

Fasting – Christian Disciplines

Intro: We aren't big into self denial (note the "we"). The Ohio youth rally and the calls I got later. That may have something to do with why we don't talk about fasting very often – that, and we misunderstand Jesus' correction to the Pharisees way of fasting.

When I ask people what they know about fasting, I find the first two things they mention are 1) it isn't commanded and 2) if you do it, you can't talk about it.

Here's the thing: fasting is mentioned throughout the Bible. Maybe... just maybe... we need to talk about this.

I. A History

- A.** When Hannah was taunted by other women because she had no children, she went before God with prayer and fasting. (1 Sam. 1)
- B.** When Nehemiah heard about the fallen, broken down walls around Jerusalem, he fasted and prayed before the God of heaven. In chapter nine, when he confronts Israel with their sins, he has the entire nation fast and pray.
- C.** When Daniel feared that his people would remain forever in captivity and never be returned to their homeland, he approached his God with prayer and fasting.
- D.** Joel calls the nation to turn again to God with prayer and fasting.
- E.** In the Book of Jonah, the people of Ninevah fast and pray, asking God not to carry out the sentence of doom against them and their city.
- F.** When Saul of Tarsus sees Jesus on the road to Damascus, he repents and refuses to eat for three days.
- G.** When the early church appointed elders, they fasted. When those elders sent out missionaries, they fasted.

II. Types of Fast

- A.** In **Deuteronomy 9:9,18** we have what is called an absolute fast. "For 40 days and nights, I neither did eat bread or drink water."
- B.** In Esther, Esther asks Mordecai to call the Jews to a three day, absolute fast.

- i. These were unusual and can't mean what they appear to mean. You can't live without water for more than three days. (No, not even David Blaine)
 - ii. Most fasts in the religious world of the day went from dawn to sunset.
 - iii. Still, this is pretty serious stuff.
- C. Some fasts allowed you to drink, but you didn't eat at all.
- D. Most fasts were the elimination of certain foods or drink. (sugar, simple foods, meats) This allows all the people to fast – even those who are aged, diabetic, etc.
- E. Some fasts are individual fasts but a great many in Scripture are corporate ones.
 - i. 1 Samuel 7 – Samuel called for a national fast.
 - ii. Ezra called for a national fast.
 - iii. Again, Nehemiah, Jonah, and Joel called for a national fast.
- F. Individual fasts are as common as the corporate ones. David, Ahab, Daniel, Anna, Saul and many others fasted alone.
- G. But... why?

III. The Purpose and Power of Fasting

- A. I've often seen fasting misused. Some believe that fasting makes God more likely to do what they want Him to do.
- B. I've seen others who believed that fasting was a way to punish themselves or prove to God that they were sorry (or serious).
- C. God is not impressed by fasting in and of itself. "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? And when you were eating and drinking, were you not just feasting for yourselves?'" (Zech.7:5-6)
- D. Jesus said that when the Pharisees fasted "They appear unto men to fast." (Matt. 6:16-18) He also spoke of the Pharisee who prayed "with himself" in Luke 18:9-14.
- E. The power in fasting is focus.
 - i. Think of how much time is spent in gathering food, preparing food, and eating food.

- ii. When that time is taken to focus on God and His will, or on prayer and our need to communicate with Him... we benefit.
- iii. It is not to make Him do our will... it is to make our will His will. It is to tune into God while turning down the noise of our own desires.
- iv. The weakness we feel when we fast reminds us of our weaknesses and the fact that He has none.

IV. True Fasting

A. When we fast to get our way or when we fast as an act of pride, we anger God. God made sure we got that message in Isaiah 58.

- i. **Isaiah 58:2,3.**
- ii. **Vv.4-5.** Fasting cannot be about us. God requires a change in behavior – a turning from selfishness to sacrifice.
- iii. **Vv.6-11.**
- iv. A true fast has us busy doing good and keeping our eyes and hearts upon Jesus.

B. Lent is the most common time among Christians to fast, but it would be tragic to only fast then. Find what keeps your eyes off Jesus. It could be anything – your phone, internet, cable, hobby, sport, women, men, pride, worry, anger, bitterness...

- i. ... and walk away from it physically and/or mentally.
- ii. Dedicate that time and space to God.
- iii. Determine to do good works during that time.
- iv. Spend much of that time in communication with God.

C. Ever noticed how sometimes your shoulders can tense up and be up there around your ears? You relax them only to have them creep back up again? It takes training to notice when you are getting tense and react to it.

- i. And it takes training to learn what is taking your eyes and heart off Jesus and immediately react by handing it over to Him and giving Him the gift He most wants...
- ii. Your presence.