

THE
DISCIPLESHIP
PLACE

Practicing Wesleyan-Holiness
Spiritual Formation



SESSION 14

Fasting and the Disciplines of Abstinence

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Fasting and the Disciplines of Abstinence

SESSION OVERVIEW

Fasting and Chastity

Solitude and Silence

Simplicity and Secrecy

Application

Exam

Discussion Guide for Mentor and Participant

LEARNER OBJECTIVES

At the end of this session, you should:

- define and explain the key concepts of disciplines and abstinence
- embrace and own some of the disciplines of abstinence as valuable for your Christian life
- experience some of the disciplines of abstinence and later evaluate and write about their usefulness in your spiritual journey

Fasting and the Disciplines of Abstinence

INTRODUCTION



A 12-pound hawksbill turtle crawled up to die on a Honolulu beach. Concerned environmentalist arranged an autopsy, which showed that one quarter of its weight was plastic. The contents of its intestines included: several beads, a comb, a golf tee, a toy wheel, a balloon, a toothpaste cap, part of a medical syringe, baggies, and a plastic flower. The living turtle became a dead trash barrel. *From Reflecting God, 93.*

The worldly environment in which we live is also full of trash. The devil makes sure that to live for God we must continually swim through a swirl of trash in our neighborhood, at work, at school, and even in our homes because of television, the Internet, etc. That is his job. He loves his work and he is good at it.

Without the leadership of the Holy Spirit and the disciplines of abstinence, we face risks similar to those of the hawksbill turtle. The plastic manufacturers made tools and toys that looked good enough to eat. Just so, the devil and sinful culture often make excess and sin look good enough to eat. The practice of fasting and the disciplines of abstinence keep us in tune with the Spirit and help us live a balanced life. The disciplines of abstinence deal primarily with normal human needs and desires. Food, drink, sex, companionship, and sleep are not inherently evil. Neither are our desires for convenience, material security, comfort, approval and acceptance, or a good reputation. However, any of these can become a sinful obsession or emotional crutch that throws our spiritual life out of balance. When food, sex, security, and lust for praise run a rebellious and harmful course they can become primary hosts of sin in our personalities.

Using the liturgy of Fasting, we shall explore six disciplines of abstinence in this module. They are:

- fasting food for the body in order to provide a feast for the soul
- fasting indulgence in favor of chastity (discipline of sexual urges)
- fasting social company in order to make room for solitude
- fasting noise and entertainment in order to make time for silence

- fasting acquisitiveness in order to live in frugality or Christian simplicity
- fasting self-promotion in favor of secrecy

Consider the following as you look at the six disciplines of abstinence.

- What scriptural support can be found for this discipline?
- What traditional support can be found for this discipline? That is, what has the Church generally taught on this subject?
- What is the value of this discipline for Christians today?
- What are some guidelines that could be useful in my church or ministry situation?

FASTING AND CHASTITY



NOTES

FASTING FOOD FOR THE BODY TO PROVIDE A FEAST FOR THE SOUL

“When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do . . . put oil on your head and wash your face so that it will not be obvious . . . that you are fasting” (Matt. 6:16-18). Jesus did not say, “If you fast. . .” He did not say, “You *must* fast . . .” He did say, “When you fast . . .” And He said it twice in the Sermon on the Mount. No debate, no argument, no direct order—just the *expectation* that we would fast.

When you begin to deny the body food or drink (or sex) you discover how used to being satisfied your body is. Its demand will be insistent, until fasting has become a usual discipline. Especially in North American context, we receive it almost as an insult when asked to deny our hunger.

Fasting reveals how often we use food and drink as comfort sources because we lack emotional and spiritual health. Nothing promotes gluttony more than a low self-image, overwork, criticism, or failure in relationships. Fasting will often uncover some of these feelings. While this can be uncomfortable, it is also a great opportunity for personal growth. Fasting will certainly demonstrate how powerful and clever our body is in getting its own way against our strongest resolves. Our bodies will react with increased hunger pains, headaches, and even some loss of energy.

Fasting is giving up food so we can concentrate on the spiritual, not the physical. Fasting to lose weight or to participate in a hunger strike has little, if any, spiritual value. You will find there are many outside the Christian experience who promote fasting for physical benefits. While those may be true, that is not the focus of the spiritual fast. *From The Sermon on the Mount, Discourse 7 (Edward H. Sugden, ed., John Wesley’s Fifty-Three Sermons [Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1983], 334).*

John Wesley taught that fasting should always have the glory of God as its aim. “We fast to express our sorrow and shame for transgressions; to wait for an increase in purifying grace . . . to add . . . earnestness to our prayers . . . to avert the wrath of God, and to obtain all the . . . promises . . . made . . . in Jesus Christ.” Fasting shows trust in God because the fasting believer finds a source for sustenance beyond food. Our belly is not our god—fasting regularly lets our body and us know that. Fasting is a testimony that we understand suffering is a part of discipleship. *Cited by Willard, 167. From Susan Muto, Pathways of Spiritual Living, 77.*


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Fasting leads to self-control in other areas of life. Thomas á Kempis in *The Imitation of Christ* wrote, “Refrain from gluttony and thou shalt the more easily restrain all the inclinations of the flesh.” Prayer needs fasting. “Prayer is the one hand with which we grasp the invisible; fasting, the other, with which we let loose and cast away the visible.” Bible characters for whom fasting was very important include Moses, Elijah, David, Zechariah, Daniel, Jonah, Joel, Paul, Barnabas, Nehemiah, Isaiah, and Jesus of Nazareth.

Fasting has some practical preparations involved. Some of the responses of the body that make it difficult can be quelled with physical preparation. You may want to ask someone who fasts as a regular discipline how he or she prepares for fasting. Any medical concerns should be checked out with your doctor. Clearly there are some conditions that preclude fasting from food. You will want to explore those options.

It is usually best to start with fasting a meal before you take on a whole day and fast a few days before taking on a week. These first steps help you to learn some of the basics. For example eating a large meal before you begin a fast only heightens your hunger pangs. Lighter meals are a much better introduction. A good resource for fasting is *God’s Chosen Fast: A Spiritual and Practical Guide to Fasting* by Arthur Wallis, (Fort Washington: Christian Literature Crusade, 1968).

FASTING SEXUAL INDULGENCE IN FAVOR OF CHASTITY

To practice the discipline of chastity we turn away from dwelling upon or engaging in the sexual dimensions of our relationships to others—even our husbands or wives. Sex was God’s idea, and as an expression of love between married partners, it is good, even sacred. Some mistakenly think getting married is a license to abandon all sexual self-control. Though sexual union is a very important part of marriage, it cannot carry all the freight. Marriages built on sexual attraction alone soon die. Mutual abstention from sex in marriage can be an aid to the spiritual life (1 Cor. 7:5). Mutual is a key word in this practice. This must be a prayerful consideration by both partners. Pressuring your husband or wife into this agreement is against the spirit of this discipline. The discussion should include: length of time, purpose, and types of shared experiences.

The amount of human grief and suffering because of misuse of the sexual drive is horrifying. Therefore, “the will of God . . . [is] that each of you know how to take a wife for himself in holiness and honor” (1 Thess. 4:4, RSV). “Each of you should learn to control his own body in a way that is holy and honorable, not in

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the passion of lust like heathen who do not know God” (1 Thess. 4:4, NRSV). One evangelical denomination’s governing body passed a creedal statement noting that it is a violation of Christian propriety and the conscience of the church to treat one’s spouse like a pornographic object. Abstaining from sexual thoughts and acts in marriage for a given time allows the Christian couple to live out the truth that physical urges are not to govern us. *From Willard, 170.*

Mastery over sexual conduct allows us to build friendships in the community of faith without sexual attraction always fouling the friendships. Chastity “confirms us in the practice of being very close to people without sexual entanglements.” Augustine said, “I fouled the springs of friendship with the concupiscence of lust.” Sexuality reaches into the essence of our beings. To deny that is to live a lie. To submit sexuality to the discipline of the Spirit is to be a true disciple. The discipline of chastity calls us to a proper life as males and females, refusing to let sex dominate and spoil the spiritual life. (*See also: Real Sex: The Naked Truth About Chastity by Lauren Winner, Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2005.*)

SOLITUDE AND SILENCE



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The twin disciplines of solitude and silence may be harder to practice than fasting. In our hurried world finding a pocket of time for solitude and silence is like discovering the pearl of great price. We have become accustomed to much noise in our homes and workplaces. When the television, radio, iPod, or conversations cease the quiet can be almost deafening. As with all disciplines, it takes practice to receive the full benefits. It is in the practice of these disciplines we learn the lessons Evelyn Underhill wrote of: “Find out where your treasure really is. Discern substance from accident. Don’t confuse your meals with your life, and your clothes with your body. Don’t lose your head over what perishes . . . Don’t mistake what you possess with what you are.” *From Herald of Holiness, Jan. 1998, 24.*

FASTING SOCIAL COMPANY TO MAKE ROOM FOR SOLITUDE

Jesus repeatedly sought solitude. Solitude as a spiritual discipline is more than just getting away to relax—though that can enhance your spiritual life. Solitude is seeking to be alone in hope God will join you as you commune about the things that really matter. Solitude has risks. You have to look inside. You cannot depend on sitcoms and game shows, business meetings, or soccer practice to keep your soul distracted. “If you do not find yourself alone, you will not find yourself at all.” *Quote by Andre Gide. From July 24, 1983, part 4, p. 3. Cited by Willard, 161.*

“It is not easy to be solitary unless you are born ruthless. Every solitary repudiates someone,” wrote Jessamyn West in the *Los Angeles Times*. That is, to be alone you almost always have to say no to a spouse, child, friend, or church committee. While the practice of solitude will create the inner transformation that improves your relationship with spouse, child, friend it is still difficult to create those boundaries of space and time. *From Henri Nouwen, Out of Solitude (Notre Dame, Ind.: Ave Maria Press, 1974), 20.*

We need to find solitude because the world in which we live, study, work, and do business is a world that conspires against God and godliness. Solitude is especially important to the novice or rookie Christian. We must scrutinize our schedules and find pockets of solitude—or we must change our lifestyles. It is in solitude we discover that being is more important than having, and that we are worth more than the result of our efforts. In solitude we discover our life is not a possession to be defended, but a gift to be shared.


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FASTING NOISE AND ENTERTAINMENT IN FAVOR OF SILENCE

Stop right now and listen to all the noises that interrupt your solitude: boom boxes, television, radios, traffic sounds, refrigerators humming, air-conditioners whirring, a barking dog, a dripping faucet, a jangling telephone, a beeper. Your spiritual life will choke in the smog of this noise. Busyness and noise are the burglars who steal our solitude and silence and spoil the best fruit of the soul. *Henri Nouwen, Out of Solitude (Notre Dame, Ind.: Ave Marie Press, 1974), 20.*

THOUGHTS ON SILENCE

Solitude and silence go together, but silence goes beyond solitude. "Silence is the way to make solitude a reality," wrote Henri Nouwen. Susan Muto says we shun silence because it "evokes nameless misgivings, guilt feelings, strange disquieting anxiety." "Until you can sing and rejoice and delight in God as misers do in gold and kings in scepters" you will not "hasten to Him who calls you in the silences of your heart," says Thomas Traherne and Thomas Kelly. "Busyness rapes relationships. It substitutes shallow frenzy for deep friendships . . . It feeds the ego, but starves the inner man." *Cited by Willard, 163. From Pathways, 77. Cited in Reflecting God, 146. From Herald of Holiness, Jan. 1998, 25.*

"Silence is frightening because it strips us as nothing else does, throwing us upon the stark realities of our life. It reminds us of death, which will cut us off from this world and leave only us and God." Did you ever notice how hard it is to be silent in the presence of others? Novelist Faith Baldwin tells of New York visitors to her countryside home being unable to sleep because of the deafening silence. Silence allows us to hear the gentle God whose only Son "will not . . . cry out; no one will hear his voice in the streets" (Matt. 12:19), but they will hear Him in the silence of their hearts. *From Willard, 165.*

Silence helps us learn the art of not speaking. Perhaps we then can take time to really listen for a change. We often speak out when we should be quiet because we want others to know how important we are. When we develop a quiet confidence born in silence before God we may have the wisdom, "when others come fishing for reassurance and approval send them to fish in deeper waters for their own inner quiet."

SIMPLICITY AND SECRECY



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FASTING THE ACQUIRING OF THINGS IN FAVOR OF CHRISTIAN SIMPLICITY OR FRUGALITY

Frivolous consumption corrupts the soul and conspires against trust in God. Les L. Steele defines Christian simplicity as a “willingness to disentangle ourselves from too many commitments, relieve ourselves of debts and obligations that keep us anxious and burdened.” Christian simplicity is the opposite of the credit-card addiction that says I should have everything now. In frugality, we “abstain from using money or goods . . . in ways that merely gratify our desires or our hungers for status, glamour, or luxury.” For an example of Christian simplicity, see Phil. 4:11-13. Financial debt can cause spiritual bondage. *Charles Warner*, *Herald of Holiness*, Jan. 1998, 24.

The practice of overspending is hard to break. Daily we are bombarded with messages that have the distinct purpose of creating discontent. Advertisements are constantly reminding us of the latest fashions, the most improved technology, and experiences you can only have if you go to the latest resort or restaurant. The best first step to simplicity may be to limit your exposure to these temptations.

The next step is to begin to talk about this practice of simplicity with others. It is difficult to tell a group of friends that you cannot go out to eat, or join them for some entertainment because of financial reasons. A frank discussion about your desire to spend less and give away more may create an atmosphere where together you begin to think of more low or no cost outings.

We have the natural tendency of increasing our cost of living any time our income increases. When it might have been God’s desire the increase be used in a new ministry, compassionate response to a neighbor, or the support of a hungry child. Overspending affects our ability and sometimes willingness to hear from God.

A man who gave \$600 million to charity explained he could only wear one pair of shoes, only eat one hamburger. So why have millions stacked up? Others needed it more. Conspicuous consumption flaunted before the poor inspires them to disgust or envy. “Simplicity is making the journey of life with just enough baggage.” Read Heb. 13:5 and Deut. 8:13-14. *From On the Way, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990), 93. From Willard, 168.*


 NOTES

FASTING SELF-PROMOTION IN ORDER TO DEVELOP THE DISCIPLINE OF SECRECY

Dallas Willard describes the discipline of secrecy as abstaining from making our good deeds and qualities known. Self-promotion is important in the business world where artists, writers, actors, and business executives hawk their portfolios and résumés. Whole books are written on just how to promote yourself. But self promotion in the spiritual realm is a sure sign of sickness or sin.

Several ministers were in a meeting. One mentioned his teaching trip to Russia from which he had just returned. A second man then told about his own educational trip to Russia. The third had to go back to his high school days but told of a mission trip of two weeks in Moscow. The fourth man, had spent a whole year teaching pastors in Russia, but he remained silent. The discipline of secrecy, I thought. I almost envied him, because I was one of the three who had to blab about my wonderful ministry in Russia! *From Spirit of the Disciplines, 172.*

A friend of mine recently gave a million dollars to a Christian school to construct a building—a building that will carry another man’s name above the door. My friend is practicing the discipline of secrecy. Troy Winslow spent 27 years as a missionary to the Philippines. He never made more than \$15,000 in a year—until he retired and then he made a lot of money in the stock market. He never told me of his giving. But when I went to the Philippines to teach I kept running into gifts he had quietly bought for the field: A Jeep for the *Jesus Film Ministry*, a building for a Christian elementary school, a remodeled church, and several others. I had no idea he was quietly giving tens of thousands to missions. *From The Christian’s Guide to Financial Freedom, Bill Martin and Wes Tracy, a video course, Nazarene Publishing House, 2000.*

The discipline of secrecy. How strong is what John Wesley used to call the “thirst for praise?” Only the divinely enabled grace of secrecy can help us overcome that thirst. When we are free of the “thirst for praise”, we are set loose to serve with joy. We are no longer waiting for someone to give thanks, nor are we dependant on someone telling us we have done a good job. Instead, we offer our gifts as an offering to God with the prayer that God is glorified.

The practice of the discipline of secrecy helps us develop a relationship with God independent of the opinions of others. We have all heard Christian figures that brag on themselves, show off their credentials, and drop names of the rich and famous. They are advertising more than their great achievements. They are also

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hawking their shallowness and their neglect of the grace of secrecy. Put them on your prayer list. Then spend some time reviewing the ways in which you are quick to point out your achievements, who you know, or credentials. We all can be guilty of taking credit in times of success or being frustrated when someone else gets praise due us. Ponder doing an anonymous act of service for the church or a neighbor. Read Phil. 2:3. *From Willard, 172-73.*

APPLICATION



NOTES

1. Plan a 30 minute time of solitude and silence this week.
2. Write a one- to two-page paper on the struggle you had to find the time, the interruptions, your thoughts, and feelings about the experience. Do not write during the half-hour period of solitude and silence reflect on it. Share this paper with your mentor and talk about the experience.
3. In what ways do you work to meet the *expectation* of Christ that you will fast (Matt 6:16-18)? If the word “work” does not describe your effort to meet Christ’s expectation that you will fast, what word does? Why?

JOURNALING

Note: Throughout your work in this module, it is suggested you keep a journal. This is an important tool in the study of spiritual formation. Journaling is a tool to help you slow down in your studies and listen to your heart, soul, mind, and most importantly to God.

Choose one of the disciplines of abstinence to practice this week. Reflect on your choice and your experience in your journal.

SUGGESTED READING

- E. Dee Freeborn, et al., *The Upward Call* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 1994), chapter 7.
- “Blessed Subtraction,” 95-106. Wesley Tracy, et al., *Reflecting God* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City and Christian Holiness Partnership, 2000), 145-52.
- Wes Tracy, *Reflecting God Workbook*, 98-104.
- Wes Tracy, *Reflecting God Leader’s Guide*, 38-40.
- Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1988), 156-75.

EXAM

**NOTES**

1. Food, drink, sex, companionship, and sleep are inherently evil.
 - A. True
 - B. False

2. Fasting reveals how often we use food and drink as comfort sources.
 - A. True
 - B. False

3. One of the focuses of a spiritual fast is the health benefits.
 - A. True
 - B. False

4. The disciplines of abstinence deal primarily with normal human needs and desires.
 - A. True
 - B. False

5. The discipline of secrecy is abstaining from making our good deeds and qualities known.
 - A. True
 - B. False

6. Jesus is the only biblical character for whom fasting was important.
 - A. True
 - B. False

7. Frivolous consumption corrupts the soul and conspires against trust in God.
 - A. True
 - B. False

8. Self-promotion is an important antidote to a low self-image.
 - A. True
 - B. False

9. Solitude is seeking to be alone in hope that God will join you as you commune about the things that really matter.
 - A. True
 - B. False



10. Silence is important to practice when with others we consider more important.
 - A. True
 - B. False

11. The discipline of secrecy helps us develop a relationship with God independent of the opinions of others.
 - A. True
 - B. False

12. The discipline of simplicity has been made simpler by media's messages and advertisements.
 - A. True
 - B. False

DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR MENTOR AND PARTICIPANT



NOTES

Be prepared to discuss the following with your mentor.

1. Share your paper on the thirty minutes time of solitude and silence you practiced this week.
2. Discuss one spiritual discipline you were either the most attracted to explore or the one you were most repelled by.