

Fasting to Seek God

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Scripture Text: [Matthew 6:16-18](#)

Introduction

This morning I want to talk about the subject of fasting, a very important spiritual discipline but a much-neglected discipline. In a culture of plenty and prosperity, this subject on fasting seems to be out of place, strange, and irrelevant. It runs counter to our culture of "I, me, my, mine" mindset. Not only, this spiritual discipline directly opposes the desires of our fallen nature, which are continually being enticed by the world and Satan.

Few disciplines go against the flesh and the mainstream of culture as this one. - Donald S. Whitney

We don't hear much about fasting these days, even in our churches, but the Scriptures say much about fasting. Fasting is mentioned in Scriptures more than baptism (about 77 times for fasting, 75 for baptism).

In the Old Testament

Moses fasted during the 40 days and 40 nights he was on Mount Sinai receiving the law from God.

[Exodus 34:28](#) And he was there with the LORD forty days and forty nights; **he did neither eat bread, nor drink water.** And he wrote upon the tables the words of the covenant, the ten commandments.

King Jehoshaphat called for a fast in all Israel when they were about to be attacked by their enemies - Moabites and Ammonites.

[2 Chronicles 20:3](#) And Jehoshaphat feared, and set himself to seek the LORD, and proclaimed a fast throughout all Judah.

In response to Jonah's preaching, the **men of Nineveh** fasted and put on sackcloth.

[Jonah 3:4](#) And Jonah began to enter into the city a day's journey, and he cried, and said, Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown. [5:](#) So the people of Nineveh believed God, and proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them even to the least of them.

In the New Testament

Prayer and fasting also occurs in the New Testament.

Anna "[worshipped night and day, fasting and praying](#)" at the Temple

Luke 2:36 And there was one Anna, a prophetess, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Aser: she was of a great age, and had lived with an husband seven years from her virginity; 37: And she was a widow of about fourscore and four years, which departed not from the temple, but served God with fastings and prayers night and day.

John the Baptist taught **his disciples** to fast

Mark 2:18 And the disciples of John and of the Pharisees used to fast: and they come and say unto him, Why do the disciples of John and of the Pharisees fast, but thy disciples fast not?

Jesus fasted for 40 days and 40 nights before His temptation by Satan

Matthew 4:1 Then was Jesus led up of the spirit into the wilderness to be tempted of the devil. 2: And when he had fasted forty days and forty nights, he was afterward an hungred.

This morning I want to talk about the **What, Why, Who, When,** and **How** of Fasting.

I - What is Fasting?

1. What it is not

People often fast for personal health, or for dietary reasons. But our Lord is not talking about this kind of fasting. This fasting is not to be used in order to lose weight.

Fasting is **not a method of punishing our bodies** like what they do in the Philippines where some practice self-flagellation, or whipping oneself.

Fasting is **not to impress God** nor **to earn His acceptance or favor**, our acceptance having been made full and complete on the basis of the finished work of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Like alms and prayer, fasting is to be done as an act of devotion to God and not to win the approval of anyone else.

Fasting is **not like a "spiritual hunger strike"** to compel or to manipulate God into doing what you and I desire. Fasting or no fasting, God only promises to answer our prayers when we ask according to His will.

2. What it is

Fasting is defined as the Christian's voluntarily abstinence from food and drink in order to focus on prayer and fellowship with God. Fasting is seeking God's face.

And that is what I am calling each and everyone to do - to seek God's face and to ask God to bless our Anniversary Sunday Service. We will ask God to bless this special event with many first time visitors. As Pastor Obero preaches that God would speak to the lost and bring them to saving knowledge of Jesus Christ and that God may be honored and be glorified. Fasting is seeking God and His glory.

But we must not confined fasting to the question of food and drink. I like what the late Martyn Lloyd-Jones says ...

*"Fasting should really be made to include abstinence from **anything** which is **legitimate** in and of itself for the sake of some special spiritual purpose. There are many bodily functions which are right and normal and perfectly legitimate, but which for special peculiar reasons in certain circumstances should be controlled. That is fasting."*

What he is saying is that we can fast **from good things other than** food and drink as well. When we fast, we are saying that **God is more valuable to us than things**, than pleasure (even legitimate pleasures), and relationships. We are seeking God's face and His reward.

The purpose of Christian fasting should be to take our eyes off the things of this world and focus our thoughts on God. By taking our eyes off the things of this world through prayer and biblical fasting, we can focus better on Christ.

So, what is fasting? Fasting is the Christian's voluntarily abstinence from anything, food, drink, things, pleasure, and relationships in order to focus on seeking God's face.

Hungering for God

The point of fasting is not a giving up of food for its own sake. It is a giving up of food, willing to be hungry because **we hunger for something more than food**. That is the meaning of fasting: it cries out, "This I want more than the pleasure of food!"

Prayer is one hand with which we grasp the invisible; fasting the other, with which we let loose and cast away the visible. - Andrew Murray

By fasting, the body learns to obey the soul; by praying the soul learns to obey the body. - William Secker

Fasting is calculated to bring a note of urgency and importance into our praying, and to give force to our pleading in the court of heaven. The man who prays with fasting is giving heaven notice that he is truly in earnest. - Arthur Wallis

II - Why Should We Fast?

Without a purpose, fasting can be a miserable, self-centered experience. - Donald S. Whitney

As far as a command to fast, there is only one place in the Bible where fasting is required and it is found in the Old Testament.

[Leviticus 16:29-31; 23:26-31](#)

The Old Testament law specifically required prayer and fasting for only one occasion, which was the Day of Atonement. This custom became known as "the day of fasting".

Jeremiah 36:6 Therefore go thou, and read in the roll, which thou hast written from my mouth, the words of the LORD in the ears of the people in the LORD's house upon the fasting day (day of fast): and also thou shalt read them in the ears of all Judah that come out of their cities.

In the New Testament, there are many places in the Bible where we are commanded to pray and to give, but no command to fast. But, while there is no command to fast, in Jesus' teachings, fasting is implied that His disciples would fast.

Matthew 6:16 Moreover **when** ye fast ...

Notice our Lord did not say "if you fast", instead "when you fast". He is assuming that in the lives of His disciples at least on some occasions they will be fasting. Jesus assumes that fasting was a good thing and that it would be done by His disciples.

This is what we see in ...

Matthew 9:15 And Jesus said unto them, Can the children of the bridechamber mourn, as long as the bridegroom is with them? but the days will come, when the bridegroom shall be taken from them, and then shall they fast.

When the bridegroom is taken away, then the disciples will fast.

So Jesus is not teaching on whether we should fast or not. He is assuming we will fast and here in our texts, He is teaching us how and how not to do it. And so it is important that we know what is fasting and what is involved in fasting that pleases God.

J. C. Ryle ...

"It is a subject about which we find no direct command in the New Testament. It seems to be left to everyone's discretion, whether he will fast or not. In this absence of direct command we may see great wisdom. Many a poor man never has enough to eat, and it would be an insult to tell him to fast: many sick people can hardly be kept well with the closest attention to diet, and could not fast without bringing on illness. It is a matter in which each person must be persuaded in their own mind, and not rashly condemn others who do not agree. One thing only must never be forgotten: those who fast should do it quietly, secretly and without ostentation. Let them not "show men they are fasting." Let them not fast to man, but to God."

Thus fasting is a choice we each must make. It is a voluntary spiritual discipline. It is a Christian's voluntary, non-coerced abstinence from food or water or anything for spiritual purposes.

III - Who should Fast?

In Jesus' day, fasting was not such a mystery. It was a practice that was part of the culture. Everyone was expected to fast once a year on the Day of Atonement.

Of course, there are some people who cannot and should not fast because of medical reasons. However, for the majority of Christians, it would be wise to consider engaging in the practice of fasting.

Unless we have medical reasons not to fast, we have very good reasons to motivate us to fast! But be sure that we fast for the right reason.

My prayer is that by means of this message, those who are able to fast will hear God's call to fast.

IV - When to Fast?

There are times fasting is not appropriate. Even Jesus taught us that fasting was not always appropriate. He was once approached by the disciples of John the Baptist and asked, [Matthew 9:14](#) Then came to him the disciples of John, saying, Why do we and the Pharisees fast oft, but thy disciples fast not? [15: And Jesus said unto them, Can the children of the bridechamber mourn, as long as the bridegroom is with them? but the days will come, when the bridegroom shall be taken from them, and then shall they fast.](#)

For the disciples to have fasted when Jesus - the Bridegroom - was sitting right there with them would have been very inappropriate.

This is what makes fasting different from praying. There is never a time when it is not appropriate to pray, actually, we are commanded to **pray without ceasing**. But when it comes to fasting, there is time and a season for it. What are these times and occasions? The Bible tells us a lot about the reasons why someone would fast before God in this way.

1. Times of distress and trouble

Prayer and fasting was often done in times of distress or trouble.

David fasted when he learned that Saul and Jonathan had been killed

[2 Samuel 1:11](#) Then David took hold on his clothes, and rent them; and likewise all the men that were with him: [12: And they mourned, and wept, and fasted until even, for Saul, and for Jonathan his son, and for the people of the LORD, and for the house of Israel; because they were fallen by the sword.](#)

Nehemiah had a time of prayer and fasting upon learning that Jerusalem was still in ruins

[Nehemiah 1:1](#) The words of Nehemiah the son of Hachaliah. And it came to pass in the month Chisleu, in the twentieth year, as I was in Shushan the palace, [2: That Hanani, one of my brethren, came, he and certain men of Judah; and I asked them concerning the Jews that had escaped, which were left of the captivity, and concerning Jerusalem. 3: And they said unto me, The remnant that are left of the captivity there in the province are in great affliction and reproach: the wall of Jerusalem also is broken down, and the gates thereof are burned with fire. 4: And it came to pass, when I heard these words, that I sat down and wept, and mourned certain days, and fasted, and prayed before the God of heaven,](#)

Nehemiah had a deep sense of Jerusalem's significance to God and was greatly distressed that affairs there had not advanced the cause and glory of God. Note that Nehemiah's focus was toward the God of heaven and for the glory of God. When I fast is that my focus and my goal

Darius, the king of Persia, fasted all night after he was forced to put Daniel in the den of lions
[Daniel 6:18](#) Then the king went to his palace, and passed the night fasting: neither were instruments of musick brought before him: and his sleep went from him.

2. Sorrow over sin

For one thing, it is associated in the Bible with **sorrow over sin** - and repentance from it.

In the book of Judges, when **the people of Israel** were forced to fight against the tribe of Benjamin because of its idolatry and wickedness, they wept before the Lord and fasted all day until evening ([Judges 20:26](#)).

Some of the great heroes of the Bible, who led others in repentance from sin, did so with fasting. **Nehemiah** led the people in confession of national sin by first calling them to assemble "with fasting, in sackcloth, and with dust on their heads" ([Nehemiah 9:1](#)).

Daniel, when he prayed his great prayer of national confession for his people, made "request by prayer and supplications, with fasting, sackcloth, and ashes" ([Daniel 9:3](#)).

God, through the prophet **Joel**, called the people to repentance from sin; telling them, "Now, therefore . . . turn to Me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning" ([Joel 2:12](#)); and said, "Blow the trumpet in Zion, consecrate a fast . . ." (v. 15).

When Jonah preached to the **Nenevites** that God's judgment was coming, a national repentance occurred in which they "proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest to the least of them" ([Jonah 3:5](#)).

Even **Saul of Tarsus** (that is, the apostle Paul), when he was confronted by the Lord on the road to Damascus because of his murderous rebellion against the message of the gospel, repented and "was three days without sight, and neither ate nor drank" ([Acts 9:9](#)).

This kind of fasting illustrates the seriousness with which we are to grieve over sin, and how nothing else - not even eating and drinking - is as important as turning completely away from it.

3. Humbling of one's self

And not only is fasting associated with sorrow and repentance from sin, but it's associated with a **humbling of one's self** in general.

King David, when it appeared that his infant son was going to die, "pleaded with God for the child, and David fasted and went in and lay all night on the ground" ([2 Sam. 12:16](#)).

Queen Esther, before she went before the king to appeal for the life of her people, asked her cousin, "Go, gather all the Jews who are present in Shushan, and fast for me; neither eat nor drink for three days, night or day" ([Esther 4:16](#)).

Ezra led the people in a prayer to God for protection, "proclaiming a fast there at the river of Ahava, that we might humble ourselves before our God, to seek from Him the right way for us and our little ones and all our possessions" ([Ezra 8:21](#)).

Even the Gentile centurion **Cornelius** prayed to the God of Israel with fasting. He received the message of the gospel through God sending Peter to him and his household as a result of such intense prayer; because, as he told Peter, "Four days ago I was fasting until this hour . . ." ([Acts 10:30](#)).

4. When crucial things were about to happen

The **church of Antioch** fasted and sent Paul and Barnabas off on their first missionary journey. [Acts 13:2](#) As they ministered to the Lord, and fasted, the Holy Ghost said, Separate me Barnabas and Saul for the work whereunto I have called them. [3:](#) And when they had fasted and prayed, and laid their hands on them, they sent them away.

They were fasting to seek the leading of the Holy Spirit in the direction of their mission. They were hungry enough for God's leading that they wanted to say it with the hunger of their bodies and not just the hunger of their hearts. "We want your leading, O God! O Holy Spirit, what is your will for the mission of this church?"

Jesus, before He began His public ministry, preceded that ministry with forty days of fasting in the wilderness ([Matthew 4:1-2](#)).

V - How to Fast?

Negatively

[Matthew 6:16](#) Moreover **when** ye fast, be not, as the hypocrites, of a sad countenance: for they disfigure their faces, that they may appear unto men to fast. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward.

If we are led to fast, we must be very careful that we do not fast in such a way as to be seen and admired by men. It teaches us a principle that has application to all those things that we do to deny 'self' out of reverence to God - that we must always beware of doing those things so as to be seen by men. Otherwise, we have no reward from our Father for our having done them.

Positively

Fast to be seen by God in secret.

[Matthew 6:17](#) But thou, when thou fastest, anoint thine head, and wash thy face; [18:](#) That thou appear not unto men to fast, **but unto thy Father** which is in secret: and thy Father, which seeth in secret, shall reward thee openly.

When we fast, we must not do anything that will draw attention to our appearance, our hungry state or our dedication to God. Fasting is between the saint and his God. A true Christian fast is seeking God, seeking God's attention, seeking God's reward.

[Matthew 6:18](#) That thou appear not unto men to fast, but unto thy Father which is in secret: and thy Father, which seeth in secret, shall reward thee openly.

Closing Thoughts

I could say more about this subject on fasting but I hope I have said enough to stimulate us to seriously consider this important but much-neglected spiritual discipline.

As I have said, there are some people who cannot and should not fast because of medical reasons. So, please check with your doctor for any health concerns.

However, for most of us, it would be wise to consider engaging in the practice of fasting.

My prayer is that by means of this message, those who are able to fast will hear God's call to fast.

"Fasting, like the Gospel, isn't for the self-sufficient and those who feel they have it all together. It's for the poor in spirit. It's for those who mourn. For the meek. For those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. In other words, fasting is for Christians.

It is a desperate measure, for desperate times, among those who know themselves desperate for God." - David Mathis

AMEN!