



practicing the way

# fasting

## Fasting as Prayer

### Overview

Our prayer, following Jesus's example, is for God's will to be done here on earth as it is in Heaven (Matthew 6:10). But why does it seem to be so difficult to know God's will in the specific sense? All throughout the Scriptures, a great myriad of characters—both admirable and decidedly less so—ask God for things, and God answers. Jesus himself pleaded with his disciples to understand God not as uncaring or aloof, but as a loving father eager to provide for his kids. Complicated though it may be, we can wrap our heads around the idea of asking God for things.

Fasting on the other hand, we understand a bit less. In one sense, fasting is a means by which the disciple of Jesus prays with their entire body. After all, you are not simply a spirit in a body; you are a spirit and a body. The discipline of fasting draws our attention to both our spiritual and our physical being. In fasting, the great hunger of the heart and mind for answered prayer permeates the body itself.

We believe that God is responsive—he actually acts differently than he would based on the actions and prayers of his people. Certainly, fasting is not a manipulative device by which the fasting person assumes he or she can pressure God into doing something he or she wants. Fasting is not a way we jump ahead in the journey of prayer, but the way we pray and how we do it matters. Fasting is one important method of engaging your entire person (not just your mind) in prayer. Fasting fosters an internal intimacy, a quiet space, in which God's voice has more room. God is relational. Like any other intimate relationship, we hear one another better when we focus our entire person on the other. Fasting is not a hunger strike, but it is a way of expressing to God our hunger for him to move in our life.

### Practice

Here's the Practice for this coming week:

In the teaching, we talked through 6 types of prayer for which fasting is a naturally ally: to repent, to grieve, to cry out in crisis, to change God's mind, to know God's heart and to train our hearts in compassion. As you fast and pray this week, consider leaning into one of those six areas, following the prompts below.

- First, mark out a period of time this week to fast – somewhere between 12 and 24 hours – but it's up to you.
- In which area do you want to hear God or be heard by God this week? Perhaps it's one of the six categories:
  - o To **repent**: Is there something from which you need to repent? Is there a sin in your life in need of contemplation and forgiveness?
  - o To **grieve**: Is there something you need to grieve? Have you experienced a loss that you need to hold

before the Lord in prayer and fasting, grieving with God's Spirit? This can be something in your immediate life – such as a loved one, a job, a relationship, or a failed plan you once held close – or something outside of your own situation – such as a natural disaster, a school shooting, war, racism, global violence against women, or some other current event.

- o To **cry out in crisis**: Are you in or on the brink of a crisis and need God's intervention?
- o To **change God's mind in a situation**: Is there an area of your life in which you want to see reality change? Do you need to wrestle with God about something in your life?
- o To **know God's mind in a decision**: Is there an area of confusion in your life about which you'd like to hear God's thoughts? Are you in the midst of making a big decision and desperately need to hear what God's wants to happen?
- o To **train our hearts in compassion and unite us with other believers**: What issues so move you to compassion that you could respond with a personal fast? Who do you need to connect with around the world who is suffering?
  - As you fast, allow the hunger you feel to prompt you towards prayer. Use the time you would normally eat in communion with God, engaging one of the above conversations with him.
  - Sometimes God speaks to us in the midst of our fast. Make sure that, whether you were certain it was God or not, you write down what you hear. Spend time reflecting on these things:
- o Is what I heard something I find in the Bible? Does it contradict something in the Bible? (Note: God will never say something to you that contradicts what he has already spoken in the Bible.)
- o Invite someone(s) from your Community to pray with you about what you've heard and to help you discern its source.
- o If I feel that God has or has not spoken, how will I respond? What are my next steps? Do I need to make fasting more of a habit in my life? Or is there another direction in which I'm being led to take action?
  - Come together as a Community to talk about your experience and pray together. If someone in your Community heard God say something significant, spend time praying with them about what they've heard, thanking God for speaking and asking him what next next steps she/he/you all should take.

## Closing Questions

1. Has your view of fasting shifted since we began this series? How?
2. What is an area of your life in which you would love to discern God's will?
3. Is it easy for you to hear God's voice?
4. Have you heard or experienced an encouraging story about fasting and discernment?

## Prayer

If you're not eating, you will have more time to pray. Take as long as you want. You might pick one, or more, of the six areas of and then spend some time hearing God or being heard by God this week.

For most of us, fasting is new and complicated. That's okay! No one—least of all God—expects you to be an expert, already fluent in the art of fasting. Close in prayer by inviting Jesus to teach you, remembering the Father's loving patience, and by thanking God in advance for the ways in which he will hear us and be heard by us this week.