

WEEK 2 TEACHING GUIDE

focus

BIG IDEA

Focus on giving something up.

BIBLE

Matthew 6:16-18; Psalm 121:1-2;
Romans 12:9-11

WHAT? *What are we talking about today?*

ACTIVITY | Fast Focus

- Welcome back to *Focus*, where we're talking about four things it's really important to focus on. Let's see if your focusing skills have improved at all from last week.
- **INSTRUCTIONS:** Give every student a [handheld maze party favor](#). To play, have students stand and put one minute on the clock. At the end of one minute, anyone who didn't complete their maze must sit down. At the end of each round, have students shake their mazes to reset them, remove ten seconds from the clock to shorten the next round, and repeat. Keep playing until everyone is eliminated and declare the students who made it to the final round the winners.

POLL | Would you rather give up . . .

- Focusing isn't easy. Whether you're struggling to focus on school work, the book you're trying to read, or the new skill you're trying to learn, here's what I'm wondering – if you could give something up in exchange for becoming a better focuser, would you?
- **INSTRUCTIONS:** For this poll, have students stand in the center of the room. For each poll, have them run to the left side of the room for the first option or the right side of the room for the second option.
- In exchange for better focus, would you rather give up . . .
 - Cereal or pizza?
 - Data or WiFi?
 - Your phone or your bed?
 - All cats or all dogs?
 - TikTok or YouTube?
 - Haircuts or manicures?
 - Soda and sports drinks or fast food?
 - Social media or phone calls?
- Well, I'm really glad we don't actually have to choose between any of those things. Honestly, they all seem pretty impossible to give up.

QUESTION | Which three things would you take with you?

- Okay, let's think about this another way. Let's pretend we're all about to be stranded on a deserted island. Usually, when people get stranded, they usually don't have time to plan. But somehow, in our special universe, we get just enough time to grab three important things. **Which three things would you take with you?**
- **INSTRUCTIONS:** Give a few students a chance to respond.
- Pretty interesting responses, don't you think?
 - Some of you focused on your vital needs and chose an endless supply of water.
 - Others focused on more handy things like bug repellent, a Swiss army knife, or a first aid kit.
 - And a few of you focused on simply being happy with a book or your fully-charged phone until your rescue came.
- The things we choose to hang onto say a lot about what we value, don't they? But so do the things we're willing to let go of.

DISCUSSION

- **INSTRUCTIONS:** If you have more than 15 students, skip this discussion time and save it for small groups!
 - **What's one thing you couldn't go a day without?**
 - **Have you ever given up something you really liked for a good reason? What happened?**

SO WHAT? Why does it matter to God and to us?

QUESTION | What have you heard about fasting?

- Has anyone here ever heard of "fasting" before? "Fasting" isn't actually about being fast. It has nothing to do with how quickly you can rap, chug a soda, or ride your hoverboard down the street. So what is it? **What have you heard about fasting?**
- **INSTRUCTIONS:** Give a few students a chance to respond.
- Fasting is a spiritual discipline that's been around for a long time and is practiced by just about every faith tradition. Fasting simply means giving up one thing, for a set period of time, in order to gain something else.
- Fasting often involves giving up food, but giving up food is not safe, healthy, or wise for a lot of people. Fasting can also mean a period of giving up . . .
 - Social media.
 - Candy.
 - Caffeine.
 - Streaming shows and movies.
 - Or whatever it is that's distracting you from focusing on God.
- Fasting is when you give up something you like, but can live without, in order to focus on something so much more important.

DISCUSSION

- **INSTRUCTIONS:** If you have more than 15 students, skip this discussion time and save it for small groups! If you have fewer than 15 students, the starred questions are designed for high schoolers, so you may want to skip them for middle schoolers.
 - ☆ **Why do you think fasting is such a popular way for people to get close to God?**
 - ☆ **Have you ever tried fasting from something before? If so, what was the most difficult part?**
 - ☆ **What are some of the ways you think fasting could be misused?**

SCRIPTURE | Matthew 6:16-18

- Fasting has been a strategy people have used for centuries to grow their faith. When Jesus was here on earth, fasting was a pretty common way for people to try and get closer to God.
- But not everyone used fasting the way it was intended to be used. Instead of fasting in order to get closer to God or grow their faith, people sometimes fasted to . . .
 - Get attention or sympathy.
 - Earn other people's respect or praise.
 - Impress God.
 - Show off how "holy" they were.
- In the book of Matthew, we find a story where Jesus addresses this with some of his earliest followers. In one sermon in particular (called The Sermon on the Mount) Jesus encouraged them to see fasting differently — not as a routine of religion, but a relationship beyond it.
- **INSTRUCTIONS:** *Read Matthew 6:16-18.*
- The people Jesus was speaking to had a good amount of experience with religious practices like fasting. They fasted on their own and they saw the religious leaders they looked up to fasting too. So Jesus didn't need to teach them what fasting was — he needed to help them see fasting differently, because they had lost focus.
 - Instead of focusing on fasting as a way to get close to God, some people used fasting as a way to put the focus on themselves.
 - First, Jesus gives a big thumbs up to fasting in general. He wanted people to know they should fast — but for the right reasons. Next, Jesus helps them see what fasting should look like, and what it shouldn't.
- Jesus wanted to help them reset their focus when it came to fasting. The whole point of fasting is to remind us that God can be our source of strength, regardless of what we lack. But it's not something we do to seem super holy or spiritual.

STORY | Talk about a time you wanted to seem holy.

- **INSTRUCTIONS:** *Tell a story from your own life (or ask a volunteer or student to tell a story) about a time you did something spiritual to impress someone or seem holy. Maybe you sat in the front row at church, made a show of throwing money in the offering bucket, volunteered to pray out loud, or made sure everyone knew you were fasting during a weekend retreat. What motivated you to do that? What were you hoping to gain (or afraid to lose)? How did you lose focus on what really mattered and what could you have done differently?*
- Don't get me wrong, the things I did were good things that help people get closer to God. But just like the people Jesus spoke to about fasting, I got a little lost. My focus was on trying to look religious rather than truly growing closer to God.

DISCUSSION

- **INSTRUCTIONS:** *If you have more than 15 students, skip this discussion time and save it for small groups! If you have fewer than 15 students, the starred questions are designed for high schoolers, so you may want to skip them for middle schoolers.*
 - **Have you ever been tempted to do something because it would make you seem more "holy"? What happened and how do you feel about it now?**
 - ★ **How can you tell if you're fasting for good reasons or selfish reasons? How easy do you think it is to tell the difference?**

SCRIPTURE | Psalm 121:1-2

- So let's say we do want to try fasting. After all, Jesus didn't say "if you fast." He said, "when you fast," like he was expecting us to fast at least once in a while! What does good fasting look like? How can we fast in a way that actually helps us get closer to God?
 - Remember, fasting is when you give up something you like, but can live without, in order to focus on something so much more important.
 - Whether you're giving up candy, caffeine, video games, screen time, or something else you really like, it's not enough to stop focusing on that thing — you have to choose something else to focus on instead.
- But here's the thing about fasting (or anything else you do to grow closer to God): life doesn't shift into "easy mode" when we try something challenging for Jesus. During your fast . . .
 - You might start noticing someone's needs more clearly.
 - God may speak to you about restoring a relationship or offering mercy to someone who has hurt you.
 - You might feel compelled to help solve a big problem or join a movement of people in a way that scares you.
 - You may see something in your own life standing out in a way you didn't notice before.
 - You might see where you need to grow but you've been distracted from seeing it —until now.
 - And you'll probably be tempted (often!) to break your fast. Giving something up isn't easy or fun for very long.
- But no matter how difficult fasting can be at times, it's worth it and there's help available. God promises to be there through all of it.
- **INSTRUCTIONS:** *Read Psalm 121:1-2.*
- When you focus on giving something up, God doesn't give up on you. God does the opposite. God shows up for you. So when you're fasting . . .
 - Keep looking for God while you read the Bible, listen to people teach about Jesus, or have conversations with others about what God is doing in your life.
 - Notice God giving you strength when you are outside or in a place that makes you feel safe or inspired.
 - Talk to God and ask for help during your fast and through everything that you go through.
- Just like this psalmist, you too can always turn to God for strength, help, and protection. When we choose to fast from something in order to grow, God will help us **focus on giving something up.**

NOW WHAT? *What does God want us to do about it?*

OBJECT LESSON | +/-

- **INSTRUCTIONS:** *Before your teaching time, get two large buckets, boxes, or jars, plenty of scrap paper, and duct tape. Use duct tape to create a large plus sign on one bucket and a minus sign on the other. During your teaching time, ask students to share their ideas of what they could give up (-) and what they could add (+) during their fast.*
- Now it's time to put what we've learned to the test. It's not actually a test though. It's more of a challenge to help us imagine all of the different ways a fast can go. I have two buckets that represent some choices we have to make!

- The "minus" bucket is going to be full of things we could give up on a fast. **What are some things you might be able to give up for a day, a week, or even a month?** (Maybe video games, candy, listening to music in the car, or texting late at night?)
- The "plus" bucket is going to be full of opportunities for us to grow while we are focused on giving something up. Once you've removed something from your life, **what kinds of things could you add to your life that would help you grow closer to God?** (Maybe reading a book of the Bible, having a conversation about God with a friend, serving others, journaling your questions about faith, or taking a walk to pray?)
- This week, practice focusing on fasting by choosing at least one thing to subtract from your life for a day, or even for the whole week. But don't forget to choose at least one thing to add to your life too. Remember the point isn't the ritual, it's your sincere desire to know and grow closer to God.
 - **START SMALL:** You'll hear about people fasting from something for a month, or 40 days, or sometimes even longer, but it might be better to select a shorter amount of time to begin with. This may mean giving up something for a week, a few days, or even a few hours. You don't get bonus holiness points for longer fasts. The point is simply focus on how Jesus can fill you up while you practice the habit of fasting.
 - **FOCUS WITH A FRIEND:** Fasting with a friend will give you someone to check in with. Share what you'll be giving up and how you hope to connect with God and others during that time. Exchange ideas, check in with each other and offer support.
 - **WONDER WHY:** When you start to feel stressed or begin to wonder if you can stick with your commitment, wonder about your "why." Remember what your goal was in the first place: to grow closer to God! Your "why" will help you stay on track.

DISCUSSION

- **INSTRUCTIONS:** *If you have more than 15 students, skip this discussion time and save it for small groups! If you have fewer than 15 students, the starred questions are designed for high schoolers, so you may want to skip them for middle schoolers.*
 - **How do you think giving something up could help you grow closer to God?**
 - **Read Romans 12:9-11. How do you think we could apply this passage to fasting?**
 - **This week, what's one thing you're going to give up to help you better focus on God?**

RESPONSE | +/- Mosaic (and the Focus Journal)

- We've been talking about what the focus of a fast should be. Even though we know it's more than a performance it's tempting to make it about us when we're thinking about how challenging giving something up may be. To help us remember the focus shouldn't be on ourselves, we're going to cover these mirrors with the commitments we're making to God this week.
- **INSTRUCTIONS:** *Before your teaching time, find and display two household mirrors or get an [inexpensive set of mirrors](#). Use duct tape to create a large plus sign on one mirror and a minus sign on the other. During your teaching time, provide sticky notes and markers to students. Invite them to commit to one "subtraction" and one "addition" this week, write them down on two different sticky notes, and place the sticky notes on the mirrors. While students write, play a song like "[Shall Not Want](#)," by Elevation Worship and Maverick City Music as a teaching tool, but make sure you have purchased any licenses required to do so. For more information on how to legally use copyrighted material for educational purposes, [read this!](#) Before your teaching time, prepare extra copies of The Focus Journal for any students who didn't already receive one. The instructions and files can be found in the Spring Discipleship section of your curriculum dashboard. Place one journal under each seat, along with a pen.*

- It might not seem like spending less time on your phone or not eating chocolate could change your life, but it can (and will) help you grow closer to God – if you fast with the right focus.
- Healthy things grow and Jesus was super clear about what growth looks like. It looks like loving God and others instead of being self-focused.
 - No matter what you decide to "subtract" from your life this week, one of the things you can "add" is a daily time spent with God, maybe through this Focus journal we've created for you.
 - Whether we decide to temporarily give up pizza, ice cream, video games, or so much time looking at our phones, the point of fasting is to grow our closeness with God. That's the power of **focusing on giving something up.**

WEEK 2

DISCUSSION GUIDE

focus

It's not easy to stay focused. Especially these days, when we're connected to a never-ending stream of new notifications, ads, messages, videos, posts, and entertainment, it makes sense if we feel a little distracted sometimes. Maybe you've struggled recently to stay focused on your homework, or on the story your friend was telling you, or on the movie you were watching — but have you ever struggled to stay focused when you were spending time with God? In this four-week series, we're going to get honest about how difficult it can be to stay focused when we're trying to pray, read the Bible, or grow in our faith. Each week, we'll explore passages from Psalms and the Gospels as we challenge ourselves to focus on practicing four spiritual disciplines that can help us grow. Together, we'll try focusing on **what God has said**, on **giving something up**, on **talking to God**, and on **rest**.

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Focus on giving something up.

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Matthew 6:16-18; Psalm 121:1-8;
Romans 12:9-11

QUESTIONS

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- Why do you think fasting is such a popular way for people to get close to God?
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- What are some of the ways you think fasting could be misused?
- Have you ever been tempted to do something because it would make you seem more "holy"? What happened and how do you feel about it now?
- How can you tell if you're fasting for good reasons or selfish reasons? How easy do you think it is to tell the difference?
- How do you think giving something up could help you grow closer to God?
- Read Romans 12:9-11. How do you think we could apply this passage to fasting?
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Share your habit stacks with each other! See if anyone has identified a habit stack that would be helpful to someone else in the group.

WEEK 2

DISCUSSION GUIDE for middle schoolers

focus

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