

The Heart of Fasting

Matthew 6:16-18 - NCBC, November 3, 2019

Main Point: **The right motive for fasting is treasuring Christ.**

- Don't fast for the sake of your reputation (16)
- Fast for the sake of your reward (17-18)

Application: **So when you fast, treasure Christ more than self!**

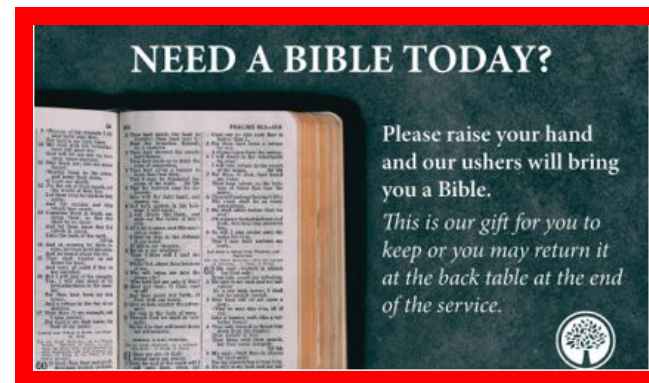
Opening Announcements:

- **All are invited to honor Pastor Denny Schlappi in his retirement** at an Open House this afternoon – November 3, 2019 from 2-4pm.
- **Ladies Refresh Event** this coming Friday Nov 8th, 6-8:30pm
- **First Prayer** this Weds evening at 6:45pm. All invited!!

<<Come Thou Fount>>



Let's continue our worship now by opening our Bibles to **Matthew chapter 6**. We are in the middle of Jesus' sermon on the Mount, and so far **chapter 6** has been warning us against showboating our righteousness in front of others. We've considered how Christ's true disciples give and pray differently from all other religions, and now this morning in **verses 16-18** we turn our attention to *The Heart of Fasting*.



If you do not have a Bible with you, simply raise your hand. It would be our joy to give you a copy of God's life-giving Words this morning.

This is such an exciting time to be part of New Castle Bible Church! So much is happening in and through our church family these days... May we always be thankful while profoundly dependent upon our Heavenly Father and His grace.

Thank you to all of you who prayed and creatively took opportunities to love your neighbors and share the good news of Christ this past week. I've already heard a couple reports of how God was honored and glorified through your witness. Well done church!

Thanks as well to all of you who took time this week to do the homework from the Treasure Principle class. That resource is excellent for every one of us... so thanks for attending the class, and reading the book, and asking God to keep growing us in the joy of generosity!

Along those lines, I want to highlight a very special event coming up for our entire church family on Friday evening, **November 22**. All are invited to a special "Praise Dinner" where our elders will cast vision for eliminating our church mortgage. We are so close to having a mortgage burning ceremony... we can smell the smoke!! So everyone is invited to come, enjoy an evening hearing from our leadership about our future ministry vision, and together give generously to retire this debt for good!

But that's not the only exciting thing on our radar. Our search team continues to work very hard to hire a "singing elder" to serve as our new Associate Pastor of

Music and Worship. In the last few weeks, we've experienced a flurry of interest, so please pray fervently for God's will to be done in all of these conversations. Pray for God's favor to provide the man of His choosing in His perfect time for His greatest glory here among us.

Also, please keep praying for Pastor Denny as he finishes his last two months on staff. This afternoon is a very special **open house from 2-4pm in this room to honor Denny and Karilyn** both for their decades of faithful ministry here. Please stop by between 2 and 4pm today to help us appropriately honor Denny & Karilyn in his upcoming retirement!

So yes, there's a lot happening at New Castle! It's an exciting time to be a part of this family... let's stay humble. Let's keep praying. Let's trust our Heavenly Father as He causes us to grow deeper and reach farther for His glory together.



Now today our Bibles are open to **Matthew 6 verses 16-18** where we consider The Heart of Fasting.

Please stand in honor of the reading of God's Word. From the English Standard Translation, I'll reading from **Matthew 6:16**:

¹⁶ "And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. ¹⁷ But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, ¹⁸ that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

This is God's Word. Please be seated.

Let's Pray.

What is God's answer for a church who is intoxicated by their amount of wealth and knowledge? What is God's response to the sluggish apathy of a modern Laodicean church?¹

God's answer is genuine repentance accompanied by prayer and fasting.

Fasting is not very popular these days. Fasting doesn't sit well with full stomachs, full schedules, and full minds. Souls who are full of this world will never voluntarily invite discomfort into their life – even if to gain more of Christ!

God gives His children the powerful gift of fasting, but this gift is most often either neglected entirely or legalistically abused today. And so our Bibles are open to **Matthew 6**

¹ Revelation 3:14-22
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where Jesus condemns the contagious hypocrisy that so commonly destroys God's design for fasting.

In the context of the Sermon on the Mount, **verses 16-18** are really more about hypocrisy and motives than about fasting. Fasting is just another example of religious practice that becomes worthless if done out of self-love.

In **verses 2-4**, Jesus teaches that righteous people give for different reasons than hypocrites. In **verses 5-15**, Jesus teaches that righteous people pray differently than hypocrites. And now in **verses 16-18** righteous people fast for different reasons than the hypocrites as well.



The right motive for fasting is treasuring Christ.

That's the main point of these verses. True righteousness is always a matter of what the heart loves most, before it's ever a matter of external behavior or outward appearance.

Jesus assumes His followers will fast. **Verses 16 and 17** don't begin with *if you fast*, but rather *when you fast*. Just like Jesus assumes that we will give and pray... He also

assumes we will occasionally abstain from some gift of His in order to spiritually hunger more for God Himself. Jesus assumes that Christians will fast.

Now this may surprise you since the New Testament never commands Christians to fast. In fact, the only biblical command to fast was for Old Testament believers once a year during the national Day of Atonement.²

But in **Matthew 4** we find Jesus Himself fasting in the wilderness before launching His public ministry.³ And fasting plays a significant role in the launching of the Gospel to the Gentiles in **Acts 13**⁴ and the ordination of local church elders in **Acts 14**.⁵

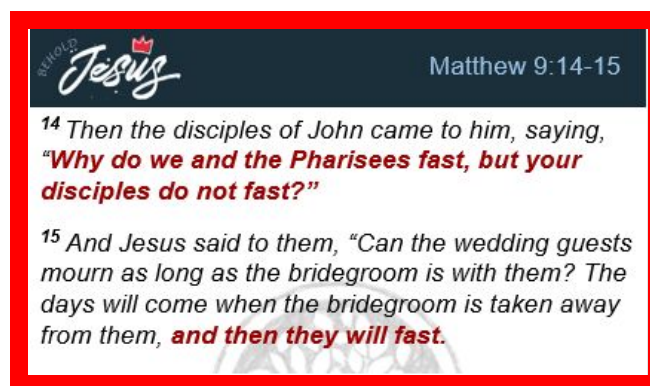
In fact, Jesus specifically said in **Matthew chapter 9** that New Testament Christians would fast:

² Leviticus 16:29-31 “afflict yourselves” is generally understood to include fasting. C.f. Leviticus 23:27. Other fasts eventually became part of the Jewish ceremonial tradition (Zechariah 7:5, 8:19; Nehemiah 9:1; Psalm 35:13) as well as personal, private fasts were known to be observed at times as well (Nehemiah 1:4; Daniel 9:3; Luke 18:12).

³ Matthew 4:2

⁴ Acts 13:2-3

⁵ Acts 14:23



In **Matthew 9:14**, the disciples of John came to Jesus saying, “Why do we and the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?”

You see, the most religious Jews fasted twice a week,⁶ on Mondays and Thursdays in order to honor when Moses received God’s law at Mt. Sinai. Interestingly, Mondays and Thursdays were also the major market days in Jerusalem at this time – the days when public fasting would have the greatest audience!!

And so John’s disciples ask, why don’t you and your disciples fast twice a week – just like the most religious people of our time?

And Jesus answers in **verse 15**, *Can the wedding guests mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them?*

Translation – fasting is an expression of longing for Christ! Fasting is an expression of repentance and sad spiritual homesickness. My disciples have no reason to fast as long as they are with me! But listen - *the days will*

⁶ C.f. Luke 18:12

come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast.

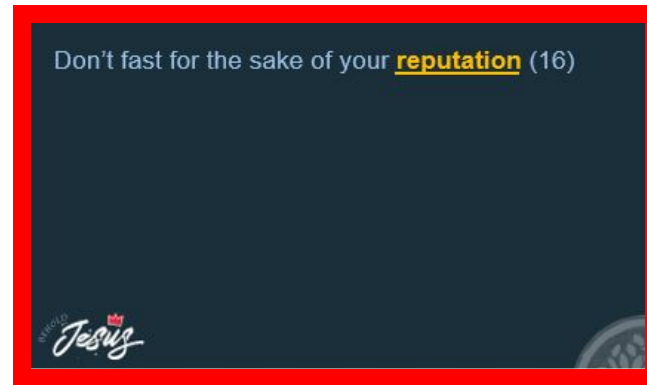
In the Old Testament, believers fasted out of heart-ache for Jesus to come! In the New Testament, believers fast for Jesus to come back – longing to again be with Him without the hindrances of sin!

So yes, Jesus assumes that fasting is a means of grace that we will voluntarily benefit from in our pursuit of God.



But the point of Matthew 6 is not to call us to fast, but to warn us against hypocritical motives, when we fast.

Look carefully at **verse 16** where Jesus teaches,



Don't fast for the sake of your reputation (16)

Verse 16 says,

And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward.

Jesus sees right through all religious hypocrisy. The Pharisees wrongly believed true spirituality was always somber, joyless, gloomy, and severe. Religion wasn't an answer to the sin of their heart – religion was an answer to their status in their community! So in order to make sure their spirituality was noticed by others, they resorted to theatrics when they fasted.

Disfigure here does not mean mutilate – it means they would deliberately make themselves look miserable. They wouldn't wash their hair or their face. They wanted their religious performance to be obvious to others. Some Pharisees even used ashes like make-up to cause their face to appear as if their fasting was more severe than reality – all so that others would see how righteous they truly were.

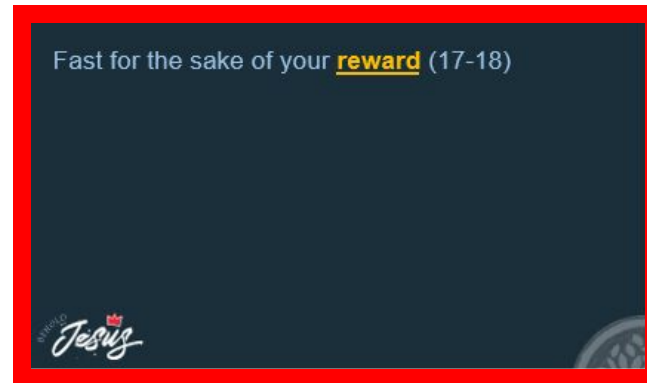
But our Heavenly Father sees all, and knows all, and rewards all. God knows the secret motives of our hearts. And so Jesus teaches, *Truly I say to you, they have already received their reward in full.* The hypocrites get what they want. They got people's attention. But there's no further benefit for all of their religious formalism. No spiritual benefit at all for all their pretending and self-display.

So what about you? Do you ever play the role of a religious hypocrite? Do you ever try to act more spiritual in front of other people than you really are before the eyes of our Heavenly Father himself?⁷

Matthew 6:1 warns us against practicing any righteousness before the wrong audience. As Pastor Warren Wiersbe wrote, "If we believe we have to look miserable to be considered spiritual, then there is something wrong with our spirituality."

God is the only One who sees the secret motives of our heart. He's the only One who grants us joyful heavenly rewards. Yet this contagious disease of religious hypocrisy is pervasively common in all our hearts.

And so Jesus goes on in **verses 17-18** to teach us that when we fast we must,



Fast for the sake of our eternal reward.

*But when you fast, Jesus says with a strong contrast in **verse 17**, anoint your head and wash your face, that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.*

You must never fast out of a hunger for human praise. Instead, whenever you fast, *anoint your head and wash your face.*

This does not refer to doing anything special. Anointing with oil was a normal cosmetic of the day. Jesus is simply teaching – whenever you fast, groom yourself just like you normally do so that you don't attract any special attention to the fact that you are fasting.

Now obviously absolute secrecy in all religious expression is impossible. In fact, some religious practices are inherently public – even as we observed today with believer's baptism!! So let's be clear. To be seen fasting is not a problem. But *to fast to be seen* is a

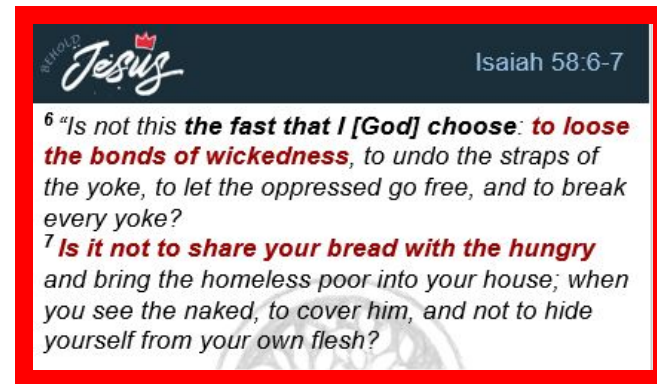
⁷ Proverbs 15:3
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grievous sin of hypocrisy that disqualifies a soul from participation in God's kingdom.⁸

Your fasting should be for God's audience alone. Godly fasting always humbles pride – it's an expression of dependence and faith in God's future mercy. So the only true reason to fast is out of a sincere heart desire to commune more with Christ! To experience greater freedom from sin! To treasure Christ more than you love yourself. The righteous who have God as their Heavenly Father voluntarily deny self through fasting for the sake of loving Christ more!

Never fast to be noticed by others. Fast for the sake of your heavenly reward – for *without faith it is impossible to please God, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that He exists and that He rewards those who seek Him.*⁹

Now nearly two years ago we had a sermon on *Prayer and Fasting* from **Isaiah 58**. Let's turn to **Isaiah 58** now to quickly review God's design for fasting:



Verses 6-7 reveal two righteous purposes for fasting.

First, in **verse 6**, God says through Isaiah, *Is not this the fast that I choose, to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?*

In other words the first benefit of denying yourself voluntarily in a spiritual fast is to overcome slavery to sin. Whenever you fast, you voluntarily deprive yourself of some good gift from God in order to cultivate a greater hunger for God Himself.

So you may abstain from food, or media, or coffee, ...or even your marital relations for a time,¹⁰ – never to earn God's favor, but rather to train your own soul that your own natural appetites – your belly – is not your god.¹¹

After all, whatever you want most in life is your true master. Whatever you desire most is your real god.¹²

⁸ Matthew 23:13

⁹ Hebrews 11:6

¹⁰ 1 Corinthians 7:5

¹¹ Philippians 3:10; c.f. 1 Corinthians 6:12

¹² James 4:1-5

Therefore, while fasting is never commanded for Christians, self-denial is.¹³ And secret voluntary fasting is one of God's grace gifts to His children in order to help us experience freedom from slavery to sinful desires.

Second, **verse 7** reveals that fasting also awakens your own heart to the real needs of others around you, so that you can better love them as a representative of our Heavenly Father.

Is fasting not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh?

So there's two righteous purposes for fasting. According to **verse 6** fasting is a gift from God to help us defeat stubborn sin. According to **verse 7** fasting helps us better love our neighbors as ourselves.

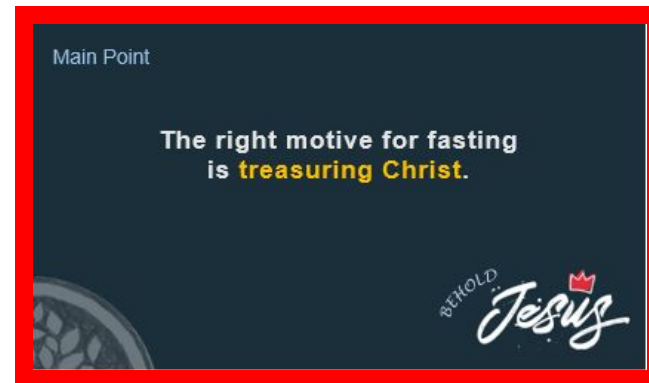
By implication then we should understand that fasting must always result in humbling my pride and dealing with my sin. Any kind of fasting that leaves my sin untouched is not pleasing to God.

Second, fasting must be accompanied with dependent prayer. True fasting must rend the inner man of the heart before it ever affects our outer appearance.¹⁴ Fasting must be connected with the heart's crying out for more of

¹³ Luke 9:23-24

¹⁴ Joel 2:13

Christ...otherwise it is merely a form of human self-denial that has no spiritual benefit at all.¹⁵



The right motive for fasting is treasuring Christ.

So don't fast for the sake of your reputation with others. Rather, fast for the sake of your eternal reward!



When you fast, treasure Christ more than self!

It is our own self-love that fuels hypocrisy in our hearts. It is our own deception about the exceeding sinfulness of

¹⁵ Colossians 2:20-23; Zechariah 7:5

our own sin that is the soil bed for all religious hypocrisy. All hypocrites forget that sin is a matter of the heart before it is ever a matter of behavior. Hypocrites forget that God knows all, and sees all, and rewards all who sincerely seek Him.

Instead we fear people more than God Himself. We put other people in the place of God in our life, and ask people to affirm that we're okay. We worry more about false accusations being spread around about us than we worry about the inner greed or rebellion of our own hearts. We value our influence more than we value our dependence and humility. We value competence and performance more than character and prayer.

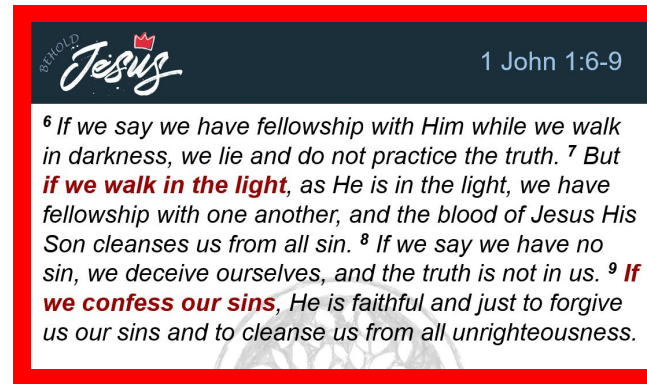
But here's the truth – who I am when no other person is looking is who I really am before God. The rest is a show...it's a performance. It's a self-exalting exhibition of my own pride!

So whenever you fast, guard your heart! Voluntarily and secretly deny yourself some of God's gifts for a time in order to train your soul that God Himself is worth it! Benefit from this grace gift of fasting!!

But tell others what you are doing – not even as a disguised prayer request. God is enough of a reward for you all by Himself. Seek *Him*. And find your treasure in Christ alone!!

Listen, **Matthew 6** is calling us to take off our masks. Stop living for the foreheads of other people!

I believe **1 John 1 verses 6-9** provide wonderful Gospel hope for religious hypocrites like us this morning.



John gives a strong warning in **verse 6**, *If we say we have fellowship with Him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth.*

God sees our heart. We must confess that we are not good enough to please God on our own. That's what it means in **verse 7** to walk in the light. We must agree with God that we are sinful on the inside – no matter what people think of us on the outside. And **verse 7** says,

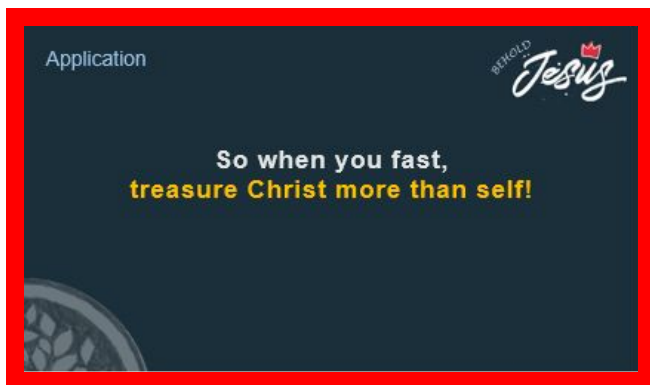
If we walk in the light – meaning we confess our sins to God and to others – we take off the masks and we stop pretending to be more spiritual than we really are – *as God is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin.*

This is good news!! Christian fellowship is authentic and humble. And results in cleansing: *The blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin.*

So will you confess your sins – perhaps even those secret sins that no one else knows – will you confess

them to God this morning? Agreeing that the sins of your own heart are the greatest problem in your life right now? **Verse 8** is clear, *If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.* But fellow Christian, *If we confess our sins, God is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.*

Here's the point loved ones – only God can make you righteous! No amount of religious activity can cleanse you from the sin problem in your own heart. So take off all the masks! Repent of living for other people.



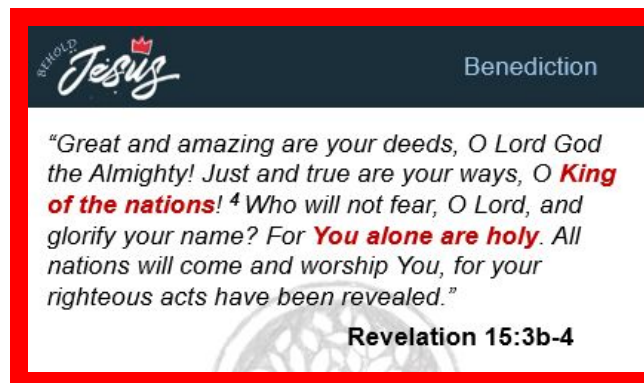
And when you fast, treasure your relationship with Jesus more than you even love yourself. Such is the joy for all who have God as their heavenly Father, and who have been made righteous through faith in Christ alone.

Will you pray with me now?



<<All I have is Christ>>

Let's pray our benediction together as we dismiss.



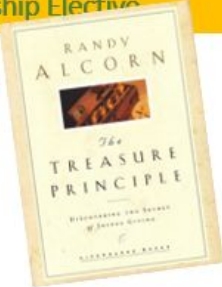
Great and amazing are your deeds, O Lord God the Almighty! Just and true are your ways, O King of the nations! Who will not fear, O Lord, and glorify your name? For you alone are holy. All nations will come and worship you, for your righteous acts have been revealed.
Revelation 15:3b-4

ALL-CHURCH Special Stewardship Elective

Sunday **October 27** and
Sunday **November 3** *Concludes TODAY!*

9:30am in NCBC Family Center

YOU ARE INVITED:
Don't miss this excellent training!




End of 1st Service Only

**Many Hands
Make Light Work.**

*Thank You
New Castle!*

Please share a few minutes to stack chairs & ready the Family Center for weekly activities.



End of 2nd Service Only

Recommended Resources on The Heart of Fasting:

- Exodus 34:28
- 1 Samuel 7:6
- 2 Samuel 12:20
- 2 Chronicles 20:3-4
- Ezra 8:21-23; 10:6
- Esther 4:16
- Psalm 35:13; 69:10
- Isaiah 58:1-14
- Jeremiah 14:12
- Daniel 9:1-23
- Zechariah 7:5-6
- Matthew 4:1-11; 9:15; 17:21
- Luke 4:2; 5:33-39; 18:12
- Acts 9:9; 13:1-3
- 1 Corinthians 7:4-5

- *Prayer & Fasting* sermon preached at NCBC on 1-14-18

- desiringgod.org/topics/fasting
- gospeltranslations.org/wiki/Disciplines_for_Life/Fasting:_When_Hunger_%3D_Power
- blogs.faithlafayette.org/2011/03/01/what-is-fasting-and-should-we-be-fasting-today/
- graceky.org/messages/06-fasting-a-hunger-for-god/
- gotherefor.com/offer.php?intid=29717

- [A Hunger for God](#), John Piper
- [God's Chosen Fast](#), Arthur Wallis
- [A Praying Life](#), Paul Miller

Growing Deeper: Life Group Questions

1. Read 2 Corinthians 12:9-10. How does our weakness make room for God's power? If our fasting doesn't earn God's attention to our prayers, how do you explain the fact that fasting makes our praying more effective? (c.f. Isaiah 58:8-9)
2. Read 1 Corinthians 6:12. What's one regular activity that you would really miss if it were removed from your schedule? (Examples: Reading the news, drinking coffee, eating dessert, surfing the web, etc.) Would you be willing to lay it aside for a month to make sure it hasn't mastered you? Why or why not? Discuss together with your group, and pray for each other in these regards.
3. Read Matthew 6:1, 16-18 and Isaiah 58:1-5. Who is more deserving of God's grace: A badly over-weight couch potato or a highly disciplined, two-fasts-per-week Pharisee? What makes fasting so prone to misuse or neglect in the church today?
4. Review Isaiah 58:6-7. What purposes does God give for fasting? What opportunities do you have to address injustice or oppression in your community? Discuss what first steps you could take towards God's kind of fasting and prayer in these regards.
5. As a group, visit the desiringgod.org/topics/fasting webpage. Select one of the brief articles, and read through it together. Discuss common questions, and share what you've learned about fasting. How has God challenged you through this teaching? Spend time praying for one another.