

TIPS FOR FASTING

The following steps are taken from *Habits of Grace* by David Mathis (Crossway, 2016), pg. 124-126.

1. Start Small

Don't go from no fasting to attempting a weeklong. Start with one meal; maybe fast one meal a week for several weeks. Then try two meals, and work your way up to a daylong fast. Perhaps eventually try a two-day juice fast. A juice fast means abstaining from all food and beverage, except for juice and water. Allowing yourself juice provides nutrients and sugar for the body to keep you operating while also still feeling the effects from going without solid food. (It is not recommended that you abstain from water during a fast of any length.)

2. Plan What You'll Do Instead of Eating

Fasting isn't merely an act of self-deprivation, but a spiritual discipline for seeking more of God's fullness. Which means we should have a plan for what positive pursuit to undertake in the time it normally takes to eat. We spend a good portion of our day with a fork in hand. One significant part of fasting is the time it creates for prayer and meditation on God's word. Before diving headlong into a fast, craft a simple plan. Connect it to your purpose for the fast. Each fast should have a specific spiritual purpose. Identify what that is and design a focus to replace your eating time. Without a purpose and plan, it's not Christian fasting; it's just going hungry.

3. Consider How It Will Affect Others

Fasting is no license to be unloving. It would be sad to lack concern and care for others around us because of this expression of heightened focus on God. Love for God and for neighbour go together. Good fasting mingles horizontal concern with the vertical. If anything, others should even feel more loved and cared for when we're fasting. So as you plan your fast, consider how it will affect others. If you have regular lunches with colleagues or dinners with family or roommates, assess how your abstaining will affect them, and let them know ahead of time, instead of just being a no-show or springing it on them in the moment that you will not be eating. Also, consider this backdoor inspiration for fasting: If you make a daily or weekly practice of eating with a particular group of friends or family, and those plans are interrupted by someone's travel or vacation or atypical circumstances, consider that as an opportunity to fast, rather than eating alone.

4. Try Different Kinds of Fasting

The typical form of fasting is personal, private, and partial, but we have a variety of forms in the Bible: personal and communal, private and public, congregational and national, regular and occasional, absolute and partial. In particular, consider fasting together with your family, small group, or church. Do you share together in some special need for God's wisdom and guidance? Is there an unusual difficulty in the church, or society, for which you need God's intervention? Do you want to keep the second coming of Christ in view? Plead with special earnestness for God's help by linking arms with other believers to fast together.

5. Fast from Something Other than Food

Fasting from food is not necessarily for everyone. Some health conditions keep even the most devout from the traditional course. However, fasting is not limited to abstaining from food, as we saw from Martyn Lloyd-Jones: “Fasting should really be made to include abstinence from anything which is legitimate in and of itself for the sake of some special spiritual purpose.”* If the better part of wisdom for you, in your health condition, is not to go without food, consider fasting from television, computer, social media, or some other regular enjoyment that would bend your heart toward greater enjoyment of Jesus. Paul even talks about married couples fasting from sex “for a limited time, that you may devote yourselves to prayer” (1 Cor. 7:5).

6. Don't Think of White Elephants

When your empty stomach starts to growl and begins sending your brain every “feed me” signal it can, don't be content to let your mind dwell on the fact that you haven't eaten. If you make it through with an iron will that says no to your stomach but doesn't turn your mind's eye elsewhere, it isn't true fasting. Christian fasting turns its attention to Jesus or some great cause of his in the world. Christian fasting seeks to take the pains of hunger and transpose them into the key of some eternal anthem, whether it's fighting against some sin, or pleading for someone's salvation, or for the cause of the unborn, or longing for a greater taste of Jesus.

* Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*, 1:38.

TIPS FOR SILENCE & SOLITUDE

The following tricks are taken from *Celebration of Discipline* by Richard Foster (HarperOne, 1978), pg. 105-106.

Utilize the “Little” Solitudes that Fill Our Day

Consider the solitude of those early morning moments in bed before the family awakens. Think of the solitude of a morning cup of coffee before beginning the work of the day. There is the solitude of bumper-to-bumper traffic during the freeway rush hour. There can be little moments of rest and refreshment when we turn a corner and see a flower or a tree. Instead of vocal prayer before a meal consider inviting everyone to join into a few moments of gathered silence. Once while driving a carload of chattering children and adults, I exclaimed, “Let's play a game and see if everyone can be absolutely quiet until we reach the airport” (about five minutes away). It worked, blessedly so. Find new joy and meaning in the little walk from the subway to your apartment. Slip outside just before bed and taste the silent night. These tiny snatches of time are often lost to us. What a pity! They can and should be redeemed. They are times for inner quiet, for re-orienting our lives like a compass needle. They are little moments that help us to be genuinely present where we are.

Develop a Quiet Place

We can find or develop a “quiet place” designed for silence and solitude. Homes are being built constantly. Why not insist that a little inner sanctuary be put into the plans, a small place where any family member could go to be alone and silent? What’s to stop us? The money? We build elaborate playrooms and family rooms and think it well worth the expense. Those who already own a home could consider enclosing a little section of the garage or patio. Those who live in an apartment could be creative and find other ways to allow for solitude. I know of one family that has a special chair; whenever anyone sits in it he or she is saying, “Please don’t bother me, I want to be alone.” Let’s find places outside the home: a spot in a park, a church sanctuary that is kept unlocked, even a storage closet somewhere. A retreat centre near us has built a lovely one-person cabin specifically for private meditation and solitude.

The following tricks are taken from *Habits of Grace* by David Mathis (Crossway, 2016), pg. 103-105; 141-142.

Create Your Closet

Find your regular place for private prayer, and if you can’t locate a ready-made spot, make one. It may simply be a clean desk, or someplace you can kneel. Many of us have found that beside the bed proves more fruitful than lying in bed. Maybe you can find an actual closet, or nook under the stairs, with enough space to sit or kneel, and enough light to read and even capture notes. It will help you be regular in private prayer to have your go-to spot.

Begin with Bible

Because prayer is a conversation we didn’t start, but a response to God’s initiation and speaking to us in his word, many of us have learned, with George Mueller, to start with the Scriptures. Mueller says that for ten years, he began each day with an immediate attempt at fervent and extended prayer, only to eventually learn how much richer and focused his prayers were when they came in response to God’s word. From then on, Mueller began with a brief prayer for God’s help as he read, then he went first to the Bible and would open his ear to God in his word by meditating on the Scriptures, then transition, through the discipline of meditation, into his season of daily private prayer.**

Keep It Fresh

Change it up for a new year, or a new month, or a new season of life. Regularly, or just on occasion, write out prayers with focus and care, or sharpen your affections in prayer with fasting or take a break from the chaos of life with some special retreat for silence and solitude. Few things are as worthy of your attention and investment as the privilege and power of private prayer.

Book a Day (or More) for a Special Spiritual Retreat

When you do get such a thing on the calendar and find a place for it, here are some ideas for how to move through such a special season of silence and solitude:

- Pray for God’s blessing, that he will bring to light what in life needs your fresh attention, and that his Spirit will prompt your subconscious to “speak” honestly to your soul. Don’t assume the voices in your head are God’s; assume they are yours. To hear God, take up the Scriptures, and to the degree that your own thoughts for yourself align with what God has revealed in his word, then take them as a gift from God and take them to heart.
- Read and meditate on the Bible, whether it’s what’s assigned that day in some regular reading plan you’re working through in your daily respites or some special section you’ve selected for your time away. Trust God to meet you in his word and lead your time with Scripture—not just with internal promptings, but in what his providence has put before you objectively in the Bible.
- Perhaps spend a few minutes just listening to the silence, and let your soul begin to “thaw,” especially if you keep a busy schedule in a crowded town.
- Have a computer (consider turning the Wi-Fi off!) or good old-fashioned pen and paper. After thawing out, get the voices in your head down on paper.
- Resist the urge to get detailed right away about specific to-dos back home; try to reflect on life and your callings in the big picture, at least to begin with. But as you wrap up your time away, get more specific, and bring back with you into normal life some takeaways that will help you sense, even immediately, the value of your retreat.
- During your time away, include an extended season of prayer, guided by the Scriptures, perhaps the Lord’s Prayer, and continue recording thoughts as you direct your heart godward in praise, confession, petition, and supplication.
- Consider setting a calendar reminder for a few days or a week after you return home to reflect back on your time away and read any notes you took or journaling you got on paper.

**George Mueller, *A Narrative of Some of the Lord’s Dealings with George Mueller*, Jehovah Magni, ed. Addresses by George Mueller Complete and Unabridged, 2 vols. (Muskegon, MI: Dust and Ashes, 2003), 1:272–73.