

Fasting

Fasting has become one of the least understood and practiced spiritual tools available to Christians today. Part of it may be because of abuses practiced by some religions over the last few hundred years. However, I believe that it is largely due to our unwillingness to sacrifice our desires and perceived needs for the Lord. I hope that this lesson isn't just informative, but that the Lord tears down any inhibitions you may have about fasting and that you recognize and even practice fasting as a way to get closer to the Lord.

"Man lives on once quarter of what he eats. On the other three quarters lives his doctor."
– Inscription on an Egyptian pyramid, circa 3800 BC

What is fasting?

Fasting is abstaining from **food**, but not **water**, for a period of time, usually a day or more.

Luke 4:1-2 – "And Jesus being full of the Holy Ghost returned from Jordan, and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness, Being forty days tempted of the devil. And in those days he did eat nothing: and when they were ended, he afterward hungered."

What is the purpose of fasting?

To understand the purpose of fasting, it is helpful to understand the nature of our inner warfare. Read *Romans 7:14-25* and discuss the battle Christians face between the inner and outer man.

Recognizing that the outer man (flesh) is sinful and the inner man (soul) is clean, how does fasting help us to allow the inner man to have greater success in conquering our outer man? (See also *1 Corinthians 9:24-27*)

It brings the flesh into subjection and allows us to focus on things that are spiritual. By denying the flesh, we learn self-control and are able to resist the temptations within and without.

Biblical fasting starves the flesh and feeds the spirit!

Below are some of the effects of fasting upon our spiritual lives:

1. Fasting causes us to **afflict** (**humble**) our souls before God (*Psalms 35:13, Isaiah 58:5*)
2. Fasting helps to break the bondage of **sin** in our lives (*Isaiah 58:6*)
3. Fasting promotes **righteousness** in our lives (*Isaiah 58:7*)

Fasting is a tool, much like prayer, meditation, or studying God's Word that is designed to bring us closer to God.

What are reasons to fast?

Understanding the purpose of fasting helps us see why we should fast. I thought it would be helpful to look at some reasons that people in the Bible fasted. Here are a few reasons that still have application today.

1. To **Repent** of Sins (*Joel 2:12-13*)
2. To **Grieve** (*1 Samuel 31:13*)
3. To Seek the Lord and His **Intervention** (*Ezra 8:21-23*)
4. To Seek the Lord's **Will** (*Ezra 8:21-23; Acts 13:1-3*)
5. Before making a solemn **covenant** (*Nehemiah 9:1, 38, 10:29-30*)
6. To **Draw Nearer** to God (*Daniel 10:2-3*)
7. Before **Ordaining** someone (*Acts 13:1-3, 14:23*)

Fasting

Isn't fasting bad for you?

Some people are skeptical about fasting because they claim that it isn't good for your body or that we can't last without food for more than a few days. Medical research demonstrates that fasting is not only possible, but it is good for you¹. Most medical commentary sites the ability of the body to rest the digestive tract and cleanse itself of toxins that we consume as two very positive results of fasting. Just recently, David Blaine, a popular performer, completed a 44 day fast. The excerpt below was taken from his web site and records what happened when he ended his fast.

"David Blaine has emerged from his plexi-glass box after enduring an extraordinary 44 days in confinement and without food. Thousands gathered to witness him complete his challenge and there was a carnival atmosphere as well wishers waited to see him released. Blaine wept as the box touched the ground and, despite intermittent smiles seemed tired and emotional. His relief at completing his challenge was palpable. As the door to the box opened, Blaine wept uncontrollably. His first words were, "This has been one of the most important experiences of my life". He then broke down again. Supported by members of his team, Blaine then addressed the crowd. "I've learned more in that little box than I have in years. I learned how important it is to have a sense of humour and to laugh at everything because nothing makes any sense anyway. I've learned how strong we all are as human beings. How strong we all are. But most importantly I've learned to appreciate all the simple things in life - a sunrise, a sunset, a smile from a strange one, a smile from a loved one and I thank you all so much. I love you all so much. I love you" – taken from www.davidblaine.com

When we fast for the Lord, we don't do it for the medical benefits. However, I felt it was important to note that fasting for reasonable durations is not physically harmful for most people. If you have concerns about your ability to fast, I would suggest talking to your physician to determine whether there are any health risks for you.

"A little starvation can really do more for the average sick man than can the best of medicines and the best doctors. I don't mean a restricted diet; I mean total abstinence from food."
- Samuel Clemens (Mark Twain), *My Debut as a Literary Person*, 1889

Isn't fasting just something they did in Biblical times but not today?

As I previously mentioned, fasting has been out of vogue for quite some time. Richard Foster said, "...in my research I could not find a single book published on the subject of Christian fasting from 1861 to 1954." Certainly there were people that fasted during that time, but the lack of Christian literature addressing the subject shows that it had went below the radar for most believers. What does the Bible say on this subject?

Luke 5:33-35 – "And they said unto him, Why do the disciples of John fast often, and make prayers, and likewise [the disciples] of the Pharisees; but thine eat and drink? And he said unto them, Can ye make the children of the bridechamber fast, while the bridegroom is with them? But the days will come, when the bridegroom shall be taken away from them, and then shall they fast in those days."

Matthew 6:16 – "Moreover when ye fast, be not, as the hypocrites..."

Both of these passages clearly teach Jesus did not discourage fasting, but plainly stated that His disciples would fast. If we review the reasons why people fasted in Biblical times, we see that we could also gain from engaging in this practice. It isn't a command, but it is suggested!

¹ For more information on the medical benefits of fasting, check out this web site:

<http://www.healthpromoting.com/Articles/articles/benefit.htm>

Fasting

How do I fast?

That's an easy question – don't eat! This is true, but there is more to fasting than just abstaining from food. In *Jeremiah 14:10-12*, the Lord tells Israel that He will not hear them when they fast because of their disobedience. Jesus also gives specific instruction on practices to avoid during a fast. Let's look at some of the "Do and Do Not" passages concerning fasting.

Do Not...

1. Pursue all of your own **desires** when you fast (*Isaiah 58:3*)
2. Fast with the intention of **hurting** or **belittling** others (*Isaiah 58:4*)
3. Fast while living in **rebellion** to God and His Word (*Jeremiah 14:10-12*)
4. Fast to be **seen** by others (*Matthew 6:16*)
5. Fast as an act of **righteousness** (*Luke 18:9-14*)

Fasting is not a goal in itself but a means to an end!

Do...

1. Avoid seeking the **attention** of men (*Matthew 6:17-18*)
2. Avoid seeking **pleasure** or **fulfillment** of the flesh (*1 Corinthians 7:1-5*)
3. Focus on the fulfilling the Lord's **will** in your life (*Matthew 6:17-18*)
 - a. Confess your **sins** and **repent** of them (*Isaiah 58:5-6*)
 - b. Live in **obedience** to what He is **asking** of you (*Isaiah 58-7*)
4. Pray! (*Luke 2:36-38*)

Fasting is to prayer as a megaphone is to talking

As a closing suggestion, I would encourage you to fast at the beckoning of the Spirit of God when you are seeking to draw close to the Lord, repenting of some sin, discerning God's will, or seeking His intervention in some area of your life. It may be helpful to remove other distractions when you seek the Lord with fasting and prayer. Take a day or two off of work or make some time when you can be alone with the Lord. Remember, your goal is the Lord, not accomplishing a fast.

I drank at every vine. The last was like the first

I came upon no wine, so wonderful as thirst.

I gnawed at every root. I ate of every plant.

I came upon no fruit so wonderful as want.

Feed the grape and the bean to the vintner and the monger;

I will lie down lean with my thirst and my hunger.

- Edna St. Vincent Millay