

Fasting¹

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FASTING
Week 1
Matthew 6:16-18

When we ponder the notion of fasting, what kind of images do our minds conjure up?

- a. A medieval monk beating himself in the middle of the night in an isolated monastery as somber tones of a Gregorian chant waft.
- b. A hollow-eyed fanatic, or someone who is “odd for God.”
- c. It will make us suffer dreadfully and give us a generally negative experience.

For some Christians, fasting for spiritual purposes is as unthinkable as shaving their head or walking barefoot across a pit of fire. Indeed, fasting sounds almost un-American, with all the advertisements for sumptuous foods and gourmet restaurants that bombard us every day. We even have the Food Network – 24 hours a day devoted to nothing but food.

I think the reason fasting is so misunderstood is due to the famine of contemporary awareness of it. Most of us have never fasted ourselves (going without food before you have your blood drawn doesn't count)! We rarely hear sermons about fasting. Yet, it's mentioned in Scripture more times than even something as important as baptism (fasting is mentioned 77 times; baptism is mentioned 75 times).

Christians in a gluttonous, denial-less, self-indulgent society may struggle to accept and to begin the practice of fasting. Few things go so radically against the flesh and the mainstream of culture. However, we cannot overlook its biblical significance. Of course, some people, for medical reasons, cannot fast. But most of us dare not overlook fasting's benefits in the disciplined pursuit of a Christ-like life.

Defining biblical fasting: “A Christian's voluntary abstinence from food (and possibly from drink as well) for spiritual purposes.”

Today I want us to try and get a grip on what exactly fasting is and why we should practice it. The next two weeks we will examine particular purposes that for which we can fast.

Interestingly, though the Bible has much to say regarding fasting, the only instruction that is given to us is found in our passage in Matthew. We'll look at that in more detail in a moment.

Fasting teaches us a lot about ourselves very quickly. It will certainly prove humiliating to us as it reveals to us how much our peace depends upon the pleasures of eating. It may also bring to mind how we are using food pleasure to assuage the discomforts caused in our bodies by a faithless and purposeless existence, or lack of rest or exercise. If nothing else, though, it will certainly demonstrate how powerful and clever our body is in getting its own way against our strongest resolves.

We could most certainly make a case for abstinence from other things as well. Sometimes we may need to fast from involvement with other people, or from the media, from the telephone, from talking, from sleep, etc. in order to become more absorbed in a time of spiritual activity.

Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones makes this case:

To make the matter complete, we would add that fasting, if we conceive of it truly, must not only be confined to the question of food or drink; fasting should really be made to include abstinence from anything which is legitimate in and of itself for the sake of some special spiritual purpose. There are many bodily functions which are right and normal and perfectly legitimate, but which for special peculiar reasons in certain circumstances should be controlled. That is fasting. There, I suggest, is a kind of general definition of what is meant by fasting.

Strictly speaking, though, the Bible only refers to fasting in terms of its primary sense, that is, abstinence from food. So that is the aspect we will consider. This is what we would consider a normal fast, abstaining from food but not water.

This is perhaps the type of fast Jesus did in the desert, although I am not going to say that Jesus couldn't have gone without water for 40 days either. But it is interesting that we're told in Matt. 4:2, "After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry." It doesn't mention him being thirsty. Luke also tells us that "He ate nothing during those days."

This would be the fast we would most often partake of, since the body can normally function no longer than three days without water.

A second type of fast is a partial fast, where we limit the diet but don't abstain from all food. In Daniel 1:12 we read, "Please test your servants for ten days: Give us nothing but vegetables to eat and water to drink." It was also said of John the Baptist that "his food was locusts and wild honey."

An absolute fast is the avoidance of all food and liquid, even water. We're told that Ezra "ate no food and drank no water, because he continued to mourn over the unfaithfulness of the exiles" (Ezra 10:6). Note here that Ezra was fasting for a purpose, which we will examine in the coming weeks.

There are two instances of supernatural fasts. In Deut. 9:9, Moses wrote of his meeting with God on Mount Sinai: “I stayed on the mountain forty days and forty nights; I ate no bread and drank no water.” Elijah fasted in the same manner (1 Kings 19:8). These are supernatural because a normal person would be dead long before forty days was up.

Our passage in Matthew refers to a private fast (in a sense they are all private) because He says we should fast in a way not to be noticed by others.

Fasting confirms our utter dependence upon God by finding in him a source of sustenance beyond food. Through it we learn by experience that God’s word to us is a life substance, that it is not food (“bread”) alone that gives life, but also the words that proceed from the mouth of God (Matt. 4:4). We learn that we too have meat to eat that the world does not know about (John 4:32, 34). Fasting unto our Lord is therefore feasting – feasting on him and on doing his will.

Thus, when Jesus directs us not to appear distressed and sad when we fast, he is not telling us to mislead those around us. He is instead explaining how we will feel – we really will not be sad. We discover that life is so much more than meat. Our belly is not our god, as it is for others.

I won’t say it is my favorite commercial, but it does intrigue me. There is a Coors Light commercial where the vendor is commenting on finding a good home for the beer he is holding in his hand. The man sitting in the seat, who would like to buy the beer, mentions that he is a brain surgeon. The vendor is not convinced, so the man stands up and says, “Hey, beer man. I can give it a good roof over its head” (as he extends his “beer belly” out and pats it.

No, our belly is not our god! Rather, it is your joyful servant and ours, as Paul tells us in 1 Cor. 6:12-13.

The other aspect we need to consider is this: Jesus expects us to fast. Notice how he begins our passage: “When you fast...” There is no hint of a maybe/maybe not mentality. It is something Jesus expects his disciples to do. It is the same way he starts talking about praying a few verses earlier, and none of us will dispute the validity of prayer.

Also, while eating with Matthew and other “sinners,” he is rebuked for feasting. He makes it clear that while the disciples have him physically present, it was not a time for fasting. When he would go to the Father, then he expects us to fast until he, the bridegroom, returns.

When we regard the notion of Jesus' expectations about fasting, we must not make fasting some legalistic routine. It is a privilege and an opportunity to seek God's grace that is open to us as often as we desire.

FASTING

Week 2

Selected Scriptures

Last week we explored the biblical meaning of fasting, as well as the expectations God has for us in fasting. As in anything, however, it is not enough to do something just because we are commanded to do it. If we do, then fasting becomes nothing more than a weight-loss program, and not a benefit, or a means of grace. That is not to say that we should fast only when we feel like it; we are expected to fast, and therefore, we must fast. Yet, we must have a spiritual purpose for fasting, or we'll be just like the man who told one writer on fasting,

I've fasted on several occasions; and nothing happened. I just got hungry...Several years ago I heard a couple of pastors discussing fasting. On their recommendation I tried my first fast. They said it was commanded in the Bible and should be practiced by every Christian. Being a Christian, I decided to try it. After putting it off for several days, I mustered up enough courage to start. I couldn't go to the breakfast table with my family because I didn't think I would have enough willpower to abstain from eating, so I went on to work. The coffee break was almost unbearable, and I told a little white lie about why I didn't go with the group. All I could think about was how hungry I was. I said to myself, "If I ever get through this day, I'll never try this again." The afternoon was even worse. I tried to concentrate on my work, but all I could hear was the growling of my stomach. My wife prepared a meal for herself and our child, and the aroma of the food was all I could bear. I figured that if I could make it till midnight, I would have fasted all day. I did – but immediately after the striking of the hour of twelve, I dug into food. I don't think that day of fasting helped me one bit.

I think this man was quite right, fasting had not helped him one bit. This man had no purpose for his fast. And without a purpose, fasting can be a miserable, self-centered experience. God didn't intend for us to just beat our bodies, but to do so for the purpose of godliness. There is the goal, the prize, the finish line.

There are a variety of purposes given in the Bible, and we will look at a few of them specifically. It is important to note that **NONE** of the purposes is to earn God's favor. We cannot use fasting as a way to impress God and earn His acceptance. We are made acceptable to God through the work of Christ Jesus, not our work. Fasting has no eternal benefit for us until we have come to God through repentance and faith.

One purpose of our praying is to strengthen our prayers. Calvin wrote: "Whenever men are to pray to God concerning any great matter, it would be expedient to appoint fasting along with prayer." There's something about fasting that sharpens the edge of our intercessions and gives passion to our supplications. Often in the Scriptures fasting has been used by the people of God when there is a special urgency about the concerns they lift before the Father.

READ Ezra 8:21-23

When Ezra was about to lead a group of exiles back to Jerusalem, he proclaimed a fast in order for the people to seek the Lord earnestly for safe passage. They were to face many dangers without military protection during their nine-hundred-mile journey. This was no ordinary matter to be brought to God in prayer. Most of us have faced difficult decisions and trying journeys in our own lives. This is a special matter, and there is great benefit to fasting along with praying. It sharpens the focus of our prayers – helps us to focus on the real issues of prayer. Verse 23 gives us remarkable insight here as well, and if we read casually, it could be overlooked. “So we fasted and petitioned our God about this, and he answered our prayer.”

Now, on the flip side of that, the Bible doesn't teach that fasting is a kind of spiritual hunger strike that compels God to do our bidding. If we ask for something outside of God's will, fasting doesn't cause Him to reconsider. Fasting doesn't change God's hearing, but it changes our prayers.

In a very real way, all the other biblical purposes of fasting relate to prayer. Fasting is one of the best friends we can introduce to our prayer life. Over and over we read in Scripture how men and women fasted and prayed. Yet despite this great resource to our prayer, it seems that very few are willing to enjoy its benefits. I think Arthur Wallis, who wrote *God's Chosen Fast* is right when he says,

In giving us the privilege of fasting as well as praying, God has added a powerful weapon to our spiritual armory. In her folly and ignorance the Church has largely looked upon it as obsolete. She has thrown it down in some dark corner to rust, and there it has lain forgotten for centuries...

It is certainly time for the church to again realize the importance of fasting along with our praying.

A second purpose is to seek God's guidance. Again, this is related to prayer, but specifically in the pursuit of God's guidance, and not just to strengthen our prayers. How many times have we asked ourselves, “I wish I knew God's will for this?”

We performed a very important function in the church today. We ordained and installed elders and deacons to active service. I was reflecting on the process that we undertake for choosing men to serve, and I have to say that what we do doesn't always resemble the Biblical model given to us. In another one of those passages that we could so easily overlook, Paul and Barnabas are seeking guidance in appointing elders to the churches in Lystra, Iconium and Antioch. In Acts 14:23 we read, “Paul and Barnabas appointed elders for them in each church and, with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord, in whom they had put their trust.

David Brainerd, who was the son-in-law of Jonathan Edwards, prayed with fasting for the Lord's leadership regarding his entry into ministry. On Monday, April 19, 1742, he recorded in his journal: "I set apart this day for fasting and prayer to God for His grace; especially to prepare me for the work of the ministry, to give me divine aid and direction in my preparations for that great work, and in His own time to send me into His harvest."

Wow, when I read that, was I ever convicted. I entered the pastoral ministry because many people told me I was gifted in that area. I certainly gave much prayer to it, but I never considered fasting and prayer to truly seek God's guidance in that area. And also, I don't seek God's guidance here in the same manner. Here was a man committed to taking the Gospel to those who had not heard, and his fasting and prayer added an intenseness to his petition, and to open his ears to hear God lead.

Fasting doesn't ensure the certainty of receiving clear guidance from God. Rightly practiced, however, it does make us more receptive to the One who loves to guide us.

The last purpose I want to look at tonight is to fast to express repentance and the return to God. I am lumping this purpose with fasting to express grief for sin because it is important that we move beyond just grief to actual turning away – a change of action. Fasting can represent more than just grief over sin. It also can signal a commitment to obedience and a new direction.

In 1 Samuel 7:6 we see the Israelites expressing repentance through fasting when "they drew water and poured it out before the LORD. On that day they fasted and there they confessed, 'We have sinned against the LORD.'"

There is a lot of talk about confessing and repenting of sin for individuals and for nations, but too often we neglect the call to the church to earnestly repent of corporate sin and turn away from it. Wendy and I were in a church where the pastor had an affair with the secretary. This occurred over a number of years, and most everyone had their suspicions. When the affair finally became public, the only repenting done was by the pastor and the secretary. As I look back on that experience, there was a need for the church to repent before the Lord, because they had seen or suspected sin, and as long as the church continued to grow seemed to overlook it.

How often do we tolerate sin in our midst or even in our own lives because things are going well. Sort of reminds you of our nation as a whole, doesn't it?

In Joel 2:12, God specifically commanded His people to signify their repentance and their return to Him by fasting: “‘Even now,’ declares the LORD, ‘return to Me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning.’”

Surely the most thorough fast ever recorded is the one in Jonah 3:5-8, and it is a fast to express repentance. After God blessed Jonah’s preaching with a great spiritual awakening, we read:

The Ninevites believed God. They declared a fast, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth. When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, took off his royal robes, covered himself with sackcloth and sat down in the dust. Then he issued a proclamation in Nineveh: “By the decree of the king and his nobles: Do not let any man or beast, herd or flock, taste anything; do not let them eat or drink. But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth. Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence.”

Fasting is an excellent way to express repentance, to understand the seriousness of our sin, and show a willingness to turn away from it. However, it can also be in vain without repentance. Fasting can be little more than a “dead work” if we have persistently hardened our hearts to God’s call to deal with a specific sin in our lives. We must never try to immerse ourselves in any spiritual pursuit as an attempt to drown out God’s voice about forsaking a sin. It is a perversion of fasting to try to use it to balance self-punishment for a sinful part of life we want to continue feeding.

Thomas Boston, the great Puritan pastor and writer, said,

In vain will ye fast, and pretend to be humbled for our sins, and make confession of them, if our love of sin be not turned into hatred; our liking of it into loathing; and our cleaving to it, into a longing to be rid of it; with full purpose to resist the motions of it in our heart, and the outbreakings thereof in our life; and if we turn not unto God as our rightful Lord and Master, and return to our duty again.

Again, that is true of any godly pursuit. If it is being to done for penance, or to ease a guilty conscience, then it is being done in vain. Do not think that you will become more spiritual because you fast. We’ll look at an example in Zechariah next week of what God thinks of fasting without aim or purpose, a perfunctory religious activity. It isn’t pleasant.

Again, we must remember that fasting is a privilege and an opportunity to seek God’s grace that is open to us as often as we desire, but we must examine our own hearts and search the deep recesses of our motivations, that we might fast aright.

FASTING
Week 3
Selected Readings

Over the past two weeks, we have been challenged to take a fresh look at the discipline of fasting and its place in the life of the church. We also saw the importance of having a purpose for fasting. We fast not to be saved but because we are saved. There is no meritorious benefit in observing a fast, but it is a God-given means of grace, and, if done with humility and obedience, promises to bring God's gracious blessings to us.

We have examined Biblical examples of fasting to strengthen prayer, to seek God's guidance, and to express grief over sin, repentance and the return to God. Tonight, as we wrap up this series on fasting, I want us to look at fasting to humble oneself before God; to minister to the needs of others; and express love and worship to God.

When we fast with the proper motivation, it is a physical expression of humility before God, just as kneeling or prostrating yourself in prayer can reflect humility before Him. There are times in my own life when I am compelled to my knees, or to my face, in utter humility before God. I must confess that I do not do it enough. Pride is so pernicious within the life of the pastor, and one must seek opportunities to humble ourselves before God.

And just as there are times when you feel the need to express humility by praying on your knees or on your face before the Lord, so there are times when you may want to express a sense of humility before the Lord in every activity throughout the day by fasting.

There is a remarkable passage of Scripture that reflects this humbling through fasting, and it comes when least expected. Turn with me to I Kings 21:20-29. (READ).

Here is one of the most wicked men in all of Israel. The evil he piled up before God was enormous. Yet, when this word came to him from Elijah, there was a difference. Instead of rising up in bitterness and rage at the words of Elijah, he humbles himself through fasting. Maybe more remarkable, God saw his contrite heart and answered him.

When we are confronted by our own sin, either within ourselves, or by someone else, how do we react? Often, I think, it is in indignation and outrage, not in contrition and repentance. Once again, pride comes, and the fall follows quickly. We attempt to exalt ourselves – I think that is what we do when confronted with sin – instead of humbling ourselves before God. Remember His words to us:

“Humble yourselves, therefore, under God’s mighty hand, that he may lift you up (or exalt you) in due time.” 1 Peter 5:6

Another Biblical instance of humbling oneself through fasting is found in Psalm 35. David cries out to God about those who are opposing him. There are times in our lives when we are right. Now I don’t think they come as often as we think they do; nevertheless, there are times when we are right. In those times, opposition can come quickly, whether through deaf ears or out and out contention. Once again there is a valuable lesson to be learned from David.

He had every “right” to be angry with the opposition he faced. However, he handled the situation in a very different manner. We read in verse 13: “Yet when they were ill (speaking against David), I put on sackcloth and humbled myself with fasting.” David knew that a sharp answer or resentment were not the solution. He understood that he must come before God in humility and not based on his “rights.” The church could learn a lesson here. Again, “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.”

The next purpose I want us to look at is fasting to minister to the needs of others. Perhaps you are thinking that practicing a fast fosters tendencies of introspection or independence. Nothing could be further from the truth. Remember, fasting is not some self-centered, self-exalting exercise. What we just looked at should bear witness to that. In the most extensive passage in Scripture dealing exclusively with fasting, God emphasizes fasting for the purpose of meeting the needs of others.

READ Isaiah 58:1-12

That should make you quite uncomfortable, maybe a little fidgety. I know it did me! As I have reflected upon our reasoning for having a church-wide fast, there are many purposes for which we can be fasting. As I have covered each of the purposes so far: to strengthen prayer; to seek God’s guidance; to express grief for sin, repentance and the return to God; to humble oneself before God; and to minister to the needs of the others; each has its own merit in pursuing. As we have called a congregational fast, we are fasting with this in mind: we celebrate mankind being made in the image of God, and decry the wanton taking of life through abortion.

We are going to spend a few moments discussing Isaiah 58, but I want us to see that our day of fast can have each of these purposes in mind as we draw near to God in prayer and fasting. As we pray, it is important that our prayers have the strength and power that is necessary for us to commune with God. We know that God has placed the Planned Parenthood building across the street from US for a reason, and we need to seek God’s guidance as to our ministry there. Each of us

has sin in our lives, and a need to grieve over it, repent of it, and return to God in a new and fresh way. I would also guess that most of us still think too highly of ourselves, and could stand to humble ourselves under the mighty hand of God.

With each of these, we move toward the purpose God gives in Isaiah 58. It is not enough to concern ourselves only with us. Our faith must have expression in doing – specifically towards those among us and those around us, but also those outside us. If we were to stop our fasting before this purpose, we would be like the Jews God is speaking against. “Is this the kind of fast I have chosen, only a day for a man to humble himself? Is it only for bowing one’s head like a reed and for lying on sackcloth and ashes?”

This is where the teaching of Jesus comes in. Our fast is only between God and ourselves, and no one else. We are not to appear distressed and sad – like wearing our humility on our sleeve. We need to remember the other part of that passage: “...do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full.” I am quite sure that Jesus had this passage in Isaiah in mind when He was teaching about fasting.

I can think of no greater purpose for our fast than the words in verses 6 & 7. “Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter – when you see the naked, to clothe him, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?”

We can complain about the awful injustice of abortion, the heinous killing of little children, but we also need to consider the ramifications. If we ask these women to keep their babies, are we willing to feed them, clothe them and nurture them? Do we understand the darkness that hangs over that place, and are we willing to share the light of the gospel of Jesus Christ there? Oh, not in standing in our lower field with signs and placards, but in being Jesus to those who work there!

We do not serve an impotent God, but one who sent His Son to do these very things. Did He not answer John the Baptist’s disciples when they asked, “Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?” by saying, “The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor.” (Luke 7:20, 22) The Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve... Can we do anything less?

And notice in Isaiah what that expresses of God’s people. In verses 8 & 9 we read, “Then your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly

appear; then your righteousness will go before you, and the glory of the LORD will be your rear guard. Then you will call, and the LORD will answer; you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I.”

I have been very convicted of late at the number of times God commands the Israelites to take care of the strangers and foreigners in their land. Somehow we have not translated that to our responsibility to care for the unbeliever, but it is there, plain as day.

Before we leave this purpose, let me make a suggestion to you. One tangible way you could use this fast to minister to the needs of others would be to figure out how much you would have spent on food and give that towards the purchase of the ultra-sound machine.

One last purpose I want to look at is fasting to express love and worship to God. As we have made our journey through the various purposes, perhaps you thought that fasting was only associated with dire circumstances and great trouble. But the Bible also says that fasting may be an act of sheer devotion to God.

In Luke 2 there is an unforgettable woman whose entire life is flashed before us in just three quick verses. Her name is Anna. We read in Luke 2:37, “...She never left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying.” Fasting can be an expression of finding your greatest pleasure and enjoyment in life from God. That’s the case when disciplining yourself to fast means that you love God more than food, that seeking Him is more important to you than eating.

This honors God and is a means of worshiping Him as God. It means that your stomach isn’t your god as it is with some. Instead it is God’s servant, and fasting proves it because you’re willing to sublimate its desires to those of the Spirit.

Christians throughout history have fasted for this purpose in preparation for the Lord’s Supper. In addition to the elements of repentance and humility before God in this kind of fast, it is also intended to help the person focus on adoring the One who is represented in the Supper.

Another variation on this is to spend the mealtime in praise and adoration of God. May we yearn for days when God will cause us to crave the spiritual banquet of worship more than any buffet. Fasting must always have a spiritual purpose – a God-centered purpose, not a self-centered one – for the Lord to bless our fast. Thoughts of food must prompt thought for God. They must not distract us, but instead remind us of our purpose. Rather than focusing the mind on food, we should use the desire to eat as a reminder to pray and to reconsider our purpose.

If we do these things, we will avoid what happened to the Israelites in Zechariah 7:5. The Israelites had held two fasts to commemorate the destruction of the Temple. Since they had returned to the land, and the Temple was being built, they inquired of the Lord whether they should continue the fast. The Lord's response to them was, "Ask all the people of the land and the priests, 'When you fasted and mourned in the fifth and seventh months for the past seventy years, was it really for me that you fasted?'" In reality, these fasts had become empty rituals, not God-centered experiences. May we enjoy this means of grace from God, but may we participate with obedient and purposeful hearts.

I want to close by reading Matthew Henry's comments on this passage.

Let them all take notice that, whereas they thought they had made God very much their Debtor by these fasts, they were much mistaken, for they were not acceptable to Him, unless they had been observed in a better manner, and to better purpose... They were not chargeable with omission or neglect of the duty... but they had not managed [it] aright... They had not an eye to God in their fasting... When this was wanting, every fast was but a jest. To fast, and not to fast to God, was to mock Him and provoke Him, and could not be pleasing to Him... If the solemnities of our fasting, though frequent, long, and sever, do not serve to put an edge upon devout affections, to quicken prayer, to increase Godly sorrow, and to alter the temper of our minds, and the course of our lives, for the better, they do not at all answer the intention, and God will not accept them as performed to Him.

Before we fast we must have a purpose, a God-centered purpose. But even at our best we do not deserve what we desire, nor can we force God's hand. Yet, God promises to see what is done in secret, and to reward us. God will bless a biblical fast by any of His children. And whether or not you receive the blessing you hope for, one thing is sure: If you knew what God knew, you would give yourself the identical blessing that He does. None of His rewards is worthless.