

Questions About Fasting For Today's Believer

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Fasting is a wonderful spiritual discipline – but even more than that, it's a powerful way for you to connect with God and strengthen your relationship with Him! Please take a few moments to read this booklet and get some insights on how to fast successfully and what you can expect when you fast.

A Key Scripture to Learn:

Jesus says in Matthew 6:16-18: (16) Moreover when you fast, do not have a sad countenance as the hypocrites do. For they disfigure their faces, so that they may appear to men to be fasting. Truly I say to you, they have their reward. (17) But you, when you fast, anoint your head, and wash your face; (18) So that you may not appear to be fasting to men, but to your Father who is in secret; and your Father, who sees in secret, shall reward you openly.

Introduction

In the Sermon on the Mount, found in Matthew chapters 5-7, the Lord Jesus addresses three important acts of worship: giving, prayer, and fasting. The Lord wanted us to take particular care to remember some important things about each of those acts:

1. First, Jesus simply assumed we would give, pray, and fast. He didn't say, "if you fast," but "*when* you fast." So fasting is not for a few "super-Christians," but rather it's a normal part of our Christian life.

2. Second, the Lord warned against hypocrisy in fasting and against behaving in such a way that people will think we are holy. Jesus says to do these things as a matter of devotion to our Father, to our "Abba."

3. Finally, Jesus encourages us that when we fast to the Lord in secret, **God will reward us openly.**

Let's look at what He says about fasting and then answer some important questions about fasting and the rewards God promises to those who fast.

What is Fasting?

Fasting is simply the practice of going without food for a time, in order to seek God and devote your time and energy to seeking Him in a more intensified way. Fasting was a normal part of life for God's people and many people in the ancient world. Fasting used to be much more common in nearly every branch of Christianity, but I would say that recently fasting has made something of a comeback.

In the ancient world people fasted for many different reasons. We'll have more to say about that in a moment, but in order to understand this passage we need to know that disfiguring yourself or making yourself unkempt was a common way to show that you were fasting or mourning. When Jewish people were in grief they would tear their clothes; some would put on sackcloth, a coarse cloth like burlap. They would throw dust on their heads and some would sit in ashes as a sign of humility. If they added a few tears to the mix, they'd make themselves look even messier.

Now, these were dramatic signs of outward devotion. People who did this wanted you to know that they were devoted to God and that they were

mourning over the things that were affecting their lives or affecting society. There were a number of opportunities to show that you were a man of fasting, because there were annual days of fasting on the calendar. The Pharisees also fasted twice every week.

You may remember the man in the parable Jesus told who justified himself and said, “God, I thank you that I’m not like other people or like this guy over here, I fast twice a week.” Part of that pride was letting folks see you were holy and that you were mourning over the things that displeased God.

So Jesus says quite bluntly that they wanted to **appear** to be fasting, but that being seen in that condition – uncombed, unwashed and clothes messed up, was all the reward they would ever have for their efforts. God said they already **have** their reward. Jesus says that in a true fast we are fasting to God, and so we should appear normal to others. If there is something we should tear, then God says to us in Joel 2:13, “...*tear your heart, and not your garments, and turn to the LORD your God, for He is gracious and merciful...*”

You see, fasting is primarily a private matter in which I express my personal devotion to God. It's a way for me to tell God how much I desire Him, and that I long to be with Him more than I even desire my necessary food. That I desire Him more than I enjoy the good things of life.

Now let's clarify something. Jesus was not *forbidding* public fasts. There are in the Bible examples of what we call public or "*declared*" fasts. A king or a prophet would call a public fast and the people would fast together. Even in the New Testament we see people fasting together. So both public *and* private fasts have their proper place for God's people.

In Matthew 6, Jesus is telling us that our regular fasting, the fasting that all Christians should do, is not to be showy but is to be done to the One who can see everything in secret. We have a wonderful promise from the Lord – that if we fast from the heart, God will reward us openly. He will bless us in ways that are open and obvious. How will He bless us? We can leave that to Him, but He will indeed bless us.

Let's look at some questions about fasting, about how it works and talk a little about how to do it, in the light of the Scriptures.

Seven Questions on Fasting

1. What is fasting?

- Fasting is voluntarily going without food, completely or partially. Sometimes we talk about fasting TV or things like that, and that may be beneficial, but fasting in the Bible means going without food.
- Sometimes it may also include going without liquids for a time. The Jews were commanded by God to fast on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, and not to eat or drink anything at all that day.

2. Why do we fast?

- As we've already seen, we fast to seek God, *not to impress our friends*. If you fast to have people admire you and say "wow" at your exploits, then that is your only reward.
- Second, we fast to seek God, and *not to impress ourselves*. If pride is the most dangerous sin, then one of the most dangerous types of

pride is spiritual pride. May we never feel we have arrived or are better than others because we fasted or prayed more than they.

- Finally, we fast to seek God, and *not to lose weight*. In fact, fasting to lose weight may backfire on you. While fasting may have some health benefits, it is not the answer for my wardrobe problem!

3. How does fasting work?

- We've heard and read many wonderful testimonies of fasting. We've even seen the benefits of fasting in our own lives. As you read the Word you'll see that many of God's heroes and plain old folks like you and me fasted, and then saw God move to help them in their time of trouble. We encourage you to get a concordance and look up all references to fasting in the Bible. You will be blessed.
- But if you were to ask us point-blank, "*How exactly does fasting work?*," then we'd have to say that we don't precisely know. What we mean by that is that there is no Scripture that says, "*Behold, this is why thou shouldest fast unto Me.*" But there are good, Bible principles that *will* help us understand why fasting is spiritually helpful, and why it has the effects it does.

- **One reason fasting is powerful is that it focuses us on the Lord.** This can take several forms.
 - Fasting gives me *more time to seek God*. I free up time if I'm not cooking and eating and cleaning. The Bible says to sow to the Spirit and not to the flesh, and this is one way we can sow more to the Spirit.
 - Fasting also gives me *more time let God search me*. As I give less time to myself and more time to Him, I'm giving Him more time to search my heart and show me things I need to deal with.
 - I also have *more time which I can devote to the Word of God*. Time I would use for meals, I can sow to the Word and feasting on Christ in the Word instead of on my dinner.
 - You might say, "*Well, is it all just a matter of time then?*" No, that's not all it is, but I want to suggest that in our busy society our lack of time with God has become a major factor in making us weaker Christians. Not everyone can spend four hours a day with God in prayer, and I'm not saying that you need to. But in my opinion, the pendulum has swung too far over in the opposite direction, because four **minutes** a day with God isn't

doing much for us. Four minutes isn't even enough to refresh our spirits, much less to let His life and power permeate us.

- The saints of an earlier generation used to sing a hymn that said this: *Shut in with God in a Secret Place / There in the Spirit, beholding His Face / Gaining new power to run in the race / I love to be shut in with God!*
- I hope that we love to be shut in with God, that we love to be with Him in our prayer closet. Fasting will give you the time and the focus you need to be shut in with God, and seek His Face!
- **Another reason fasting is powerful** is that it weans us away from worldly entertainment, and entertainment that will defile you. If you don't know what I mean by that word *defilement*, I mean something that pollutes your spirit and your life.
 - Now, we didn't say entertainment was bad. We didn't say not to relax after work and watch the ballgame. But I will say this: compared to past generations of Christians, we do spend more time and money on worldly amusements and pursuits.

- Not only this, but compared to previous generations, our entertainment is much more immoral and polluting. It robs you of spiritual sensitivity, sears your conscience, and finally it will rob you of your appetite for spiritual things completely.
- Let God get a hold of you in a time of fasting and break the hold, the spell the world has on you. Get into God's Presence and wake up from the devil's nightmare.
- **Finally, fasting is powerful because it keeps your body under subjection.** It keeps your flesh in its proper place. Jesus said the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak! Paul wanted to keep his body under subjection lest he end up being disapproved by God. He said he would treat his body with severity so that it wouldn't get the upper hand over him.
 - A Christian lifestyle that incorporates fasting will keep you from indulging the flesh. And we must do this in order to live the overcoming life Jesus has for us.

- I've believed for a long time that when Jesus said *when you give, when you pray, when you fast*, he was really giving us three keys to overcome the enemies we all have to face.
- What are the three enemies of the believer? Your enemies are: **the world, the flesh, and the devil.** Think about this:
When you *give*... you are overcoming the power of the world, and breaking its grip on you. When you *pray*... you are overcoming the power of the devil. When you *fast*... you are overcoming the power of the flesh to control you.
- For many of us, fasting will be the missing ingredient that will bring us into new freedom and new power in the Spirit.
- Focusing on the Lord, breaking the grip of the world, and keeping the flesh under subjection: these things make fasting a powerful weapon for the Christian. When we fast, God changes us, and having a clean heart will always amplify the intensity of your prayers. This is how fasting works, and this is what makes it powerful.

4. Who should fast?

- Fasting is for Christians. Jesus assumed we would do it. Every Christian should fast at least occasionally. It's a part of the normal Christian life, just like prayer and giving.
- But we don't look at fasting as a duty. **You see, fasting is for people who are in love with Jesus** – people who long to see Him. People who long for Christ, the Bridegroom, and long for His Presence. Jesus' disciples didn't fast when He was here, but **we** fast now. Jesus was asked about this in Luke 5, and He said this:
 - *...He said to them, "Can you make the children of the bridechamber fast while the bridegroom is with them? But the days will come, when the bridegroom shall be taken away from them, and then shall they fast in those days."* (See Luke 5:33-35)
 - In saying this He was teaching us that fasting is for those who long for Him so much that they love Him more than they love their necessary food. They fast to show God that they are more hungry for Jesus than they are for a meal. Some people refer to

this as the Bridegroom Fast. We should fast because we are lovesick for Him and desire His Presence so much.

- We fast because we want more of Him. Sometimes people say they want more of God, but do we really make room for Him? Sometimes you have to throw out some old furniture before you can get something better. What are we willing to move around or just toss so that God can have more of our hearts? Some of us need to have a tag sale in our hearts to make space for Jesus.
- One other thing we want to mention is that fasting is for physically healthy people. In times of national emergency such as we see in the Book of Joel the entire nation was put under a fast: people were recalled from their honeymoons; children, babies and animals were all made to fast. But that was a national emergency. Regular fasting is for those who can tolerate it. If you are very young, or pregnant, or have blood sugar issues, if you're on medication or are elderly, then fasting may not be safe. You should ask your doctor about whether you should fast or how much fasting you can do.
- God knows your heart and there may be other things you can give up so you can pursue Him better. God knows that. We are not trying to

kill you to make you holy. *“Well, praise God! He fasted a lot and was a very holy guy. Of course, he did die from it, but wow – he was so holy!”* Fasting is about your heart, it’s not about you being heroic.

5. What are the different types of fast we see in the Scriptures?

- The typical fast is what we call the normal fast: going without food.
- Another fast is the complete fast – going without food *or* water. Sometimes we call this an “Esther fast,” because this is what Queen Esther did in her great distress. This is an extreme fast because it is dangerous to go without water for that length of time.
- There are also partial fasts. Sometimes people speak about a “Daniel fast.” There were two different partial fasts Daniel did. In one, for example, he didn’t eat any meat, or rich foods or drink any wine.
- Some fasts are supernatural. Moses was on the mountain with God for 40 days with no nourishment at all. That was supernatural so don’t try that unless you are where he was, in the cloud of God’s glory.

6. When should we fast?

The lives of the people in the Bible were written for our example and so we can see when they fasted and what they were *seeking* when they fasted. I believe God encourages us to fast for these reasons, too, just as they did.

- A. *Guidance*: when they didn't know what to do, they fasted to receive guidance. Ezra fasted to find the right way.
- B. *Deliverance*: when the people needed God to rescue them. When Judah was invaded, Jehoshaphat proclaimed a fast and the people came together to seek the Lord.
- C. *Revelation*: Daniel knew the Captivity of God's people in Babylon was going to end, so he prayed and fasted. God sent an angel to give him understanding and the angel explained to him the whole future course of Israel's history.
- D. *Power*: The disciples failed to cast a demon out of a boy. Jesus said, this kind can only come out through prayer and fasting. Some problems are tougher problems than others! Some problems are Chihuahuas but some are Great Danes. If you're not careful, not only will you be running away from the Great Danes, you might end up running away from the Chihuahuas, too! We need to ask God for His

supernatural power, day and night if necessary. The great evangelist John Wesley said, *“Bear up the hands that hang down, by faith and prayer; support the tottering knees. Do you have any days of fasting and prayer? Storm the throne of grace and persevere in it, and mercy will come down.”*

E. *Worship*: The leaders of the Church came together in Acts 13 to fast and minister to the Lord together. This resulted in the birth and commissioning of new apostolic ministries.

F. *Consecration*: To consecrate yourself to God, or to begin a season of ministry and service. Jesus did this and so did many others.

G. *Regular fasting*: To be ready for life and ministry – this is what we call the fasted lifestyle. When that difficult demon popped up, Jesus was ready when others were not. He lived a fasted lifestyle. John Wesley wouldn't ordain anyone who wouldn't fast twice a week.

- a. Sometimes I am asked whether you should fast ahead of a time of ministry, or fast while you are ministering. My preference is to fast before a time of ministry or busyness, not during. This is because the body is weaker while you are fasting.

7. How should I fast? (practicalities of fasting)

If you've never fasted, I would say this: start out slow. Don't begin with a 40-day fast. (Not unless you want our next meeting to be in the hospital!) Start out by skipping a meal and work your way up from there to the point where you can go a whole day on just water or juices. If you are on juices alone, try to avoid things that are too acidic and may upset you. I think if you have a set day for yourself to fast each week your mind and body will get used to that day and it will go easier for you.

Once you can fast for a whole day, you can begin to think about longer fasts like a three-day fast. Assuming you don't have a blood sugar problem, most of the hunger you feel during fasting is psychological. Your body is trained to eat every day, a certain number of times. But there was an ancient saying that man only lives on $\frac{1}{4}$ of what he eats... and doctors live on the rest! A lot of our eating is just out of habit.

Some people get to the point where they fast for a week or even longer. In the Bible some people did partial or even stricter fasts for three weeks or even for 40 days. Jesus himself fasted 40 days.

You should end a fast gradually the same way you got into it. Add things back into your diet gradually and with wisdom. If you don't eat for 14 days and then you go out with the gang to Outback to celebrate the end of your fast, you will again be in the hospital and I will again be visiting you there.

How strict should your fast be? Should you go without food? Should you have juices or maybe just water? That's between you and God. It's God who sees your heart. If you've never fasted then, again, you may want to start out with a partial fast of some kind, a Daniel fast.

When you're fasting be aware that you may need more rest. So don't push yourself to the point of exhaustion. Also, don't condemn yourself if the "potato chip demon" conquers you and you blow it. God is pulling for you and He would want you to get back on the horse, and not give up on fasting.

What to do spiritually when you fast

I suggest that when you fast, especially on longer fasts, you should use your meal times to feast on the Word instead. Let the Word be your food instead

of physical food. This has tremendous benefits. You should also stay humble by serving. Jesus said He had food to eat that His disciples didn't know anything about, and that food was to do the Will of God.

I can recommend a couple of good books on fasting. One is called "*The Hidden Power of Prayer and Fasting*," by Mahesh Chavda. Another one I like which is a bit older is "*Shaping History Through Prayer and Fasting*," by Derek Prince. These books can give you more teaching and more practical pointers than I can in this format.

Let's conclude by looking at what God promises to those who fast.

What does God promise to those who fast?

If we fast with a right heart and with concern for others and for the poor, God promises us the blessings of what He calls His ***chosen fast***. This means the fast that God approves of. In Isaiah 58, the Lord talks about people who were fasting in a wrong spirit, just as the people Jesus talked about who were fasting in a wrong spirit:

(6) Is not this the fast that I have chosen? To loose the bands of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, and to let the oppressed go free, and that you break every yoke? (7) Is it not to deal your bread to the hungry, and that you bring the poor who are cast out to your house? When you see the naked, that you cover him; and that you do not hide yourself from your own flesh?

(8) Then shall your light break forth as the morning, and your health shall spring forth speedily; and your righteousness shall go before you; the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard.

(9) Then you shall thou call, and the LORD shall answer; you shall cry, and he shall say, "Here I am," if you take away from the midst of you the yoke, the putting forth of the finger, and speaking vanity;

(10) And if you draw out your soul to the hungry, and satisfy the afflicted soul; then shall your light rise in obscurity, and your darkness be as the noonday: (11) And the LORD shall guide you continually, and satisfy your soul in drought, and make your bones fat; and you shall be like a watered garden, and like a spring of water, whose waters fail not.

(12) And those who shall be from you shall build the old waste places; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; and you shall be called, “The Repairer of the Breach,” “The Restorer of Paths to Dwell In.”

There are so many wonderful promises for those who will walk in true righteousness,

give the way that God intended,

pray the way God intended, and

fast the way that God intended...

Let’s learn to seek the Lord with fasting, and out of a pure heart, so we can have the reward He is longing to give us: the blessings of God’s Chosen Fast, and blessing of experiencing His Presence in a greater way. For God told us in Jeremiah 29: 13 – *And ye shall seek me, and find me, when ye shall search for me with all your heart.*