

Fasting

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

- John Wesley

To most, fasting seems out of place in our current culture. Most likely, there is confusion, apathy, or arrogance when it comes to understanding fasting. Therefore, the following is a guide that will help you and your family think well about the spiritual discipline of fasting.

What does the Scripture say?

Throughout the Bible, fasting refers to abstaining from food for spiritual purposes. More specifically, fasting—typically— involves abstaining from all food, solid or liquid, but not from water. In the forty-day fast of Jesus, it is clear that Jesus ate nothing at all and that toward the end of the fast, he became very hungry. During the fast, Satan tempted Jesus to eat, which shows that the abstaining was from food but not water (Luke 4:2).

In most cases, fasting is a private matter between the individual and God. There are, however, occasional times of corporate or public fasts. The only annual public fast required in the Mosaic law was on the day of atonement (Leviticus 23:27). Also, it was not uncommon for fasts to be called for in times of group or national emergency. For example, when Judah was invaded, King Jehoshaphat called the nation to fast (2 Chronicles 20:1-4). The group fast can be a beautiful and powerful experience if people are united in purpose.

The Scriptures are filled with various accounts of people humbling themselves and going to the Lord in prayer, committed to their sustenance coming from him, not food.

Should Fasting be Considered a Commandment?

“And when you fast, don’t make it obvious, as the hypocrites do, for they try to look miserable and disheveled so people will admire them for their fasting. I tell you the truth, that is the only reward they will ever get. But when you fast, comb your hair and wash your face. Then no one will notice that you are fasting, except your Father, who knows what you do in private. And your Father, who sees everything, will reward you.”

- Matthew 6:16-18

Two factors are essential to consider while thinking about Jesus’ words in Matthew 6.

First, Jesus’ teaching on fasting fits perfectly within the context of his teaching on giving and praying. It is as if there is an assumption that giving, praying, and fasting are all part of the Christian life. To promote giving and praying without recognizing the importance of fasting would misrepresent the text.

Second, Jesus states, “When you fast”. He assumes that people will fast and gives instructions on how to carry it out properly. His intention is to restore proper fasting. Having said this, however, we must realize that these words of Jesus do not necessitate a command. He does not say, “If you fast” or “You must fast”. His word is, very simply, “When you fast,” which is not an imperative, but rather an assumption.

What is the Purpose of Fasting?

It is sobering to realize that the very first statement Jesus makes about fasting deals with the question of motive. To use good things to our own ends is always the sign of false religion. It is easy to take something like fasting and try to use it to manipulate God to do what we want as if fasting is a way to twist his arm.



Fasting must forever center on the Lord, and on him alone. It must be God-initiated and God-ordained. Every other purpose must be subservient to God. Once the primary purpose of fasting is firmly fixed in our hearts, we are at liberty to understand that there are also secondary purposes in fasting.

More than any other discipline, fasting reveals the things that control us. We cover up what is inside us with food and other good things, but in fasting, these things surface. Anger, bitterness, jealousy, strife, fear—if they are within us, they will surface during fasting. At first, there will be a temptation to believe that our anger is due to our hunger; then the realization that the anger is being revealed by the Spirit will settle in.

Another purpose of fasting is that it reminds us that we are sustained “by every word that comes from the mouth of God” (Matthew 4:4). Food does not sustain us; God sustains us. Technology does not sustain us; God sustains us. In Christ, “he holds all creation together” (Colossians 1:17). Therefore, in fasting, we are not so much abstaining from food as we are feasting on the Word of God.

Finally, fasting helps us keep our balance in life. We quickly begin to allow nonessentials to take precedence in our lives. We quickly crave things we do not need until we are enslaved to them. Richard Foster puts it this way, “Our human cravings and desires are like rivers that tend to overflow their banks; fasting helps keep them in their proper channels.”

How Should Fasting be Approached?

1. Have a Plan

Fasting is not merely an act of abstinence but a spiritual discipline used to seek more of God’s fullness in the life of the believer. This means we need to have a plan for how we will approach the time it usually takes to eat a meal. Let’s face it, food is in front of us a good portion of a given day. Therefore, we need a plan to use this time for prayer, meditation, and acts of love toward others.

Practically, your plan needs to be connected to your purpose for the fast. Each fast should have a specific spiritual purpose. Identify your goal and be diligent to replace the time you would eat with a particular practice. As David Mathis says, “Without a purpose and plan, it’s not Christian fasting; it’s just going hungry.”

2. Think of Others

Fasting is no excuse to be unloving to those you are around. Wouldn’t it be counterintuitive for you to be seeking the Lord through fasting while lacking care and concern for others? Fasting well does not neglect others as we turn our attention on the Lord. If anything, those around us should feel more loved and cared for while we fast.

3. Manage Your Attention

During a fast, our attention will be drawn to the growls coming from our stomachs. As this happens, don’t be content to let your mind dwell on the fact that you haven’t eaten. The goal is not to make it through a fast by willpower alone. The goal is to turn your mind’s attention toward the Lord when reminders of hunger creep in. Mathis points out that “Christian fasting turns its attention to Jesus or some great cause of his in the world.” Fasting challenges our ability to keep our mind’s attention and our heart’s desire on the task at hand. It is in these moments that having a plan becomes vital.

¹ Foster, Richard J. *Celebration of Discipline: the Path to Spiritual Growth*. San Francisco: HarperOne, 1978. The overall structure and tone of this guide come from the fourth chapter, “The Discipline of Fasting”, of this work.

² Mathis, David. “Fasting for Beginners.” Last modified August 26, 2015. <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/fasting-for-beginners>. The