

A BRIEF TEACHING ON FASTING

BY BRUCE MILLER

Fasting can be spiritually powerful. While Jesus fasted (Matt 4) and it has been a powerful spiritual discipline throughout history, many Christians have never fasted or even been taught about it. In our culture today, fasting is associated with the latest dieting fads such as intermittent fasting for your health. Some also connect it with political protests.

In contrast, Biblical fasting is abstaining from food for spiritual reasons. It's an act of humility that aids you in seeking God. Biblically you fast not to attract attention for a good cause, lose weight or improve physical health. Instead you fast to seek God with all your heart, to repent of your sin, and to seek his will.

We are not a culture of self-control, moderation, or restraint. On the surface, to voluntarily deprive yourself of what you want does not make sense to many people. Fasting can seem weird.

And yet a deeper look reveals that fasting can bring deeper satisfaction and contentment. God made us holistic beings, spiritual and physical, our souls, minds and bodies are interconnected and impact each other.

Power and benefits of fasting

In America fasting stands out against our cultural excess, gluttony, and consumption. Delayed gratification, self-denial and moderation are foreign concepts. But the Bible calls us to discipline ourselves (including our bodies) for godliness (1 Cor 9:24-27).

Fasting reveals things that control us and confirms our utter dependence on God. We can discover that life is so much more than food (Lk 12:33) Our belly is not our God (Phil 3:19; Rom 16:18); rather our body is to be God's servant (1 Cor 6:13) and we are to use the parts of our physical bodies for him (Rom 6:11-13). At deeper levels, in fasting, we can grasp that Jesus the Bread of Life (John 6:35), the manna for our souls. The Bible begins with eating from the trees in the Garden (Gen 2) and ends with us eating from the Tree of Life (Rev 22).

REASONS TO FAST

In an excellent brief article, "A Biblical Perspective on Fasting," Kent Berghuis reviews every reference to fasting. You can see his list and his summary of six biblical purposes for fasting. He states that the Bible mentions fasting in about 59 contexts. He says in summary: "The Bible describes fasting as a natural way for God's people as individuals or as a body to express humility, sorrow, repentance, seriousness in prayer, and a desire for God's manifest presence."

Fasting is never commanded in the Bible, but it assumed by Jesus that his followers would do so. In the Sermon on the Mount when Jesus gave instructions on proper fasting He said,¹⁶ “When you fast, . . . and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. Matthew 6:16-18. Jesus did not command fasting, but by saying, “when you fast,” he assumes that his followers will fast. This assumption is clearer in his answer to John the Baptist’s disciples, who asked why Jesus disciples did not fast,¹⁵ Jesus answered, “How can the guests of the bridegroom mourn while he is with them? The time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them; then they will fast (Matthew 9:15). Jesus is saying that his disciples did not need to fast while he was with them, but when he rose from the dead and returned to heaven, then his disciples would fast. Jesus’ comments still do not constitute a command, but they do indicate that he anticipated his followers would fast. So, I believe that it would be wise and helpful for most followers of Jesus today to practice fasting at times.

Biblically fasting is not only a personal, private spiritual discipline, but at times a community act in which the people of Israel or the members of a church would fast together. That’s what we are doing to start the next year at Christ Fellowship.

While there are several biblical purposes of fasting, for us in these 21 days we are fasting as an aid to prayer and to experience God’s presence. [Some of the following is adapted from the article by Berghuis.] In the Bible prayer and fasting frequently occurred together. Bible characters often fasted while in intercessory prayer for others (2 Sam. 12:16–23; Neh. 1:8–10; Ps. 35:13; Dan. 6:18; 9:15–19) or while voicing prayer requests for their own needs (1 Sam. 1:7–11; Neh. 1:11; Ps. 109:21–24; Dan. 9:3; 10:1–3). Leaders prayed and fasted for success in battle (Judg. 20:26; 1 Sam. 7:6; 2 Chron. 20:3), for relief from famine (Jer. 14:1–12; Joel 1:14; 2:12–15), or for success in other endeavors, such as Ezra’s return from the exile (Ezra 8:21–23) or Esther’s success before the king (Esth. 4:16). Jesus’ encouraged fasting as an aid to one’s personal devotion to God (Matt 6:16-18). Anna stands as a positive example of such devotion (Luke 2:37). The early church engaged in a corporate fasting-and-prayer meeting, and the Holy Spirit spoke to them (Acts 13:2–3). These biblical examples that link fasting and prayer illustrate the desire of the human heart to commune with God.

Moses is the prime example for fasting to experience God’s presence and power. Since he went without water forty days on Mount Sinai, one must conclude that he was supernaturally sustained during his fast (Exod. 34:28). In an interesting parallel Elijah visited Horeb and was sustained for forty days with food supplied by an angel (1 Kings 19:8). Jesus too fasted for forty days (Matt. 4:2). As the Son of God in human flesh, he demonstrated his reliance on God the Father in his time of temptation. The key to his fast was his reply to

the devil that “man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that proceeds from the mouth of God” (4:4). By this he meant that there is more to life than eating—that God’s Word sustains life at its deepest levels. Believers today may fast when they feel distant from Christ.

BRUCE’S PERSONAL TESTIMONY

For me, in 1995, when I was trying to decide if God wanted me to start this church, I took time to fast and seek his will. One day I fasted driving all over McKinney praying for people and asking God for his will. Those times of fasting led to starting Christ Fellowship.

Fasting increases my intensity and earnestness in seeking God with all my heart. The first time I did much fasting was in the Fall of my senior year in High School. I made a pledge to fast every Sunday for 10 weeks and take the entire day to study God’s Word and pray. I did an intensive study of Proverbs. I’ll never forget those 10 weeks; they were one of the spiritual high points of my whole life. I felt so close to God and I grew tremendously. Students, I invite you to fast for these 21 days.

Fasting can intensify your focus on God. For years I fasted for three days annually. When I fast, I tell myself that every time I feel a hunger pain, I will convert it to a spiritual hunger pain to know God more. I know that he is my food. He is all I need. In fasting you can give yourself to an undivided, intense devotion to the Lord. You are expressing a value, that your spiritual life has priority in your life. Andrew Murray says, “Prayer is the one hand with which we grasp the invisible; fasting is the other with which we let loose and cast away the visible.” Fasting can help you open up to God with an intense focus.

HOW? SOME PRACTICAL ADVICE

Remember God is not impressed that you are not eating; he is looking at your heart. Take the time you would have spent eating and give that time to God. Pray, read his Word, listen to him. Be sensible about your health. People with certain medical conditions or on certain medications should not fast for a whole day. Talk with your doctor if you have a question about it. There are no biblical guidelines for the length of a fast. The pattern is that most fasts were one day which for the Jews was from sunrise to sunset, so 24 hours. Most biblical fasts were from all food entirely. People ask should I drink only water, or could I have fruit juices or a Powerade? God does not address these specific questions. The approach you use is between you and God. Some people might choose to fast from coffee, meat, or dessert. Some people choose to fast for one meal a day. The real issue is not the nature of your fast or its length, but what is in your heart.

You can even fast from things other than food. You can engage in a media fast. You can fast from certain kinds of music, from social media, YouTube, TV, movies, video games, news, sports, or anything that might distract you from God.

Let me encourage you to try some kind of fast for these 21 days. Ask God what he would have for you to do.

A NOTE ABOUT SECRECY

Jesus' teaching in this passage has often been misconstrued.

¹⁶ "When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show others they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. ¹⁷ But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, ¹⁸ so that it will not be obvious to others that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. Matthew 6:16-18

Jesus' point is not secrecy, but motive. The issue is not privacy. In the context he was talking about giving, praying, and fasting. Of course, people should pray in public. And giving was often known. Consider that people knew Barnabus sold his field to give the proceeds to the church, or that Jesus noted that the widow put all she had in the offering. The issue is motive. Are you fasting so others will notice you and say what a godly person you are? Are you doing it as a badge of spirituality? The contrast is not public vs. secret but for God vs. for-show. Spiritual activities are not to be a display for others but a devotion to our Father. It is not wrong to let other people know you are fasting or from what you are fasting, but it is wrong to let them know so they will be impressed.