

Eight Grade- Fasting

This session tackles the spiritual discipline of fasting. Fasting is often misunderstood as a hyper-spiritual, unobtainable discipline reserved for only the most mature of believers. Because of this, many believers miss out on the fruit of fasting. We want to teach our students to understand fasting as a spiritual discipline, a method to help them encounter and meet with God just like any other discipline. We want to teach our students what it practically looks like to fast a form of true worship, and how to be faithful in its practice. A lot of your work during this session will be in deconstructing our student's misconceptions of fasting, and then building it back up with the truth of Scripture.

Introducing the Topic

Use these questions to help gauge what students already know about the subject, and help them begin to verbally process what may be misconceptions or partial understandings of fasting together in community.

-Today we're talking about the discipline of fasting, so to start us off, I want y'all to tell me everything you know about what fasting is and why we do it! (Encourage as many people in the room to share as you can get to speak up. We want this relatively "easy" question to help set the tone for sharing in the group.)

-Have any of you had any experience with fasting or known people who have fasted? What has your experience of fasting and people who fast been? (This question may take some re-phrasing to fit your group, but the aim of this question is to help students address some of the elitism they tend to feel around fasting, we want them to be able to process out loud that fasting often seems like something for the hyper spiritual only. However, if they have largely good experiences of fasting, don't feel the need to bend the conversation to that answer!)

-Why do you think fasting is so rarely practiced in our generation/age-bracket of believers? (Spend a lot of time here. This is where we want to begin to deconstruct their preconceptions about fasting by giving them space to express what is off-putting about it. When one student answers, ask the others if they agree or what they think about that answer. Encourage quieter members of your group to share! Write down their answers so that you can revisit them later and compare them to Scripture.)

Scripture Study

As you transition to the Scripture Study portion of this session, remind students that Scripture is where we turn for truth. We want to continually reiterate that we study Scripture not just for the "Christian take" on a matter, but God's revealed word, given to us out of love for our good.

-Read Ezra 8:21-23 together at your tables. Explain the context of this passage before you read that Ezra was sent by God to re-establish the temple and the priesthood in Jerusalem after the Jews had been freed to return after exile.

-What stuck out to you from this passage?

-Why does Ezra say he proclaimed a fast? *(to find favor before the king...)*

- What is the purpose of fasting according to this passage? *(“...to humble ourselves before God...”)*

-How does fasting humble us? *(We must recognize our limits, how dependent we are on food, on comfort, how dependent we are on God to sustain us through pain, how weak our flesh really is, etc.)*

-Why is it good to humble ourselves before God? Why don't people like the idea of humbling themselves?

-What did Ezra and his people do while they fasted? *(they prayed...to seek God, to implore Him for what they needed, fasting never happens without prayer)*

-How is fasting different from just good old fashioned dieting? *The difference is the purpose and the methods. Dieting's purpose is to change our bodies or improve our health, and dieting methods all revolve around the food itself. Fasting's purpose is to humble ourselves before God, and enter into His presence. The methods of fasting revolve around prayer and honoring God with our bodies.) *many of our student, both male and female, struggle with eating disorders, so this would be a fitting time to emphasize that part of honoring God with our bodies is nourishing them and caring for them, and that starving our malnourishing ourselves is never considered a God-honoring spiritual practice.*

-What are some reasons you would fast? *(Encourage them to share personal examples! Real things going on in their lives they want to talk to God about. Real struggles they want comfort in. Encourage as many of them to share as possible!)*

-Read Matthew 6:1-18 together at your tables.

-What sticks out to you in this passage?

-What does Jesus tell us to “beware” of? We give warning when something is dangerous, why do you think Jesus calls that behavior dangerous?

-Jesus describes the faith of the hypocrites, what things does he say about the way they practice their faith? Why does he say that is a problem?

-What does Jesus command *his* followers to do instead of practicing their faith like the hypocrites? What does Jesus command when it comes to fasting specifically? **One key*

thing to highlight here is that Jesus emphasizes they continue to take care of their bodies as they fast- fasting isn't meant to be a form of punishment, but a way to care for our souls. God is honored by our care for our bodies.

-Jesus says that when we fast in a way that honors God, God will reward us. What do you think that reward is? (maybe it will be an answer to our prayers, but the best thing God could ever give us is Himself, so the best reward in fasting is the ability to enter into God's presence because we have cut out a distraction/comfort)

Practical Application

We want students to be able to contextualize what Scripture teaches to their daily life. This portion of the conversation is centered around the practical application of the text, and aimed at helping students actually integrate this spiritual discipline into their walk with the Lord.

-So in summary, why do we fast, and how should we fast?

-What practical steps do you think you would need to take to prepare to fast? (Eat healthy, full meals leading up to your fast, set a time to fast, decide why you're fasting, set aside time to pray and be alone with God during your fast, prepare a healthy meal to break your fast)

-What do you think will get in the way of actually practicing this spiritual discipline?

-Is there anything in your life right now, any big decision you're making, anything heavy on your heart, that you or you and some friends could fast and pray over?