

RENEWING THE MIND

Fasting



SESSION 4: FASTING FOR THE SAKE OF OTHERS

Main Text:

Isaiah 58:1-9

Take Home Exercise:

Fast for 12 hours



OPENING EXERCISE (5 Minutes)

Spend a moment in prayer inviting the Holy Spirit to guide your time together, and then lead your group through the following exercise, adapted from the Spiritual Disciplines Handbook.

Invite someone in your group to pray and invite the Holy Spirit to lead and guide your time together. Spend one or two minutes in silence together. By intentionally creating space for silence, free from distraction and noise, we position ourselves to hear from him.

As another option, consider using the practice of centering prayer, a traditional form of prayer that couples scripture meditation with prayer. The goal of centering prayer is not to clear our mind of all thoughts but rather to become aware of our thoughts and freely release them into God's loving hands.

1. Sit comfortably in a position that allows you to stay alert and attentive.
2. Read **Psalm 146** aloud together.
3. Choose one word or phrase from the text that grabs your attention and expresses your desire for God. This word could reflect a desire of your heart (e.g., love, grace, peace, safety), or it might be a name, characteristic, or title of God (e.g., Great Shepherd, Counselor, Healer, Defender). Silently reflect on this word, allowing it to draw your attention to God and his presence.
4. Allow yourself to settle into the silence. It is not unusual for the first few moments to be filled with noisy thoughts. Release these thoughts to God, and return your attention to him by repeating the word that stood out to you from the text. Take time to be with Jesus, and be still. There is no need to “do” or accomplish anything.
5. As you near the end of this time, offer yourself and your love to God. You might offer a simple phrase to God like “I am yours.” Don't rush out of this time of silence with God. Allow yourself to be still and wait in his presence.

OPENING DISCUSSION (10-15 Minutes)

Spend some time together debriefing the take-home exercise from your last gathering.

In the last gathering, you were encouraged to fast as a community for 12 hours, with the focus of offering yourself to the Lord and growing in holiness. Reflect back on your most recent experience with fasting, and review any journal entries you may have written during that time. Giving yourselves immense grace, share with the group how this went.

How did your fast go this week? Was there anything particularly encouraging, challenging, or surprising to you? How are you feeling three weeks into this new habit?

In *Celebration of Disciplines*, Richard Foster writes that “more than any other discipline, fasting reveals the things that control us...we cover up what is inside us with food and other good things, but fasting brings these things to the surface.” Has fasting brought to the surface any particular habits, patterns, or attachments in your own life?

STUDY TOGETHER (20 Minutes)

Lead the study and discussion below for your group. Feel free to read it in its entirety or put it in your own words.

In his book *Invitation to A Journey*, Robert Mulholland defines spiritual formation as “the process of being formed in the image of Christ for the sake of others.” Spiritual habits, like fasting, are means by which we regularly and intentionally open our lives to the transformative work of the Holy Spirit. Our desire is not only for personal transformation but also for societal transformation. Last week, we explored the first two of four motivations for fasting—offering ourselves to God and growing in holiness. This week, we will explore the next two motivations for fasting that are more others-oriented—to amplify our prayers and to stand with the poor. Fasting helps us in our prayer life as we intentionally create more space to hear from God (discerning his voice, receiving guidance, direction, or encouragement) and also present our requests to him. As we acknowledge the abundance we often live with and realize the scarcity that others in our very communities experience, we begin to consider how we might respond in service, generosity, and justice.

Watch and discuss this brief overview of the sermon together.

VIDEO 5—Fasting for the Sake of Others

How might fasting for justice enable us to grow in compassion toward others and embody God’s heart and character to the world?

How might fasting be an appropriate response to the pain and injustice we experience in our world? What issues of justice or social concern move you to respond with fasting?

For many of us, we struggle with the problem of food abundance—having too much food to eat. But for most of the world, and more people in our own country than most of us realize, the problem is not abundance but scarcity. Fasting is one way to bridge the gap between the “haves” and “the have-nots.” In Isaiah 58, the prophet speaks to the connection between fasting and justice.

Fasting helps us grow in solidarity with the poor as well as offers a proactive step to alleviate poverty. Historically, on fasting days, Christians would take the food or the money typically spent on food and give it to the poor. This simple practice of giving away money that would have been spent on food has the subtle potential to transform the lives of the poor and our own lives.



Invite someone in your group to read Isaiah 58:1-9 aloud.

Why was the fast described in verses 1-6 displeasing to the Lord? How does Isaiah confront both the posture and the practice of their fasting? How might this be a significant reminder, even a warning, for us today as we fast?

What does this passage teach us about God's desire for justice? How does this encourage you? How does this challenge you?

TAKE HOME EXERCISE (5 Minutes)

Read through the below exercise, adapted from Practicing the Way, that each individual will do before your next gathering. Talk through any questions people may have on what they are to do. Again, it is about practice, not perfection. Give yourselves grace.

1. Identify a day and time to fast as a community.

Set aside a day this upcoming week when you will fast. It is recommended that you fast as a community on the day you typically meet. Doing so will help you stay encouraged and enlivened as you begin to cultivate this habit. We recommend starting with a 12-hour (sun-up to sun-down) fast.

2. Plan in advance for your fast, leaving room in your day to commune with God.

Avoid overfilling your schedule on the day you choose to fast, allowing for more space to simply commune with God. Consider how you may need to adjust your schedule that day (e.g., lunch meetings, workouts, plans with family and friends, etc.).

3. Fast for justice.

Devote this fast as an intentional time to "cry out in prayer" on behalf of those who are suffering and experiencing injustice both here in the Bay Area and across the world. Take some time to also pray for a particular ache (or issue) in the world (poverty, trafficking, racial injustice, etc.). As you do, consider specifically praying for and partnering with one or two of our local and global outreach partners (go to cpc.org/missions for more information).

OPTIONAL EXERCISE: Calculate the money you would have spent on snacks, meals, coffee, La Croix, etc., on the day you are fasting, and give that money to those in need. Perhaps calculate what you'd spend on yourself and give that money to someone in need that you encounter during your day. Or put your money together with your community and give it all to a cause or organization.

4. Reflect back on your fast with the Lord.

Break your fast, ideally with your community group, with a small meal. After your fast, spend some time reflecting on your day with the Lord. Consider journaling about the following prompts:

1. How was your fast? What was encouraging? Where did you face resistance?
2. What particular ache did God place on your heart? How might you continue to pray for and respond to this ache? Who might you invite to join you in this?
3. Is there a particular area in your own life where you might need discernment and guidance from the Lord?
4. What ways may God be prompting you to seek justice and serve in the city where you live?

CLOSE IN PRAYER (5 Minutes)

Close your time by reading and reflecting on the following prayer together. Then, take some time to share any prayer requests/updates and pray for each other's upcoming week.

Almighty God, who created us in your image: Grant us grace fearlessly to contend against evil and to make no peace with oppression; and, that we may reverently use our freedom, help us to employ it in the maintenance of justice in our communities and among the nations, to the glory of your holy Name; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.