

PRAYER & FASTING



Growing in grace through the discipline of prayer and fasting

FASTING

Fasting is not a major emphasis in the teachings of Jesus, nor the Apostles, nor of the writers of the new testament. However, it has been a regular **practice** of the church. Why? Because fasting is very useful when it helps you move towards the goal of all Christians – to know Jesus and have faith in Him. If fasting does not serve this purpose then it is a useless religious exercise that only encourages the work of the flesh.

When we approach fasting as a religious exercise we can easily fall into a few traps. One trap is when we think our fasting will impress God; or move Him to do something on our behalf. Or we think fasting will make us more spiritual or prove our spirituality. Fasting does not make you more spiritual. Fasting does not impress God and it does not move His hand. Faith in Jesus pleases God. Faith in Jesus moves God. And Jesus makes you more spiritual.

Another trap is focusing on fasting itself rather than the purpose for fasting. In this trap fasting becomes about what you can and cannot eat. Your energy is given mostly to getting through the fast. In other words, you are focused on the mechanics of fasting rather than the person of Jesus. When you fast this way, the best part of fasting is

coming off of it. Rather than growing in your relationship with the Lord, you dream about what you will eat when the fast is over.

So, if fasting as a religious exercise is useless, why do followers of Jesus fast?

FASTING IS FEASTING

When Jesus fasted in the wilderness, the devil tempted Him to turn stones into bread. Jesus responded by quoting Deuteronomy 8:3, "Man shall not live by bread alone but by every word that comes from God's mouth." This was such an important test for Him prior to His ministry.

Why? Because the Messiah was One who would find His delight in the Lord (Isaiah 11:3). The key to eternal joy was prophesied by David, "delight yourself in the Lord and He will give you the desires of your heart." (Psalm 37).

When the Lord is your foremost and highest delight then your heart is always satisfied, at peace and full of joy. "For the LORD God is a sun and shield; The LORD gives grace and glory; No good thing does He withhold from those who walk uprightly." (Psalm 84:11)

There is nothing good about Himself that He will withhold from you. This is an incredible gift and promise from the Lord. Unfortunately, we are too easily tempted to think this promise is only for us after we die and are with the Lord in heaven. The truth is that the Lord can be our greatest delight now.

When Jesus and His disciples were passing through Samaria they stopped at a well (John 4). The disciples went into town to buy food. Jesus remained at the well and had a life changing conversation with a woman who had come to get water. Upon returning with food, the disciples urged Jesus to eat. Despite having traveled all day without eating, Jesus had no interest in food. He told His confused disciples, *"I have food to eat that you do not know about."*

*discover a satisfaction that surpasses the
satisfaction that comes from anything else*

They thought someone had secretly brought Him food without telling them. However, Jesus meant that He was so enjoying the divine encounter that God had arranged with this woman from Samaria and that He had more satisfaction from this than any meal could provide. He was so enjoying His Father and doing His Father's will that He literally had no appetite for anything else at that moment.

This is the kind of relationship that is available to every follower of Jesus. We can delight ourselves in the Lord – and discover a satisfaction that surpasses the satisfaction that comes from anything else including food. This is not to imply that we will never eat food. But it most definitely means that nothing, including food, has a hold on our desires. We are certainly free to enjoy all the good things God has provided in His creation. There is a reason God designed food to taste good. It is not just for our nutrition but also for our enjoyment. God has designed your body so that you get to enjoy nourishing it at least 3 times a day! Hallelujah!

*Fasting gives you opportunity to
practice finding satisfaction in the Lord*

But you should also be free to abstain from the pleasures of God's good creation. Abstaining from good things like food should be easy. Obviously you can only abstain from food for a short period of time as your body needs it to stay alive. But I am not talking about your survival, I am talking about your **desires**. Abstaining from food for a short period of time is not difficult because of your body's need to survive (your body is perfectly capable of surviving days without food). What makes fasting hard is that our desire for food is so strong that we find it emotionally painful to deny the fulfillment of these desires even for a short period of time.

Your desires are so strong and your flesh's hatred of being denied its pleasures is so intense that your body and mind will nag you and make you miserable in an attempt to break you of self discipline when you decide to abstain from anything that brings you pleasure.

This is why fasting is such a useful exercise for followers of Jesus. It helps you see the hold your own desires have over you. And it gives you opportunity to practice finding satisfaction in the Lord.

Jesus said that whoever would follow Him must deny Himself, pick up his cross and follow Him. This is the true fast – to lay down a life oriented towards pleasing yourself and follow the One who gives the best kind of life – a life that delights in the Lord. The purpose of fasting food is to help better align yourself with this. Fasting is a very practical and powerful opportunity to practice saying no to your desire to enjoy food so that you can discover the greater joy of enjoying your relationship with God.

Fasting without prayer is just a diet

This is why the primary focus of fasting is prayer. Fasting without prayer is just a diet. Every hunger pain, every desire for a tasty morsel is your opportunity to turn your attention towards the Lord and find the same "food" that Jesus spoke of.

FASTING IS FOLLOWING

Fasting is also a great opportunity to start some new habits in your life. When Jesus said that He had “food” that the disciples did not know about, he went on to explain that this food was doing the will of His Father. Jesus enjoyed doing that which pleased the Lord. It energized Him more than food energized His body.

Fasting frees up a lot of your time - the time it takes to buy food, prepare the food and eat the food. Rather than use that extra time doing something that distracts you from the discomfort of fasting (like TV, social media, the internet, your phone), consider using some of that time doing something that would please the Lord.

The prophet Isaiah rebuked God’s people for fasting as a religious exercise without considering the condition of their own hearts. But true fasting is about a heart change where we move away from selfishness toward taking delight in what pleases the Lord. Isaiah was speaking to a people who were living selfishly. And it was evident in their fasting. They fasted food and therefore felt like God should do something for them in return. In other words their fasting was really just self serving. And they were upset because God did not seem to notice their fasting – proving their wrong motives!

Fasting is not about getting God to do something for you. Fasting is about denying your own desires to find the delight of the Lord. The Lord says through Isaiah (chapter 58),

*"Is this not the fast which I choose,
To loosen the bonds of wickedness,
To undo the bands of the yoke,
And to let the oppressed go free
And break every yoke?
"Is it not to divide your bread with the hungry
And bring the homeless poor into the house;
When you see the naked, to cover him;
And not to hide yourself from your own flesh?"*

David writes in Psalm 40 that *"I delight to do Your will, O my God."* The writer of Hebrews quotes Psalm 40 and says this describes the attitude of Jesus (Hebrews 10:5-9). Again, fasting is an opportunity to align our hearts with the attitude of Jesus in delighting to do the will of God.

FASTING BREAKS STRONGHOLDS OF UNBELIEF

Jesus said that some kinds of unbelief only get broken through prayer and fasting. Matthew records an interesting interchange between a man whose son was sick and demonized, the disciples and Jesus. The man brings his son to the disciples and asks them to help. The disciples try

and fail. Shortly afterwards, Jesus is walking towards them and the man engages Jesus and tells Him about the disciples failed attempt. The man then pleads with Jesus to heal his son.

Jesus laments their lack of faith and proceeds to cast out the demon and heal the boy. When the disciples ask Jesus why they failed, He responded, *"Because of the littleness of your faith; for truly I say to you, if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move; and nothing will be impossible to you. But this kind does not go out except by prayer and fasting."* (Matthew 17:14-21)

Jesus says their faith is little, yet proceeds to say that if they had faith like a mustard seed (which is the smallest of seeds) that nothing would be impossible for them. I think when Jesus says "littleness of faith" He means the poor quality of their faith. He then says that if they had even a little genuine faith they could do anything. A large amount of poor faith is not nearly as powerful as a small amount of genuine faith. What was poor about their faith?

Mark gives us some additional insight. When he recorded this incident, he includes an additional exchange between Jesus and the man. The man pleads with Jesus to heal his son with the words "if you can." Jesus is shocked and responds "'If You can?' All things are possible to him who believes!" To which the man cries out, "I believe, help my unbelief." (Mark 9:23-24)

This is a confession of poor faith. I believe, I just do not fully believe. I believe that God *can* heal, but I am not fully persuaded that He *will* heal. This man does the right thing, he asks for help that his faith may become genuine.

Jesus then tells His disciples that there are kinds of unbelief that are only overcome through prayer and fasting. I do not think that Jesus is saying that fasting itself breaks unbelief. I think His point is that to receive the grace that overcomes this kind of unbelief you need intimacy, humility and a surrendered life. Prayer and fasting is an important discipline that will help you learn to receive such grace.

A FEW TIPS FOR FASTING

Here are a few practical tips for fasting that can help you, especially if you are new to fasting.

1. Set a specific time and place to meet with the Lord during your fast. Remember, the reason to fast is to pray and be with the Lord.
2. Keep a journal. This will help you capture and remember what you learn during your fast. You may be surprised how rich it is and you will want to keep it to periodically remind yourself.

3. Choose the type of fast you will do. The most common fasts include:
 - *Water and Liquids Only*. Although this can be done for extended periods, it is generally only recommended for shorter time periods.
 - *Daniel Fast*. Only drink water and eat vegetables. The idea is to eat basic and simple and avoid any of the more pleasurable foods, especially meats, sides, alcohol and desserts.
 - *Day Fast*. Fast all food during the day and drink only water and other liquids. Have a simple meal at night.
4. Give up caffeine and alcohol, and eat clean for several days before your fast (get headaches and tiredness out of the way before you start your fast).
5. At the end of your fast ease back into eating food as it is easier on your stomach and digestive system.
6. Drink lots of water.
7. Get plenty of sleep.

A BLESSING

May your heart find satisfaction in the goodness of God. May your heart be guarded with peace casting your cares upon Him. May you be strong in grace. May the joy of His Presence fill your heart and mind. God is with you and loves you with an unbreakable and everlasting love.

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