

Fasting: A *Living the Way* Guide

Session One | Training for Godliness

We live in a self-indulgent culture. From Hollywood to Wall Street, Americans are encouraged to pursue every pleasure without restraint. On TV and the Internet we are bombarded with alluring images, pop-up ads, and advertising jingles prompting us to indulge ourselves. In these and many other ways, we all deal with temptations to excess on a regular basis, and this includes the Christian community. Consider your own personal struggles with sin. Most, if not all, of these boil down to a failure of self-control. Whether you struggle with anger, gossip, lust, overspending, gambling, overeating, or even anxiety, your basic challenge is that of **restraining your desires**. It is no surprise, then, that the Bible so strongly emphasizes the virtue of self-control.

A proverb says, “Like a city whose walls are broken through is a person who lacks self-control” (Pr. 25:28), and another says, “Better a patient person than a warrior, one with self-control than one who takes a city.” In the New Testament, self-control is listed among the “fruit of the Spirit” (Gal. 5:23) and among the necessary characteristics of a church elder (Titus 1:8). The importance of self-control is evident in the fact that so many other virtues or “fruit of the Spirit” require the ability to control oneself. Consider courage, which is the ability to control one’s fear. And chastity—the ability to control one’s sexual impulses. And patience—the ability to wait without complaining. These and many other forms of godly behavior boil down to a basic exercise of self-control.

1. What is area in your life where you wish you had *more* self-control? What is an area where you believe you have a *lot* of self-control?
2. What are some ways in which you have been hurt or disappointed by others because of their lack of self-control?

The Spiritual Disciplines

It is important to think about the virtues like courage, chastity, and patience as **moral skills**. In this sense, they are qualities that we may develop through practice. The Apostle Paul compares this to athletic training:

²⁴ *Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize.* ²⁵ *Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last, but we do it to get a crown that will last forever.*

²⁶ *Therefore I do not run like someone running aimlessly; I do not fight like a boxer beating the air.* ²⁷ *No, I strike a blow to my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to*

others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize. (1 Cor. 9:24-27).

He makes the same point elsewhere:

“Train yourself to be godly. 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. 4:7-8).

So how are we supposed to train to be godly? If godliness (self-control among other moral skills) comes through training, what sorts of exercises are we supposed to do? This is where the **spiritual disciplines** come in. Spiritual disciplines are methods of moral-spiritual training that build self-control and draw us closer to God. Dallas Willard defines spiritual disciplines as “Activities of mind and body purposefully undertaken to bring . . . our total being into effective cooperation with the divine order.” The basic idea is that developing a mature Christian character requires effort, even intentional training. Paul uses the analogy of athletics—something to which all of us can identify, even if we are not athletes. In order to excel in any sport, much training and practice is necessary. One cannot become a good hitter in baseball by simply *thinking* about hitting pitches or even studying the mechanics of hitting. One must do batting *practice*—over and over again.

Another useful analogy is carpentry. In order to become a good carpenter, it is not enough to watch videos on how to wire an outlet or install a toilet. Nor will reading instructions on how to use an electric drill or circular saw make you skilled with these tools. You must actually *use* the tools and put them to use on real projects. And you must do this repeatedly. After doing so many times, behold, you will become a decent carpenter! This is the whole idea behind apprenticeships in the trades—working for long periods of time under the guidance of proven professionals. And so it goes in other industries, from health care to the legal world. Genuine achievement in any field requires real life practice. There are no short-cuts to excellence.

The same is true in the Christian spiritual life, which is precisely the apostle Paul’s point in 1 Cor. 9 and 1 Tim. 4. Christian maturity only comes with practice—“training for godliness.”

1. Do you normally think about the fruit of the Spirit as skills? Why or why not?
2. Do you have spiritual goals? If so, is having a mature moral character one of your goals? Why or why not?

Exercises for Session Two

1. Read “Training vs. Trying” (chapter 3) in John Ortberg’s *The Life You’ve Always Wanted*.
2. Reflect on one or two areas in your life where you could use more self-control.
3. Complete the discussion questions for session two. Come ready to discuss!

Session Two | The Spiritual Discipline of Fasting

The Different Kinds of Spiritual Disciplines

Traditionally, the spiritual disciplines have been divided into two categories: disciplines of engagement and abstinence. The **disciplines of engagement** include celebration, confession, fellowship, meditation, prayer, service, study, submission, and worship. All of these involve a positive activity of some kind. Some of these, such as celebration, fellowship, and worship may not seem like the sorts of activities that require “discipline,” since they are often so enjoyable. But they are disciplines nonetheless, because they contribute to the building of a godly character. Other disciplines of engagement, such as study, service, and especially submission, tend to require more effort and may even be unpleasant at times. Still others, such as prayer and meditation, may often come naturally while at other times they require serious struggle and commitment. Whatever the level of difficulty or natural inclination we may feel with regard to these disciplines of engagement, they are all extremely beneficial to our personal growth in Christ. They are all powerful means of growing more like him and more “in tune” with the Holy Spirit as we grow in Christian discipleship.

The **disciplines of abstinence** include chastity, fasting, frugality, sacrifice, secrecy, silence, and solitude. All of these involve surrendering or denying oneself of certain things, at least for a period of time. Each of these forms of self-denial focuses on a particular life context where we are tempted to overindulgence. And since we live in a highly self-indulgent culture, these disciplines tend to come much less naturally to us than the disciplines of engagement. Consider the discipline of secrecy. This is the discipline of keeping quiet about some accomplishment or good deed you performed, simply for the sake of restraining your pride. Not that there is anything wrong with telling others about your achievements. It is just a good exercise in self-control to do this from time to time. When done repeatedly, the cumulative effect is that you will become less self-centered and stronger in resisting temptations to pride. In short, you will become more Christlike in terms of personal humility. Or consider the discipline of silence—going for some predetermined length of time, say, a 12-hour period, without speaking. As important as talking is, intentionally abstaining from this for a significant length of time can be a powerful way of building self-control in this area, developing the skill of “taming the tongue” (James 3:8).

1. What disciplines of engagement do you practice regularly? Which ones do you practice less frequently or not at all? Why do you think this is the case?
2. What disciplines of abstinence do you practice regularly? Which ones do you practice less frequently or not at all? Why do you think this is the case?
3. Which disciplines are you drawn to most naturally and why?

What is Fasting?

Fasting is one of the most important spiritual disciplines of abstinence. It is especially important because it is so powerful as a means of building self-control. While disciplines like frugality and solitude address particular temptations related, respectively, to money and socializing, fasting addresses virtually all dimensions of human temptation. This is because fasting involves self-denial regarding our most fundamental physical need for survival (okay, with the exception of oxygen—but there is no spiritual discipline associated with that, thankfully!). While our desires for sex, money, oral expression, and social interaction are certainly strong. None compare with the desire (and need) for physical nourishment with food and water. So to intentionally deny oneself of such nourishment for a day or more is a significant statement of one's resolve to grow spiritually.

So, to define this discipline, *fasting is intentional abstinence from food, and possibly drink, for the sake of spiritual growth*. While some people use the word “fasting” in other contexts, such as when abstaining from technology, recreation, particularly addictive hobbies (which can also be very beneficial, from a moral-spiritual standpoint), the original and most important kind of fasting regards food and drink. Even when understood in its original context pertaining to food and drink, fasting is a highly elastic practice, since it can be done in a specified way, such as by fasting from particular foods (e.g., meat, caffeinated beverages, sweets, etc.). And the varieties of fasting periods and rhythms are virtually infinite, as one can fast from food for hours, days, or even many weeks. Complete fasts from food *and* water are more rare and should be reserved for only those more advanced in this discipline, especially since total abstinence from both food and water can be life-threatening after three days. Still, the spiritual rewards for those who advance to this level can be significant.

It is no wonder that so many biblical figures fasted (e.g., Moses, David, Elijah, Esther, Daniel, Paul, Jesus and his disciples), as have so many Christian leaders since biblical times (e.g., Martin Luther, John Calvin, John Knox, John Wesley, Jonathan Edwards, Charles Finney, etc.). In fact, Jesus takes it for granted that his followers will fast with some regularity:

¹⁶“When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show others they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. ¹⁷But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, ¹⁸so that it will not be obvious to others that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.” (Mt. 6:6-18).

Notice that Jesus begins with the word “when,” not “if.” He also warns against the temptation to pride that comes with fasting, despite the fact that it is such a humbling discipline. For this reason, it is critical that one be especially prayerful while fasting. Notice, also, Jesus' exhortation to practice the discipline of secrecy while fasting. So here we have a good example of how the disciplines can be combined for our spiritual good.

1. If you have fasted before, what was your experience like? If you have never fasted, what

do you anticipate the experience will be like?

2. If fasting is such a humbling spiritual discipline, why do you suppose it might be tempting to be prideful about it?
3. Besides prayer and secrecy, what other spiritual disciplines might be helpfully combined with fasting?

“Of fasting I say this: It is right to fast frequently in order to subdue and control the body. For when the stomach is full, the body does not serve for preaching, for praying, for studying, or for doing anything else that is good. Under such circumstances God’s Word cannot remain. But one should not fast with a view to meriting something by it as by a good work.” (Martin Luther)

Exercises for Session Three

1. Read “The Discipline of Fasting” (chapter 4) in *The Celebration of Discipline* by Richard Foster:
<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/53050ebfe4b035d468e0f52d/t/5fee77ce6ed34a73671e1591/1609463760796/Celebration-of-Discipline-Richard-J.-Foster+Fasting+Chapter.pdf>.
2. Commit a day or part of a day to fasting in the next few weeks. Do so prayerfully, asking God to teach you something significant during your fast.
3. Complete the discussion questions for session three. Come ready to discuss!

Session Three | Fasting with Purpose

The fact that Jesus Christ fasted should be evidence enough that Christians should practice this discipline. Jesus did not have a sinful nature to struggle with, yet he fasted, even in extreme ways. How much more so, then, is fasting important for the rest of us who constantly battle with our own sinful natures!

Why Fasting is Important

Still, it is helpful to identify some of the many spiritual benefits of fasting (in addition to health benefits, which are actually significant). Some of the benefits include:

- **Fasting builds moral strength:** Like physical training such as weightlifting, fasting builds moral muscle through the active practice of self-control. So when done regularly, one is likely to see improvements in other areas requiring self-control, such as patience, chastity, and anger management.
- **Fasting improves perspective through suffering:** Since hunger is uncomfortable, fasting requires intentional spiritual focus that transcends pain. This naturally improves one's ability to do the same through other unpleasant circumstances. Fasting reminds us that our bodily comforts are not what is most important.
- **Fasting reinforces prayer:** Any sacrifice we make for the sake of the kingdom of God is significant statement of our moral-spiritual earnestness. As one goes through the day without eating, the bodily discomfort this causes is an on-going spiritual "statement" of one's commitment to the Lord.

The power of fasting to reinforce prayer is evident in this story we find in the gospel of Mark, where a man approached Jesus with a demon-possessed son, saying,

"Teacher, I brought my son to you, for he has a spirit that makes him mute. ¹⁸ And whenever it seizes him, it throws him down, and he foams and grinds his teeth and becomes rigid. So I asked your disciples to cast it out, and they were not able . . . if you can do anything, have compassion on us and help us.' ²³ And Jesus said to him, "'If you can"! All things are possible for one who believes.' ²⁴ Immediately the father of the child cried out and said, 'I believe; help my unbelief!' ²⁵ And when Jesus saw that a crowd came running together, he rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to it, 'You mute and deaf spirit, I command you, come out of him and never enter him again.' ²⁶ And after crying out and convulsing him terribly, it came out, and the boy was like a corpse, so that most of them said, 'He is dead.' ²⁷ But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up, and he arose. ²⁸ And when he had entered the house, his disciples asked him privately, 'Why could we not cast it out?' ²⁹ And he said to them, 'This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer and fasting.'" (Mark 9:17-18, 23-29)

1. The Bible teaches that God uses trials to mature us (e.g., James 1:2-4; 1 Pet. 1:6-7). Many Christians view fasting as a self-imposed trial that has moral-spiritual power for

just this reason. Do you find this perspective encouraging as a motive to fast?

2. Are there issues in your life about which you have prayed repeatedly without any apparent results? Have you considered reinforcing your prayers about this by fasting?

Biblical Occasions for Fasting

There are various occasions for fasting recorded in Scripture. Here are two recurring contexts in which biblical figures fasted:

1. When Declaring Repentance: A major reason for fasting that is depicted and sometimes commanded in Scripture is to declare one's repentance for sin. For example, the Lord commands the Israelites to fast on the Day of Atonement (Lev. 23:26-27). Later, the Israelites fasted as a sign of their repentance for worshiping false gods (1 Sam. 7:2-6).

Another well-known instance of fasting out of repentance is in the book of Jonah, where the Ninevites responded to the prophet's warning by repenting with a fast. We are told that "The Ninevites believed God. A fast was proclaimed, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth" and that "When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he relented and did not bring on them the destruction he had threatened." (Jonah 3:5, 10). Also, through the prophet Joel, the Lord tells the Israelites to "return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning" (Joel 2:12). And after his confrontation by the Lord on the road to Damascus, Saul of Tarsus declares his repentance with an extreme three-day fast from food and water (Acts 9:9).

2. When Making Requests of the Lord: There are also instances of fasting in Scripture when believers are making requests from the Lord, whether that be counsel or a blessing of some kind. For instance, Ezra and his fellow Israelites "fasted and petitioned God" for a safe journey back to Israel (Ezra 8:21-23). In the New Testament, the disciples fasted when commissioning Paul and Barnabas in Acts 13:2-3. And a little while later, Paul and Barnabas fasted as they commissioned elders at the churches of Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch (Acts 14:21-23). And, finally, fasting is an appropriate way of supplementing one's prayers for spiritual strength, as the story of Jesus' deliverance of the demon-possessed boy, discussed above, demonstrates.

All of these biblical contexts for fasting reinforce the idea that fasting should be a normal part of a Christian's life. After all, we are always in need of these things—repentance, divine counsel, divine strength, and divine provisions. This helps us to see why many Christians fast regularly, such as on a weekly or monthly basis.

"The absence of fasting is the measure of our contentment with the absence of Christ." (John Piper)

1. Why do you suppose fasting has been so often practiced by biblical figures and throughout Christian history as a way of declaring their repentance? Why not just pray more earnestly or spend more time worshiping or studying Scripture? What is so significant about fasting in this regard?
2. Why is fasting an appropriate way of supplementing or reinforcing one's requests of the Lord (for, say, wisdom, guidance, safety, healing, etc.)?
3. If you fasted prior to this session, what was your experience like? Did you learn anything from it?

Exercises for Session Four

1. Read John Calvin's "The Joy of Self-Denial" and excerpts from Catherine Marshall's *A Man Called Peter*.
2. Commit another day or part of a day to fasting in the next few weeks. Do so prayerfully, asking God to build your "skill" of self-control. Be mindful during and after your fast, noting how it affects you, especially your attitudes in prayer and towards other people.
3. Complete the discussion questions for session four. Come ready to discuss!

Session Four | Avoiding Fasting Pitfalls

Fasting is an especially powerful spiritual discipline, and perhaps for this reason there are certain things to watch out for that might tempt you to become discouraged when practicing this discipline. You might have already experienced some of these things.

What to Expect When You Fast

1. Discomfort: Fasting is uncomfortable. This might seem too obvious even to mention, but it is wise to be intentionally mindful about this because. Anticipating the discomfort will make discouragement less likely.

2. Doubt: Even if you are fully expecting discomfort during your fast, you may still find yourself thinking, “This isn’t helping me. What’s the use?” If this happens, be sure to remind yourself that the benefits of fasting are not short-term but **long-term**. No weightlifter ever saw results *while* doing squats and bench-presses. Nor does one’s shooting percentage improve the same day they are practicing free throws. The benefits accrue over time. Still, while fasting it is easy to forget this. Keep in mind, also, that the enemy will try to discourage us while fasting, precisely because it is so spiritually powerful.

Lastly, although it is not a guaranteed, do not be surprised if you experience the **joy and assurance** of the Holy Spirit as you fast. After all, Scripture says

“Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.” (James 4:8-10)

The Problem of Abuse

A common objection to fasting is that we need to be wary of practicing the discipline because it is prone to abuse (e.g., legalism, eating disorders, etc.). While we certainly should be aware of the potential for abuse, it is important to remember that the distortion of a good thing does not justify our rejecting it. After all, sex, music, and even worship are *very* frequently abused, but we don’t discourage practicing these things. Rather, we simply take care to be mindful of potential abuse and strive to model wise and obedient practice in these areas. Still, as regards legalism, it is always wise to be on your guard against a legalistic mindset, especially if you are unique among your friends in fasting. And as for concerns about eating disorders, those who have had this problem may be advised to 1) fast only with strict accountability and/or 2) practice only selective fasting (e.g. refraining from sweets, meats, coffee, or other particular foods).

1. Fasting is an uncomfortable spiritual discipline, but is it unique among the disciplines in this regard? What other disciplines are uncomfortable to practice, at least some of the time?
2. At any point during your recent fasts have you been tempted to pride? Have you been tempted in other ways? If so, how did you deal with that?

Keeping in Mind our Motivations to Fast

As you conclude these sessions, it is appropriate to recall the proper biblical motivation for fasting, which is *gratitude for grace*. We fast not to earn God's favor but to honor him with a more obedient life out of thankfulness for his grace. Fasting is not a way of somehow making ourselves more acceptable to God but rather a way of becoming more Christlike, as we grow in self-control. We are motivated to do this because in Christ we are *already* fully accepted by God. In short, fasting is not working *for* salvation but a working *out* of our salvation which is already achieved by Christ.

The logic of Christian obedience is not that of earning salvation through good works but rather doing good works out of the joy of salvation. As the apostle Paul exhorts us, "Continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose" (Phil. 2:12-13). Note his emphasis on the fact that even as we work out our salvation, it is God working in us to do this. So it is all a work of God. Not only was our salvation accomplished by divine grace, but even our obedience out of gratitude for this grace is God's gift—yet another facet of divine grace. Paul strikes a similar theme in Ephesians 2 when he says, "it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do" (Eph. 2:8-10). Again, we are saved by grace, and our good works follow. Even those good works are engineered by God. So there is simply no place for human pride. The Christian lives in grace, through and through.

This critical point should inform all of our fasting. It is a response to God's grace, an expression of a strong desire to be more Christlike in terms of our exhibiting the fruit of the Spirit, especially self-control.

1. If you fasted prior to this session, what was your experience like? If it was your second fast, how was your experience different, if at all, from your first fast?
2. How sensitive are you to concerns about abuses related to fasting (e.g., to legalism, pride, or an unhealthy attitude toward food)? Are there other concerns that might create obstacles for you, psychological or otherwise, as you practice fasting in the future?