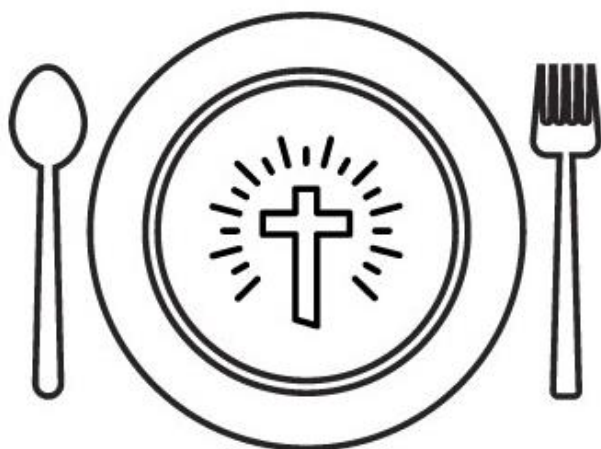


Fasting



Adapted from Practicing the Way

For GS Family Use

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Hello GS Family!

As we continue in our 21 days of prayer and fasting, we wanted to take some time to answer some of the most often asked questions concerning fasting, and to address some of the apprehensions we may have, especially if we've never fasted before. This need not be read in one sitting, and while a bit long, it will be worth meditating on, especially in this season of prayer and fasting.

Though there are others, we'll primarily look at these 4 reasons disciples have fasted throughout the ages: 1. To offer ourselves to Jesus 2. To grow in holiness 3. To amplify our prayers 4. And to stand with the poor.

The following thoughts are inspired by, and borrow heavily from, the Practicing the Way course on fasting our Rooted Youth and Young Adults Small Group have been working through. We hope you find this encouraging, informative, and even transformative in your understanding of one of the oldest practices in Christianity.



A Brief Introduction to Biblical fasting

A disciple of Jesus is one whose entire life is organized around three basic goals: 1. To be with Jesus 2. To become like Jesus 3. To live as He did. To follow Jesus is to adopt His overall lifestyle – to arrange our lives around His practices – in order to open our whole life to God who transforms us from the inside out.

Jesus fasted, and yet He also feasted. It was said of Jesus that “He came eating and drinking.” But Jesus also fasted, beginning His ministry with forty days of fasting in the wilderness. When the devil tempted Jesus to eat, our Lord said, **“Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.”** All through the Gospels we read stories of Jesus fasting, and yet today very few Christians fast. If fasting is not a part of our discipleship to Jesus, we are not alone. Fasting has basically disappeared from modern Christian spirituality in the West. We’re more likely to hear about fasting from a fitness guru, wellness expert, or Muslim than from a Christian. Not to mention, many Western people have a deeply unhealthy relationship to food and to our own bodies; just the idea of fasting is a trigger for many of body shame, or ongoing struggles with eating disorders. And it is important for us to address those internal struggles we might have, and to not allow the Satan the accuser to shame us. There is healing and wholeness in Christ.

Yet it remains, many Christians in the West don’t want anything to do with fasting. But what if we’re missing out on one of the most important of all the practices of

Jesus? In Matthew 6:16-18 Jesus said: **“When you fast, do not look somber 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.”**

Notice two things:

1. Jesus assumes that his disciples will practice fasting: “When you fast,” not “if you fast.”
2. When you fast, the Father “will reward you.”
Meaning, there’s a gift waiting for you on other side of fasting.



A Brief History of Fasting

Though most followers of Jesus in the West do not fast, Christians throughout history have. Fasting is a part of every major religion in the world – including Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and most indigenous spiritual practices, but the first mention in all of human history of fasting as a spiritual discipline is in the book of Exodus - with Moses' forty day fast on Mount Sinai, followed by the command for all Israel to fast on the Day of Atonement. There are stories of fasting all through the OT – all the major characters fast – Moses, David, Samuel, Esther, the prophets, and by the time of Jesus, it was common practice for the Jewish people to fast twice a week until sundown. And, the early Christians continued this practice; almost all the church fathers taught on fasting, and the first Christians took it seriously. On the Sabbath between Good Friday and Easter, the entire church would fast for the forty hours between Jesus' death and resurrection. In the early history of the church, there were both regular one day fasts and periodic longer fasts. This lasted for well over 1500 years before it started to die out.

Followers of Jesus used to fast, a lot. It was considered just as central to the Way of Jesus as reading your Bible or going to church. And it still is outside the West. Fasting is vigorously practiced by the Eastern streams of the church, such as the Eastern Orthodox, Coptic Christians in Egypt, Dalit Christians in India, by believers in Iran, and especially in Africa, where entire churches often fast to begin the new year - a practice you actually

continue to see in some African American churches and immigrant communities here in the US.

Fasting is one of the most essential and powerful of all the practices of Jesus, and, arguably, the single most neglected in the modern, Western church. So many of the saints testify to the power of fasting. Listen to one example from St. Basil the Great (A.D. 330-379): “Fasting gives birth to prophets, she strengthens the powerful; fasting makes lawgivers wise. She is a safeguard for the soul, a steadfast companion for the body, a weapon for the brave, and a discipline for champions. Fasting repels temptations, anoints for godliness. She is a companion for sobriety, the crafter of a sound mind. In spiritual battles she fights bravely, in peace she teaches tranquility.” The life of Jesus exemplified these things, and He fasted regularly.



The Basics of Fasting

1. What is fasting, exactly? Let's start with what it's not. It's not abstinence. People regularly say they are fasting from shopping or social media. All great things to do. But that's not fasting; that's abstinence, which also has a long and rich history in the church. It's also not a restricted diet. You may have heard of the "Daniel fast," where you eat a vegan diet, but in the Daniel story, the word "fast" is never used. That's not a fast, it's a restricted diet, which also has a long and rich history in the church. Fasting is – at its most basic – not eating food. In a normal fast you continue to drink water, but there are also a few examples in Scripture of a fast from both food and water.

2. How long is a fast? There's no set time. The most common fast is from waking until sundown, but there are examples in Scripture of two-day fasts, three-day, seven-day, twenty-one day, and forty day fasts.

3. When do we fast? Fasting is not a command for Christians, the "when" is up to us. In both Scripture and in church history, we do see two different types of fasting: fasting as rhythm and as response.

Rhythm: this would be fasting on regular set days weekly. This was done twice a week for most of church history and fasting on Fridays in the Catholic tradition today; the only example in Scripture is in the OT, where Israel is commanded to fast on Yom Kippur.

Response: most of the examples of fasting in Scripture are in response to a national crisis, like an invasion, or

sin, or to grief and loss. In 1 Samuel 31, when king Saul dies, the entire nation fasts for seven days. In Jonah 3, when Nineveh is warned of their coming destruction, the king calls for a city-wide fast, and they are spared. In Esther 4, when the Hebrew people are threatened with genocide, Queen Esther calls for three-day fast, and they are saved. Fasting is both a rhythm and a response.

4. Should we fast in community or alone? Both. A lot of people misread Jesus' warning in Matthew 6 about fasting; he's not saying that fasting in community is wrong, but that fasting as virtue signaling is wrong. Scripture is full of examples of the people of God fasting together. In fact, in the OT, fasts were commanded for the entire community, including children and even animals! And the most important question of all:

5. Why do we fast? There are all sorts of reasons we fast, but to group them into four basic categories, mentioned at the beginning, we fast: 1. To offer ourselves to Jesus 2. To grow in holiness 3. To amplify our prayers 4. To stand with the poor

Let's look at each of those reasons now. But first, take a minute to empty your heart and mind of anxious thoughts and ask the Prince of Peace to teach you by His Spirit through the thoughts and scriptures to follow. Amen.



Fasting to Offer Ourselves to Jesus

The early Christians continued the Jewish practice of fasting twice a week until sundown, but they changed the days, from Monday and Thursday, to Wednesday and Friday. Because Wednesday was the day Jesus was betrayed and Friday was the day he was crucified. The early disciples were getting in touch, at a bodily, primal level, with what the New Testament writers called “participating in the sufferings of Christ.” They were intentionally adopting the pattern laid down by Jesus of dying and rising – death to self-followed by life in God. Not out of hate of the body or of pleasure, but out of a burning desire for Jesus; to be with him and to become like him. This, this is the ultimate reason for fasting: hunger for Jesus, and for his transformation. John Piper calls fasting “whole body hungering for God.”

Hunger is the feeling of wanting or needing something you do not have. One NT scholar called fasting “body talk,” a way of praying with your body – “God, I hunger for you, I want you, I need you”. Now, we may not feel hungry for God. If we’re honest, we may feel apathetic about God. All the more reason to fast, as fasting has the potential to awaken the latent hunger within all souls for God.

Fasting is a practice to offer our whole life to God. Paul’s writes in Romans 12: **“In view of God’s mercy ... offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God — this is your true and proper worship.”** Note Paul’s word choice: offer your bodies, not just your heart. The word in Greek is soma, where we get the

word somatic. It means, our whole person, including our body. Many of us grew up in a church tradition where much was said about giving your heart to Jesus, and that's beautiful, but he doesn't just call for our heart, but for all that we are. Part of the reason we emphasize the "heart" over the whole person is because, in the Western church overall, we've lost a theology of the body, which, put simply, is the truth all through Scripture that you don't have a body, you are a body. Or to be more precise, your body is a part of who you are. Jesus came in a body — a doctrine we call the incarnation — to save all of our body — a doctrine we call the resurrection! One day in the future, at Jesus' return, what happened to Jesus' body will happen to the bodies of all His followers - we will be raised from death to life. In the meantime: our discipleship to Jesus must take seriously the body.

The Apostle Paul famously said to the Corinthians: **"Your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you... Therefore, honor God with your bodies."** (1 Corinthians 6:19-20) Our body is a temple, a dwelling place for God. Therefore, what we do with the body matters. The body is the sphere where our discipleship to Jesus becomes real. Where it's not just an idea or even a feeling, but a practice. Or what Jesus called the Way of life. One way to think about discipleship is as a disciplined attempt to get the teachings of Jesus into our body itself, into our neurobiology, or what we call "muscle memory," so that when confronted with various situations, His teachings just come out of us without even thinking about it. Fasting is one of the best possible ways to get the

teachings of Jesus into our body. Back to Romans 12 – we offer our whole persons, including our bodies, to Jesus “in view of God’s mercy” – Meaning, we do this for Him, because of all He’s done for us. We give up food, because He gave up everything; we offer our body in devotion because He already gave His for our salvation. We fast for all sorts of reasons. But this is the primary reason we fast, not to get something from Jesus, but to give something to Jesus – what Paul calls “worship” – our love, affection, and devotion.

Jesus assumed His disciples would fast, but He never commanded it. Neither did the Apostles in the NT. They all fasted, but they never laid down a regimen to follow. We don’t have to fast. It is not required. But Jesus fasted. And then said, “Come, and follow Me.” Practices, like fasting, and prayer and sabbath, are ways we follow Jesus – crucial ways we open our whole person to His grace to be transformed.

As we practice fasting, or to be more precise, follow Jesus in this practice, we’ll discover this is one of the most powerful disciplines for the spiritual life. Through fasting, we experience the Father’s reward, which is Jesus himself. If we want to offer our body and all that we are to Jesus as an act of love, the practice of fasting is a great way to start.



Fasting to Grow in Holiness

Jesus said, ***“Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”*** **Matthew 16:24** And it is only by following Jesus’ example of a Cross-shaped life of self-denial, that we can be formed into people who are permeated by the love and joy and peace of Jesus himself. Fasting is one of the best practices we have to cultivate a heart of self-denial in our overall life.

We mentioned a “theology of the body” – the idea in Scripture that our body is a part of who we are; and that our discipleship to Jesus must take seriously our body, our whole person. Let’s look at what is happening in our body as we fast. There are three distinct physiological stages our body goes through in fasting:

1. In the first four hours after a meal, our body is feeding on energy from the food in our stomach.
2. But around 16 hours in (so, if we eat dinner around 6 p.m., then 10 a.m. the following day), our body switches from burning glucose for energy to burning fat; what doctors call “ketosis,” which is incredibly good for us.
3. Then around 24 hours in, our body shifts into a state called “autophagy.” A term from the Greek, which literally means “self-eating.” It begins to break down and cleanse our body of old, dead, or damaged cells, what doctors call “zombie cells” – the type of cellular material that causes maladies like cancer, aging, and chronic disease. Some doctors call autophagy our body’s way of “taking out the trash.”

As a result of the body's internal processes, there are all sorts of health benefits to fasting. It can cleanse our body of toxins. Increase our metabolism. Reduce our weight. It can lower our insulin levels, inflammation, and blood pressure. Strengthen our immune system. Reduce our heart rate. Slow aging. Protect against and possibly reverse many diseases, such as diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and a range of neurological disorders including Alzheimer's. It comes as no surprise that medical experts have been touting the benefits of fasting for a very long time. But, while fasting is very good for our overall health, when we as followers of Jesus engage fasting as a spiritual discipline, the ultimate aim is not to lose weight or clean out our gut microbiome. And while we want to be careful to avoid a dualism that sees fasting as a spiritual discipline vs. fasting as a healthy habit as an either/or, rather than a both/and, still, fasting seems to have lost something of its spiritual meaning and has taken on, in a culture characterized by the search for material well-being, a therapeutic value for the care of one's body. Fasting certainly brings benefits to physical well-being, but for believers, it is, in the first place, a means to heal all that prevents us from conformity to the will and person of God. Put another way, it's to grow in holiness.

Holiness put simply is wholeness in Christ. What health is to the body, holiness is to our soul and spirit. In the same way that fasting is our body's way of purging our body of "zombie cells", fasting is our soul's way of purifying and purging our whole person of self-defeating cycles of sin and shame.

Fasting is a way to “consecrate” our soul, in the language of Scripture; to set it apart as holy, and dedicate it to God for His special purposes. The saints have long attested to the power of fasting to grow in holiness. St. Augustine, when asked, “Why fast?” Said: “Because it is sometimes necessary to check the delight of the flesh in respect to licit pleasures in order to keep it from yielding to illicit joys.” St. Leo from the 5th century, the bishop of Rome said: “Fasting gives strength against sin, represses evil desires, repels temptation, humbles pride, cools anger, and fosters all the inclinations of a good will even unto the practice of every virtue.” Thomas à Kempis said of fasting: “Restrain from gluttony and thou shalt the more easily restrain all the inclinations of the flesh.” Throughout church history, you quickly realize that many church mothers and fathers believed that without fasting it was almost impossible to reach a high level of holiness.

Many of those early believers practiced fasting with regularity and intensity. And they saw the stomach as both an enemy and a potential ally in the fight against sin. For example, gluttony is the first of the “seven deadly sins” on purpose. Because Christian thinkers have long said that an undisciplined appetite has a domino effect across all the areas of our life. They especially noted the connection between gluttony and sexual immorality. That the capacity to steward our body’s natural drives for food and sex in a healthy way, rise, or fall, together. In the last session, we read Paul’s line to the Corinthians: “Your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit”. Said another way, our body is God’s home:

Jesus answered him, "If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him. John 14:23

But listen to what Paul writes to the Romans:

"I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. For I know that good itself does not dwell in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing. For in my inner being I delight in God's law; but I see another law at work in me, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within me. What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death?" Romans 7:15-24

This is a famous passage because Paul seems to be naming the existential angst many of us feel around sin: what we want to do, we don't do, and what we don't want to do, we do! And this self-defeating cycle that a lot of us get stuck in has to do with our body; Paul calls it "a body of death." So, which is it, Paul? Is the body a "temple of the Holy Spirit"? Or a "body of death"? The answer: both. In Paul's theology, in our body, and our person as a whole, we have a "spirit," meaning a part of us that is a home for God; where our spirit is one with God's Spirit. And we have a part of us that is infected by a fatal disease called sin. The word Paul uses for this warped part of our person is the "flesh," or *sarx* in Greek. And it does not mean matter, as in the English

phrase “flesh and bone.” We are a whole person; we cannot, we should not, separate the material from the immaterial. Our “flesh” has to do with our whole person. Some translations render it as our “sinful nature,” others as “self-indulgence.” It’s the instinctual drives in our body for things like food, sleep, sex, self-preservation and instant gratification that have overpowered our will and bent our heart away from our first love, and turned it in on itself. But it’s also more immaterial drives too - our desires for security, safety, affection, esteem, power, and control. Not all or always bad, but often disordered. Augustine called the flesh our “disordered desires.”

Our fight is not against the body. Our fight is against the flesh. The call upon us as followers of Jesus is to the cross. Jesus told us, ***“If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. Matthew 16:24***

Paul calls it “crucifying the flesh” and it’s a theme all through Paul’s letters. He writes to the Galatians: ***“Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.” Galatians 5:4*** He writes to the Colossians: ***“Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed.” Colossians 3:5***

The Reformed tradition calls this “mortification,” from the root word “mortal.” As in, we are to kill the flesh. Not coddle it, not make excuses for it, or justify it, but nail it to the cross. The question is, how? Ever tried to

do this? To stop sinning? “I think I will just stop lying from now on...” and we do...for a while. Until lying saves us face, gets us a promotion. In that moment lying reveals what we desire more than Christ. And the fact we can’t stop reveals how much we need Him.

Later in Romans, Paul goes on to write: ***“If you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live.” Romans 8:13*** He’s saying: we can’t use the flesh to defeat the flesh; willpower is not enough; we need the power of the Spirit. Willpower is great, but it only works on very small changes. Willpower vs. a plate of cookies is one thing; but willpower vs. a pornography addiction? Or drugs or alcohol? Or outbursts of anger based on a childhood trauma? Willpower doesn’t stand a chance. As apprentices of Jesus, we need to find a way to draw on the same power that Jesus did, the power of the Spirit, in order to live out His teachings.

If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you. Romans 8:11

How do we do that? One of the ways is through the Practices of Jesus, or the spiritual disciplines. Especially fasting. It’s one of the best disciplines we have to draw on the power of God to transform our whole person. Said another way, fasting is a way to feed our spirit and starve our flesh.

At least four things are happening in us as we fast:

1. It's weaning us off the pleasure principle.

Underneath our desire for food, is an even deeper desire – what psychologists call “the pleasure principle.” Which is the driving motivation of the immature, who only want to do what feels good in the moment. Once reserved for children and middle schoolers, the pleasure principle is fast-becoming the new normal for all ages. So much of our culture is built around the mantra: “if it feels good, do it.” But as we all know, many things that feel good in the short term, reap damage in the long term. And on the flip side, many things that are no fun at all in the short term, yield dividends for years to come. Through fasting, we mature beyond the pleasure principle; and we learn how to do the right thing, even when it's hard, and, how to be happy and content even when we don't get what we want. As a result, when we can't get what we want – due to life circumstances, or other people's decisions, or even God's sovereign appointment over our lives – we are increasingly free of anger or anxiety; and instead, are joyful and at peace, no matter our circumstances.

2. It's revealing what's in our heart. Richard Foster in his book “Celebration of Discipline” writes: “Fasting reveals the things that control us.” Fasting teaches us so much about ourselves! Our unhealthy relationship to food, how weak we are, how much we need pleasure to be happy, how far we are from God – it's very humbling. But as all this stuff comes up from the substrata to the surface of our heart – and it's exposed in all its ugliness – we have the chance to offer it to God, and in doing so, be set free.

3. It's re-ordering our desires. One of the most crucial aspects of fasting is, when we fast, our desires change. We find ourselves wanting to sin less, and wanting to be holy more. Our desires for lust, or greed, or to hold onto bitterness, go down, as our desires for purity, kindness, and compassion go up. In fasting, we begin to feel a profound change in our desires; we notice a purifying of our whole person, and it's like fleshly desire is transformed into a yearning for God himself. God is at work deep in our person, to do by His power what our willpower cannot possibly do; transform us.

4. It's drawing on the power of God to overcome sin. Fasting is a discipline, and like any good habit, it's a way to increase our willpower muscle. It's a way to grow in both self-control and self-discipline. Self-control is the ability to say no to something. To not do something you want to do, but is bad for you in the long term. Self-discipline is the ability to say yes to something. To do something you don't want to do, but is good for you in the long term! Together they make for self-mastery. Disciplines like fasting are a way to bring our whole person back under the mastery or control of our will. But again, willpower alone is not strong enough to break the chains of the flesh. Fasting is (ultimately) about drawing our energy from the Holy Spirit's power, from a relational connection to God himself. As we come to God and give him our weakness; He gives us His strength.

To summarize all that, we could say: fasting is a way to turn our body from an enemy into an ally in our fight against the flesh. That's why fasting is hard! Especially at

first, because we are essentially picking a fight with our flesh! But the more we do it, and the more our flesh is weakened through self-denial and our spirit strengthened by connection to God, the freer we become. The discipline of fasting is a pathway to freedom. Whenever someone is trapped in ongoing sin, and especially if the sin is sexual in nature, a great recommendation is they start fasting. Because fasting is one of the most powerful weapons we have to break the chains of sin and set our heart free.

Remember, the ultimate aim of fasting is Jesus himself. Yes, it's to grow in holiness, or wholeness; to open our whole person to the Spirit of God and let him form us into a person of love and goodness; but even more so, it's what believers of old called "union" with God. As Jesus himself said, "Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God." To see God, is the soul's true ache; to see, to look at, to behold the beauty of God himself. Holiness is not a formula, because God is a person, not an equation. And He is compassionate in His very being. Like it or not, there is a reciprocal relationship between our level of holiness and our vision of God. How badly do we want to see God?

Again, we don't have to fast! It's not commanded by Jesus or any of the writers of the New Testament. But pretty much all the saints have long said, not only is it powerful, it's essential. In the same way that there is no substitute for healthy eating and regular exercise for a flourishing body, there is no substitute for fasting and a life of self-denial for a flourishing soul. And remember: the Way of Jesus is the Way of the Cross; but the Cross

is always followed by the resurrection; death by life; Friday by Sunday. So, if we want to grow in holiness, if we want to “see God” in a greater way than ever before, fasting is a phenomenal way to do so.



Fasting to Amplify Our Prayers

All through Scripture, prayer and fasting go together. We can pray without fasting, and we can fast without praying, but when we combine the two, it's like there's a chemical reaction that amplifies the power of prayer. Prayer is an umbrella term used all through Scripture for the medium by which we communicate and commune with God. We can break down prayer into two basic categories: listening to God, and speaking to God. Fasting is a powerful practice that amplifies both God's voice to us and our voice to God. Put another way: fasting is a way to hear God, and to be heard by God.

1. To hear God. In Acts 13:2-3 we read a fascinating story about the first disciples of Jesus:

While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off.

Notice, it's as they are fasting that the voice of God comes with clear direction. This has been the experience of countless followers of Jesus: in times of fasting and waiting on God for direction, that's when we often hear God's voice most clearly.

Now, let's take a moment to talk about what's happening in our body as we fast. (Remember, we're chipping away at the false-dichotomy between the physical and the spiritual; we are whole persons; what we do with our body has an effect on our soul.) We

covered some of the ways that fasting is good for our physical health, but it's also good for our mental health. Peer reviewed studies on fasting have demonstrated that: Fasting increases the blood flow to your brain, causing you to be more alert and aware; compared to eating, which causes blood to flow to your digestive system, which is why we are tired and a bit cloudy of mind after a large meal. Think of the post-Christmas dinner haze! It also increases neuroplasticity, the ability for our brains to make new neural connections. It's also proven to decrease the neurotransmitters that signal anxiety and depression, and increase those that elevate calm and a sense of well-being. It's also been proven to increase what doctors call "interoception"; which is our ability to accurately notice what's happening inside our body and mind. It's even been shown in some studies to arrest or even reverse the effects of Alzheimer's! It comes as no surprise that fasting is not an exclusively Christian practice. Interestingly, fasting has been practiced by writers and intellectuals for many years due to its effect on mental prowess. Because fasting is a way of honing our mind to a point of alertness, focus, and perception. Now, to repeat, this doesn't happen overnight and this is not the primary goal of fasting. If we are new to fasting, and especially if our regular diet is high in sugar and refined grains, then at first, we may get a headache or feel dizzy. But if we stay with our practice and make it a regular part of our Spiritual Disciplines, our body will adapt; and when we fast, we will start to feel calm, but also highly alert and attuned.

We can easily see how all this would put your mind and body into a more ideal state to hear God's voice. Not to mention that when we fast, we have more time. One of the first things we realize when we start fasting is how much time, energy, and mental attention goes to food – grocery shopping, cooking, eating, cleaning up – we get a lot of time and head space back when we fast. As Priscilla Shirer said of her practice of fasting: "I'm able to gain perspective on how unbalanced is the amount of time, energy and effort that I put into my body vs. into my Spirit." When we choose to sacrifice a need of a body to place more importance on a need of the spirit, it seems the heavens are opened to us in a way that might not have otherwise been.

Fasting puts us in an ideal position to listen, not only is our mind attentive, but our heart is humble and hungry. Consider God's word to Israel through the prophet Joel:

Yet even now," declares the Lord, "return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; and rend your hearts and not your garments." Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love; and he relents over disaster. Who knows whether he will not turn and relent, and leave a blessing behind him, a grain offering and a drink offering for the Lord your God? Blow the trumpet in Zion; consecrate a fast; call a solemn assembly. Joel 2:12-15

Or through the prophet Jeremiah:

Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will hear you. You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you, declares the Lord, and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, declares the Lord, and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile. Jeremiah 29:12-14

Jeremiah doesn't specifically mention fasting, but he uses the same phrase: "all your heart." Fasting is one way to seek God with all our heart. Again, it comes as no surprise that all through Scripture and church history there are stories of people fasting to hear God's voice of direction, or for what the NT writers later call "discernment." When we are facing a major decision, and especially in situations where we don't know what to do, it is often critical to set aside a few days to pray and fast. And if possible, to couple fasting to silence and solitude, to get away from the noise and distraction. But even if that's not possible, because of work or life circumstances, we can still get up early, and the time that we would have spent eating or sleeping to digest all that food, we give to listening in prayer.

Let's look deeper at the correlation between fasting and our heart. James 5:5 says: **You have lived on the earth in luxury and in self-indulgence. You have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter.**

King David prayed, **"Show me the way I should go, for to you I entrust my life."** (Psalm 143:8) This discipline of

fasting and listening for God's voice is a part of the larger movement in the spiritual journey from decision making to discernment. From, "What's a good and wise decision to make my life better?" to "What is the will of God for my life? Which is part of an even deeper movement of the spiritual journey from control to surrender. From, "I am in control of my life." To "I am the Lord's servant, may it be done to me according to His word." Fasting is a discipline by which we open our body and soul to God's Spirit to facilitate these essential movements deep inside our being. The second way fasting amplifies our prayers is:

2. To be heard by God. God hears our prayer, whether we are fasting or not; but there's something about fasting that seems to amplify our prayers before God. This is one of the primary reasons we fast, as God said through the prophet Isaiah, for "your voice to be heard on high." (Isaiah 58:4) Or that can be translated, "to make your voice heard in heaven."

Do we ever feel stuck in prayer? Like there's a wall between us and God or God's power? Like we just can't break through the wall? Fasting can help us "break-through", or as the Pentecostals say, to "pray through" all that stands between you and God's plans, purposes, and power for your life. Now, we have to be careful here. Fasting is not a hunger strike to pressure God to give into our demands. We don't starve ourselves to gain access to God; we're sons and daughters of a loving Father and we have access to His throne. And yet – back to the line from the prophet Jeremiah, you will "find me when you seek me with all your heart" (Jeremiah 29:13)

– there is something about the seeking and finding that God really seems to find value in.

There's a lot of mystery here – Scripture tells us “what” – when we add fasting to prayer there is a higher correlation between our requests and the release of God's power, but it doesn't tell us “why”, at least not clearly. Different streams of the church have different theories as to why. It's likely, at least in part, because God is relational; His ultimate aim is to draw us into the inner life of the Trinity and prayer with fasting takes us deeper into union with God. Fasting burns away whatever is creating relational distance between us and God. You may have another take, but while there's a diverse array of theological opinions in the church of Jesus on why some prayers are answered and others are not, one thing is very clear in Scripture: God responds to prayer and fasting. Consider the words of Jesus in Mark 9, when answering His disciples as to why they couldn't cast out a demon, Jesus responded: **“This kind only comes out through prayer and fasting”**. And, think of the story in Jonah 3, where the city of Nineveh is warned by the prophet Jonah of its coming destruction, but then we read:

The Ninevites believed God. A fast was proclaimed, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth... When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he relented and did not bring on them the destruction he had threatened.
Jonah 3:5-10

There's a play on words that's lost in translation from Hebrew to English. In the closing line, the phrase "turned from their evil ways" and "relented" are the same word in Hebrew – naham. Which means, to repent, or relent, or change your mind. The text literally reads, "When God saw that they naham-ed, he naham-ed." What does it mean for God to naham, a word that's often translated "repent"? Arthur Wallis, in God's Chosen Fast, writes this: "Because man repents in respect to sin, God relents in respect to judgment. Man's change of heart makes it morally possible for God to behave differently towards him, yet acting consistently with His Holy character and principles."

We often assume that God is going to do what God is going to do with or without our prayers, but the pattern you read all through Scripture is when God's people pray, and especially when they fast, He responds. Jonah is one such story of a people fasting and God relenting. But Scripture is full of stories like it - King Jehosophat, Esther, the church in Antioch, and many more, etc.

Remember: the end goal of prayer is not ultimately to get what we want from God; but to get God himself. It's union; it's to enter the inner life of the Trinity, to hear the Father and Son and Spirit speak their love over us; and to speak back our love in return. So, when we need to hear God, or we need to be heard by God, one critical and profitable discipline is fasting.



Fasting to Stand with the Poor

Here are a few first-person stories from John Mark Comer's church community which created the Practicing the Way content.

Sarah is a new mother in LA; but the father just abandoned her and the baby; she makes barely enough to survive in the city. One week, she paid her utilities, but had no money left to buy groceries; her fridge was empty, and her cupboards bare. She is a new Christian, and with some hesitation, she prayed to God for help and felt a strange peace come over her. A few hours later, she opened the front door of her apartment, and there, on the stoop, were three bags of groceries and an envelope with \$200 in it. It was anonymous, but she strongly suspects it's from someone at her church just down the road.

The Ngoy family are refugees from the Congo; they were forced to leave their homeland due to rising violence, and granted asylum in the United States. But when they landed at the Portland airport, all their possessions for a family of six were in one plastic garbage bag. They did not speak English, understand the culture, or know how to navigate the complex world of American social services. They were dropped off at a spartan apartment and left alone. But a few hours later, there was a knock at the door. A community group from a local church was there, carrying bags of groceries and home supplies, and offering long-term friendship.

Rafeal is a young professional in Minneapolis. Every day he sees the growing inequality in the city, and the

specter of homelessness. Not to mention the inequality around the world. But what can one person do in the face of so much pain and suffering? Rafeal is an apprentice of Jesus, and every Friday he goes without food until sundown. Each week, he takes the money he would have spent on breakfast and lunch, and donates it to his local food bank. It's not much. But it's something.

Stories like Sarah's, the Ngoy's, and Rafeal's have the power to move us much more than statistics. But the statistics are still haunting: Around 2 billion people in the world live in poverty; around 10% of the global population, or 700 million people, live in "extreme poverty," on less than two dollars a day. Here in America, the extreme poverty rate is even higher, at 11.6%, or nearly 40 million people. And most of them are children. Globally, nearly 22,000 children die daily due to poverty. And yet: the average family of four in the U.S. spends \$1,500 a year on food they throw away. 40% of food in America is thrown out; estimates range from 80-160 billion pounds of food waste per year. So, millions of men, women, and children are hungry, and millions more have more food than they know what to do with.

Is there a practice from the Way of Jesus to stand against all this disparity? Yes, it's the practice of fasting. Throughout church history, it's one of main practices that followers of Jesus have adopted to move toward the hungry, and those on the margins. Fasting as a way "to stand with the poor" may be one aspect of fasting that is new to us; we may not think of fasting as a

vehicle for the biblical vision of justice, but in the imagination of the biblical writers, it is. Isaiah 58 is one of the most essential passages on fasting in all of Scripture. Take some time to read Isaiah 58:3-12 now.

In context, God is speaking through the prophet Isaiah to the people of Israel, who were intended to be a “kingdom of priests,” a channel of God’s rule and reign to the wider world, but were falling woefully short.

The people complained: **“Why have we fasted,’ they say, ‘and you have not seen it? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you have not noticed?”** They are telling Isaiah, we are fasting, but it doesn’t seem to be working. Why is God not hearing our prayer?

Listen to God’s reply: **“Yet on the day of your fasting, you do as you please and exploit all your workers. Your fasting ends in quarreling and strife, and in striking each other with wicked fists. You cannot fast as you do today and expect your voice to be heard on high. Is this the kind of fast I have chosen, only a day for people to humble themselves? Is it only for bowing one’s head like a reed and for lying in sackcloth and ashes? Is that what you call a fast, a day acceptable to the LORD? Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter— when you see the naked, to clothe them, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?”**

God says the type of fasting He chooses is: 1. To fight injustice 2. To free people from oppression 3. To share your food with the hungry 4. To provide shelter to refugees, immigrants, and those with no home 5. To clothe the naked 6. To meet the practical needs of people all around you.

And then God promises if Israel practices this kind of fasting, He will act: **“Then your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear; then your righteousness will go before you, and the glory of the LORD will be your rear guard. Then you will call, and the LORD will answer; you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I.”**

This is a whole other dimension to fasting than the previous three reasons; it has less to do with us, and more to do with others, in particular, the poor. In his commentary on Isaiah 58, St. Augustine said: “Break your bread for those who are hungry, said Isaiah, do not believe that fasting suffices. Fasting chastises you, but it does not refresh the other... Do you wish your prayer to reach God? Give it two wings, fasting and almsgiving.” Augustine seems to say: Prayer is like a bird, if you want it to fly to heaven, give it two wings, fasting, and almsgiving. Almsgiving is a word used by Jesus and the early Christians that can also be translated “works of mercy.” It’s a combination of what today we would call generosity, service, and justice. You see, in the biblical imagination, almsgiving is just as tied to fasting as prayer. In the same way that it’s hard to imagine fasting without praying... it’s theoretically possible, but it’s kind of missing the whole point; to the biblical mind, it’s just

as illogical to practice fasting without generosity, service, and justice.

Followers of Jesus have been practicing this type of fasting for thousands of years. One early Christian writing dating to the early second century suggests Christians should “...estimate the cost of the food you would have eaten on that day and give that amount to a widow or orphan or someone in need. Be humble in this way, that the one who receives something because of your humility may fill his soul and pray to the Lord for you.” Our loss (in sustenance) is the poor’s gain (in substance). St. Gregory of Nyssa, a church father from the fourth century said it more poetically: “Give to the hungry what you deny your own appetite.” Caesarius of Arles in France, in the sixth century said: “Let us fast in such a way that we lavish our lunches upon the poor, so that we may not store up in our purses what we intended to eat, but rather in the stomachs of the poor.” What all these followers of the Way are saying in chorus is: We can’t separate our relationship with God from our relationship with our neighbor. So then, fasting, like prayer, is a way to love God and love our neighbor at the same time. When we pray, we pray to God, and yet so often we petition Him for our neighbor. We pray both worship towards God, and mercy toward humanity.

This type of fasting is a way to do three things:

1. To stand in solidarity with the hungry. Regularly going without food by choice, can put us emotionally in touch with the millions of people around the world and in our own countries who regularly go without food not

by choice. This denial of our stomach does something to our heart; you begin to feel the compassion of God; you begin to see the poor not as a stranger, but as a fellow image bearer of the Father.

2. To share what we have. What we give up in money spent on food can be turned into generosity to the poor; and what we give up in time spent on food – shopping, cooking, eating, cleaning up – can be spent in service of the poor. Dorothy Day said: “How shall we have the means to help our brother who is in need? We can do without those unnecessary things which become habits, cigarettes, liquor, coffee, tea, candy, sodas, soft drinks, and those foods at meals which only titillate the palate. We all have these habits, the youngest and the oldest. And we have to die to ourselves in order to live, we have to put off the old man and put on Christ.” There’s a long-standing tradition in the Catholic church of fasting on Fridays and serving that day in a food pantry or soup kitchen or local nonprofit. This is one way to not just “talk” about justice, but to do justice. There’s so much “slacktivism,” as it’s come to be called, in the digital age; much of what people call “justice” is just ranting on social media; but in a biblical theology of justice, talk is cheap; the call is to act in love. Consider the words of the beloved disciple in his first epistle:

This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters. If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person? Dear children, let us not love with

**words or speech but with actions and in truth. John
3:16-18 NIV**

What can one person do in the face of all the evil and injustice in the world? Well, we can do this: we can fast and free up our resources to share with those in need. This could literally be as simple as giving the twenty dollars we would have spent on breakfast and lunch to our local food bank, or our church's food benevolence fund, or buying groceries for someone in need in our community; or just Venmo-ing someone to help pay their medical bills. It's that simple. But it's powerful.

3. To stand against evil and injustice. Fasting can be a loving, non-violent way to protest systemic injustice. Fasting is a way for the powerful to voluntarily align with the powerless; as Jesus himself did for us. To fight this evil, we must turn to prayer. As St. Gregory said: "It is impossible to engage in spiritual conflict, without the previous subjugation of the appetite." He, like most of the saints, saw fasting as a prerequisite to any prayer for breakthrough. There's a long-running history in the church of fasting to prepare for spiritual war. In deliverance ministry, or what we call exorcism, fasting beforehand is pretty much mandatory. To purge and purify your soul of sin and grow in power and authority in the Spirit to "tear down strongholds," in the language of the New Testament. The fast Isaiah has in mind is one where we stand in solidarity with the poor, we share our resources, and we stand against evil and injustice.

This last type of fasting will have an effect not just on the poor, but on you and me and the church as a whole.

Remember Jesus' vision of what the church is meant to be - a new kind of family of peace and justice and love. In the same way that, in a healthy family, there's no way that anyone would ever go without food or shelter as long as there are resources in the family as a whole. So too, in a healthy church family, there's no way that anyone would ever go without food or shelter or access to the basic necessities of life. This is the gospel; you have been adopted, not just into relationship with God the Father, but into his family. And while all families fall short of the ideal, fasting is one of the best practices we have to co-create a new family with Jesus where it can be said, as it was of the early church, "there is no needy person among them." (Acts 4:34)



Final Thoughts

Our prayer is this vision of fasting as one of the most powerful and essential of all the practices of Jesus, inspired you, but also answered any questions you might have. Remember, fasting has the potential to transform our relationships:

To Jesus: To awaken a hunger within, and draw us into a deeper union with Jesus.

To our body: To heal our relationship to food, to pleasure, to starve our flesh and feed our spirit; to develop self-control and daily.

To God in prayer: To sharpen our ability to hear God's voice, as well as give power to our prayers to break through walls.

To the poor: To the hungry, to those in need, to form a new community of justice and righteousness.

Fasting can do all this and more! So, as we consider these things, as we look to the life of Jesus and His words of Truth, how can we begin to integrate fasting into our spiritual disciplines, or our overall Christ-centered, Kingdom-focused, lifestyle, just as most followers of Jesus have done until recent history. If we were to study a community of disciples of Jesus in say 250 AD or 1,250 AD, and most anywhere in between, we would notice the same basic pattern: They ate very modestly most days. They fasted on Wednesdays and Fridays until sundown, as well as on holy days in the church calendar. And they feasted every Sabbath and on

special occasions. This pattern – eating, fasting, and feasting – is a long-standing way of life for followers of Jesus. But it's no secret we Americans prefer feasting to fasting, yet the two live in a reciprocal relationship. As Marva J. Dawn put it, in her writing on feasting on the Sabbath: "Americans do not know how to feast because they do not know how to fast. Especially if we fast on behalf of those who don't have enough and share our plenty with them, our feasting will be much more meaningful." The invitation of the church of Jesus down through history is to join in this ancient rhythm - to eat, to fast, and to feast.

But let us never forget: fasting is temporary, feasting is eternal. The story of Scripture begins with a fast —the first command in Scripture, in Genesis 3, is to not eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. And yet, Scripture ends with a feast, in Rev. 21-22, where all God's people, from every tribe, tongue, and nation, gather around the table with Jesus himself. No more fasting, no more hunger, no more solidarity with the poor because there are no more poor! When we feast, we act out an advance sign of our glorious future. And when we fast, we pray with our bodies for Jesus to drag his future into the present; we pray, in the words of the early church, "Maranatha; Come quickly, Lord Jesus." So, may we feast, and may we fast, and may we together hasten Jesus' return to make all things new.

GS Family you are loved! We are expecting great things over this season of prayer and fasting. If you have further questions, we would love to have those conversations with you! And we encourage you to continue to look at the life of Jesus and His first disciples in their practice of fasting. God bless!

The GS Pastors

