

**Pastor Robert Rutta**

## **Fasting**

Matthew 6:1-18

In this lesson I want to focus on an aspect of prayer that I may not talk about as much as I should – the topic of fasting.

Biblical fasting is abstinence from food in order to concentrate on a definite spiritual problem or need. It is done in conjunction with confession of sin and prayer.

This is something that has had a central place in my mind over the last few months.

In November there was a point where my heart broke over Abby and I began fasting two days a week that God would save her life.

I did my best that as few people as possible knew about it – it is not for show.

I probably don't mention this topic as often as I should in my preaching because I count it as something very personal.

I guess I feel that if I teach on it I should give personal illustrations, and I prefer to keep those between myself and the Lord.

Even Diana and I don't discuss it.

We developed a pattern early in our marriage.

I just mention to her that I won't be eating today.

She understands that there is something weighing heavy on my heart – whether a concern about someone in the church, or whatever it may be.

The next morning she will ask, "Should I set a place for you at the table today?" If I say "no", then nothing more is said until the next morning.

I fast over major decisions, major concerns over people in the church, concerns over someone's health, etc.

Basically, anything that grabs my heart.

I began as a teenager as I was begging God to help me change and to follow His call for my life.

I will say more of this later, but people with health problems such as diabetes must be careful about fasting.

### **I. Warnings About Fasting**

#### **1. Biblical fasting is not for show (Matthew 6:16-18).**

God hates hypocritical religion, which is man's attempt to appear holy before other men without possessing true holiness before God.

In this passage, Christ rebukes the kind of fasting that is done for the sake of appearing spiritual before men.

He is not making light of the practice of fasting itself when done properly.

In fact, He takes for granted that His followers will fast.

He did not say "IF thou fastest," but rather, "WHEN thou fastest."

And He made a wonderful and definite promise that those who practice biblical fasting will be rewarded openly by God the Father.

#### **2. Biblical fasting is not an empty religious ritual.**

Luke 18:12

12 I fast twice in the week, I give tithes of all that I possess.

This is the statement of a Pharisee who was practicing religion in an attempt to justify himself before God.

He had regular times of fasting – two days a week.

Nowhere, though, does the Bible require such a practice.

Fasting is not a ritual observed once a week, or once a month, etc.

Fasting, rather, is something that is practiced when a special need arises and when the Holy Spirit leads.

### **3. Biblical fasting is not for physical health.**

Though various sorts of fastings may or may not promote better health, this is never the purpose given in the Bible for fasting.

Many popular Christian books emphasize the importance of fasting for physical benefit, but this is not biblical fasting.

I cannot say that fasting is or is not good for the health, and I cannot say it either is wrong or right to fast for health.

I am just saying that this is not Biblical fasting.

### **4. Fasting does not necessarily guarantee that one's prayers will be answered.**

In 2 Samuel 12 we have the record of how David fasted and prayed for God to preserve the life of the child which had been conceived through his adulterous relationship with Bathsheba.

God did not honor David's fast in that particular case.

This reminds us that fasting, while an important practice in spiritual warfare, is not a guarantee that we will get what we are desiring from God.

Earnest prayer with fasting does often result in the answer we are seeking, but it is no guarantee.

God is always sovereign in answering prayer, and we must always submit to His will.

### **5. Fasting is not a matter of law but of liberty.**

It is a personal matter. Fasting is important and useful in Christian life and service, but it is not something that can be commanded and it is not

something by which we are to judge the spiritual condition of others.

## **II. The importance of fasting is seen in the number of positive references in the Old and New Testaments.**

There are over 30 positive examples, commands, and instructions in Scripture about fasting.

Judges 20:26--Israel fasted for victory in war

1 Sam. 1:6-7--Hannah fasted for a son

1 Sam. 7:6--Israel fasted in repentance

1 Sam. 31:13--Men of Jabeshgilead fasted in mourning for Saul

2 Sam. 1:12--David and his men fasted in mourning for Saul, Jonathan, and the fallen of Israel

2 Sam. 12--David fasted for mercy upon his child

1 Kings 21:27--Ahab fasted for mercy

2 Chron. 20:3--Jehoshaphat and Israel fasted for help and protection

Ezra 8:21-23--Ezra and the Jews fasted for help and protection

Nehemiah 1:4--Nehemiah fasted in mourning and for help

Nehemiah 9:1-2--Israel fasted in mourning and repentance

Esther 4:16--Esther and friends fasted for victory  
 Esther 9:3--Fasting is mentioned as having had a role in the victory  
 Psalm 35:13-14--Fasting in prayer and mourning  
 Psalm 69: 10-11--Fasting in prayer and mourning  
 Isaiah 58:6-8--The fast which pleases God  
 Jeremiah 36:9--Israel fasted for mercy  
 Joel 1:14; 2:12, 15--God commanded fasting and repentance  
 Jonah 3:5--The Ninevites fasted in repentance for mercy  
 Daniel 9:3--Daniel fasted for wisdom  
 Matthew 4:2--Jesus fasted when tempted in the wilderness  
 Matthew 6:17-18--Jesus promised that the Father would bless fasting  
 Matthew 9:14-15--Jesus said his disciples would fast  
 Matthew 17:21--Fasting is necessary for overcoming some demonic strongholds  
 Mark 9:29--Fasting is necessary for overcoming demonic powers  
 Luke 2:37--Fasting was part of Anna's service to God  
 Acts 13:2--Fasting was part of the ministry of the workers at Antioch  
 Acts 13:3--Ordination was accompanied by fasting  
 Acts 14:23--Ordination was accompanied by fasting  
 1 Corinthians 7:5--Fasting and prayer is the only proper reason for abstinence from the marital relationship  
 2 Corinthians 6:5--Fasting was one way Paul approved himself as a minister of Jesus Christ  
 2 Corinthians 11:27--Paul fasted often

These examples and instructions regarding fasting cannot be taken lightly.

1 Corinthians 10:11

11 Now all these things happened unto them for ensamples: and they are written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the world are come.

The Lord Jesus Christ is our Pattern (1 Peter 1:21), and His fasting during the temptation in the wilderness is our example, just as His prayers during the temptations in the garden are our examples.

### **III. The Chief Purpose of Fasting**

The Lord Jesus said that fasting is an essential part of spiritual warfare Read Matthew 17:14-21

There are spiritual battles that you will face that can be conquered by NOTHING but prayer AND fasting.

### **IV. What Are Some Other Occasions When We Should Fast?**

1. Fast when sorely tempted (Matthew 4:2).
2. Fast when wisdom is earnestly desired (Daniel 9:3).
3. Fast when God's help and protection are needed (Ezra 8:21-23; 2 Chronicles 20:3; Jeremiah 36:9).
4. Fast when victory is desired in seemingly impossible situations (Esther 4:10-17; 9:31; Neh.1:4).
5. Fast during times of special repentance, confession, and revival (Joel 1:14; 2:12; 2:15; Neh.9:1-2).
6. Fast when new ministries are launched and when men go forth to proclaim God's Word and battle spiritual enemies (Acts 13:2-3; 14:23).
7. Fast when involved in spiritual ministry (2 Corinthians 6:5; 11:27).

An Encouraging Promise about Fasting (Matthew 6:17-18)

The Lord Jesus Christ made a definite promise about fasting. When one fasts in the proper manner for the proper reason -- "the Father which seeth in secret SHALL reward thee openly."

This is one of the most wonderful promises in the Bible and cannot be dismissed lightly.

God would not make such a promise if He did not consider fasting important.

Christ never discouraged proper fasting.  
He condemned and corrected false practices, but never did He discourage Scriptural fasting.  
In fact, He took for granted that His followers would fast.

## **V. Why Does God Require fasting?**

We don't know the complete reason, but we do know that fasting demonstrates the earnestness and desire of the heart.

God sees the hearts of men, but the Bible says He requires open evidence of the heart's desire--  
Joel 2:12. "Therefore also now, saith the Lord, turn ye even to me with all your heart, and with fasting, and with weeping, and with mourning."

Fasting can be seen as one way of evidencing the earnestness and sincerity of our hearts toward God in matters of prayer.

## **VI. How Long Is a Biblical Fast?**

The Bible sets no specific time length for fasting.

Daniel fasted 21 days.

Esther and Mordecai fasted 3 days and nights.

The Lord Jesus fasted 40 days in the wilderness.

But frequently the Bible simply does not say how long people fasted. We are not told, for example, how long Ezra fasted before making the journey to Jerusalem (Ezra 8:21-23).

Fasting is a matter of individual freedom under the direction of the Holy Spirit.

It can be one meal or many meals, according to the need of the hour and the direction of God.

Romans 14 speaks of this sort of thing and says, "Let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind" (Rom. 14:5).

## **VII. What Is a Biblical Fast?**

A biblical fast has the following basic elements:

1. Abstinence from food (Matthew 4:1-2).

2. Prayer (Matthew 17:21).

Biblical fasting is always associated with an increased attention to prayer and communion with God.

Fasting that does not include prayer is not biblical fasting.

3. Confession of sins (Daniel 9:3-6; see entire chapter).

Biblical examples of fasting are often connected with periods of special repentance and confession of sins.

There are no rigid guidelines for fasting in the Bible.

In Daniel's fast of 21 days, we are told that he ate "no pleasant bread, nor flesh, nor wine" (Dan. 10:3).

It looks like possibly Daniel did eat something, but he abstained from pleasant foods.

Since God has not given specific instructions about fasting, it is to be a private matter between an individual and the Lord.

People with health problems such as diabetes must be careful about fasting.

God has promised, "I will instruct thee and teach thee in the way which thou shalt go: I will guide thee with mine eye" (Psa. 32:8).

This promise applies to fasting. God will guide me as to when to fast, and how long, and from what I should abstain.

I would also emphasize that although there are no rigid guidelines for fasting, a biblical fast should have a serious element to it to be effective. Fasting from the evening meal to breakfast is not a serious fast. Skipping one meal is not a serious fast.