



## The Spiritual Discipline of Fasting

August 20, 2023 | Matthew 9:14-15, Matthew 6:16-18, Joel 2:11-15

God has issued you an invitation. That invitation is to enjoy His presence and His fellowship. Spiritual disciplines are a means, not the end. In the last few weeks I have showed you Biblically:

- Spiritual disciplines are a means, not the end. The end is closeness to Jesus and conformity to be like Him.
- Worship is a spiritual discipline, both personal and congregational.

*Today we learn that fasting is a spiritual discipline, a means to humble oneself before God.*

In his book, *Celebration of Discipline*, Richard Foster argues that the most important text in the Bible for the priority of fasting in the Christian life is Matthew 9:14-15.

**Matthew 9:14–15 (NASB95):** <sup>14</sup> Then the disciples of John came to Him, asking, “Why do we and the Pharisees fast, but Your disciples do not fast?” <sup>15</sup> And Jesus said to them, “The attendants of the bridegroom cannot mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them, can they? But the days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast.”

John Piper responds to Foster’s point:

Now that last sentence is the sentence that Foster said shows that in Jesus’s mind, when He is taken away, that is, when He dies and ascends to the Father, there will be fasting. Therefore, the context of fasting in Jesus’s mind is longing for the not yet of the kingdom.

While He was here, they didn’t fast because the bridegroom was present. But when the bridegroom was taken away to come a second time there is this ache in the heart of God’s people. Fasting is a physical exclamation point at the end of the sentences: “I need You! I want You! I long for You! You are my treasure! I want more of You! Oh, for the day when You would return! Maranatha! Come, Lord Jesus!”

Bill Bright, CRU’s co-founder, believed fasting played a vital role in what God did through him and through CRU as a ministry. He listed several benefits he gained from fasting:

- Fasting is a biblical way to truly humble yourself in the sight of God. King David said, “I humbled myself with fasting” (Psalm 35:13; see Ezra 8:21).
- Fasting enables the Holy Spirit to reveal your true spiritual condition, resulting in brokenness, repentance and a transformed life.
- Your confidence and faith in God will be strengthened. You will feel mentally, spiritually and physically refreshed.

## The Purpose for Fasting

Definition - “to be empty” a specific, intentional abstention from food for the purpose of humbling oneself and seeking God.

Circumstances in the Bible in which believers sought God through the spiritual discipline of fasting:

1. **To prepare for ministry.** Jesus spent forty days and nights in the wilderness fasting and praying before He began God’s work on this earth. He needed time alone to prepare for what His Father had called Him to do (Matthew 4:1-17; Mark 1:12-13; Luke 4:1-14).
2. **To seek God’s wisdom.** Paul and Barnabas prayed and fasted for the elders of the churches before committing them to the Lord for His service (Acts 14:23).
3. **To show grief.** Nehemiah mourned, fasted, and prayed when he learned Jerusalem’s walls had been broken down, leaving the Israelites vulnerable and disgraced (Nehemiah 1:1-4).
4. **To seek God’s intervention.** Mordecai and the Jews fasted upon hearing news of Haman’s wicked plot for their extermination (Esther 4:3).
5. **To seek deliverance or protection.** Ezra declared a corporate fast and prayed for a safe journey for the Israelites as they made the nine-hundred- mile trek to Jerusalem from Babylon (Ezra 8:21-23).
6. **To repent.** After Jonah pronounced judgment against the city of Nineveh, the king covered himself with sackcloth and sat in the dust. He then ordered the people to fast and pray. Jonah 3:10 says, “When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, He relented and did not bring on them the destruction He had threatened.”
7. **To gain victory.** After losing forty thousand men in battle in two days, the Israelites cried out to God for help. Judges 20:26 says all the people went up to Bethel and “sat weeping before the Lord.” They also “fasted that day until evening.” The next day the Lord gave them victory over the Benjamites.
8. **To worship God.** Luke 2 tells the story of an eighty-four-year-old prophetess named Anna. Verse 37 says, “She never left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying.” Anna was devoted to God, and fasting was one expression of her love for Him.
9. **Other examples:**
  - David fasted to ask God to intervene because of injustice (Psalm 35:13). In 2 Samuel 12:16-17, 23, he fasted to ask for a miraculous healing — a request God did not grant.
  - **1 Samuel 7:6 (KJV):** And they gathered together to Mizpeh, and drew water, and poured it out before the LORD, and fasted on that day, and said there, “We have sinned against the LORD.” And Samuel judged the children of Israel in Mizpeh.
  - **2 Chronicles 20:3 (KJV):** And Jehoshaphat feared, and set himself to seek the LORD, and proclaimed a fast throughout all Judah.

### 1. Seeking God

### 2. Self examination

### 3. Spiritual cleansing

### 4. Spiritual renewal

### 5. Seeking God's wisdom and guidance

## The Practice of Fasting

Jesus taught His disciples that insincere religious practices are never acceptable to God. When we fast, we must do so with a sincere motive.

**Matthew 6:16–18 (NASB95):** <sup>16</sup> “Whenever you fast, do not put on a gloomy face as the hypocrites do, for they neglect their appearance so that they will be noticed by men when they are fasting. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. <sup>17</sup> But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face <sup>18</sup> so that your fasting will not be noticed by men, but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you.”

- a. **Definition** – “to be empty” a specific, intentional abstention from food for the purpose of humbling oneself and seeking God.
- b. **Degree** – absolute, liquid, or partial
- c. **Duration** – 1 day, 3 day, 7 day, 14 day, 3 week, 40 days

(Some choose a partial fast of one meal per day.)

Are there reasons not to fast, such as health concerns? (from the Bill Bright website) There are certain persons who should NEVER fast without professional supervision. For example:

- Persons who are physically too thin or emaciated
- Persons who are prone to anorexia, bulimia, or other behavioral disorders
- Those who suffer weakness or anemia
- Persons who have tumors, bleeding ulcers, cancer, blood diseases, or who have heart disease
- Those who suffer chronic problems with kidneys, liver, lungs, heart, or other important organs
- Individuals who take insulin for diabetes, or suffer any other blood sugar problem such as hyperglycemia
- Women who are pregnant or nursing

In conclusion, fasting and prayer are the only disciplines that fulfill the requirements of 2 Chronicles 7:14: “If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land.” If you fast, you will find yourself being humbled. You will discover more time to pray and seek God's face. And as He leads you to recognize and repent of unconfessed sin, you will experience special blessings from God.

“Fasting helps to express, to deepen, and to confirm the resolution that we are ready to sacrifice anything - to sacrifice ourselves - to attain what we seek for the kingdom of God.” – *Andrew Murray*