

SESSION 01

To Offer Ourselves to Jesus

Overview

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 on a weekly basis, despite the fact that 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 by fasting.

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." In the biblical view, you don't have a body, you are a body; your body is a part of who you are as a human.

This means that we can't simply think our way into spiritual maturity. Our discipleship to Jesus must take seriously our body, as it is "the temple of the Holy Spirit" — a home where we make room for God to dwell.

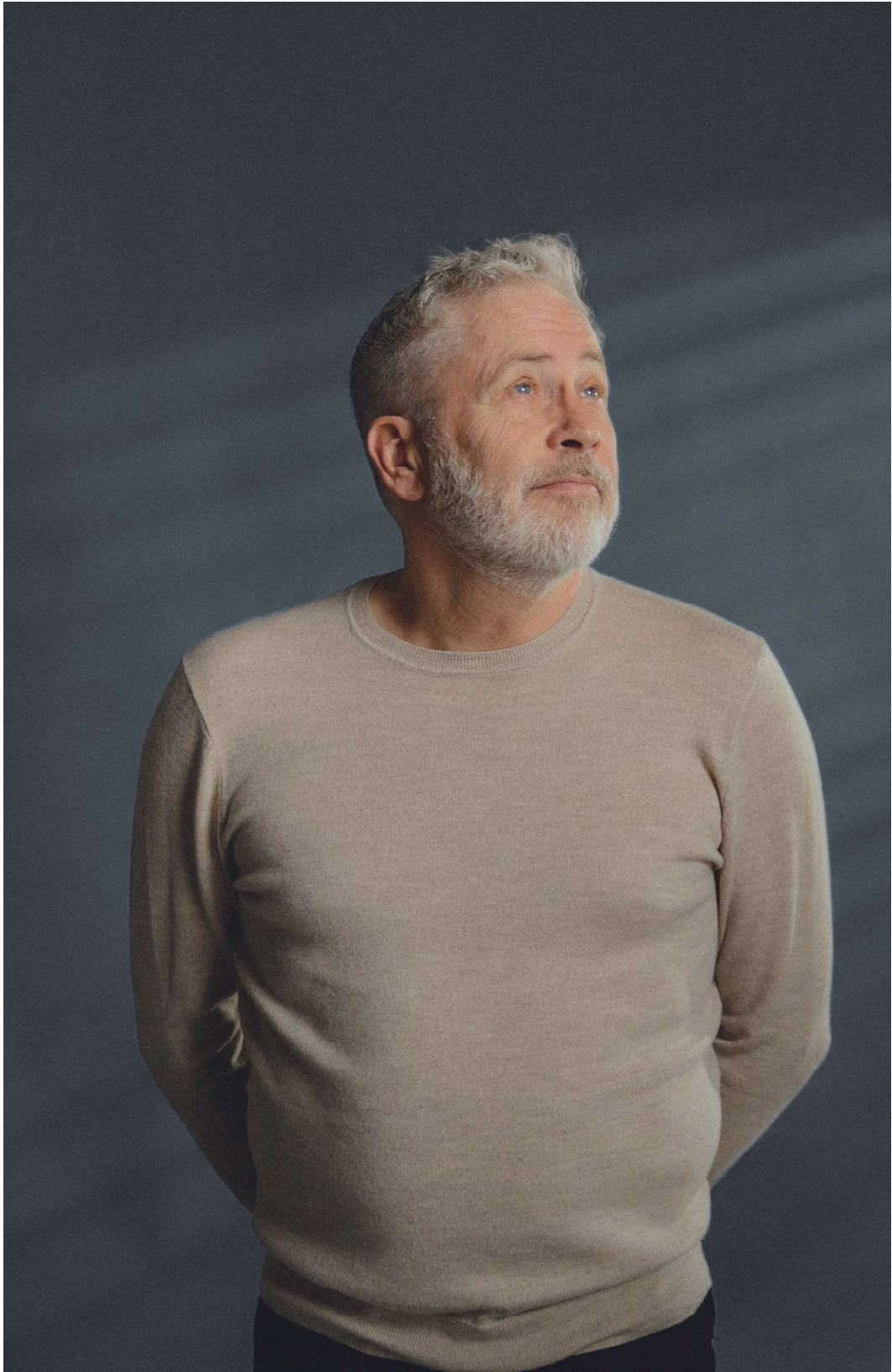
Most of us are used to approaching our spiritual formation and life with God through the mind — by thinking, talking, praying, reading, or hearing teaching and preaching. But few of us are comfortable approaching our spiritual formation through our stomachs, or our bodies as a whole.

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

Opening Questions

When instructed, circle up in triads (smaller groups of 3-5 people) and discuss the following questions:

- 01 Is fasting a new practice for you in your discipleship? What experience do you have with it so far?
- 02 What fears or questions do you have as you begin to practice fasting?
- 03 What would you love to see God do in your life or your community through this Practice?



Teaching

Key Scripture

“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.

—Matthew 6:16-18

Session summary

- For millennia, God’s people have been regularly abstaining from food as a spiritual discipline.
- The definition of fasting is not eating food. While abstinence from other habits (social media, alcohol, etc) can be helpful, it’s different from the practice of fasting.
- Fasting allows us to yearn for God with our whole selves — getting our discipleship into our hungry bodies.
- Jesus doesn’t give specific requirements for fasting. But historically (and across the globe), the church has fasted for two days out of every week, as well as calling for targeted fasts in times of crisis.

Teaching Notes

As you watch Session 01 together, feel free to use this page to take notes.

[illegible]

Discussion Questions

Now it's time for a conversation about the teaching. Pause the video for a few minutes to discuss in small groups:

- 01 What did you just learn that was new or provocative to you?

- 02 What do you expect your greatest challenge will be as you practice fasting?

- 03 If you could put into one word what you most desire from this Practice, what would that word be? And why?

Practice Notes

As you continue to watch Session 01 together, feel free to use this page to take notes.

[illegible]

IN COMMUNITY — LEARN

Closing Prayer

**End your time together by
praying this liturgy:**

Father, you have made our bodies holy;
they are who we are, and they are good.
Help us to draw them into prayer,
into your presence, into holy becoming,
that we may know and love you more.



Exercise

Fast for one day this week, focusing on offering yourself to Jesus

For the Fasting Practice, each week's exercise will be similar and straightforward: fast for 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. This week, focus on reason one: offering ourselves to Jesus.

A few basic tips

- 01 Drink tons of water to stay hydrated (unless you choose to do a total fast, no food or water).
- 02 If you normally drink coffee to wake up, you may want to still have coffee, but just have it black to avoid a caffeine headache. Coffee is 99.9% water and will not keep your body from entering the fasting state.
- 03 The more time you can give to prayer and reflection, and the less busy you are that day, the better. Make it your goal to slow down the day you fast and be present to your body, and God, as much as you possibly can. You may want to find a park on your lunch break or take a few short walks throughout your day. Give as much attention to God as is doable.

Resist the urge to judge your experience. Release thoughts like, "I liked it; I disliked it." "I felt close to God; I didn't feel close to God." Just let the experience of fasting be what it is, and offer it to God in love.

- 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 together as a community; this will help to encourage and enliven your weekly practice.
- Fast until sundown that day, then eat a simple meal in gratitude.
- If a full day is too much for your body or soul, start smaller. Skip breakfast and break the fast at lunch or 3 pm. 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'd normally 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 times of prayer, or each time a hunger pang comes, you may want to pray Romans 12v1-2, 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 — just enjoy God's company and attempt to open your heart to him all through the day.
- If you've never fasted before, you may feel "hangry" or tired. Keep in mind that these symptoms will go away in time if you stick with the practice. You'll start to feel better, not worse.

Reach Exercise (Optional)

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

Fast for two days, like the early Christians.

- You may want to adopt the Wednesday and Friday rhythm like they did, or pick different days that work better for your schedule.
- Just avoid fasting on the Sabbath or the Lord's Day, as Sunday is for feasting, not fasting.



ON YOUR OWN — REFLECT

Practice Reflection

Reflection is a key component in our spiritual formation.

Millenia ago, King David prayed in Psalm 139:23-24:

Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my
anxious thoughts.

See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way
everlasting.

South African writer Trevor Hudson has quoted one of his pastoral supervisors as saying, “We do not learn from experience; we learn from reflection upon experience.” If you want to get the most out of this Practice, you need to do it and then reflect on it.

Before your next time together with the group for the next session, take five to ten minutes to journal out your answers to the following three questions:

01 Where did I feel resistance?

02 Where did I feel joy?

03 Where did I most experience God’s nearness?

Note: As you write, be as specific as possible. While bullet points are just fine, if you write it out in narrative form, your brain will be able to process your insights in a more lasting way.

[illegible]

Keep Growing (Optional)

The following resources were created to enhance your experience of this Practice, but they are entirely optional.



Read

God's Chosen Fast by Arthur Wallis
Chapters 01-05



Listen

Rule of Life Podcast on Fasting
Episode 01



Bonus Conversation

If you would like to slow down this four-week Practice to give your community more time to sit in each week's teaching and spiritual exercise, you can pause and meet for an optional bonus conversation in the appendix.