

“Fasting”

“Am I sad? I eat. Am I happy? I eat. Tired? Eat. Angry, depressed, bored? Eat, eat, eat. Do we have a social occasion? We must eat. My life can parody I Thessalonians 5:16-18 ...

“Be eating always, eat continually, and eat in all circumstances.”

(Ben Patterson, Chapel Dean – Hope College)

“The best of all medicines are resting and fasting.”

(Ben Franklin)

“A fast is better than a bad meal.”

(Irish Proverb)

“Feast, and your halls are crowded; Fast, and the world goes by.”

(Ella Wheeler Wilcox)

“Some have exalted religious fasting beyond all Scripture and reason; and others have utterly disregarded it.”

(John Wesley)

“In my research I could not find a single book published on the subject of Christian fasting from 1861 to 1954, a period of nearly one hundred years.”

(Richard Foster, Celebration Of Discipline, p. 47)

Fasting is the third area – after giving and praying – for which Jesus gives a corrective to the hypocritical religious practices typified by the scribes and Pharisees. Fasting has been practiced for various reasons throughout history. Many ancient pagans believed that demons could enter the body through food. When they felt they were under demonic attack they would fast to prevent more evil spirits from gaining access to their bodies.

Zoroaster, Confucius, and the Yogis of India were committed to fasting – often for long periods of time, in which mystical visions and insights are claimed to be received. Plato, Socrates, Aristotle and even Hippocrates all fasted. In modern western society fasting has become popular for purely physical and cosmetic reasons, and is recommended in some diet programs.

The Bible records no teaching or practice of fasting for practical reasons. Legitimate fasting always had a spiritual purpose and is never presented as having any value in and of itself. The only fast commanded in Scripture is the one connected with the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur). On that day all the people were to fast as an act of self-denial. That was a national fast, involving everyone in Israel.

Fasting is unlike giving and prayer because it is NOT commanded by God to us. It is spoken of favorably in both the Old and New Testaments and was practiced by O.T. heroes, N.T. saints, and early church fathers. However, it is shown to be an entirely noncompulsory, voluntary act, not a spiritual duty to be regularly observed. This is exciting because it means that we have freedom in the gospel. Our freedom, however, does not mean license; it means opportunity. Since there are no laws to bind us, we are free to fast on any day, for any length of time, and for any reason we felt led to fast.

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“**When** you fast, 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.
¹⁷ But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, ¹⁸ so that it will not be obvious to men that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.”

Matthew 6:16-18 (NIV)

1. The Problem of Fasting

(Pitfalls, can negate its effectiveness)

a) Fasting is assumed - “when”

“Then John's disciples came and asked him, ‘How is it that we and the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?’ ¹⁵ Jesus answered, ‘How can the guests of the bridegroom mourn while he is with them? The time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them; then they will fast.’”

Matthew 9:14-15 (NIV)

b) Problem of insincerity. (v.16a). *(Exercise in external holiness for show.)*

Two extreme views of eating were held among the Jews of Jesus' day. Many, like the ones mentioned in this passage made an obvious display of fasting. Others believed that, because food is a gift from God, each person would have to give an account to Him on the day of judgment for every good thing he had not eaten. The first group not only was more prevalent but was more self-righteous and proud. Their fasting was not a matter of spiritual conviction but a means of self-gratification.

c) Problem of showmanship (v.16b).

Many Pharisees fasted twice a week, usually on the second and fifth days of the week. They claimed those days were chosen because they were the days Moses made the two separate trips to receive the tablets of law from God on Mount Sinai. But those two days also happened to be the major Jewish market days, when cities and towns were crowded with farmers, merchants, and shoppers. They were, therefore, the two days where public fasting would have the largest audiences.

d) Problem of secrecy (v. 17,18). *(Oil was used for deodorant.)*

Those wanting to call attention to their fasting would wear old clothes, sometimes purposely torn and soiled, dishevel their hair, cover themselves with dirt and ashes, and even use makeup in order to look pale and sickly. Hypocrite comes from a Greek word for the mask used by actors to portray a certain character or mood.

Note: It's not that no one should know about your fast.

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2. The Purpose of Fasting

There are several things that occur when you fast. Fasting is not to be used to strong arm God. That's not the way it works. But there are some things that fasting will do for you. **Let's look at seven together ...**

1. Fasting can secure favor with people around you.

“The king's heart is in the hand of the LORD;
he directs it like a watercourse wherever he pleases.”
Proverbs 21:1 (NIV)

“They said to me, “Those who survived the exile and are back in the province are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been burned with fire.”

⁴When I heard these things, I sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and **fasted** and prayed before the God of heaven. ⁵Then I said: “O LORD, God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and obey his commands, ⁶let your ear be attentive and your eyes open to hear the prayer your servant is praying before you day and night for your servants, the people of Israel. I confess the sins we Israelites, including myself and my father's house, have committed against you. ⁷We have acted very wickedly toward you. We have not obeyed the commands, decrees and laws you gave your servant Moses. ⁸“Remember the instruction you gave your servant Moses, saying, ‘If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the nations, ⁹but if you return to me and obey my commands, then even if your exiled people are at the farthest horizon, I will gather them from there and bring them to the place I have chosen as a dwelling for my Name.’ ¹⁰“They are your servants and your people, whom you redeemed by your great strength and your mighty hand. ¹¹*O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of this your servant and to the prayer of your servants who delight in revering your name. Give your servant success today by granting him favor in the presence of this man.*” I was cupbearer to the king.”

Nehemiah 1:3-11 (NIV)

“In the month of Nisan in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, when wine was brought for him, I took the wine and gave it to the king. I had not been sad in his presence before; ²so the king asked me, “Why does your face look so sad when you are not ill? This can be nothing but sadness of heart.” I was very much afraid, ³but I said to the king, “May the king live forever! Why should my face not look sad when the city where my fathers are buried lies in ruins, and its gates have been destroyed by fire?” ⁴The king said to me, “*What is it you want?*” Then I prayed to the God of heaven, ⁵and I answered the king, “If it pleases the king and if your servant has found favor in his sight, let him send me to the city in Judah where my fathers are buried so that I can rebuild it.”

Nehemiah 2:1-5 (NIV)

Note: Difficult employee, employer, spouse, child, etc.

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2. Fasting helps you to ascertain the will of God.

“While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." ³ So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off.”

Acts 13:2-3 (NIV)

“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.”

Acts 14:23 (NIV)

Note: New job, relationship, direction, geographic relocation, etc.

“At that time I, Daniel, mourned for three weeks. ³ I ate no choice food; no meat or wine touched my lips; and I used no lotions at all until the three weeks were over.”

Daniel 10:2-3 (NIV)

“Then he continued, "Do not be afraid, Daniel. Since the first day that you set your mind to gain understanding and to humble yourself before your God, your words were heard, and I have come in response to them.”

Daniel 10:12 (NIV)

Note: Wisdom, discernment, no need to call all our friends.

3. Fasting brings us to a place of brokenness and humility in our walk with God. (Surrender)

“When they had assembled at Mizpah, 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."

And Samuel was leader of Israel at Mizpah.”

1 Samuel 7:6 (NIV)

“David pleaded with God for the child. He fasted and went into his house and spent the nights lying on the ground.”

2 Samuel 12:16 (NIV)

“So I turned to the Lord God and pleaded with him in prayer and petition, in fasting, and in sackcloth and ashes.”

Daniel 9:3 (NIV)

“Yet when they were ill, I put on sackcloth and humbled myself with fasting. When my prayers returned to me unanswered, ¹⁴ I went about mourning as though for my friend or brother.

I bowed my head in grief as though weeping for my mother.”

Psalm 35:13-14 (NIV)

4. Fasting will help you gain a breakthrough with the Lord.

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After this, the Moabites and Ammonites with some of the Meunites came to make war on Jehoshaphat. ² Some men came and told Jehoshaphat, "A vast army is coming against you from Edom, from the other side of the Sea. It is already in Hazazon Tamar" (that is, En Gedi). ³ Alarmed, Jehoshaphat resolved to inquire of the LORD, and he proclaimed a fast for all Judah. ⁴ The people of Judah came together to seek help from the LORD; indeed, they came from every town in Judah to seek him. ⁵ Then Jehoshaphat stood up in the assembly of Judah and Jerusalem at the temple of the LORD in the front of the new courtyard ⁶ and said: "O LORD, God of our fathers, are you not the God who is in heaven? You rule over all the kingdoms of the nations. Power and might are in your hand, and no one can withstand you. ⁷ O our God, did you not drive out the inhabitants of this land before your people Israel and give it forever to the descendants of Abraham your friend? ⁸ They have lived in it and have built in it a sanctuary for your Name, saying, ⁹ 'If calamity comes upon us, whether the sword of judgment, or plague or famine, we will stand in your presence before this temple that bears your Name and will cry out to you in our distress, and you will hear us and save us.' ¹⁰ "But now here are men from Ammon, Moab and Mount Seir, whose territory you would not allow Israel to invade when they came from Egypt; so they turned away from them and did not destroy them. ¹¹ See how they are repaying us by coming to drive us out of the possession you gave us as an inheritance. ¹² O our God, will you not judge them? For we have no power to face this vast army that is attacking us. We do not know what to do, but our eyes are upon you." ¹³ All the men of Judah, with their wives and children and little ones, stood there before the LORD. ¹⁴ Then the Spirit of the LORD came upon Jahaziel son of Zechariah, the son of Benaiah, the son of Jeiel, the son of Mattaniah, a Levite and descendant of Asaph, as he stood in the assembly. ¹⁵ He said: "Listen, King Jehoshaphat and all who live in Judah and Jerusalem! This is what the LORD says to you: 'Do not be afraid or discouraged because of this vast army. For the battle is not yours, but God's. ¹⁶ Tomorrow march down against them. They will be climbing up by the Pass of Ziz, and you will find them at the end of the gorge in the Desert of Jeruel. ¹⁷ You will not have to fight this battle. Take up your positions; stand firm and see the deliverance the LORD will give you, O Judah and Jerusalem. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged. Go out to face them tomorrow, and the LORD will be with you.'"

2 Chronicles 20:1-17 (NIV)

“There, by the Ahava Canal, I proclaimed a fast, so that we might humble ourselves before our God and ask him for a safe journey for us and our children, with all our possessions. ²² I was ashamed to ask the king for soldiers and horsemen to protect us from enemies on the road, because we had told the king, "The gracious hand of our God is on everyone who looks to him, but his great anger is against all who forsake him."

²³ So we fasted and petitioned our God about this, and he answered our prayer.”

Ezra 8:21-23 (NIV)

Note: Some of you are in need of protection and God is awaiting your fast.

5. Fasting gives us power and authority in the spirit realm.

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“Lord, have mercy on my son,” he said. “He has seizures and is suffering greatly. He often falls into the fire or into the water. ¹⁶ I brought him to your disciples, but they could not heal him.” ¹⁷ “O unbelieving and perverse generation,” Jesus replied, “how long shall I stay with you?”

How long shall I put up with you? Bring the boy here to me.” ¹⁸ Jesus rebuked the demon, and it came out of the boy, and he was healed from that moment. ¹⁹ Then the disciples came to Jesus in private and asked, “Why couldn’t we drive it out?” ²⁰ He replied, “Because you have so little faith. I tell you the truth, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there’ and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you.” *But this kind does not go out except by prayer and fasting.”*

Matthew 17:15-20 (NIV)

Note: Although the phrase “this kind does not go out except by prayer and fasting” is not found in the best manuscripts of Matthew, it is a genuine saying of Jesus and is found in Mark's Gospel (9:29), from which an early scribe probably picked it up and added it to Matthew. However, the last two words of the verse, “and fasting,” are not found in the best manuscripts of any Gospel.

6. Fasting prepares us for new seasons of ministry.

- Moses fasted for 40 days before he led the children of Israel & received the law.
- Jesus fasted for 40 days before He began His ministry.
- Paul fasted before his ministry in Acts 9.

7. Fasting gives us a greater awareness of the Lord.

- Bring you to a place of quiet in your heart before the Lord.
- You’re hungry when you fast. That hunger reminds you that you’re seeking God.

“The king of Britain called for a day of solemn *prayer* and **fasting** because of a threatened invasion by the French in 1756. On February 6, John Wesley recorded in his journal, ‘The fast day was a glorious day, such as London has scarce seen since the Restoration. Every church in the city was more than full, and a solemn seriousness sat on every face. Surely God heareth prayer, and there will yet be a lengthening of our tranquility.’ In a footnote he wrote, ‘Humility was turned into national rejoicing for the threatened invasion by the French was averted.’”

Note: Fasting must be accompanied by prayer or it is simply dieting!

3. The Promise of Fasting (v. 18)

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“Shout it aloud, do not hold back. Raise your voice like a trumpet. Declare to my people their rebellion and to the house of Jacob their sins. ² For day after day they seek me out; they seem eager to know my ways, as if they were a nation that does what is right and has not forsaken the commands of its God. They ask me for just decisions and seem eager for God to come near them. ³ 'Why have we fasted,' they say, 'and you have not seen it? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you have not noticed?' "Yet on the day of your fasting, you do as you please and exploit all your workers. ⁴ Your fasting ends in quarreling and strife, and in striking each other with wicked fists. You cannot fast as you do today and expect your voice to be heard on high. ⁵ 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? Is that what you call a fast, a day acceptable to the LORD? ⁶ "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? ⁷ 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? ⁸ 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. ⁹ Then you will call, and the LORD will answer; you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I. "If you do away with the yoke of oppression, with the pointing finger and malicious talk, ¹⁰ and if you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed, then your light will rise in the darkness, and your night will become like the noonday. ¹¹ The LORD will guide you always; he will satisfy your needs in a sun-scorched land and will strengthen your frame. You will be like a well-watered garden, like a spring whose waters never fail. ¹² Your people will rebuild the ancient ruins and will raise up the age-old foundations; you will be called Repairer of Broken Walls, Restorer of Streets with Dwellings. ¹³ "If you keep your feet from breaking the Sabbath and from doing as you please on my holy day, if you call the Sabbath a delight and the LORD's holy day honorable, and if you honor it by not going your own way and not doing as you please or speaking idle words, ¹⁴ then you will find your joy in the LORD, and I will cause you to ride on the heights of the land and to feast on the inheritance of your father Jacob." The mouth of the LORD has spoken.”

Isaiah 58:1-14 (NIV)

“Food is ultimately not about food, but about God. The meaning of hunger – indeed, of all desire – is to point us to God. We shouldn't be too quick to make hunger go away, for it can teach us much about our frailty, need, and emptiness apart from God. A full stomach can be cause for deep gratitude, or as is so often the case, cause for spiritual dullness and laziness. A little hunger never hurt anyone, but its absence will.”

(Bob Patterson)

In the Spring of 1877 the people of a state got word that there was to be a terrible plague of locusts coming. They knew that the locusts would destroy everything in sight and so on April 26, 1877, the Governor called a state-wide **fast**. The entire state began *praying*. Businesses shut down and people sought the Lord. They prayed for a heat wave and it caused all the locusts to hatch. They then prayed for a cold blizzard to come and it did. The storm killed all the newborn locusts! God responds when His people **fast!**