

## ***Acts of Devotion that Glorify God*** ***-FASTING-***

### ***Matthew 6:16-18***

The concern in verses Matthew 6:16-18 has more to do with the motive behind fasting than the actual practice itself; however, the words “WHEN you fast” imply that Jesus expected that His disciples would fast.

### ***Fasting in the Old Testament (OT)***

People fasted for numerous reasons in the OT.

They fasted:

- 1) when **mourning** over a death (Judg. 20:24-26; I Sam. 31:13; II Sam. 1:12; 3:33-35).
  - 2) to express **repentance** over personal sin or the sin of others (I Sam 7:6; Dan. 9:3-6).
  - 3) to express **sorrow** over calamity (Neh. 1:3-6).
  - 4) in times of **impending disaster** (Jon. 3:5-9; Est. 3:13-4:3; Joel 2:15).
  - 5) when they were **burdened with great cares** (II Chron. 20:1-4).
  - 6) when they were **seeking guidance** from God (Ezr. 8:21-23; II Chr. 20:3; cf. Matt. 4:1-4) or **during special times of prayer** (II Sam. 12:16-23; cf. Matt. 17:21; Acts. 13:2-3).
- The most prominent type, and the one that is singular to the OT is fasting that expressed submission to God. It was referred to as “afflicting the soul” (Lev. 16:29-31; Ps. 35:13; Isa 58:3-5; Zech. 8:19, etc.). David said that he humbled his soul with fasting (Psa. 35:13; 69:10). Fasting was a renunciation of self (Ps. 35:13; Ezr. 8:21; Isa 58:3) where the individual took the attitude of a mourner (I Ki, 21:27; Neh. 9:1, etc.). It is the sacrifice of personal will which gave fasting its value.
  - Although there are numerous references to people fasting, not many fasts were actually commanded. There was only one fast prescribed by God in the Law of Moses – the fast done on the Day of Atonement, a day designated for national repentance (Lev. 16:29 ff; 23:27 ff.; Nu. 29:7). Then after the destruction of Jerusalem, four more fast days were set aside to remember the disaster (Zech. 7:3, 5; 8:19).
  - Fasting lasted for different lengths of time. Most fasts only lasted from sunup to sunset (Judg. 20:26; I Sam. 14:24; II Sam. 1:12), but some were longer (I Sam. 31:13; I Ki. 19:8). At times people fasted by abstaining from certain types of foods. At times it was the total abstinence of all foods. Sometimes liquids were also abstained from (Est. 4:16; Act 9:9). In Psalm 109:24 the effects of longer periods of fasting are recorded – “My knees are weak from fasting, and my flesh has grown lean, without fatness.”
  - Unfortunately, over time fasting was practiced in hopes of manipulating God. In Jesus’ day the Jews (particularly the Pharisees) observed prescribed fasts twice a week which were thought to be highly meritorious (cf. Lk. 18:12). As an outward form, fasting also became a means of self-exultation instead of an expression of true humility. In Matthew 6:16 Jesus warned against putting on “a gloomy face as the hypocrites do” or neglecting one’s appearance to be noticed by men. Such practices were condemned (Jer. 14:12; Isa 58:1-6), and the importance of moral action by loving the poor and feeding the needy was emphasized instead (Zech. 7:5-10; also see Zech. 8:19; Joel 2:13).

***Fasting in the New Testament (NT) - selected texts******Matthew 3:16–4:4***

Matthew 3:16 states that after being baptized, Jesus came up out of the water and the heavens opened and the Holy Spirit descended on Him like a dove. The visible manifestation of the Spirit tied Jesus to the Servant in Isaiah (Isa 42:1-4), identifying Him as the promised Messiah.

Matthew 4:1 begins with the word “then” which ties the three temptations that follow His baptism. The same Spirit that had descended upon Jesus now leads Him into the desert to meet the great adversary.

Of interest to us is that Jesus’ temptation included fasting. His fast for 40 days paralleled the 40 years of testing Israel experienced in the desert. Both the hunger Jesus experienced and that which Israel experienced taught a lesson - “You shall remember the whole way which the LORD your God has led you in the wilderness these forty years, that He might humble you, testing you, to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep His commandments or not. He humbled you and let you be hungry, and fed you with manna . . . that He might make you understand that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by everything that proceeds out of the mouth of the LORD” (Deut.8:2-3). In other words, fasting was part of the preparation necessary for their appointed work. It was the method used by God to test the people’s obedience and make them realize their dependence upon Him. It is significant that at the end of the forty days of fasting Satan tempted Christ to turn stones into bread. Jesus replied from Deuteronomy 8:3, “Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God.” Jesus’ food was to do the will of the Father who had sent Him (Jn. 4:34), and His response during fasting made that apparent.

Jesus’ fasting also paralleled and contrasted the 40 days of fasting experienced by Moses (Exo. 34:28; Deut. 9:9). Moses, the mediator of the old covenant, fasted as he awaited revelation from God. Jesus, the mediator of the new covenant, also fasted but, unlike Moses, He had already received revelation for He “came from above and therefore knew the things of God (Jn. 3:11-13).

Jesus was standing on the threshold of the most important event in the history of the world; the salvation of man was dependent upon His success in fully obeying God. At the very onset of His ministry, God willed that Jesus’ obedience be tested as Satan tempted Him to abandon the path of suffering and the cross. Out of all the ways that Jesus could have prepared for this world defining set of temptations, He was led to fast! Although the situation was unique to Him, the fact that even Jesus fasted should surely make us think.

***Matthew 9:14-17***

In this section of Scripture, the disciples of John the Baptist came to Jesus and asked why Jesus' disciples didn't fast. Jesus replied by saying, “The attendants of the bridegroom cannot mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them, can they?” Fasting was associated with mourning or was an expression of sorrow or desperation. It was something people did when they were distraught or distressed. But that's not the situation with the disciples of Jesus. Jesus’ coming was like the coming of the bridegroom at a wedding feast. It was a time of joy and celebration. Fasting was incongruent with the presence of the bridegroom(Jesus) in their midst.

The metaphor of the bridegroom had already been used by John the Baptist who saw himself as the “best man” and Jesus as the groom (Jn. 3:29), so choosing this illustration would no doubt resonate with John’s disciples who came to ask about fasting. However, the picture of the bridegroom also has deep roots in the Old Testament where God is called the Bridegroom of His people (Isa. 54:5-6; 62:4f.; Jer. 2:2; 3:20; Ezek.

16:8; Hos. 2:19f.). Now His Son, the Messiah, the one who the nation had been waiting for, has come and claims to be the Bridegroom of God's people (cf. Matt 22:2; 25:1; II Cor. 11:2; Eph. 5:23-32; Rev. 19:7, 9; 21:2). Such an event is too exhilarating, too wonderful, too joyous to be mingled with fasting. The absence of fasting among Jesus' disciples was a witness to the significance of the coming of Christ.

Jesus continued, "But the days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast." "Then" is the period that we now live in; it began with Jesus' death and will continue until His return. Evidence for this is in the fact that the early church fasted (cf. Acts 13:1-3; 14:23; 2 Corinthians 6:5; 11:27), and that Jesus pictured His second coming as the arrival of the bridegroom to receive His wife (the church-Matt. 25:1-13).

A second illustration is also given in Matt. 9:16-17, "But no one puts a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment; for the patch pulls away from the garment, and a worse tear results. Nor do people put new wine into old wineskins; otherwise the wineskins burst, and the wine pours out and the wineskins are ruined; but they put new wine into fresh wineskins, and both are preserved."

It was common knowledge that a new piece of cloth, if used to mend older, well-shrunk material would pull away from the clothing when washed and create an even bigger tear. Likewise, if new, unfermented wine was put in an old wineskin, the gases released in the fermentation process would stretch the brittle skin beyond its capacity and it would split. New wine needed to be put in a new wineskin that still had the elasticity necessary to expand as the wine fermented.

The newness that Jesus brought could not be patched or poured into Judaism. New forms had to accompany the new situation introduced by the coming of the Bridegroom. Although this is true in a general sense, it is used to explain why the disciples weren't fasting. The disciples of John and the Pharisees were fasting in accordance with Jewish custom, but these old wineskins couldn't contain the new wine introduced by the coming of Christ.

What's the difference between the fasting of Judaism and the "new" fasting of the church as we await Christ's return?

The difference is this: The Jews fasted because they yearned for revival, an awakening, or deliverance from corruption. They awaited the coming of Messiah and the fullness of joy He would bring. The fullness that we are longing and fasting for has already appeared in history. The day of salvation has dawned! We have been delivered from the corruption of the world. We have been made partakers of the Holy Spirit and have tasted the powers of the age to come (Heb. 6). We have seen the glory of God in the face of Christ (2 Cor.4:6) and we know that when He appears, we will be like Him (1 Jn. 3:2). As Paul says, "having the first fruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our body" (Ro.8:23). We have the hope of resurrection which gives us victory over death (I Cor. 15:55-57). We fast because we long for the consummation of joy to arrive.

#### ***Acts 13:1-4***

In Acts 13:2 we read that the church was fasting. The reason for their fast is not stated, but judging by what happened we may assume that they were fasting to seek the leading of the Holy Spirit in the direction of their mission as a church.

There are three observations we can make that could aide us in the way we fast:

1) Fasting was done by a group together. Jesus talks about private fasting and fasting for the wrong motives, but when the motives are right then fasting as a group was a practice of the early church.

2) The purpose was to discover God's will and to receive His guidance. In verse 2 it says: "while they were ministering to the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said . . ." Many of the questions we have are not explicitly answered in the Bible. The ones that are clearly written don't need prayer to discern. Fasting was practiced to seek God's guidance in such matters.

3) The result was world changing. "This moment of prayer and fasting resulted in a mission's movement that would make Christianity the dominant religion of the Roman Empire within two and a half centuries and would yield 1.3 billion adherents of the Christian religion today with a Christian witness in virtually every country of the world. Furthermore, 13 of the 29 books of the New Testament were the result of the ministry that was launched in this moment of prayer and fasting." (Piper)

We find a similar illustration in the OT. In II Chronicles 20 the enemies of Judah came against them to make war. It was a terrifying horde of men who would surely destroy the people of God if left unchecked. In verses 3 and 4 it says, "Jehoshaphat was afraid and turned his attention to seek the Lord; and proclaimed a fast throughout all Judah." The next day when the people went out they discovered that the invading armies had fought one another and destroyed themselves. Instead of being destroyed themselves, the enemy was wiped out and plundered. Fasting changed the course of history.

### ***Conclusion:***

- There is no command to fast in the NT. If fasting was an essential Christian practice, one would expect to find it in places like Romans 14 or Colossians 2 where ascetic and ritual practices of the church are mentioned. Furthermore, we would expect it mentioned in Hebrews – a book written from the context of a Jewish perspective of life. But even Hebrews leaves fasting out, though it mentions prayer, thanksgiving, and doing good as sacrifices that please God (Heb. 13:16). Nevertheless, whether it is commanded or not, Jesus assumes His disciples would fast and said that God promises to reward their fasting (Matt. 6:18). It is even possible that the treasure of Matthew 6:19-20 that Jesus tells us to store in heaven is, at least in part, the fruit of unhyprocritical fasting, praying and giving, while seeking the reward of men results in storing up treasure on earth (see verses 1-18); in Jesus' words they "have their reward in full" (Matt 6:2, 5, 16).
- The New Testament approaches fasting from a much different perspective than the Old. Fasting is still an act of submission to God but it is never simply an external act, nor is it practiced on specific fast days or as a part of a religious system; rather, it is done voluntarily as a symbol of the attitude of our heart. Most significantly, fasting is no longer primarily associated with mourning, but with joy as an expression of our longing for our Bridegroom's return.
- From the above observations, we might decide to fast:
  - (1) when we want God to reveal what is in our hearts
  - (2) as we prepare for our appointed work
  - (3) to express our longing for the return of Christ
  - (4) to seek God's guidance for direction, or in any circumstances where we desire to express humility before God and submission to His will.

Just as praying on our knees, lifting our hands, or prostrating ourselves before God are legitimate external expressions of our heart when praying, so fasting is an outward expression of our heart's desire before God.

**Should I fast?**

Fasting is not mandatory for Christians, though it is not forbidden either. As we have seen, it was practiced by the early church when the need arose. It would not be inappropriate to fast for any of the reasons mentioned above. However, one should be careful not to fast to try to look spiritual or see fasting as a means of becoming spiritual. To try to be spiritual through fasting is never proper motivation. True fasting is to express contrition, humility, longing, and submission to the will of God.

Some practical steps in fasting:

**1) Always ask your doctor if you are in good enough condition to fast, and get his/her advice first on how to do so. The steps below are simply what other Christians have done, but they may not be safe for all people.**

2) Determine the reason why you are fasting. Do you desire to demonstrate repentance, seek God's will in something, are you burdened by cares, or are you longing for Christ's return, etc.?

3) Start small. It's never wise to begin by fasting for prolonged periods of time.

- ◆ Prepare the day before by eating smaller meals and avoiding sugary or fatty foods
- ◆ Always drink plenty of water during your fast
- ◆ **Be cautious: if you are taking any medication, be aware of the effects a fast may have. If you are doing hard manual labor you may become faint. If you have a medical condition (diabetes, expectant mothers, heart problems, etc.) do not fast. Ask your doctor if in doubt.**
- ◆ Start by skipping a meal and work your way up to longer fasts
- ◆ You may have to restrict certain social and physical activities

4) Prepare yourself spiritually. Focus on your purpose while you are fasting, not on the fact that you are fasting.

5) According to Jesus, individual fasting should be done in such a way that attention is not drawn to yourself or the fact that you are fasting (Matt. 6:17-18). It should be done in secret. Those who fast this way will receive reward from the Father.

6) While you fast,

- ◆ limit your activity
- ◆ prepare yourself for mental discomfort – crankiness, impatience and anxiety
- ◆ prepare yourself for physical discomfort – especially on the second day. You may have hunger pains, headaches, dizziness, or the blahs. If you feel hungry, drink more liquids.

7) Break a longer fast with fresh fruits, juices and vegetables.