person discuss your experiences and encourage one another. Consider including people who are not part of our church as well. *Use Discussion Guide #3* below to guide your conversation.
- If you commit to Beast Mode, please email, text, or call me so I know about it and can be praying for you. As time allows I will try to reach out to see how it is going. mboyd@grandgrace.org; 218-259-1844.

READING: FASTING

Adapted from Adele Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook*, Expanded Edition, 245-249

Desire	To let go of an appetite in order to seek God on matters of deep concern for other, myself, and the world
Definition	A fast is the self-denial of normal necessities in order to intentionally attend to God in prayer. Bringing attachments and cravings to the surface opens a place for prayer. This physical awareness of emptiness is the reminder to turn to Jesus who alone can satisfy.
Scripture	Matthew 6:16-18; Isaiah 58:6-7
Practice Includes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Abstaining from food, drink, shopping, desserts, chocolate, and so on to intentionally be with God • Abstaining from media: TV, radio, music, email, cell phones, and computer games to allow space for listening to the voice of Jesus • Abstaining from habits or comforts: elevators, reading and sports in order to give God undivided attention • Observing fast days and seasons of the church year • Addressing excessive attachments or appetites and the entitlements behind them, and partnering with God for changed habits • Repenting and waiting on God • Seeking strength to persevere, obey, and serve • Overcoming addictions, compulsions, whims, and cravings
God-Given Fruit	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Keeping company with Jesus in relinquishment • Praying for needs in the body of Christ • Identifying and fellowshiping with Jesus by choosing to follow his sacrificial example • Freeing up more time for prayer • Repenting of self-indulgent, addictive, or compulsive behaviors • Letting these small deprivations remind you of Jesus' great sacrifice on your behalf • Seeking strength from God for obedient love and service

On Fasting

Fasting has been part and parcel of the Judeo-Christian tradition for millennia. Scripture is replete with examples of people who fast for a variety of reasons.

Old testament saints fasted at times of mourning and national repentance. They fasted when they needed strength or mercy to persevere and when they wanted a word from God (see 1 Samuel 7:6; Nehemiah 1:4; Esther 4:16). However, fasting was no magical guarantee that God would answer as the intercessor wanted. King David fasted when he wanted God to spare the life of Bathsheba's child, but the child died (2 Samuel 12:16-20).

Fasting was a normal practice for the Jews of Jesus day. Jesus began his ministry with a forty-day fast. He also practiced fasting before healings and to overcome temptation. But he did not hold his followers to a strict regime of fasting (Matthew 4:2; Mark 2:18-19; Luke 5:33).

The New Testament church sometimes fasted when it sought God's will and needed the grace and strength to remain faithful to God's work. There were also fast times linked to times of worship (Acts 13:2-3).

In many Christian traditions fasting is an important part of preparing to embrace a particular liturgical season. During Lent, fasting reminds the church of how Jesus gave up everything – even his life – for us.

Scripture also gives a variety of warnings about fasting for the wrong reasons or with the wrong attitude: (1) When people do not live as God desires they should be prepared for fasting to accomplish nothing (Isaiah 58:3-7). (2) Fasting is not for appearances. It does not make anyone pious or holy, and it does not earn points with God (Matthew 6:16; Luke 18:9-14).

Fasting is not a magical way to manipulate God into doing our will; it's not a way to get God to be an accomplice to our plans. Neither is fasting a spiritual way to lose weight or control others. Fasting clears us out and opens us up to intentionally seeking God's will and grace in a way that goes beyond normal habits of worship and prayer. While fasting, we are one on one with God, offering him the time and attentiveness we might otherwise be giving to eating, shopping, or watching television.

Fasting is an opportunity to lay down an appetite – an appetite for food, for media, for shopping. This act of self-denial may not seem huge – it's just a meal or a trip to the mall – but it brings us face to face with the hunger at the core of our being. Fasting exposes how we try to keep empty hunger at bay and gain a sense of well-being by devouring creature comforts.

Through self-denial we begin to recognize what controls us. Our small denials of the self show us just how little taste we actually have for sacrifice or time with God.

This truth is not meant to discourage us. It's simply the first step in realizing that we have to lay down our life in order to find it again in God. Brian Taylor puts it like this in *Becoming Christ*: “Self-denial is profoundly contemplative for it works by the process of human subtraction and divine addition.” Deny yourself a meal, and when your stomach growls “I'm hungry,” take a moment to turn from your emptiness to the nourishment of “every word that comes from the mouth of God” (Matthew 4:4). Feed on Jesus, the bread of life. Skip the radio or TV for a day and become aware of how fidgety you are when you aren't being amused or diverted. Then dodge the remote, and embrace Jesus and his words: “my food...is to do the will of him who sent me” (John 4:34). Taste the difference between what truly nourishes the soul – the living bread and the life-giving water – and what is simply junk food.

Fasting reminds us that we care about “soul” things. We care about the church. We care about the world. We care about doing God's will. Thus we willingly set aside a little comfort so we can listen and attend to the voice and nourishment of God alone. For God can give us grace and comfort and nurture we cannot get on our own.

Guidelines For Fasting From Food

- Don't fast when you are sick, traveling, pregnant or nursing. People with diabetes, gout, liver disease, kidney disease, ulcers, hypoglycemia, cancer and blood diseases should not fast.
- Don't fast if you are in a hurry and are fasting for immediate results regarding some decision. Fasting is not magic.
- Listen for a nudging from God to fast.
- Stay hydrated. Always drink plenty of water and fluids.
- If you are new to fasting, begin by fasting for one meal. Spend time with God that you would normally be eating.
- Work up to longer fasts. Don't attempt prolonged fasts with guidance. Check with your doctor before attempting long periods of fasting.
- If you decide to fast regularly, give your body time to adjust to new rhythms of eating. You may feel more tired on days you fast. Adjust your responsibilities appropriately. (Expect your tongue to feel coated, and expect to have bad breath.)
- Begin a fast after supper. Fast until supper the next day. This way you miss two, rather than three, meals.

- Don't break your fast with a huge meal. Eat small portions of food. The longer the fast, the more you need to break the fast gently.

What To Do in the Time Set Apart for Fasting

Bring your Bible and a glass of water during your fast.

Relax and breathe deeply. Place yourself in the presence of God. Offer yourself and your time to God by repeating Samuel's words, "Speak Lord, your servant is listening." Or simply say, "Here I am."

Spend some time worshipping God for his faithfulness. Thank him for where he has come through for you. Psalm 103:1-5 also provides a starting point for praise.

Bring your desires to God. Ask him if this desire is in line with his will and his word for your and the church. Be still and listen. Offer your desires and prayers to God.

Spiritual Exercises

1. Fast one meal a week. Spend your mealtime in prayer. When you feel hungry, sit with Jesus in the wilderness and feed on the bread of heaven. Talk to Jesus about what his self-denial means to you.
2. For a period of one week, fast from media, sports, shopping, reading, or use of the computer. Dedicate the time you now have to God. What feelings arise in you? What thoughts interrupt your prayer?
3. Abstain from purchasing morning coffee or daily sodas or evening videos. Offer the money or time to God.
4. Make two lists: one of needs, the other of wants. Ask God to show you where to fast from some of your wants. Offer to God the time you spend hankering after your wants.
5. When facing a trial, decide on a fast that gives you time to seek God's strength in your journey.

Resources on Fasting

Celebration of Discipline by Richard Foster, chapter 4, "Fasting"

Fasting: Spiritual Freedom Beyond Our Appetites by Lynne M. Baab

A Hunger for God: Desiring God Through Fasting and Prayer by John Piper

Simplicity and Fasting by Jan Johnson

Soul Feast by Marjorie Thompson, chapter 5

DISCUSSION GUIDE #3: FASTING

Meet together this week with at least one other person to discuss your experiences with fasting. Later in the week would be ideal so you have some time to practice. Meeting in person is best, but over the phone or via video chat would work too.

***Before meeting, each person should read pages 2, 4, 5, and 6 in this handout.** Alternatively, you could read it together. Underline key parts of these readings and write down any questions you might have.*

Questions for Your Group

1. What were your experiences with fasting like this week?

2. Discuss the readings in this handout. What struck you as helpful or challenging?

3. Choose some of these reflection questions to discuss together (from Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook*, 248):
 - a. When you feel empty or restless, what do you do to try to fill the emptiness?
What does this tell you about your heart?
 - b. What is your attitude toward fasting or self-denial?
 - c. In what ways do you currently deny yourself?
 - d. When has self-denial brought you something good?
 - e. What has the experience of fasting been like for you?
 - f. Where do you operate from an entitlement mentality?
How can you wean yourself from this way of life?

4. In what ways is the practice of fasting necessary for growth in the spiritual life?

5. How would you like to build deliberate fasting into your life going forward?

Pray for one another as you continue on this journey together!

