

Fasting

Mark 2:18-20 The disciples of John and of the Pharisees were fasting. Then they came and said to Him, “Why do the disciples of John and of the Pharisees fast, but Your disciples do not fast?” (19) And Jesus said to them, “Can the friends of the bridegroom fast while the bridegroom is with them? As long as they have the bridegroom with them they cannot fast. (20) But the days will come when the bridegroom will be taken away from them, and then they will fast in those days.”

I have a confession: I love food and I hate fasting.

And being married to a great cook doesn't help either.

If my wife and I were politicians with portfolios, she would have the Ministry to the Interior, and I would be in charge of Consumer Affairs.

The problem is that Jesus clearly had an expectation that His followers would fast.

So, like it or not, that includes us.

In this message on fasting, we're going to look briefly at what fasting is, why we should fast, and what fasting achieves.

1. What Is Fasting?

Fasting is mentioned in both Old and New Testaments.

In the New Testament, the Greek word simply means to abstain from food.

In the Old Testament, the Hebrew word means to cover the mouth, which makes it kind of difficult to eat, doesn't it?

So the basic idea is that of going without food.

There are different kinds of fasts.

There's the short fast, for instance the one in Judges 20:26 where the Israelites fasted for one day before the Lord to seek Him and find out why they had been defeated in battle.

There's the long fast, such as the forty day fast Moses did in Exodus 34:28, and Jesus also did Matt 4:2.

There's the complete fast where you eat nothing for the entire period; the forty day fasts that Jesus and Moses did were both complete fasts.

And there's the partial fast; the prophet Daniel undertook a partial fast for three weeks in Daniel 10:2-3.

Dan 10:2-3 In those days I, Daniel, was mourning three full weeks. (3) I ate no pleasant food, no meat or wine came into my mouth, nor did I anoint myself at all, till three whole weeks were fulfilled.

Fasting is one of the great spiritual disciplines.

Now something that we need to understand is that fasting is a powerful weapon when accompanying prayer.

It gives extra power to prayer.

ILLUS – For instance, think of the woomera. The woomera is a throwing stick used by indigenous Australians to throw spears. The spear is a very dangerous weapon all by itself. But when you attach it to the woomera, it gets extra speed, extra distance, and extra power.

That's like the relationship between prayer and fasting.

Prayer is powerful all by itself, but when you fast, it becomes so much more effective.

2. Why Fast?

First, Jesus said to.

Mat 6:16 Moreover, when you fast, do not be like the hypocrites, with a sad countenance. For they disfigure their faces that they may appear to men to be fasting. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward.

Notice that Jesus didn't say, "If you fast" but "When you fast."

When the disciples of John and the Pharisees asked Jesus why His disciples didn't fast, Jesus replied that His disciples wouldn't fast while He was still with them.

But after He was taken away from them, then His disciples would fast.

We need to understand this: Fasting is not an optional extra; it's an expectation that the Lord has of His disciples.

Another reason why we should fast is that we have the examples in Scripture of godly men and women.

Moses fasted in Ex 34:28.

David fasted in 2 Sam 12:16, Ps 69:10.

Jehoshaphat fasted in 2 Chron 20:3.

Ezra fasted in Ez 8:23.

Nehemiah fasted in Neh 1:4.

Esther & Mordecai fasted in Est 4:16.

Daniel fasted in Dan 9:3.

Disciples of John fasted in Mk 2:18.

Jesus fasted in Mat 4:2.

Anna the prophetess fasted in Lk 2:37.

Cornelius fasted in Acts 10:30.

Paul (often) fasted in 2 Cor 11:27.

Paul & Barnabas fasted in Acts 14:23.

Are you getting the message?

Fasting is an important part of a godly lifestyle.

3. What Does Fasting Do?

Let's take a look at four things that fasting does.

First, fasting humbles us.

Ps 35:13 But as for me, when they were sick, my clothing was sackcloth; I humbled myself with fasting; and my prayer would return to my own heart.

ILLUS – King Ahab was an evil king. When God revealed how He was going to judge Ahab for his sins, it tells us in 1 Kings 21:27 that Ahab fasted. What was God's response? God said, "See how Ahab has humbled himself before Me? Because he has humbled himself before Me, I will not bring the calamity in his days. In the days of his son I will bring the calamity on his house." (1 Kings 21:29)

So fasting is a way of humbling ourselves before God.

This is why when we fast individually we should do it in secret.

Mat 6:16-18 Moreover, when you fast, do not be like the hypocrites, with a sad countenance. For they disfigure their faces that they may appear to men to be fasting. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward. (17) But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, (18) so that you do not appear to men to be fasting, but to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly.

Going around and making sure that everyone knows that we are fasting is the exact opposite of humbling ourselves.

Obviously, if an entire group of people are fasting, such as in a church, then we can't keep it a secret from each other, but we don't have to go around making a big thing of it either.

So what happens when we humble ourselves through fasting?

James 4:6-10 But He gives more grace. Therefore He says: "God resists the proud, But gives grace to the humble." (7) Therefore submit to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you. (8) Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded. (9) Lament and mourn and weep! Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. (10) Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and He will lift you up.

Humbling ourselves leads to an outpouring of God's grace.

When we humble ourselves in fasting, God will reward us with His grace.

Fasting prepares the heart

We don't fast in order to get something from God; we fast in order to align our hearts with the Father's heart.¹

The only thing stopping us from receiving everything that God has for us is the condition of our own hearts.

If God is going to move in us and through us, we need to align our hearts with God's heart.

How do we do that? Prayer and fasting.

Fasting disciplines the body

1 Cor 9:27 But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified.

Now why would we need to discipline our bodies?

To understand this, we need to understand that we are tripartite beings.

We are spirit, soul and body. (1 Thessalonians 5:23)

Our spirit is the part of us that is in touch with God and the spiritual world.

Our soul is comprised of our mind, our will, and our emotions.

And our body is the part of us that is directly relating to this physical world.

Which part is the most important? The part of us that communicates with God.

But we are often dominated by our physical appetites as well as the appetites of the soul.

Fasting helps to address this issue by bringing our bodies back into subjection because fasting forces the body to make sacrifices.

Even a partial fast such as the Daniel Fast can be challenging for those who are used to an unlimited diet.

But Daniel did it, and he was in his 90s at the time!

¹ Ahn, Ché, & Engle, Lou *The Call Revolution* p74

Fasting accompanies repentance

Joel 2:12 “Now, therefore,” says the LORD, “Turn to Me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning.”

When the prophet Jonah preached that God’s judgment was about to come upon the city of Nineveh, how did they respond?

Jonah 3:5 So the people of Nineveh believed God, proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest to the least of them.

Their repentance was accompanied with fasting.

Unforgiveness, anger, lust, gluttony, judgmentalism, apathy, selfishness, criticism, bondages...

How will the people of God break through on these things that we find so difficult to overcome?

Through repentance accompanied by prayer and fasting.

4. What To Pray For

So if fasting is so important, and fasting is meant to accompany prayer, what should we pray for?

Let me make some suggestions.

Pray for yourself; you need all the help you can get, just the same as I do.

Pray for strength, for wisdom, for guidance, for insight, for the love of God to flow through you.

Pray for your family; pray for them to walk with God, that God would grant them the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him. (Ephesians 1:17)

Let’s get serious about praying for our loved ones.

Pray for your church; it’s almost a complete certainty that your church isn’t everything it should be.

You’re in it for a start; are you everything you should be?

Pray for your church to get back to the mission of reaching the lost and making disciples.

Pray for your church to stand in unity.

Pray for your church to be effective in evangelism.

Pray that your church will live out the love of God.

Pray for your city and your nation.

Pray that your community will be prepared by the Holy Spirit to hear the gospel message.

Pray that your lawmakers will make just laws based on grace and truth.

There’s a lot to pray for.

But let me challenge you to make fasting an ongoing part of your lifestyle.