

“Right Fasting”

Matthew 6:16-18

Scripture Ref: Deut 8:10; 1 Cor 6:19-20; Jer 14:12; Lev 16:29-30; Leviticus 16:29;23:32; Daniel 1:15; 1 Cor 7:5; Esther 4:15-16; Acts 9:9; 2 Samuel 12:15-20; Deuteronomy 9:9-18; Exodus 34:28; 1 Kings 19:8; Matthew 4:1-11; Ezra 8:21,23,31; 2 Samuel 12:15-23; Psalm 35:13; Acts 14:23; Jeremiah 29:13,14; Joel 2:12

16 "Moreover, when you fast, do not be like the hypocrites, with a sad countenance. For they disfigure their faces that they may appear to men to be fasting. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward.

- 1. Fasting is an important discipline that has been often neglected by American Christians.**
 - a. It was very common in the early church, and even up through the 19th century. But now – not many Christians fast.**
 - b. WHY? Maybe because we love to eat! In America, we are all about eating – we eat all the time!**
 - c. So is eating bad? NO! God has given us food, for several very biblical reasons:**

Biblical Reasons to Eat

- 2. Enjoyment – God gave us a multitude of plant and animal food, and He made it very tasty to us so we WOULD eat.**
- 3. Sustenance – In Genesis God gave of every tree to eat, and also animals, so that man would be nourished.**
- 4. Fellowship – In Genesis 18 God appeared to Abraham, and they enjoyed a meal together.**
 - a. Jesus spent time at meals with people, including the last supper**
 - b. And He gave us “The Lords Supper”, which was clearly a MEAL – not just having wine and bread at communion.**
- 5. Worship – I know people worship food – not talking about that – but in the OT the grain, heave, and wave offering to the Lord was to be eaten as an act of worship. (Lev 10)**
 - a. Simply taking a meal is an act of worship, as we recognize that all that we have is a gift from the Lord – that is why we “give thanks” for the meal!**

Deut 8:10 When you have eaten and are full, then you shall bless the LORD your God for the good land which He has given you.

- 6. Ok – so eating is good, and biblical, so what about not eating? What is the deal with fasting? First – What fasting is NOT.**

What Fasting is NOT

Fasting is NOT a path to Physical or Psychological discipline

7. God never tells us to fast in order to lose weight or look better
 - a. Perhaps you need to lose some weight, and altering your eating would be helpful to you

1 Cor 6:19-20

19 Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own? 20 For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God's.

- b. Many Christians testify to possessing a greater amount of discipline in their lives once they began fasting on a regular basis.
- c. The discipline of conquering the desire to eat can transfer over to other areas.
- d. This is a helpful by-product of fasting, but should not be an end in itself.
- e. BUT – God never encourages fasting for solely discipline or self-denial reasons – from a biblical standpoint fasting has a higher spiritual purpose than your physical body.

Fasting is NOT Method to Move God

8. Sometimes fasting is viewed as an attempt to twist God's arm or to win His approval.
 - a. But God doesn't respond to pressure. One group of people in the book of Acts (23) tried to get God on their side by manipulative fasting, in that they made an oath: *'We have taken an oath not to eat or drink until we have killed Paul'* (Acts 23:12,14).
 - i. But God did not hear their prayer and their plan did not work
 - b. Using fasting in a manipulative way was done by the people in Jeremiah's day too.
 - c. God said,

Jeremiah 14:12 *"Although they fast, I will not listen to their cry; though they offer burn offerings and grain offering, I will not accept them. I will destroy them with the sword, famine, and plague"*

- d. Fasting didn't move God one bit!

Fasting is not a Religious Exercise

- 9. This is what Jesus was talking about: By Jesus' time fasting had become a very important part of the Jewish life. Perhaps *overly* important would be a better way of saying it.
 - a. Based on Luke 18:12a, we know the Pharisees fasted twice a week. The Talmud tells us that this was on the 2nd and 5th day (Monday and Thursday).
 - b. Why those days? According to the Pharisees it was because Moses went up on Mt. Sinai to get the Law on the 5th day and returned on the 2nd. At least that's what they said.
- 10. But if you look closely into Jewish history, you find another possible reason for the Pharisees fasting on Monday and Thursday.
 - a. Market day in the city of Jerusalem was on the 2nd and 5th day! Everyone from the countryside came to town on those days.
 - b. It was on these two days that the Pharisees chose to hold their fasts.
 - c. They would walk through the streets with their hair disheveled; they would put on old clothes and cover themselves with dirt; they would cover their faces with white chalk in order to look pale; and they would dump ashes over their head as a sign of their humility!
 - d. Fasting had become a "look-at-how-spiritual-I-am" exercise

What Fasting IS

A Command for the Jew

- 11. The place that we find the fast commanded by God is in Leviticus 16, as the Lord commands

Lev 16:29-30

29 "This shall be a statute forever for you: In the seventh month, on the tenth day of the month, you shall afflict your souls, and do no work at all, whether a native of your own country or a stranger who dwells among you.

- a. The Priests understood "afflict your souls" to mean refraining from food and drink, which they did from sundown to sundown.
- b. We gain some insight here about how the Hebrews viewed fasting. Fasting is more than just "afflicting one's body". It is "afflicting one's *soul*."

12. In other words, fasting in the Hebrew mind is something my soul participates in.
- Fasting is denying my self. It is denying not only my own body, but also my own wants.
 - It is a way of saying that food and my desires are secondary to something else.
 - Fasting is "afflicting one's soul" -- an act of self-denial.
 - But it is not only an act of self-denial and here is where the monks and hermits went wrong
13. *Biblical fasting is "not eating" with spiritual communication in mind.*
How do we know this?
- Because Biblical fasting always occurs together with prayer in the Bible - ALWAYS.*
 - You can pray without fasting, but you cannot fast (Biblically speaking) without praying.
14. SO - Biblical fasting is deliberately abstaining from food for a spiritual reason: *communication and relationship with the Father*

Types of Fasts

15. Other than Leviticus 16, there is not a lot of biblical guidance for fasting, so that really HOW you fast is really between you and the Lord.

One Day Fast

16. Based on the fast on the Day of Atonement, the fast was from sunset of one day to sunset of the next (Leviticus 16:29;23:32).
- According to the Rabbinical interpretation, on the Day of Atonement it is forbidden to eat, or drink, or bathe, or anoint oneself, or wear sandals, or to indulge in conjugal intercourse"
 - Of course, this direction is not from the Bible, but it is what the Jewish person considered a "normal fast."
 - Since we are not "under the law", there is no requirement for the Christian to observe the fast of Atonement fast.
 - But we can use this as a guide that a fast is when a person abstained from food and liquid for a period of one day (from sunset to sunset).

Partial Fast

17. In this type of fast, the emphasis is placed on restriction of diet, rather than abstaining completely from eating.
- Examples are: Daniel, Shadrack, Meshach and Abednego eating only vegetables and drinking only water (Daniel 1:15)

- b. Another example is our earlier example from 1 Corinthians, where Paul discusses a couple not having intercourse for a time, which was associated with fasting and praying (1 Cor 7:5).
- c. So a partial fast might be refraining from solid food only, otherwise known as a “liquid fast” (maybe you only have a smoothie)
- d. Or perhaps from meat, or TV, or or something that God puts on your heart to do without (maybe we could have a fast from “talking!”)

Extended Fast

18. This type of fast is one in which the person refrains from both food and water OR simply food (but not water) for an extended period of time.

- a. A radical fast can be harmful to your health and in most cases should not exceed three days.
- b. An example of a radical fast can be found with Esther and her household. Esther decided to fast for three days abstaining from both "food and water" both "day and night" (Esther 4:15-16).
- c. The rabbi Ezra and the apostle Paul also went without food and water for three days (Ezra 10:6-9; Acts 9:9).
- d. David is another example of a radical fast. He went seven days without food (but probably with liquid) as a plea to God to save the life of his child (2 Samuel 12:15-20).

19. Fasts that extend beyond three or seven days can be found in the Bible, but these exceptions were based upon direct guidance from God or a supernatural ability given by God to complete the fast.

- a. Examples of these extreme fasts are: Moses (Deuteronomy 9:9-18 and Exodus 34:28); Elijah (1 Kings 19:8); and Jesus (Matthew 4:1-11).

When Do We Fast?

17 But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, 18 so that you do not appear to men to be fasting, but to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly.

20. Notice again – Jesus did not say “if you fast”, but “when you fast”

- a. In other words it is assumed that we will fast – but not just anytime we want to

Mourning: Sin, or even Death

21. Repentance and confession: When people wished to demonstrate that they were serious about repenting from their sin, they fasted.

- a. Our willingness to sacrifice shows the depth of our commitment and in this case fasting is a pictorial way of saying to the Lord, "I care more about getting right with You, God, than I do about even my own life."
 - b. So a good occasion for fasting is when we are truly grieving over our sins.
 - c. To seek the Lord, and His power for victory OVER our sins!
22. Death - Some OT situations in the bible, fasting showed the sorrow that the people felt over the loss of someone God used in their lives.

Protection

23. There are occasions when death or danger threaten us. We see from the Scripture that it is certainly appropriate to employ fasting as a means of receiving God's protection during these times.
- a. When Ezra was carrying a large consignment of gold and silver to the temple in Jerusalem along a route infested with bandits, he records: *"I proclaimed a fast...that we might humble ourselves before our God, to seek from him a straight way for ourselves, our children, and all our goods"* (Ezra 8:21,23,31).

Direction

24. Fasting helps us find God's will. If we expect God to reveal his direction for our lives, we must put Him first.
- a. Often this means putting aside the fulfillment of our physical appetites, so that we can focus our attention on Him.
25. Acts 13:2 is an example of direction being given by God during a fast.
- a. Here we find the leaders of the church of Antioch worshipping and fasting.
 - b. The Holy Spirit used this occasion to tell the church leaders to choose Paul and Barnabas from among their group and send them out to spread the gospel among the Gentiles.
 - c. So fasting is one of the ways we seek God's guidance and direction in our lives.

Sickness

26. There are two examples in Scripture of fasting on behalf of those who are sick: 2 Samuel 12:15-23; Psalm 35:13.
- a. Both of these examples come from the life of David. In Psalm 35:13 David says, *"Yet when they were sick, I put on clothes of sadness and showed my sorrow by going without food."*
 - b. David saw fasting as a way to ask God for physical healing in the lives of other people.

The ordination of missionaries or church leaders:

27. Fasting appears to have been a regular part of the ordination of church leaders and missionaries.

- a. Acts 13, the calling of Paul and Barnabas for missionary service. Verse 3 tells us that after they received this direction from the Lord, then they ordained them for missionary service by prayer, fasting and laying their hands upon them.
- b. We find the same thing later on in the book of Acts -- Paul and Barnabas fasted at the selection of the first elders for the new churches they planted (Acts 14:23).
- c. It would appear that fasting in these cases is a way of seriously seeking God's blessing, anointing, and power upon the leaders of the church.

Led by the Holy Spirit

28. Bottom line: The occasion for fasting is when he or she feels the Spirit of God leading them to fast.

- a. Perhaps whenever there is a decision, a spiritual concern or struggle in his or her life.

Why Fast?

29. To SEEK GOD! God said, "When you seek me with all your heart, I will be found by you" (Jeremiah 29:13,14).

- a. When a man or woman is willing to set aside the legitimate appetites of the body to concentrate on the work of praying, they are demonstrating that they mean business, that they are seeking God with all their heart.
- b. Fasting puts things in proper focus. It is a physical way of saying, "*Food and the things of this life are not as important to me now as _____ (fill in the blank) .*"
- c. So fasting is an expression of wholeheartedness. This is clear from Joel's call to the nation of Israel:

Joel 2:12 "Yet even now," says the Lord, "return to me with all your heart, with fasting. . ."

30. As we look at the Bible it becomes evident that fasting was practiced more often than Christians usually practice it today.

- a. In fact, among most American Christians fasting is entirely neglected.
- b. I want to challenge you today to begin the practice of fasting.
- c. All of us have times in our lives when a fast would be appropriate – to deny ourselves and seek the Lord – Conference, decisions,

d. The Lord will reward your efforts at fasting.

17 But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, 18 so that you do not appear to men to be fasting, but to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly.

Here are some individual guidelines for fasting:

- 1. Reach a personal conviction on the subject through careful Bible study. -- Get into the Word on your own. See what the Bible really says about fasting.**
- 2. A physician's note: Make sure you are medically able to fast before attempting it. Some brothers and sisters that I know can only do a one-day partial fast. They drink different types of juice, but take no food or other liquid. God knows and understands their medical condition and does not expect them to harm their "temple" (1 Corinthians 6:19) in order to be spiritual. There are no rigid standards about fasting in the Bible that say you must do this or that.**
- 3. Begin with short fasts and gradually move to larger periods of time if you desire. If you've never fasted before, you need to start slow. Don't start with a three day fast!**
- 4. Be prepared for some dizziness, headache, or nausea in the early going. Most of our bodies have never gone without food for longer than a few hours.**
- 5. Break a prolonged fast gradually with meals that are light and easy to digest. Trying to gorge yourself following a fast will only make you sick and will leave you with an unpleasant memory of fasting.**
- 6. Enter with a positive faith that God will reward those who fast with the right motives. - Jesus gave this promise: "*When you fast, your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you*" (Matthew 6:18).**
- 7. Sometime during your fast, mix your fast with prayer, time in Scripture reading, singing, or devotional reading. Remember: fasting is not an end in itself. Seek the Lord, not the experience of fasting.**
- 8. Keep checking your motives concerning your fasts. Hypocrisy and spiritual pride can easily creep in. There is a reward for fasting, but only fasting done with the right motives (Matthew 23:28).**

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