

Fasting 101: Concrete Considerations When Preparing to Fast for Justice

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.
Deuteronomy 6:5; see also Matthew 22:37, Mark 12:29-30, Luke 10:27

Fasting is a spiritual practice that affects our entire being, heart, soul, mind, and might. Like any discipline of the spirit, it should be entered into prayerfully. This is a time of entering into deeper relationship with God, being changed by that relationship, and then being sent out into the world.

It is important to recognize that there are no biblical laws regarding regular fasting. At the same time, Jesus seems to operate under the assumption that this practice is a part of life; in Matthew 6:17 he says, “When you fast ...,” not “if.” The lack of guidance means, however, that embarking on a fast can mean any number of things.

For example, it is rare that anyone undertakes an **absolute fast**, meaning that not even water is consumed (see Esther 4:16, Acts 9:9). This type of fast is the exception, not the rule. More common is what might be considered a **partial fast**, in which there is a restriction of diet, but not total abstention. Such restrictions may be, as John Calvin suggests, in regard to the time of fasting (how long, when during the day), quality of food, and quantity of food (*Institutes* IV.12.18).

Some possibilities to consider:

- Fast only on certain days of the week.
- Fast only during daylight hours, as Muslims practice during Ramadan.
- Fast through a single meal each week and contribute the money you would have spent to initiatives related to your fast.

Some health essentials to fasting:

Fasting from food should be avoided by those with diabetes, expectant mothers, or heart patients. Anyone with questions about their health condition should see a doctor before beginning. For those unable to fast from food for health reasons, find other things from which to abstain in a prayerful manner, such as non-essential foods or media stimulation, for example too much television or computer time.

A progression of fasting should be observed. Begin with a partial fast over two days, from lunch to lunch or dinner to dinner, meaning that no more than two meals are skipped on a given day. Try this once a week for several weeks before considering anything more lengthy. Over time, periods of 24, 36, or more hours might be profitable, but only when prayerfully and medically considered. Begin with a time frame in mind, and end your fast when the time is up.

Preparing for a Fast:

Choose a time that is free of unusual stress or physical demands. Do not fast if you are sick or traveling. A day or two prior to a fast reduce your intake of food, especially heavier meals, and stop drinking caffeinated beverages.

Begin your fast prayerfully, mindful of the blessings you may receive rather than the deprivations you may feel.

Do not underestimate the effects of your fast. Be prepared for a difficult first day, and a second day that is harder still. It takes time for our bodies to adjust to a lack of food.

While you do not want to lord your piety over others, (see Matthew 6:16-18), do let your family, church community, and co-workers know of your plans, so that they might pray for and support you (Leviticus 23:27, 2 Chronicles 20:1-4, Ezra 8:21-23, Joel 2:15).

Be realistic about the effects a fast may have on you. Do not schedule any heavy demands that are either physical or social.

Prayerfully consider why you are joining in this fast or entering into the practice at this time. Be mindful of your motives. More fasting or longer fasting does not mean “better fasting”. Fasting should not become a source of pride.

While Fasting:

Include worship opportunities to keep your focus on God. Consider pondering a text appropriate to your reason for fasting. Take time throughout the fast to thank God for the chance to fast, and for the opportunity you will have to break it. Not everyone is so blessed. Make this a time of special attention to the poor and needy with whom you share this hunger. If the purpose of the fast is spiritual, then it is important to keep our inner attitude in the forefront. Consider keeping a journal, even if only during the times your times of fasting. Devote the time you would have been eating to prayer.

Drink two to three quarts of water per day, preferably at room temperature. Lemon juice might be added for taste. If something more is desired and appropriate to the fast, consider bouillon, vegetable or fruit juice, or unsweetened beverages. Avoid caffeinated beverages. Avoid all alcohol, and any drugs not prescribed by a doctor, including aspirin.

Avoid manual labor, and keep physical exercise to twenty minutes a day.

In Matthew 6:17, Jesus says “when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face.” Bathe regularly, keeping the water at body temperature. Extremes of hot or cold can lead to dizziness.

Use mouthwash or chew sugarless gum to aid in controlling bad breath associated with fasting.

Keep your body warm, as fasting can lead to chills because of a lowered blood pressure and metabolism.

Recognize that you may experience light-headedness, additional energy, feel more alert or over-stimulated.

Breaking the Fast

Do not overeat. Not only has your body slowed down, but your stomach has begun to shrink. Break the fast with liquids and a very light, low-calorie, plain, cooked foods. Avoid rich cuisines. Foods such as fruit, eggs, cheese, and meat should be reintroduced into your diet slowly.

In celebration of what has been and what will be, break bread with your family, church community, or co-workers. Whether alone or with others, take time to lift up prayers of gratitude. Remember people for the lack of food threatens their survival.

If you have kept a journal, review what you have written, and examine any insights you may have had during the fast. If your insights imply concrete changes in lifestyle or important actions consider what resources you need to take the next step into faithful living.

Adapted from piece written by Steve Shussett, formerly of the Office of Spiritual Formation, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 2003

Sources

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