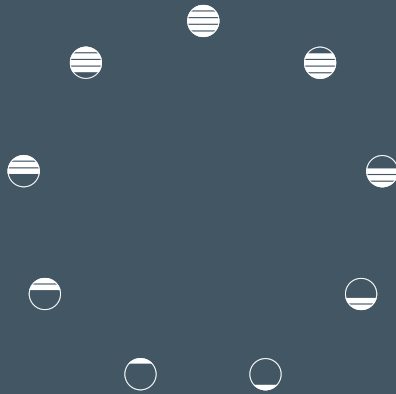


The Fasting Practice

Fasting Guide and Devotional



Practicing the Way of Jesus

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Welcome

Welcome to the Fasting Practice. For over a thousand years, fasting was one of the central practices of the Way of Jesus. It was common practice for apprentices of Jesus to fast twice a week until sundown — on Wednesdays and Fridays, as well as the 40 days of Lent. Similar to essential spiritual disciplines like prayer or the reading of Scripture or gathering to worship on Sunday, fasting was simply one of the things that practicing Christians did.

After all, Jesus began his life’s work with 40 days of fasting, a practice he continued throughout his lifetime. And he said, “Follow me.” It makes sense that we would follow his example and incorporate fasting — in both longer and shorter intervals — into our discipleship to Jesus.

And yet, very few followers of Jesus in the modern West fast at all.

There are lots of reasons for this: the influence of the Enlightenment, cultural hedonism, the widespread availability of food because of modern agribusiness, the (false) advertising of the food industry telling us that we need three meals a day, the confusion of appetite with hunger (which are not the same thing), or the struggle with disordered eating and body shame, etc. But the greatest reason is likely the West’s emphasis on the mind over the body. This focus on rational thought has given us all sorts of breakthroughs in science, medicine, and technology, but it has left us disembodied; we’ve lost sight of the human as a whole person — mind, body, and soul.

Fasting is one of the most essential and powerful of all the practices of Jesus because it is one of the best ways to integrate our entire person, including our body, around God.

Overview

This four-week fasting guide and daily devotional was created to help you practice the way of Jesus. Each week, the Sunday sermon will introduce a reason for why to fast. Use this guide to help you process and practice what God is teaching you.

Over the next four weeks, we will cover four reasons we fast.

1. To offer ourselves to Jesus
2. To grow in holiness
3. To amplify our prayers
4. To stand with the poor

These are all great reasons to fast. But, the ultimate reason to fast is to get in touch with our hunger for God. Hunger is the state of wanting or needing something you do not have. When we fast, we awaken our body and soul to its deep yearning for life with the Father. We become able to say with Jesus, "I have food to eat that you know nothing about." (John 4:32)

To help you feed on God's Word through this fasting practice, you're invited to use the sermon notes page and the daily devotional included within this guide. The devotional, which 28 people within our church family wrote, will track with the given week's theme.

In addition, use the questions in this guide to help you slow down and reflect as you engage with this practice. We encourage you to take your time with this step. As South African professor Trevor Hudson said, "We don't change from our experience; we change when we reflect on our experience." To get the most out of this practice, you must do it and then reflect on it.

Finally, we encourage you to bring this guide to your Midtown Community and/or Huddle. Come ready to discuss your experiences with others and to share what Jesus is doing in your life as you pray and fast.

Considerations

This companion guide is full of spiritual exercises, devotions, best practices, and good advice on the spiritual discipline of fasting. But it's important to note that spiritual growth is not formulaic. Sometimes we fast and we experience spiritual breakthroughs and miracles, but other times we just feel tired and hangry. That's okay. Our goal isn't to control our spiritual formation but to *surrender* to Jesus. Giving more and more of our deepest selves to him to rescue, save, heal, and transform in his time, his way, by his power, peace, and presence.

Because it's so easy to lose sight of the ultimate aim of a Practice, here are a few things to consider as you prepare for this practice.

1. Start Small

Start where you are, not where you "should" be. If a full day of fasting a week is too much, start with one meal. The smaller the start, the better your chance of sticking to it and growing over time.

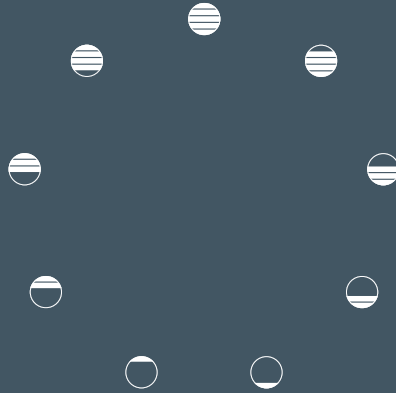
2. Decide How You Will Engage

A biblical fast is the practice of abstaining from food for spiritual purposes. Throughout Scripture, fasting always includes abstaining from food or a type of food.

A similar spiritual practice is known as sacrificing. Sacrificing is the practice of abstaining from a good or neutral thing for spiritual purposes. Examples of this include abstaining from social media or entertainment.

During this Practice, you are encouraged to fast entirely from food at least one day a week for the next four weeks. You are also encouraged to sacrifice one or more things to free up more time to spend with Jesus during this fasting practice.

If fasting from food is not wise for you, we encourage you to engage with this practice by sacrificing something (or several different things) during these 28 days. Identify something to go without that will free you from distraction and create more time in your day to pray.



Week 1: To Offer Ourselves to Jesus

I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy,
to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God
—this is your true and proper worship. Romans 12:1

Introduction

In the modern world, you are more likely to hear about fasting from a Muslim, Buddhist, nutrition expert, or fitness guru than from a serious disciple of Jesus. Most followers of Jesus in the West no longer fast; if they do, it's rarely every week, even though it was the common practice of the church for well over a millennium and a half to do so.

Yet in his teaching on fasting in Matthew 6:16, Jesus said, "When you fast," not "If you fast." He assumed his apprentices would follow his example and incorporate fasting into their discipleship.

What if we are missing out on one of the most essential and powerful of all the practices of Jesus?

One of the reasons fasting has fallen by the wayside in the Western church is that we have lost sight of what Pope John Paul II called a "theology of the body." This is the biblical theology of the human as a whole person. In the biblical view, you don't *have* a body; you *are* a body; your body is a part of who you are.

As powerful as the mind is, we can't simply think our way into spiritual maturity because we are holistic beings. Our discipleship to Jesus must take seriously our body, as it is "the temple of the Holy Spirit" — a home where God dwells.

Most of us are used to approaching our spiritual formation and life with God through the door of our mind — by thinking, talking, praying, reading, or hearing teaching and preaching. But very few of us are comfortable approaching our spiritual formation through our stomach or our body as a whole.

Fasting is one of the best disciplines we have to reintegrate our mind to our body, and offer our whole selves to God in surrender.

Practice

Week 1: Fasting to offer ourselves to Jesus

For the Fasting Practice, each week's exercise will be very similar and straightforward: fast the most common way, one full day until sundown. Each week, we will attempt to focus our hearts on the reason for fasting we covered in that week's session.

Fast until sundown one day this week, focusing on offering yourself to Jesus.

- Pick a day that works for you. Wednesdays or Fridays are ideal if you want to get in touch with Christians around the world and throughout church history.
- If possible, pick a day to do this with your Midtown Community; this will help encourage your weekly practice.
- Fast until sundown that day. Then, eat a simple meal in gratitude.
- If a whole day is too much for your body or soul, start smaller. Skip breakfast and break the fast at lunch or 3 p.m. Remember: The goal is to make fasting a part of your regular life, not try it once or twice, hate it, and never try it again. Start where you are, not where you feel like you “should” be.
- In the time you would typically be grocery shopping, cooking, eating, or cleaning, give yourself to prayer. Let your desire for food point you to Jesus as you open yourself to him.
- In your dedicated prayer times, or each time a hunger pain comes, you may want to pray Romans 12:1-2, or simply, “God, I offer my body to you in worship. Please transform me.”
- As you go about your day — your morning commute, caregiving, email, errands — enjoy God's company and attempt to open your heart to him all through the day.

Sunday Sermon Notes

Week 1: Fasting to offer ourselves to Jesus

Sermon Questions

What Scripture or thought most resonated with you from the teaching?

In your opinion, why has fasting become a neglected practice for many?

What is the connection between the Scripture's value of the body and the practice of fasting?

Monday Devotional

Read today's scripture three times, pausing to listen to God's voice after each reading. Then, reflect on the following questions and pray as directed and as you feel led.

Isaiah 6:5-8

"Woe to me!" I cried. "I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty." Then one of the seraphim flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar. With it he touched my mouth and said, "See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for." Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?" And I said, "Here am I. Send me!"

Observation

Isaiah is made aware of the Lord's majesty, holiness, and glory in the verses before this passage. In this passage, he goes through several steps in a process. What are the steps in this process, and where does it take him?

Interpretation

Do you think it would be helpful, or maybe even necessary, for us to go through a similar process to arrive at a place similar to the one that Isaiah was in at the beginning of the work that God had in mind for him?

Application

What can we do to go through a process like this in our individual time with the Lord and as we worship Him and look to Him together? What changes can we make to our "routine" to build this process into our lives?

Prayer

Ask God to help you be aware of the vast difference between His holiness and our natural state and His faithful cleansing, atonement, and calling.

Ask God to give our church an awareness of His holiness, a genuine humility, an eagerness to be purified, and a desire to go where he sends us.

Tuesday Devotional

Read today's scripture three times, pausing to listen to God's voice after each reading. Then, reflect on the following questions and pray as directed and as you feel led.

Matthew 16:24-27

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. What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul? For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father's glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what they have done."

Observation

What does Jesus say to his disciples about being his? What does he say will happen to those who lose their life?

Interpretation

What does it look like for us to take up your cross and follow Jesus today? How have you seen examples of people gaining the whole world and yet forfeiting their souls?

Application

In what ways might you be challenged to deny yourself and follow Jesus? How can you practice this in your day to day?

Prayer

Ask God to help you lay down pride, selfishness, and the desire to gain the world. Ask God to give you the desire to take up your cross and follow him.

Pray that our church would spur each other on to prioritize following God's will in all our actions.

Wednesday Devotional

Read today's scripture three times, pausing to listen to God's voice after each reading. Then, reflect on the following questions and pray as directed and as you feel led.

Romans 12:1-2

Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is — his good, pleasing and perfect will.

Observation

According to Paul, he urges believers to do something that would be holy and pleasing to God. What does he say we are to offer in view of God's mercy as a sign of true and proper worship?

Interpretation

When Paul says, "Do not be conformed to the pattern of the world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind," what does he mean? What do we need to do to avoid being conformed to the world?

Application

Paul encourages us to test and approve what God's good, pleasing and perfect will is for our lives. How can we do this on a daily basis?

Prayer

Pray that God will show you what it truly means to offer yourself as a living sacrifice for Him and to help you understand His will for your life.

Pray that we at Midtown will continue to be a body of believers seeking God's will here in Austin.

Thursday Devotional

Read today's scripture three times, pausing to listen to God's voice after each reading. Then, reflect on the following questions and pray as directed and as you feel led.

James 4:7-10

Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.

Observation

In his writings, what is James's perspective on the value of genuine internal purification and earnestness? What are some of the actions he calls us towards?

Interpretation

Why do you think James uses language that we typically associate negatively with (gloom, wailing, grief, etc) to describe the concept of humbling yourself to the Lord?

Application

James paints a vivid picture of the type of life he sees as glorifying God. What would it look like for you to "submit yourself" to God? How can you challenge yourself to humble yourself before the Lord?

Prayer

Pray for your own heart towards God. Focus on areas you are having trouble submitting to Him and ask that He would come near to you as you humble yourself.

Pray for our church family, asking that we will be a community that humbles ourselves before the Lord and seeks to purify our hearts.

Friday Devotional

Read today's scripture three times, pausing to listen to God's voice after each reading. Then, reflect on the following questions and pray as directed and as you feel led.

Esther 4:14-16

For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father's family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?" Then Esther sent this reply to Mordecai: "Go, gather together all the Jews who are in Susa, and fast for me. Do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my attendants will fast as you do. When this is done, I will go to the king...And if I perish, I perish."

Observation

What danger were the Jews facing (you may need to read the chapter for context)? What position was Esther in to help? What did she ask her friends and family to do to support her before she approached the king?

Interpretation

What do you think about Mordecai's challenge to Esther about being in a royal position "for such a time as this?" Why did Esther ask her friends and family to support her through prayer and fasting for three days?

Application

What "positions" has God placed you, and among what people has he placed you? For what purposes has he placed you there? How will you employ prayer and fasting the next time you're in a tough situation?

Prayer

Pray for yourself and the people whom God has placed in your life. Pray that you'd be more faithful in praying for them and be Christ's light to them.

Like Esther's family and friends, pray for our people to have God's favor in their places and positions throughout our city. Pray for people by name.

Saturday Reflection

Week 1: Fasting to offer ourselves to Jesus

Reflection is a crucial component in our spiritual formation.

If you want to get the most out of this Practice, you need to do it and then reflect on it. You can use the space below to reflect on your week of devotions, prayer, and fasting.

Which of the scripture readings impacted you the most this week?
What was God saying to you through those verses?

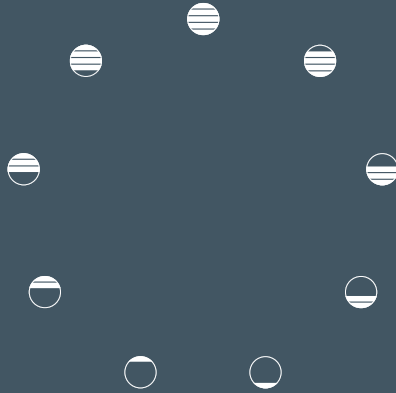
Which of the prayers was most meaningful to you this week?
What was it about that prayer that resonated with you?

In what ways did you fast and/or sacrifice this week?

What was your experience like? Where did you feel resistance?
Where did you feel delight?

Corporate Prayer

Please join us for corporate prayer this Sunday @ 9:30 AM in the gym to continue to offer ourselves, our church family, and our city to God.



Week 2: To Grow in Holiness

May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through.
May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the
coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. 1 Thessalonians 5:23

Introduction

St. Augustine of Hippo, 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.”

Like most ancient Christian intellectuals, he saw gluttony as the first of the seven deadly sins and saw a Christian’s relationship to food as a key part of their relationship with God. Most of us can see this link by direct experience: An inability to control one’s appetite has a ripple effect across the whole person, often resulting in a corresponding inability to control other bodily appetites — for drink, sex, speech, gossip, consumerism, power, and dominion over others.

But on the flip side, many luminaries from the Way of Jesus have considered fasting to be a way to feed your spirit and starve your flesh, the part of our person that is bent toward sin.

When we fast, at least four things are happening in our body and soul.

1. It’s weaning us off the pleasure principle.
2. It’s revealing what’s in our heart.
3. It’s re-ordering our desires.
4. It’s drawing on the power of God to overcome sin.

Our fight is not *against* the body — the body is broken, but it is a good gift. Our fight is *for* the body. It’s against the flesh, or sinful appetites, within us all. And fasting is one of the most powerful disciplines of the Way to free our body and soul from the chains of sin and the prison of shame. In this way, fasting is a practice that helps us grow in holiness.

Practice

Week 2: Fasting to grow in holiness

For the Fasting Practice, each week's exercise will be very similar and straightforward: fast the most common way, one full day until sundown. Each week, we will attempt to focus our hearts on the reason for fasting we covered in that week's session.

Fast until sundown one day this week, focusing on growing in holiness.

- Pick a day that works for you. Wednesdays or Fridays are ideal if you want to get in touch with Christians around the world and throughout church history.
- If possible, pick a day to do this with your Midtown Community; this will help encourage your weekly practice.
- Fast until sundown that day. Then, eat a simple meal in gratitude.
- If a whole day is too much for your body or soul, start smaller. Skip breakfast and break the fast at lunch or 3 p.m. Each week, try to stretch your fast time a little longer. If last week was until noon, try for 2 p.m. this week.
- In the time you'd typically be grocery shopping, cooking, eating, or cleaning, give yourself to prayer and focus your heart on this second motivation for fasting: to grow in holiness.
- In your dedicated prayer times, or each time a hunger pain comes, you may want to pray, "God, purify my heart and purge my whole person of sin."
- If possible, set aside time to ask God to reveal any sin in your life. As sin is revealed, offer it to God in confession, repentance, and prayer.

Sunday Sermon Notes

Week 2: Fasting to grow in holiness

Sermon Questions

What Scripture or thought most resonated with you from the teaching?

What is the difference between our body and our “flesh” in Scripture?

What are a few ways the practice of fasting helps us to grow in holiness?

Monday Devotional

Read today's scripture three times, pausing to listen to God's voice after each reading. Then, reflect on the following questions and pray as directed and as you feel led.

Nehemiah 1:4-7

When I heard these things, I sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven. Then I said: "Lord, the God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and keep his commandments, let your ear be attentive and your eyes open to hear the prayer your servant is praying before you day and night for your servants, the people of Israel. I confess the sins we Israelites, including myself and my father's family, have committed against you. We have acted very wickedly toward you. We have not obeyed the commands, decrees and laws you gave your servant Moses.

Observation

What attributes of God's character does Nehemiah appeal to in his prayer?

Interpretation

Nehemiah prays for and confesses sin on behalf of his fellow Israelites. What are some areas that we need to pray for and confess sin on behalf of the church?

Application

Nehemiah prays for and confesses his sin. What are unhealthy areas of your life that you need to confess to God?

Prayer

Ask God to make you aware of the unholy areas of your life so that you may confess them and experience God's unconditional love through forgiveness.

Pray we would be a church family where people freely confess sin because we experience the unconditional love and acceptance found in Jesus.

Tuesday Devotional

Read today's scripture three times, pausing to listen to God's voice after each reading. Then, reflect on the following questions and pray as directed and as you feel led.

Psalm 51:10-13

Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me. Then I will teach transgressors your ways, so that sinners will turn back to you.

Observation

These verses are found within a prayer of repentance, where David confesses sin and asks God for forgiveness. It may be helpful to read the entire Psalm for context. After confessing his sin, what does David ask of God in verses 10-13?

Interpretation

What theme do the words "create," "renew," and "restore" have in common? By what power is a pure heart, a steadfast and willing spirit, and the joy of salvation formed in us? What would it mean for God to renew a steadfast spirit in you?

Application

How is the act of confession connected to growing in holiness in these verses? How can you invite God to create a pure heart in you today? In what areas of your life can you allow God's love and forgiveness to form you and redeem you?

Prayer

Pray Psalm 51:10-13. Ask God to renew you and give you a clean heart.

Pray that our church family would know the joy of salvation found in God's grace, given to us through Jesus Christ.

Wednesday Devotional

Read today's scripture three times, pausing to listen to God's voice after each reading. Then, reflect on the following questions and pray as directed and as you feel led.

1 Peter 1:13-16

Therefore, with minds that are alert and fully sober, set your hope on the grace to be brought to you when Jesus Christ is revealed at his coming. As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance. But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: "Be holy, because I am holy."

Observation

What are the three commands given in these verses?

Interpretation

How are the three commands given in this passage related to each other? What do you think "be holy in all you do" means?

Application

Identify areas in your life where you are still conforming to "the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance." Confess those areas and tell God you desire to grow in holiness.

Prayer

Ask God to help you live with the hope of Jesus' return and to strengthen you to live a holy life as you wait to see Jesus face to face.

Pray that God would use this fasting practice to grow us in holiness so that we may reflect him well to each other and our city.

Thursday Devotional

Read today's scripture three times, pausing to listen to God's voice after each reading. Then, reflect on the following questions and pray as directed and as you feel led.

Romans 6:11-14

In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus. Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires. Do not offer any part of yourself to sin as an instrument of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer every part of yourself to him as an instrument of righteousness. For sin shall no longer be your master, because you are not under the law, but under grace.

Observation

How does Paul encourage believers in Romans 6:11-14 to view themselves in relation to sin, and what shift in identity is emphasized?

Interpretation

What is the significance of being dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus, and how does this impact our daily lives as Christians?

Application

How can we practically ensure that sin does not reign in our mortal bodies, and what steps can we take to offer ourselves to God as instruments of righteousness?

Prayer

Father, help us to embrace our identity in Christ, counting ourselves dead to sin and alive to You. Guide us in offering every part of ourselves to You as instruments of righteousness.

May our church collectively experience freedom from sin's mastery, leaning on Your grace. Lead us to offer ourselves wholly to You, becoming instruments of righteousness in our community and beyond.

Friday Devotional

Read today's scripture three times, pausing to listen to God's voice after each reading. Then, reflect on the following questions and pray as directed and as you feel led.

Daniel 9:3-6

So I turned to the Lord God and pleaded with him in prayer and petition, in fasting, and in sackcloth and ashes. I prayed to the Lord my God and confessed: "Lord, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and keep his commandments, we have sinned and done wrong. We have been wicked and have rebelled; we have turned away from your commands and laws. We have not listened to your servants the prophets, who spoke in your name to our kings, our princes and our ancestors, and to all the people of the land."

Observation

Notice how Daniel addresses God in the opening of this prayer. Next, notice how Daniel characterizes the people of Judah living in Babylonian captivity. What contrasts do you see between the two descriptions?

Interpretation

Look again at Daniel's address to God at the beginning of this prayer. Which aspects of God's character does Daniel focus on? Why do you think Daniel begins his conversation with God this way?

Application

Which aspects of God's character give you peace or hope? Which aspects of your character make you feel stuck, defeated, or afraid? Reflect slowly, making a list of each.

Prayer

Follow Daniel's example: Reflect on God's character, then fearlessly confess your sin, with confidence that He'll never break His promise of love.

Ask God to give each person in Midtown Church the faith to listen for His instruction and the humility to receive His correction.

Saturday Reflection

Week 2: Fasting to grow in holiness

Reflection is a crucial component in our spiritual formation.

If you want to get the most out of this Practice, you need to do it and then reflect on it. You can use the space below to reflect on your week of devotions, prayer, and fasting.

Which of the scripture readings impacted you the most this week?
What was God saying to you through those verses?

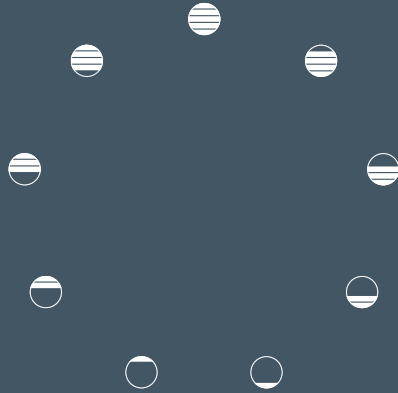
Which of the prayers was most meaningful to you this week?
What was it about that prayer that resonated with you?

In what ways did you fast and/or sacrifice this week?

What was your experience like? Where did you feel resistance?
Where did you feel delight?

Corporate Prayer

Please join us for corporate prayer this Sunday @ 9:30 AM in the gym to continue to pray for God to grow us in holiness.



Week 3: To Amplify Our Prayers

“You will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to 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. Jeremiah 29:12-14

Introduction

Fasting and prayer go together. Like two wings of a bird, together they take flight. You can pray without fasting, and you can fast without praying, but when you combine the two, there's a noticeable amplification of our prayer before God. This comes as no surprise since fasting is a way to pray with our body. When the request of our heart is coupled with the yearning of our body, our prayer is purified of its dross and presented like a precious metal before the Father for him to do as he will.

Of course, "prayer" is an umbrella term for the medium through which we communicate and commune with God. Prayer involves both speaking and listening. And fasting is a key companion in both.

Fasting is an aid in hearing God.

It helps us to discern his voice through the noise and distraction of our lives. It sharpens our mind; in the fasting state, our mind is more alert, focused, and open. It makes it easier for us to hear how God speaks to us and his will and direction for our lives.

But fasting is also an aid to being heard by God.

It helps us to break through the walls that stand between us and the release of God's plans, purposes, and power. Story after story — in Scripture and church history — attest to this reality: When prayer and fasting link arms, it's often the tipping point in the struggle to release God's Kingdom on earth as it is in heaven.

Practice

Week 3: Fasting to amplify our prayers

For the Fasting Practice, each week's exercise will be very similar and straightforward: fast the most common way, one full day until sundown. Each week, we will attempt to focus our hearts on the reason for fasting we covered in that week's session.

Fast for one day, focusing on how it amplifies your prayers.

- Pick a day that works for you; we recommend Wednesdays or Fridays. This week, we especially recommend Friday!
- On Friday evening, come gather with our church family for a special **Concert of Prayer**. Together, we will call on God and seek Him with all our hearts.
- In the time you'd normally be grocery shopping, cooking, eating, or cleaning, give yourself to prayer.
- In your dedicated prayer times, or each time a hunger pain comes, you may want to pray through a short list of specific requests you are holding before God or pray, "God, speak to me; I'm listening."
- If possible, set aside time in the quiet to listen for God's voice and offer your prayers up to God. You may want to get up early, find a quiet park on your lunch break, or end your day with a nice walk. But find a time and place to minimize distractions and combine your fasting with prayer.

Sunday Sermon Notes

Week 3: Fasting to amplify our prayers

Sermon Questions

What Scripture or thought most resonated with you from the teaching?

How does fasting help us hear God?

What is the connection between fasting and God hearing our prayers?

What are some examples from Scripture showing there is a connection?

Monday Devotional

Read today's scripture three times, pausing to listen to God's voice after each reading. Then, reflect on the following questions and pray as directed and as you feel led.

2 Chronicles 20:2-4

Some people came and told Jehoshaphat, "A vast army is coming against you from Edom, from the other side of the Dead Sea. It is already in Hazezon Tamar" (that is, En Gedi). Alarmed, Jehoshaphat resolved to inquire of the Lord, and he proclaimed a fast for all Judah. The people of Judah came together to seek help from the Lord; indeed, they came from every town in Judah to seek him.

Observation

What was the king of Judah, Jehoshaphat's response to the news that an army was coming against them? What was the people's response?

Interpretation

Why do you think Jehoshaphat's resolve to inquire of the Lord (hear from the Lord) was followed by his proclamation of a fast?

Application

We often have more minor, less dangerous, personal examples of people coming against us, like political disagreements or work/school drama. How can you remind yourself to pray and fast for reliance on God in those moments of emotional turmoil?

Prayer

Ask the Holy Spirit to remind you to pray all the time. Pray for your reliance on God to grow and your love for your enemy to mimic Christ's love for you.

Pray a similar prayer over specific people in our church. Pray that we all grow in prayer and fasting.

Tuesday Devotional

Read today's scripture three times, pausing to listen to God's voice after each reading. Then, reflect on the following questions and pray as directed and as you feel led.

Joel 2:12-14

“Even now,” declares the Lord, “return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning.” Rend your heart and not your garments. Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, and he relents from sending calamity. Who knows? He may turn and relent and leave behind a blessing — grain offerings and drink offerings for the Lord your God.

Observation

What does this passage say about God's Character?
What does God want to give us?

Interpretation

Consider the practices that Israel had practiced that they needed to “return to” God from. What is the significance of fasting, weeping, and mourning for this process of return?

Application

How have you strayed from God? How has Midtown strayed from God?
What would it look like to rend your heart in fasting to return to the Lord?

Prayer

Answer the call of the Lord. Pray sincerely and passionately for a return to the Lord for yourself and deeper communion with the Holy Spirit.

Consider Midtown and the areas where we fall short. Pray for Midtown to become more Christlike in how we love and witness to Austin.

Wednesday Devotional

Read today's scripture three times, pausing to listen to God's voice after each reading. Then, reflect on the following questions and pray as directed and as you feel led.

Mark 9:25-29

When Jesus saw that a crowd was running to the scene, he rebuked the impure spirit. "You deaf and mute spirit," he said, "I command you, come out of him and never enter him again." The spirit shrieked, convulsed him violently and came out. The boy looked so much like a corpse that many said, "He's dead." But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him to his feet, and he stood up. After Jesus had gone indoors, his disciples asked him privately, "Why couldn't we drive it out?" He replied, "This kind can come out only by prayer and fasting.

Observation

How did Jesus drive out the impure spirit? Why was Jesus but not the disciples able to drive out the spirit?

Interpretation

What makes prayer and fasting impactful when trying to rebuke impure spirits?

Application

What impure spirits take hold of your life that need to be driven out? What about the lives of those around you or in the world that you could be praying for during a fast?

Prayer

Pray during your fast that God will show you what the impure spirits and sins are in your life and that He will drive them out.

Pray during your fast for the whole global church to rebuke impure spirits and sins with prayer and fasting to God's glory.

Thursday Devotional

Read today's scripture three times, pausing to listen to God's voice after each reading. Then, reflect on the following questions and pray as directed and as you feel led.

Ephesians 1:15-17

For this reason, ever since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all God's people, I have not stopped giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers. I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better.

Observation

What specifically does Paul pray for the church at Ephesus in this passage? How does he connect the celebration of their faith in Jesus with a prayer and desire for wisdom and revelation?

Interpretation

For what reason does Paul pray the church would come to know God better through the Spirit of wisdom and revelation? If they are already faithful, loving people, why does Paul pray for even more?

Application

Often, we pray for God to change our circumstances. There is nothing wrong with bringing those kind of requests to God! But, during this fast, consider making your primary request: *God, help me know you better.*

Prayer

Pray that God would guide your prayers through the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, amplifying His will and His words in your heart.

Pray that our church will continue to give thanks and remember others. Pray that we will grow in our knowledge and relationships with Christ.

Friday Devotional

Read today's scripture three times, pausing to listen to God's voice after each reading. Then, reflect on the following questions and pray as directed and as you feel led.

Acts 13:1-3

Now in the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen (who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch) and Saul. While they were worshipping 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.

Observation

As the Antioch church engaged in worship and fasting, what action did the Spirit guide them to initiate? How did this align with Jesus' commission to his disciples recorded in Acts 1:8?

Interpretation

Do you think God may guide you in new directions as you engage in this season of worship and fasting? Are there scriptures you need to revisit that God has previously impressed on you?

Application

As you engage in fasting and prayer, consider that God may guide you in new directions. Record any promptings you sense from God.

Prayer

Thank God for guiding you with His Spirit, and ask Him if there are any specific actions you should take today.

Pray that His Spirit would guide our church in specific directions to make Austin more like heaven.

Saturday Reflection

Week 3: Fasting to amplify our prayers

Reflection is a critical component in our spiritual formation.

If you want to get the most out of this Practice, you need to do it and then reflect on it. You can use the space below to reflect on your week of devotions, prayer, and fasting.

Which of the scripture readings impacted you the most this week?
What was God saying to you through those verses?

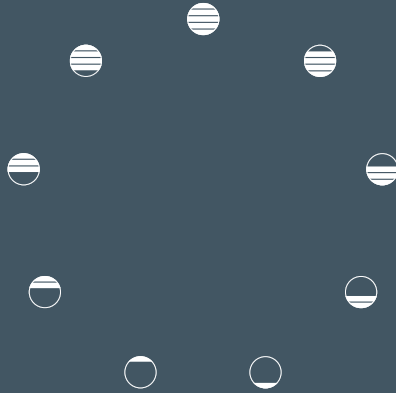
Which of the prayers was most meaningful to you this week?
What was it about that prayer that resonated with you?

In what ways did you fast and/or sacrifice this week?

What was your experience like? Where did you feel resistance?
Where did you feel delight?

Corporate Prayer

Please join us for prayer this Sunday @ 9:30 AM in the gym to pray together for our church family and our city.



Week 4: To Stand With the Poor

“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?” Isaiah 58:6-7

Introduction

“Give to the hungry what you deny your own appetite.”

— St. Gregory of Nyssa

In the West, many of us struggle with the problem of food abundance — having too much food to eat. Our pantries overflow with snacks; we have so much food in our fridges that it goes bad before we can eat it; apps like DoorDash put any food we want just a few swipes away. Dieting is a constant fad, and most of us live in a daily war of attrition against sugar, processed carbs, and over-indulgence. But most of the world, and many more people than we realize in our own neighborhoods and cities, live with food scarcity — not having enough to eat.

Fasting is a way to bridge this gap between “the haves” and “the have-nots.” Going back at least as far as Isaiah 58, it has long been a vehicle for biblical justice, a way for those with too much food to share with those in need.

Early on in the history of the church, fasting was tied to what Jesus and the early Christians called “almsgiving” — a practice that combined generosity, serving, and justice. On fasting days, Christians would take the food or the money they would have spent on food and give it to the poor. Often, they would also give the time they would have spent cooking, eating, and cleaning up to serve the poor.

This simple practice of giving away the money we would have spent on ourselves has the potential to transform not only the lives of the poor but also our own lives and communities.

Practice

Week 4: Fasting to stand with the poor

Our practice for Week 4 is very similar to the previous three weeks, with one simple addition: generosity and service to the poor.

Fast for one day this week, focusing on standing with the poor.

- Pick a day to fast; we recommend Wednesdays or Fridays.
- If possible, pick a day when you can fast with your MC or Huddle.
- Fast until sundown that day. Then, eat a simple meal in gratitude.
- In the time you'd normally be grocery shopping, cooking, eating, or cleaning, give yourself to prayer.
- Calculate the money you would have spent on breakfast and lunch and share it with the poor. Here are a few ideas on how to do this:
 - Donate the food you did not eat to a local food bank.
 - Donate the money you did not spend on food to a nonprofit that serves people experiencing poverty. (Consider: Mobile Loaves & Fishes)
 - Buy groceries for someone.
 - Share your money with someone who needs help paying a medical bill or an unexpected expense.
 - Find a need and meet it that day.
 - Pray and ask God to infuse your imagination and desire with his imagination and desire. Do whatever comes to the surface of your heart.
- As you fast, give, and serve, quietly ask God to set your heart free from self-love and self-preservation and transform you into a person of Christlike love.

Sunday Sermon Notes

Week 4: Fasting to stand with the poor

Sermon Questions

What Scripture or thought most resonated with you from the teaching?

What are some of the motivations given for fasting in Isaiah 58:3-12?

How is fasting a way to love God and our neighbor simultaneously?

Monday Devotional

Read today's scripture three times, pausing to listen to God's voice. Then reflect on the following questions and respond in prayer.

Isaiah 58:6-9

"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? 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.

Observation

What type of fasting do these verses say that God has chosen for us to do? It may be helpful to read verses 1-5 to observe the contrasting types of fasting described in this chapter.

Interpretation

Is the type of fasting described in verses 6-9 focused inward or outward? How does this focus align with the scripture Ephesians 2:8-9, that we are saved by grace, not by good deeds?

Application

What (if any) changes do you need to make in your views on fasting based on these verses? How do we let our light break forth like the dawn while protecting ourselves from boasting about our good deeds?

Prayer

Pray for God's wisdom in opening your eyes to fasting as He has chosen by blessing others as directed in these verses.

Pray for our church to become a fasting church through personal and corporate service to those who are less fortunate than ourselves.

Tuesday Devotional

Read today's scripture three times, pausing to listen to God's voice. Then reflect on the following questions and respond in prayer.

Zechariah 7:5-10

"Ask all the people of the land and the priests, 'When you fasted and mourned in the fifth and seventh months for the past seventy years, was it really for me that you fasted? And when you were eating and drinking, were you not just feasting for yourselves? Are these not the words the Lord proclaimed through the earlier prophets when Jerusalem and its surrounding towns were at rest and prosperous, and the Negev and the western foothills were settled?'" And the word of the Lord came again to Zechariah: "This is what the Lord Almighty said: 'Administer true justice; show mercy and compassion to one another. Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the foreigner or the poor. Do not plot evil against each other.'"

Observation

Who is called to reflect on their actions and posture when it comes to periods of fasting and mourning? Is anyone exempt from this?

Interpretation

What is God trying to point out about the behavior of His people and where he wants their hearts to be instead? How might this relate to your life?

Application

How is the Lord calling us to act towards one another, the widow, the fatherless, the foreigner, and the poor? Name two ways you can apply this command during this coming week.

Prayer

Ask God to reveal if you have ignored His invitation to fast and seek Him. Pray for eyes to see how to show greater compassion and love to others.

Pray that our church family would be a refuge in the city against oppression, particularly for the outcasts, the broken, the poor, and the unhoused.

Wednesday Devotional

Read today's scripture three times, pausing to listen to God's voice after each reading. Then, reflect on the following questions and pray as directed and as you feel led.

James 2:14-17

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them? Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

Observation

What does the passage say about your faith if it does not lead to action? What are some other implications of this type of "faith"?

Interpretation

What does it mean about our faith if deeds do not accompany it? In this passage, who benefits from a faith that is not dead?

Application

How can we examine our hearts to uncover the true root of our faith? Meditate on God's heart and care for us and how that should motivate our care and love for others.

Prayer

Ask God for forgiveness for any misalignment of our faith and ask Him to return your focus to how Christ has served you.

Pray that Midtown continues to grow in physical, emotional, and spiritual care for those in need around us. Pray also for wisdom in how to partner in this.

Thursday Devotional

Read today's scripture three times, pausing to listen to God's voice after each reading. Then, reflect on the following questions and pray as directed and as you feel led.

Isaiah 1:15-17

When you spread out your hands in prayer, I hide my eyes from you; even when you offer many prayers, I am not listening. Your hands are full of blood! Wash and make yourselves clean. Take your evil deeds out of my sight; stop doing wrong. Learn to do right; seek justice. Defend the oppressed. Take up the cause of the fatherless; plead the case of the widow.

Observation

What does this passage tell us about why our prayers are not heard? What are we commanded to do to change this?

Interpretation

What does it mean to "Defend the oppressed. Take up the cause of the fatherless; plead the case of the widow"?

Application

What is one thing you could do in any of these areas to move forward in "defending the oppressed or take up the cause of the fatherless or plead the case of the widow"?

Prayer

Pray that God would show you the areas where you have "done wrong" or are "doing wrong." Ask Him to help you repent and do what is right.

Ask God to move more people in our church family to get involved in serving the marginalized through our Serve Austin teams. Ask God to move through our Serve Austin teams to bring justice for many.

Friday Devotional

Read today's scripture three times, pausing to listen to God's voice after each reading. Then reflect, on the following questions and pray as directed and as you feel led.

Matthew 25:37-40

"Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?' "The King will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.'"

Observation

Who are the 'righteous' in this passage? Who is the 'stranger?' Who are the 'least of these brothers and sisters?'

Interpretation

What is the relationship between faith and good works? Between loving God and loving the hurting and outcasts, the overlooked, ignored?

Application

Who is a person in your life that you interact with regularly that you are not truly seeing? What steps could you take to show them the love of Jesus?

Prayer

Pray for God to give you His eyes, passion, and creativity to see the people directly in your path that are there for you to serve and love.

Pray for Midtown to stay sensitive to the needs of the hurting and in our city. Pray that God would continue to use us to serve many through our partnerships with Safe Families, World Relief, Ridgetop Elementary, and Helping Hand Home.

Saturday Reflection

Week 4: Fasting to stand with the poor

Reflection is a crucial component in our spiritual formation.

If you want to get the most out of this Practice, you need to do it and then reflect on it. You can use the space below to reflect on your week of devotions, prayer, and fasting.

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What was God saying to you through those verses?

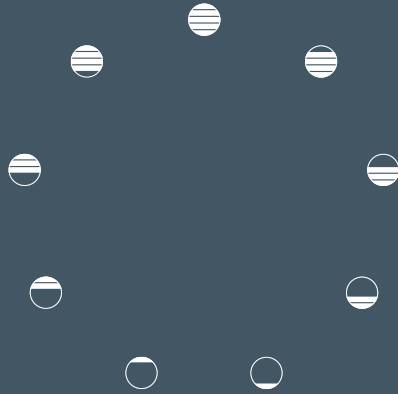
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What was it about that prayer that resonated with you?

In what ways did you fast and/or sacrifice this week?

What was your experience like? Where did you feel resistance?
Where did you feel delight?

Corporate Prayer

Please join us for prayer this Sunday @ 9:30 AM in the gym to pray together for the impoverished and oppressed in our city and world.



Keep Going

“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 6:17-18

Continue to Practice Fasting

You cannot explore the full scope of the ancient practice of fasting in four weeks. This short Practice is only designed to get you moving on a lifelong journey. The weekly fasting rhythm you've been practicing is meant to be integrated into your life rhythms, should you choose. You may want to make fasting a *rhythmic* part of your discipleship on a weekly or monthly basis, or you may wish to practice *responsive* fasting, regularly responding to life's sacred events with all you've learned through this Practice.

Where you go from here is entirely up to you, but if you decide to integrate fasting into your life, here is a helpful next step, along with a few resources and exercises to help you continue your practice.

Next Step: Join a Huddle

During the past four weeks, our Sunday sermons and Midtown Community conversations have been focused on helping us practice fasting together. But what will help you keep going when the sermons and MC conversations transition to new topics?

This is where Huddles come in. Huddles are small groups of 3 to 5 designed to help you continue the practices introduced on Sundays and in Midtown Communities.

If you want to go deeper with this Practice or want prolonged encouragement to keep practicing the way of Jesus, joining a huddle would be a great next step.

If you want to join a Huddle or start one, contact our Spiritual Formations Pastor, Matt Tolander, at mtolander@midtownaustin.org.

Recommended Reading

Fasting is an ancient practice, but it's still a new discipline for most of us in the West. Reading a book alongside the Practice can significantly help you understand and enjoy this discipline. Here are a few we would recommend:

- ***God's Chosen Fast*** by Arthur Wallis
- ***Fasting*** by Scot McKnight
- ***The Spirituality of Fasting*** by Charles M. Murphy
- ***Tony Evans Speaks Out On Fasting*** by Tony Evans

Reach Exercises

We recognize that we're all at different places in our stage of discipleship and season of life. To that end, we've included the following Reach Exercises for those of you who have the time, energy, and desire to go further in fasting.

1. Go on a Solitude Retreat

Jesus went into the wilderness in silence, solitude, fasting, and Scripture. His "retreat" was 40 days long; yours can be much shorter. Start with an overnight. But you can emulate Jesus's foray into the wilderness by practicing fasting while in solitude and silence and by immersing yourself in Scripture.

This could be an especially good idea if you are in a season of discernment and facing a significant decision.

2. Fast for a Longer Period of Time

There's no "right" length, as fasting is never once commanded by Jesus or required by the New Testament writers. But many have found that a one-time or infrequent longer fast (of a week or 21 days) can be a before/after moment in one's spiritual journey.

The key is to only do this if you sense the Spirit's invitation. Do not practice this out of idealism, spiritual heroism, or a misplaced desire for weight loss or a spiritual high.

I will extol the Lord at all times;
his praise will always be on my lips.

I will glory in the Lord;
let the afflicted hear and rejoice.

Glorify the Lord with me;
let us exalt his name together.

I sought the Lord, and he answered me;
he delivered me from all my fears.

Those who look to him are radiant;
their faces are never covered with shame.

This poor man called, and the Lord heard him;
he saved him out of all his troubles.

The angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear him,
and he delivers them.

Taste and see that the Lord is good;
blessed is the one who takes refuge in him.

Fear the Lord, you his holy people,
for those who fear him lack nothing.

The lions may grow weak and hungry,
but those who seek the Lord lack no good thing.

Psalm 34:1-10



PRACTICING THE WAY OF JESUS
TOGETHER IN AUSTIN