
The Discipline Of Fasting

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Key Passages: Matt 6:16-18; Lu 5:33-38;
Mk 9:28-29; Isa 58:1-14; Joel 2:12-17

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(rev. Feb 21, 2002)

(The following was initially used as a handout for the Lesson on Fasting in a Series of Studies on Discipleship. It is not meant to be an exposition on Fasting, but a Study Guide. Check the Resources at the end, if you are looking for an extensive exposition.)

Introduction

- Two marks of a disciple are: self-denial and humility.
- How are these related to fasting?
- Fasting is not commanded in the Bible. The Day of Atonement was the only required fast for the Jews (Lev 16:29-33).
- How do we deal with this? The Jews, however, had many days on which they fasted.
- Jesus practice and expected fasting. The Apostles did the same, so did the Early Church
- Jesus' intention was never the rejection of the practice, but its restoration to the proper perspective and place.
- Fasting without prayer and the other spiritual disciplines is starvation.
- The best parallel practice or analogy of fasting in the Bible is the observance of the Sabbath (cf. Lev 16:31)
- The most significant synonymous expression in the Bible is "humbling" one's self before God" (cf. Ezra 8:21; Isa 58:3-5; Dan 10:12)
- We cannot expect to have II Chron 7:17 fulfilled in our midst, without the discipline of fasting. Fasting is a part of this verse as much as prayer is.

Three reasons for the decline of the practice:

1. Historical: the abuse of asceticism. Exalted beyond the teachings of Scripture
2. Cultural: The expectation of three square meals a day, plus snacking as inalienable rights
3. Doctrinal and Practical: Lack of proper Biblical teaching

Three things about fasting:

1. It is Required ... Expect
2. It is to be Regulated
3. It will be Rewarded

We need to consider the:

- Practice
- Patterns
- Precepts
- Principles

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Two Aspects to consider as we study fasting:

1) The Biblical and Spiritual Aspects

- Motives
- Attitudes
- Activities: Intercession, Confession; Adoration, Worship, Singing, Reading, Memorizing and Meditating on Scriptures

2) The Practical Aspects

- Before fasting ... Preparation
- During fasting. . .
- After fasting...

A Definition of Fasting:

“Abstaining from food for spiritual reason.”

- Abstaining from that which hinders communion with God

Four things that should be differentiated:

1. Fasting: Abstaining for spiritual reasons
2. Dieting: Abstaining for physical reasons cf. Vegetarians Diet, etc.
3. Hunger Strike: Abstaining for political and other reasons.
4. Missing Meals: because of activities, not for the activities

Fasting cf. Watching

Fasting = going without food for spiritual reasons

Watching = going without sleep for spiritual reasons (2Cor 5:6; 11:27).

- The body craves sleep more than it does food and water

Types (Classifications) of Fasting:

1. Types related to food:

- Partial – abstaining from certain types of food cf. Daniel 10:2-3
- Total – abstaining from fluids such as milk, etc, but not water cf. Acts 9:9
- Supernatural – abstaining from food as well as fluids, including water

2. Types related to people:

- Private: individual
- Public: corporate

3. Types related to duration:

- One meal, one day, three, seven, twenty-one and forty days

4. Types related to choices:

- Voluntary – Most fast in the Scriptures was voluntarily
- Involuntary – fasting on Day of Atonement was compulsory

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Examples of the Practice to consider:

- Positive and negative
- Ancient and modern

Biblical Examples of Fasting:

- Moses (Ex 34:28)
- Israel (Jud 20:26; 1Sam 7:6)
- Hannah (1Sam 1-2)
- David (2Sam 12:16; Ps 109:24)
- Elijah (1Kings 19:8)
- Ninevites (Jonah 4:5-8)
- Men of Jabesh-Gilead (1Sam 31:13)
- Ezra (Ezra 8:21; 10:6)
- Daniel (Dan 9:3; 10:12 cf.)
- Nehemiah (Neh 1:4)
- Esther (Est 4:3, 16)
- Anna (Lu 2:36-37)
- Disciples of John (Matt 9:14)
- Pharisees (Lu 18:11-12)
- Jesus (Lu 4:1-2; 18:12)
- Paul (Acts 9:9; 10:30; 2Cor 11:27)
- Leaders in the Early Church (Acts 13:2-3; 14:23)
- Paul and Barnabas (Acts 14:23)
- Apostles (2Cor 6:5; 2Cor 11:27)
- Cornelius (Acts 10:30)

Examples in Church History

- Martin Luther
- John Calvin
- John Knox
- Jonathan Edwards
- John Wesley
- David Brainerd
- Charles Finney
- Rees Howell
- The Apostle Paul fasted often (2Cor 6:5; 11:27)
- The Methodists fasted Wednesdays and Fridays (similar practice in the Early Church)
- The Pharisees fasted on Mondays and Thursdays: Market days: larger audience.

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Motives for Fasting (cf. Matt 6;16-18):

- God is to be the centre of our fasting, not self, others or things
cf. Zech 7:5; Acts 13:2; Isa 58
- Fasting reveals what controls (and what does not control us)
- Fasting will help us to keep a balance perspective on life

Objectives of Fasting:

1. Humility (Ps 35:13 cf. Matt 13:12)
2. Draw closer to God (Js 4:8; Isa 58:2)
3. Clearer understanding of God's word (Illumination)
4. Guidance: Find God's will and to receive directions cf. Ezra for protection of people and property (Ezra 8:21)
5. Seek Special Favour: Healing and deliverance (Isa 58:8)
 - Deliverance from bondage
6. Wanting God to intervene in crisis or problem (2Chron 20)
7. Intercede and pray for self and others
 - Increased effectiveness in intercessory prayer
8. Power for certain types of ministry (Mk 9:29)
 - Fasting is a "power multiplier"
 - In New Testament times, Fasting was a channel of Power:
 1. Power with God
 2. Power with man
 3. Power against the forces of evil

Phrases and ideas that describe or imply fasting:

- Mourn cf. David (2Sam 12:16 cf. Matt 5:6)
- Afflict self (Ps 35:13)
- Humble soul (Ps 69:10 cf. 2Chron 7:14)
- Subdue body (1Cor 9:27)
- Worship (Lu 2:37, Acts 13:2)

Who should not fast? (Or fast cautiously! With advise of your physician)

- Diabetics
- Expectant mothers
- Heart patients
- Hypocrites (Check with the Great Physician)

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Additional Notes:

- Three days is the most difficult period.
- Toxins purged and eliminated in fasting (as assimilation stops).
- Weakness and, dizziness are temporary and often caused by sudden change in posture.
- Sense of concentration sharpens and becomes more alert.
- During fasts, it is common to feel cold, because of metabolism and its effect on body heat
- Break your fast slowly and cautiously with, fruits, vegetables or vegetable juices.
- Introduce solids slowly
- Avoid starches, grease and salad dressings, coffee, teas, “pop,” etc.
- Preserve the benefits of fasting by staying away from habit forming foods and drinks
- Learn to creep before you walk and walk before you run in fasting.
- We are more susceptible to the attacks of the enemy during and after fasting – watch out for bouts of loneliness and depression
- Vegetarian diet cf. Gen 1:29-30 cf. Gen 9:3 and Daniel 1:11ff. John the Baptist appeared to have been a vegetarian

Applications:

Seven Important Questions:

1. How do I fast? – Prepare: set objectives and examine motives
2. How long do I fast?
3. What type of fast should I undertake?
4. How often should I fast?
5. What to do before, during and after I fast?
6. How should I break my fast?
7. Why do I fast? What are my spiritual objectives and motives?

Resources:

- ***The God Chosen Fast*** - Arthur Wallis (Christian Literature Crusade, 1968)
- ***The Coming Revival*** - Bill Bright (NewLife Publications, 1995)
- ***How to Fast Successfully*** - Derek Prince (Whitaker House, 1976)
- “How to Fast,” <http://www.ccci.org/howtofast/>
(Campus Crusade for Christ International Web-site)
- “What the Bible Says about Fasting”
<http://www.bible.com/answers/afasting.html>