

Fasting FAQs

We know that for many people, fasting can be a new and unfamiliar practice. To help, we've put together some of the more important questions about fasting and their answers. If you have any other questions about fasting, feel free to reach out at info@citychurchknox.com.

What is fasting?

The practice of abstaining from food and non-water beverages, during a determined length of time, for spiritual purposes.

Is fasting commanded for followers of Jesus?

Strictly speaking, no. There is never a *command* in the Scriptures for followers of Jesus to fast. But it does seem to be *expected* that followers of Jesus will (see specifically Matthew 6:16-18 & Matthew 9:14-15). Additionally, God's people fasted throughout the Old Testament, and often fasted after Jesus' resurrection and ascension. So while it may never be explicitly commanded, it does seem to be an important and expected practice for followers of Jesus to participate in.

Can I fast from something *other* than food and drink? Like Netflix?

Historically, followers of Jesus have distinguished between the practice of *fasting* (as defined above), and *abstaining* (refraining from other things like entertainment, pleasures, habits, etc.). While abstaining from things can be a helpful and needed practice for followers of Jesus, it shouldn't be *confused* with fasting (or substituted for it).

Is fasting a means of dieting?

Biblical fasting *isn't* a means of losing weight, improving one's health, or changing one's physical appearance. Although it can have that effect, that isn't the purpose for a follower of Jesus to fast. Rather, fasting is abstaining from food and drink for specifically *spiritual* purposes.

How long do I fast for?

Generally speaking, fasts last for a predetermined period of time between twelve and twenty-four hours. During this time, the person fasting drinks only water and abstains from all other food or drink.

How often should I fast?

There are no universal guidelines given in the Scriptures for how *often* a person should fast. Many Christians in the early Church fasted twice weekly (i.e. Mondays and Wednesdays), but that wasn't in response to any particular instruction given. Other people choose to fast only during certain *seasons* of the calendar (i.e. Lent or Pentecost). Others choose to do it on an "as-needed" basis (when they feel particularly led to fast in response to an event or situation in their life). There is freedom to practice fasting at different frequencies based on your temperament, convictions, and experience level.

When I fast, do I have to keep it a secret?

Some have taken Jesus' instructions in Matthew 6:16-18 to mean that telling someone about your fast "nullifies" the practice. This is a slight misunderstanding of Jesus' words in this passage. Jesus is simply correcting some people's habit of contorting their faces and making it abundantly *obvious* that they are fasting, with the intention of receiving praise from people about it. Participating in *any* spiritual practice with the goal of being praised by others for it is something to be on guard against.

But that doesn't mean that fasting must always be done in *secret*. It may in fact be wise to tell your family, friends, or LifeGroup members that you are fasting in some scenarios so they can pray for you about it. Additionally, it may help them avoid unnecessarily tempting you with food or drink during that time. But fasting should always be done with the goal of focusing on God himself, not receiving praise from others.

I work a physically demanding job (i.e. consistent manual labor). Should I fast?

If your job requires you to burn a large number of calories on a regular basis, fasting on a work day may be unwise for your health. If you're in this situation, it may be better for your fast to fall on one of your days off of work.

I maintain a regular, aggressive workout routine. Should I fast?

For the same reasons mentioned in the last question, it may be unwise to fast on days you participate in especially strenuous workouts. Followers of Jesus should use wisdom and incorporate the advice of medical professionals in figuring out how to coordinate fasting with physical fitness.

But followers of Jesus should be careful not to prioritize working out in such a way that *prohibits ever* fasting. As Paul says, "...for while *bodily* training is of *some* value, *godliness* is of value in every way, as it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come." (1 Timothy 4:8)

I have blood sugar issues. Should I fast?

If you've been diagnosed with a condition that requires you to keep close watch on your blood sugar, you may need to think critically about how to implement fasting into your life. In this situation, it is best to consult a doctor or medical professional before participating in fasting.

I'm currently pregnant. Should I fast?

For your own health and the health of the baby, we would strongly recommend not fasting while pregnant (and in some cases, while nursing). It may be best to wait to practice fasting until you are in the clear from doctors and medical professionals to do so.

What do I do while fasting?

The goal of fasting is to use the time you would be eating (or thinking about eating) towards God. So any activity that is Godward in orientation can be helpful while fasting. If you fasted in response to a specific situation, use that time to pray for or process things related to the specific situation.

In general, helpful things to do during a fast are praying, asking for God's help (with the fast, or with something related to the fast), and using physical reminders (i.e. hunger) to fix your attention on God or something God cares about.

As best you can, avoid doing things that simply *distract* you from the reality that you're fasting. Generally speaking, your TV, Netflix and entertainment intake shouldn't go *up* during a fast.

Should I encourage my kids to fast?

If you have older children (e.g. late middle school or high school) who follow Jesus and can understand the purpose behind fasting, it may be helpful to have them participate in fasting. If your kids are younger and/or don't follow Jesus, there's probably no reason to encourage them to fast.

I struggle with body image issues or an eating disorder. Should I fast?

Week 3 of our *Formation* series will speak specifically to this question. The short answer is that fasting can still be a helpful practice, but may need additional considerations to ensure that fasting is pursued for healthy reasons.

Should I eat a lot of food before and after my fast, to prepare and recover?

In short, no. Overeating before a fast ("storing") and after a fast ("binging") can effectively defeat the purpose of fasting, not to mention become unhealthy in general. Do your best to eat a normal amount of food before beginning your fast, and when breaking your fast, so that the fast can have its intended effect.

If I start getting headaches when I fast. Does that mean I should stop?

In most cases, no. Headaches can be caused by a number of things during a fast—most notably dehydration, low blood sugar, and caffeine withdrawal. To help prevent headaches from dehydration, be sure to drink plenty of water while fasting (more than you typically would). To help prevent low blood sugar, you may want to consider eating smaller portions while *not* fasting, to help your body prepare for going without eating during fasting. And if the headaches seem due to caffeine withdrawal, you may consider lessening your intake of caffeine during *non-fasting* periods of time.