

Practising Spiritual Disciplines



SELF-DENIAL

Simplicity • Fasting • Missional

Self-denial is at the core of Jesus' ministry and our relationship with him. Jesus began his ministry with a 40-day fast in the desert. He says: "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me" (Matthew 16:24 *NIV*). God's love is proved by sacrifice. Equally, the most appropriate response for us in devotion to him is to be willing to put him above all our desires, appetites and plans.

A time of denial or fasting asserts that God is our priority. 1 John 2:15 says: "Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, love for the Father is not in them" (*NIV*). Fasting is an opportunity to reject our infatuation with the things of the world, remove distractions, focus and deepen our communion with God. It can also cause us to realize a deeper understanding of our mission, and to empathize and fellowship with the materially poor.

Before committing yourself to a time of self-denial, spend time in prayer. Ask the Lord if there is something specific he would have you give up. Examine your heart and the things in your life that use up your resources (time, money, thoughts, effort).

If you find that you are looking forward to the next meal, a TV show or a fun event MORE than you are thinking about the Lord and his kingdom, this could be an indicator of what would be spiritually beneficial to give up. Social media, technology devices and the Internet are also important to consider.

Some are challenged to give up something to empathize with people in the majority world or highlight a community injustice, such as abstaining from taking hot showers or eating meat, or committing to use public transport rather than a private car to commute. Some try to live on the same amount of food given out by their local food bank. These are often a powerful witness and a time of learning to walk in someone else's shoes. Listen to the Spirit.

While fasting, it is especially important to commune with God and make prayer a priority. Whether you are fasting from a meal, spending money or watching TV, it will simply be an exercise in discipline unless you take the opportunity to make time for the Lord. You will find that, quite often, areas of spiritual weakness will be revealed during a fast. You may be more irritable or less self-controlled in some areas of life. This is not unusual. Don't get discouraged. The Lord can gift us with more self-awareness through fasting.

While self-denial involves sacrifice, it is also a huge blessing. Keep a journal of the lessons you learn and the insight God gives you while you fast.

Beware of pride or self-righteousness. For some of us, it may be important to observe a time of self-denial secretly, so we are not motivated by gaining the admiration and praise of others.

My Action Plan

→ Pray privately and with others to humbly ask God to reveal what he would have you do in this time of self-denial.
→ Be obedient. Make

your intentions known to at least one person, so they can keep you accountable.
→ Reach out. Take part in The Salvation Army's

Partners in Mission campaign, an annual time of communal self-denial to raise funds for the Army's work around the world.

SCRIPTURE REFLECTION

Cut out and keep in your Bible or journal. Allow these verses to mould your idea of self-denial.

"The world and its desires pass away, but whoever does the will of God lives forever"
(1 John 2:17 *NIV*).

"All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had. With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all that there were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need" (Acts 4:32-35 *NIV*).

"But since you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in the love we have kindled in you—see that you also excel in this grace of giving"
(2 Corinthians 8:7 *NIV*).

"If you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed, then your light will rise in the darkness, and your night will become like the noonday" (Isaiah 58:10 *NIV*).

"Whoever oppresses the poor shows contempt for their Maker, but whoever is kind to the needy honours God" (Proverbs 14:31 *NIV*).

"The King will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me'"
(Matthew 25:40 *NIV*).