

A Guide to Fasting

HOW AND WHY WE SHOULD FAST

Fasting is not a way to manipulate God or a magic formula. Fasting is an invitation found in scripture to draw near to God. In the Bible we see people fasting as they pray and confess their sins. We see Jesus going without food for 40 days as he faced temptation by the devil and prepared for his public ministry (Luke 4:1-2). The early church prayed and fasted before they sent out missionaries and appointed elders (Acts 13:2; 14:23).



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DALLAS WILLARD

HOW TO START FASTING (from David Mathias)

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 idealistic new fast-ers have decided to miss a meal and only found their belly drove them 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 the 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. [**Menlo Pro Tip:** If you desire to fast three meals, make the first meal lunch and the third meal breakfast the following day.]

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's *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 food in front of us. One significant part of fasting is the time it creates for prayer and meditation on God's word or some act of love for others.

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 the time you would have spent eating. 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 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."

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 Corinthians 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 says more about your love for food than your love for God. 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.

FASTING

By Dallas Willard | [Dallas Willard on Fasting](#) (2:30min)

In fasting, we abstain in some significant way from food and possibly from drink as well. This discipline teaches us a lot about ourselves very quickly. It will certainly prove humiliating to us, as it reveals to us how much our peace depends upon the pleasures of eating. It may also bring to mind how we are using food pleasure to assuage the discomforts caused in our bodies by faithless and unwise living and attitudes – lack of self-worth, meaningless work, purposeless existence, or lack of rest or exercise. If nothing else, though, it will certainly demonstrate how powerful and clever our body is in getting its own way against our strongest resolves.

There are many ways and degrees of fasting. The desert fathers such as St. Antony often subsisted for long periods of time on bread and water – though we must understand that their "bread" was much more substantial than what we have today. Daniel and his friends would not eat the king's meat or drink his wine; they had vegetables and water only (Dan. 1:12). At another time, Daniel "ate no pleasant bread, neither came flesh nor wine in my mouth, neither did I anoint myself at all, till three whole weeks were fulfilled" (10:3). Jesus in the time of his preparation for temptation and ministry seems to have forgone all food for more than a month (Matt. 4).

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 is not food ("bread") alone that gives life, but also the words that proceed from the mouth of God (Matt. 4:4).

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Hence, when Jesus directs us not to appear distressed and sad when we fast (Matt. 6: 16–18), he is not telling us to mislead those around us. He is instead explaining how we will feel – we really will not be sad. We are discovering that life is so much more than meat (Luke 12:33). Our belly is not our god, as it is for others (Phil. 3:19; Rom. 16:18); rather, it is his joyful servant and ours (1 Cor. 6:13).

Actually, fasting is one of the more important ways of practicing that self-denial required of everyone who would follow Christ (Matt. 16:24). In fasting, we learn how to suffer happily as we feast on God. And it is a good lesson, because in our lives we will suffer, no matter what else happens to us. Thomas a Kempis remarks: “Whosoever knows best how to suffer will keep the greatest peace. That man is conqueror of himself, and lord of the world, the friend of Christ, and heir of Heaven.”

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 the more easily restrain all the inclinations of the flesh.” Fasting teaches temperance or self-control and therefore teaches moderation and restraint with regard to all our fundamental drives. Since food has the pervasive place it does in our lives, the effects of fasting will be diffused throughout our personality. In the midst of all our needs and wants, we experience the commitment of the child that has been weaned from its mother’s breast (Ps. 131:2). And “Godliness with contentment is great gain” (1 Tim. 6:6).

Fasting, though, is a hard discipline to practice without its consuming all our attention. Yet when we use it as part of prayer or service, we cannot allow it to do so. When a person chooses fasting as a spiritual discipline, he or she must, then, practice it well enough and often enough to become experienced in it, because only the person who is well habituated to systematic fasting as a discipline can use it effectively as a part of direct service to God, as in special times of prayer or other service.