

Love God: fasting discussion guide

based on **Matthew 6.16-18** (Linked to sermon from 18/2/18)
which can be accessed at www.stjamesbythepark.org/current-sermon-series

This was part of our 'Love is an action' series, unpacking what it means for us to 'Love God, Love each other, Reach the world'.

Intro: Have you ever fasted from anything – for spiritual or other reasons? What was your experience?

Read Matthew 6.1-21

In this part of the sermon on the mount, Jesus identifies 3 'acts of righteousness' (v1) he expects his followers to practice: giving to the poor (v2-4), praying (v4-15) and fasting (v16-18). Why do you think churches like ours have focused so much on the first two and often ignored the third? What might this reveal about us?

There are different sorts of fasts in the Bible: Normal (no food but continuing to drink e.g. Jesus in the wilderness Matthew 4); Absolute (no food or drink e.g. national crisis Ezra 10:6); Partial (restricted diet e.g. dependence on God Daniel 1:15). How does the sort of fasting our culture practices (eg at Lent) measure up against those?

There are different reasons for fasting in the Bible. Choose 1 or 2 from this list to explore a bit more:

- * Mourn and repent eg 2 Sam 12:16; Jonah 3
- * Humble ourselves eg Psalm 69:10
- * Seek God's deliverance & protection eg Ezra 8:21-32; Esther 4:15-17 & 5:1-3
- * Seek a fresh outpouring of the Holy Spirit eg Joel 1:14ff & 2:12-17
- * Consecration - setting apart for ministry eg Matthew 4:1-11
- * Before key decisions eg Acts 13:1-4; Acts 14:23

In Matthew 6, Jesus talks repeatedly about our motivation for these 'acts of righteousness' – if we do them to impress others, God won't reward us (v1, 2, 5, 16). But if we do them for an audience of one (God himself), we will be rewarded (v3, 6, 17-18) – with 'treasures in heaven' (v19-20). Simon suggested the treasures in heaven would include spiritual health and growth now, and said that fasting can help us deal with other issues (eg lust, anger). What do you make of that?

How does Matthew 6.16-18 speak to our desire to be a God-dependent, grace-filled, Bible-based, mission-focused, authentic community?

Up (love God): will you try fasting at some point this Lent, not as a way to twist God's arm, but to honour him?

In (love each other): how could you help each other fast? eg could you commit to fasting on the same day, and share your experiences with each other during the day and reflect together afterwards?

Out (reach the world): A colleague or friend (who isn't a Christian) tells you what they're fasting from in Lent. From what you've learned about fasting, how would you respond?