

Exploring fasting



Way In

In a consumer society, we don't like to think of going without something or giving things up: it just seems wrong! And yet 'fasting' has always been a practice that Christians have seen as vital to spiritual health. This session explores how denying ourselves can help strengthen our seeking after God.



Connect: Share with the group

1. How has your day been? Which animal would you choose as a symbol of your day? (eg Soaring eagle? Tortoise? Cart-horse?...)
2. What have you done in terms of your 'action point' from the last meeting?
3. Have you ever given anything up and felt better for it? Share your experience with the group.



Contemplate

1. Turn down the lights and light a single candle. Listen to someone read John 8:12 NRSV:
"Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, 'I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.'"
2. Quietly invite Jesus to be present to light up your meeting together. Use this prayer. Invite those who wish to, to say it aloud.
I am here to meet you Jesus. Lighten my darkness, I pray.



Consider 1: Read Scripture

When you fast, do not look sombre 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. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so 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.

(Matthew 6:16-18) TNIV

Then Jesus said to his disciples, "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses

their life for me will find it.

(Matthew 16:24-25) TNIV

Wesley's wisdom

The nature of self-denial is the denying or refusing to follow our own will, from a conviction that the will of God is the only rule of action to us... It is to deny ourselves any pleasure which does not spring from, and lead to, God.

(John Wesley: Sermon on self-denial)

Fasting ... is not all, nor yet is it nothing. It is not the end, but it is a precious means thereto; a means which God himself has ordained, and in which therefore, when it is duly used, he will surely give us his blessing.

(John Wesley: Sermon on fasting)



Consider 2: More about

- When Jesus taught his disciples about fasting, he wasn't creating a new idea. In the Bible fasting is seen as a way of giving special focus to God by laying aside some of our own wants and needs.
- There are many reasons why the people of God in Scripture turn to fasting, but three stand out. The physical hunger of fasting expressed the deep longings of their hearts:
 - **In tough times:** when surrounded by fearful circumstances; when mourning the loss of friends; when facing bleak circumstances; when strength fails
 - **In times of failure:** for forgiveness in times of unfaithfulness; for when we have forgotten the Lord; and for strength to choose the right path
 - **In seeking spiritual breakthrough:** for revelation and guidance; for victory over enemies; for healing the sick; for a faith that overcomes; for the anointing of the Spirit.


- Fasting is, in part, a 'statement of intent', a mark of how hungry we are for God and God's will for our lives.
- Fasting, like all the 'means of grace' is not an end in itself, so just 'giving something up for Lent' is not the point. Fasting is a way of laying aside our physical needs *in order to* seek God and God's help.
- Fasting is typically linked to prayer in the Bible. The time we save (eg by not cooking and eating meals) can be given to prayer.
- Fasting is typically, giving up one or more meals, but it could also mean giving up other activities for a period of time in order to seek God (eg fasting from TV, shopping, or sex).
- Fasting is not a spiritual way to diet(!) nor a spiritual hunger strike, twisting God's arm to give us what we want.
- If you are fasting during Lent, do it in a way that establishes a habit that can remain part of your life beyond Easter.


(for more on Fasting, see the articles on the Methodist Church website www.methodist.org.uk/deepeningdiscipleship)





Consider 3: Your response

Spend a moment in quiet, considering your own response to the readings. You might like to jot down your thoughts in the following boxes.

 What new thing have I seen about fasting in the readings?

 What puzzles me about fasting?

 What encourages me when I read about fasting?

 How could fasting help my walk with Jesus?



Consider 4: Sharing wisdom

Now share your thoughts, questions and insights together in the group.

- Take it in turns to share something from your personal reflection.
- Listen to one another carefully.
- Discuss the issues raised, sharing your knowledge, experience and wisdom together.
- Aim to help one another find out what you are each learning about the importance of the spiritual practices in following Jesus.



Commit 1: Reflect


Take a few moments to sit in silence together, reflecting on this session. How is God asking you to respond as an individual? These questions might help you think through your response:

- Is there any issue in your life, or something that God has given you a particular concern for, that you might like to fast for?
- Is there anything that you feel you could give up, in order to make space for hearing God?
- What changes could you make to your daily, weekly or monthly routine to make more room for seeking God?
- Apart from work and sleep, what do you spend most time on? Could that indicate a place to start experimenting with the practices of fasting and self-denial?



Commit 2: Focus

Write one thing you would like to try as a result of this session, in the box below.

 **MY ACTION POINT:** In response to this session on fasting, before the next meeting I would like to...



Commit 3: Pray

Lord Jesus, our desire is to know you, to serve you, and to love you more deeply. Help us as we seek to deepen our discipleship this week. Amen.