



A Guide for Fasting

Why fast? Basic information on fasting.

Have you considered what spiritual benefit there is in fasting? In today's culture, fasting can be seen as a way to lose weight (intermittent fasting) or to detox from the noise of life (media fasting). Rarely do we hear about it from a Christian perspective. Perhaps you haven't tried it because it might look like you're trying to manipulate God, or it seems like something only extreme Christians have done in church history, or that you simply don't know how to get started.

Throughout history, God's people have observed fasting as a spiritual discipline to draw closer to God in prayer, as well as to repent and to mourn over sin. While the Bible lacks an explicit command to fast, there are numerous examples in the Old and New Testaments where people fasted for various reasons (Est. 4:3, 16; Neh. 1:4; Luke 4:1-2, 14; Acts 9:9, 13:2-3). In addition to these examples, two specific points from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 6:1-18) are relevant to a Christian approach to fasting. First, when Jesus speaks of fasting, it is in context with giving (6:2-4) and praying (6:5-15). Each section starts with the assumption that this is something Jesus' followers are in the habit of doing: "when you give," "when you pray," "when you fast." Second, Jesus instructs us to avoid drawing attention to the fact that we're fasting (6:16-18). "Put oil on your head and wash your face" are reminders to keep one's outward appearance like any other day, but this also guides us to refrain from telling others.

Paul Miller describes fasting this way: "Fasting works because it draws us into a mini-participation in the dying of Christ. By putting to death one of our most basic needs (food), we enter into what the apostle Paul calls a fellowship of Christ's suffering (Phil. 3:10)." (from Miller, *A Praying Church*, p. 246)

How to fast? Some practical tips.

If you are new to fasting, here are some basic guidelines to observing this practice.

- Generally, a 24-hour fast is from sundown to sundown. You are essentially missing 2 meals.
- Drink water, coffee, tea, or vegetable juices. Avoid fruit juices and added sugar.
- Plan ahead for the times that you would normally eat and use this as an opportunity to draw near to God by feeding on scripture and prayer.
- For some with medical conditions, a partial fast would make sense. Consult with your doctor if you are concerned. Also, see the section below on alternatives to fasting from food.
- Consider a social-media fast in conjunction with a food fast.
- Keep your normal schedule of work and exercise. Avoid telling people or drawing attention to your fasting.
- When you break your fast, return to food gradually. Avoid overeating.

Alternatives to fasting from food. For those who can't fast.

With spiritual disciplines, rhythms matter more than doing something 'right'. While fasting is a practice many of us should consider (and more of us can do than we think!), some people are in situations that make fasting difficult. This can make something like a corporate call to fasting, like the one Intown is inviting people to do, sound like a painful statement of exclusion rather than an invitation for our whole family. But this doesn't have to be the case—consider these alternative ways to join us.

First of all, why shouldn't you fast?

General, limited fasting has been shown by numerous studies and countless spiritual traditions to be safe for our bodies. However, those with conditions or situations that rely on food management (such as those with blood sugar issues, those who are pregnant and nursing mothers, or professional athletes) may be unable to fast. Participating in a scheduled fast with others may also be difficult for those with specific commitments which necessitate food on that specific day (like a special dinner, or a work meeting!). Fasting is also discouraged for children and students who are not yet in high school, which makes it difficult for families that want to participate together in this call to fast.

Pick another day or time

If the issue is that you can't fast 'with' Intown on a specific day, it's okay! This is about connecting with God, being shaped by him, and building rhythms in our lives. You may also want to encourage others who are participating during the original time with a quick call or text!

Pick something else to fast

Food is a helpful thing to fast. It's a need, so there's no ambiguity: hunger pains remind us of God's daily provision to us and help us remember to pray. The point is that we are shaped into people who more and more depend on God. We should avoid 'cop out' choices (few people who give up chocolate for Lent, for instance, actually experience a real need for dependence on God!), and instead select something that will cause us to pause and reflect on God in our lives, and drive us to pray and worship. Some examples may include certain forms of technology or entertainment. Scripture even refers to spouses fasting from physical intimacy for a time!

Replace the time with something else

Many people will replace the time they would be spending eating with something else, like a focused time of prayer or even a service project! This is a great idea for families, especially those with young children. Children can sometimes not fully understand the concept of fasting, and will often interpret a fast from something like TV as a punishment or a mean thing God is forcing them to do. Instead of framing the activity negatively ('we're not going to do [X] today'), try alternative activities that can also focus your family's connection to God and spark conversations with him and about him. This could be hiking out in creation, doing God-focused art together, or even having a family worship concert where everyone can sing and dance along (you can even make instruments!).

Just pray

There is no 'just' in prayer, even if we often ask people in need what we can do for them 'besides praying'. The reason prayer and fasting go together so often in Scripture is their ability to compliment one another: prayer connects us to God and makes us aware of the things we rely on him for, and fasting provides ample time and awareness of God's presence and provision that we can't help but pray! Those who want to join in an intentional, focused time of prayer and fasting with others might want to set alarms or physical reminders to pray throughout the day. Others might carve out intentional time for prayer that shifts their normal schedule, like working a half-day and then spending the afternoon as focused time with God.

For further study

A Praying Church, Paul Miller

- The final chapter in Miller's recent book is about fasting as a pattern for prayer. If you have already purchased his book, you can skip to the end and get some great advice as you prepare to fast.

As well, there are other books about Spiritual Disciplines that have a chapter or section on fasting. You may have one of these on your shelf, or you might decide to pick one up to add to your library.

- *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*, Donald Whitney
- *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, Dallas Willard
- *Celebration of Discipline*, Richard Foster