



Life Practices

Following the Way of Christ: Spiritual Disciplines that will Help You Pursue Christ #9: The Spiritual Discipline of Fasting (Matt. 6:16-18)

Introduction

Fasting is one of the three “secret” or private “habits of grace” outlined for us in the Sermon on the Mount (along with giving and prayer). In this passage, we clearly see that fasting was _____ . In Matt. 6:16, He remarks, “when you fast,” not “if you fast,” and in Matt. 9:15 He doesn’t say His disciples “might” fast, He affirms they will.

Fasting is mentioned 70 times in our Bibles and might be defined this way:

“Biblical fasting should not be considered a method for dieting, but a method for growing into deeper communion with God and being more in tune with His Spirit. The primary Biblical reason to fast is to take our eyes off of the things of the flesh and to open our eyes to the things of God.” (Nadia Thomas)

“Christian fasting at its root is the hunger of a homesickness for God. Christian fasting is not only the spontaneous effect of superior satisfaction in God, it is also a chosen weapon against every force in the world that would take that satisfaction away.” (John Piper)

Some Biblical Examples

Old Testament

Moses (Ex.34:28), David (Ps. 35:13, II Sam. 12:17-23), Ezra (Ezra 8:23), Nehemiah (Neh. 1:4), Esther (Esther 4:15) and Daniel (Dan. 1:12)

New Testament

Jesus fasted for forty days in the wilderness (Matt. 4:2 and Luke 4:2)
Church in Antioch fasted as they selected the first missionary team (Acts 12:2-3)
Paul and Barnabas appointed elders for the new churches after they prayed and fasted (Acts 14:23)



The Purposes for Fasting (in part from www.thenivebible.com)

1. _____ (Ezra 8:23)- fasting adds a sense of urgency and seriousness to our praying
2. _____ (Judges 20:26)- our fasting is meant to make us more receptive to God's input for our lives
3. _____ or a specific deliverance from the Lord (II Chron. 20:3-4)-often this kind of fasting is done within a group of believers who unite their hearts against a common foe
4. To express repentance over sin and a desire to return to Him (I Sam. 7:6)-when we fast, we turn from ourselves and look fully into the face of the Lord.
5. _____ before the Lord (I Kings 21:27-29)-saying "no" to ourselves is a powerful way to say "yes" to God.
6. To deal with temptation and as a means of rededicating ourselves to Him (Matt. 4:1-11)-fasting helps refocus our appetites. It shifts our attention away from the flesh.
7. _____ (I Sam. 31:13)-fasting interrupts the pattern of "normal" living and can help us convey thoughts when our words fail us.
8. To minister to the needs of others (Isa. 58:3-7)-as our attention to self fades, our desire to serve others comes more clearly into view.
9. To express our love and worship for Almighty God (Luke 2:37)-fasting affirms that "what we hunger for most, we worship." (John Piper)

Types of Fast

Although the scripture only lists fasting as an exercise of withholding food and water from ourselves, other things can be fasted. We can fast _____, habits or activities that we enjoy, a particular kind of food or drink and so on.

_____ Fasts: The withholding of a particular meal or kind of food

_____ Fasts: No food at all and only water or juice is consumed

_____ Fast: No food or drink at all.

*** Remember, we are held accountable for good stewardship regarding our bodies. When considering a lengthy or absolute fast, please consult medical experts and pay attention to their counsel.



Preparing for a Fast

1. Begin with a season of prayer and _____.

Psalm 35:13 "...I put on sackcloth and humbled myself with fasting..."

2.. Spend time in scripture

Prior to the fast: ask the Spirit to guide your mind and direct your thoughts.

During the fast: select passages to meditate on. Memorize scripture as a backdrop for your thinking. You might prayerfully select a "theme" for the fast, but be open to the Lord changing the focus.

3. _____. Fasting is a spiritual exercise, not a diet plan.

4. Keep it secret. Fasting is not a time for "showing off." This is a private spiritual discipline.

5. Prepare your body for the experience. Begin this particular "training," slowly.

A Proposed "Beginners" Plan:

For the first week: Pick a day and fast one meal. (Perhaps repeat every week.)

For the second week: Choose two days and fast one meal on each day.

For the third week: Fast for one entire day (or perhaps fast until after sundown).

For the fourth week: Choose two non-consecutive days during the week to fast.

For the next week: Fast two or three days in a row. (Perhaps repeat every month.)

For those who have significant experience fasting: consider a longer fast of 7-21 days. (Again, be a good steward and consult your doctor before engaging in any long term fast.)



What to Expect:

A spiritual discipline is a form of personal training. The exercise has to be repeated often in order to become part of our spiritual routines. Any time we tell ourselves “no” there is a battle. Expect discouragement. Be aware that your body will “push back” as well (anticipate headaches, irritability, fatigue and so on). The first few days or experiences will be the most difficult.

But also, expect spiritual enlightenment. A sustained Spirit led focus as we restrain our flesh will yield an amazing set of insights and encouragements! Fasting is a tool that will always yield a spiritual harvest.

As we give, we become better givers. As we pray, we become more attuned with our Savior. As we fast, His presence becomes more obvious, His Word jumps off the pages of our Bible and His Spirit speaks loudly.

What to do: Commit to a regular pattern of fasting. Make it a habit of grace!

