

The Citizen's Fast

Matthew 6:16-18

Introduction

In Matthew 6 Jesus presents models for giving, prayer, fasting, money and trust. Jesus has spoken about how not to pray (vv.5; 7-8); and how to pray (vv.6; 9-13). Now Jesus tells us how not to fast and how to fast. Giving, praying and fasting are all physical activities with spiritual benefits. You can give to God and pray to God and fast for God with right or wrong motives. Some are hypocrites—they disfigure their faces to show they are fasting (v.16); some are humble—they brush their teeth—comb their hair—wash their faces—so only God knows what they are doing.

Fasting has been a part of religious traditions all over the world. In ancient times certain people believed that demons could invade your body via food. Today we don't worry so much about demons but rather genetic modification or Blue Bell Ice Cream recalls (*Listeria monocytogenes*). If you travel in some countries and drink contaminated water or eat certain foods you will think you have been invaded by demons. When people felt they were under demon attack they would refrain from eating certain foods or go on extended fasts. In eastern religions and native American religions, people go on prolonged fasts in order to receive visions or dreams. In modern America people go on cleansing fasts for optimum health or the perfect body.

As Islam becomes more influential, Americans are aware of the fast of Ramadam. It falls on the ninth month of the Islamic calendar. It is supposed to commemorate the first revelation of Allah to Mohammed. The fast lasts from dawn, “when it is light enough to distinguish a white thread from a black thread—until sunset”. Bathing, drinking, smoking, smelling perfumes and fragrances, eating, every unnecessary indulgence is forbidden. Nurses and pregnant women are excused, as well as the sick, and soldiers (but they must make up the fast at a future date). If a person remains sick, he may give alms to the poor. The ancient Jewish customs were almost the same. The Jewish fast was from dawn to sunset.

The Bible is silent concerning fasting for practical or health reasons. Fasting in the Bible was always connected with some spiritual activity in relation to God. Many characters in the Bible fasted; Moses, Samson, Samuel, David, Daniel, Hannah, Ezra, Esther etc. In the NT; John the Baptist and his disciples, Jesus, Paul and others. In Church history; Luther, Calvin, Wesley, Whitefield etc.

During the time of Christ, only one fast was mandatory—and that on the Day of Atonement. Leviticus 16:29; “This shall be a statute forever for you: In the Seventh month, on the tenth day of the month, you shall afflict your souls, and do no work at all, whether a native of your own country or a stranger who dwells among you.” Afflicting the soul is a Hebrew expression which includes denying yourself food in an act of self-denial. “That was a national fast that included every man, woman, and child in Israel. But it occurred one time a year, and then only as an integral part of the Day of Atonement” (J. MacArthur; p.400). The Jewish Scribes stated; “. . . it

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is forbidden to eat, or to drink, or to bathe, or to anoint oneself, or to wear sandals, or to indulge in conjugal intercourse” (Barclay p. 223).

Look Nice (Happy! v.16)

Matthew 6:16 (NKJV) “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.

The Lord condemned hypocritical prayer and now condemns hypocritical fasting.

Perhaps we should pause and ask ourselves what is fasting? In a broad sense it means to refrain from eating or some other activity. In the Bible the fast was not simply refraining from food but refraining from food for spiritual purposes. We might think of it as some denial of the flesh in order to feed the spirit. In Jeremiah 36:6 we read; “On a fast day. . .you shall read the words of the Lord”. The Lord is referencing the religious leaders who fasted to be seen by men. The Scribes and the Pharisees (and others) had a specific time set aside to fast. They fasted every Monday and Thursday. Monday and Thursday were the days most people did their shopping and ran their errands in the marketplace.

“During at least the dry seasons, many of the pious people fasted (without water, though this was unhealthy) two particular days a week. This fasting was considered meritorious, although ascetic fasting (e.g. fasting to beat down the flesh) was forbidden. Jewish fasting required abstinence not only from food but also from other pleasures, which would include the usual practice of anointing one’s head with oil to prevent dry skin; avoiding all these practices made fasting obvious (Craig Keener; p. 63).

Some people would not comb their hair or brush their teeth and put on soiled garments. They would sometimes put on make-up to make themselves look pale. Someone might say to Phillip the Pharisee—“Phil—you look pale—maybe you should get some loch’s and bagels with a little creme cheese.” “No, No, I am fasting. I fast twice a week every week, you know, I am a deeply spiritual person.”

Jesus affirms fasting—“Moreover when you fast”—but condemns fasting for all the wrong reasons. In ancient times as well as modern times some fasted to get God’s attention! The idea being that only a really spiritual and dedicated person would deprive themselves of food—maybe God’s special attention and care would come to those who deny themselves food. The false premise—“God notices people who afflict themselves to get His attention!”

Another reason people fasted was to try and prove to God their sorrow or repentance for sin was real. The danger is that proof of repentance could very easily come to be regarded as a substitute for repentance. In other words, people would fast to prove just how sorry they were, but pretty

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soon they fast to prove just how spiritual they are. Fasting is no substitute for genuine repentance (Barclay p. 234).

Some people fasted on behalf of others! Ordinary people won't fast, so the more spiritual people felt obligated to fast on behalf of their carnal family and friends; in a kind of vicarious fasting. Ordinary people were preoccupied with the cares and concerns of this world. The idea was they would make up for their carnality by going the extra mile in an extended fast. If people fast in order to show how "spiritual" they are, Jesus says "you are wasting your time." You might lose physical weight but you are not gaining spiritual muscle.

Look Neat (Healthy! v.17)

17But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face,

Jesus tells them that when you fast make the extra effort to look neat! Don't go out of your way to look bad! Put on your makeup. Comb your hair. Brush your teeth. Put on deodorant (in the ancient world they didn't really focus on under arm sprays). Do not alter your appearance to leave people with the impression that you are involved in some profound spiritual activity. Anointing your head and washing your face were a part of the daily routine.

Fasting is mentioned some 30 times in the NT and almost always in a favorable light. Again when Jesus says "when you fast" the implication is that fasting is normal, and acceptable. Jesus assumes His disciples will fast on certain occasions but does not spell out those occasions. There is a time for joy and a time for prayer and reflection. Jesus gives no specific time, days or occasions. The Jewish people were called to fast on the Day of Atonement in a kind of corporate declaration of deprivation and seeking God.

Look Normal (Whole! v.18)

18so 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.

The point of verse 18 is not to draw attention to oneself; either by outlandish outbursts of joy or making your self up to look like an extra in a Zombie apocalypse movie. Our human heart often has mixed motives. Are we doing this because we are seeking God, or the praises of men? IF we are doing something to draw attention to ourselves or the praises of others, who short circuit whatever spiritual benefit we might have obtained by fasting.

One way to impress God is to avoid impressing people. Genuine fasting is focused on the Lord. "This verse teaches that the Father never fails to notice fasting that is heart-felt and genuine, and that He never fails to reward it" (John MacArthur p. 405).

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Should We Fast Today?

Jesus assumes the fast. “When you give alms. . .when you pray. . .when you fast” (Matt.6:2,5, 16). In Matthew 9:15; Jesus says “When the bridegroom is taken from them. . .then they will fast”. The answer came when certain men asked Jesus why the disciples of John the Baptist engaged in certain fasts and the disciples of Jesus neglected these fasts. Jesus said, “Can the wedding guests mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them? The days will come when the bride-groom is taken away from them, and then they will fast.” That was a time of rejoicing. But there are seasons of mourning.

In the Bible there were personal fasts, and public fasts. In Joe 2:15 there was time when the people were called to “Sanctify a fast; call a solemn assembly”.

It would appear that during times of stress, pressure, anxiety, affliction or great need it might be appropriate to fast and pray. In times when major life-changing decisions must be made. There have been a few times in my life that called for extended fasts (going to school, getting married, major ministry decisions).

For the Christian fasting is not some religious exercise or ritual. It is not done by the calendar (though you can schedule regular times of fasting). When you fast you deprive yourself of food or pleasure or some activity in order to seek God or seek the Lord Jesus or seek His will for your life. This is a voluntary time of meditation, reflection, drawing close to the Lord. The spiritual fast is not for health (though there might be health benefits). **We afflict our body or deprive our body in order to satisfy our souls.**

PLEASE NOTE: The Scriptures never treat fasting as some kind of mystical, heightened super spiritual condition. Ancient Christian mystics, as well as some modern Christian Leaders (i.e. Bill Bright and others) claim special insight or awareness. There is a huge movement for people to engage in 40 day fasts. This can be dangerous if not properly supervised. One should never enter into that kind of prolonged fast without medical advice and assistance. Yes it is true that Moses fasted for 40 days before receiving the Law and Jesus fasted for 40 in the wilderness without food and water (but if you go without water for 40 days you will die!).

Fasting is not limited to food—but might include limiting other kinds of activities. Whatever we do, we are not to do it in order to draw attention to ourselves. We are to quietly and specifically make the decision to see the Lord—rather than personal mystical satisfaction!

We Fast For Direction

In both the OT and NT people fasted when they desired wisdom from God and direction from God. Moses fasted in preparation for revelation. Daniel fasted as he awaited God's Word (Dan. 9:3). Jesus fasted 40 days before beginning His ministry and faced great testing.

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When the nation of Israel was threatened by her enemies, King Jehoshaphat proclaimed a national fast (2 Chron. 20:3). The Moabites and the Ammonites were certainly, from a human perspective, unbeatable, but the Jewish people cried out to God and experienced deliverance. Queen Esther, her servants and the Jews in the city of Susa fasted for three days, before she went to plead her case before the king of the Persians for the Jews to be spared from Haman's plot.

Does fasting clarify your thinking? You may have attempted to fast in the past and all you could think about was food! (Jon Courson p.138) "Physiologists tell us when there is no food in the stomach, there is greater blood flow to the brain. You can actually think clearer when you're not digesting burgers and fries and shakes. Once you overcome those first pangs of hunger, your thinking processes are more focused and clearer than ever. On the other hand, if you have two Whoppers and four cheeseburger, all you want to do is sleep"

We Fast For Discipline

We live in a fast food culture. We eat out. We eat on the run. We eat in at COST-CO. McDonalds (the daring) and Taco Bell. We see food establishments everywhere; we see food commercials on the TV—computer—and hear ads on the radio. But more and more people are becoming aware of their food intake and attempting to eat healthy. Fasting may have health benefits but those benefits are not our focus. If you fast for health or nutritional benefits that is fine—but Biblical fasting is denying the flesh in order to feed the spirit. If you miss a physical meal—you consume a spiritual meal. You may want to skip lunch and go to a private place and open the Word of God and feast on Philippians, or snack on Philemon or have a hearty healthy wholesome Psalm of David.

We Fast For Liberation

Most people are governed by their passions, feelings and reason. It was Helen Keller who said; 'The best and most beautiful things in the world cannot be seen or even touched. They must be felt with the heart.'

In the normal course of life we all experience some measure of depression or oppression. We are all troubled by work or school. We may find ourselves in the grip of some sin or reoccurring problem. Fasting like prayer—can be a powerful spiritual weapon.

If you say no—to your stomach without saying yes to Jesus—you may as well be on a diet. Saying no to your physical appetites in part may mean you can say yes to spiritual disciplines.

Fasting can help us refrain from being slaves to certain things, or people or habits. "Well I'm in the habit of eating every day!" "Three—times a day—make that five times a day". Missing a meal won't kill you. Even going without food for a day will not kill you. Some of us do things

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or eat things—not out of need—but habit. They have become so essential to us that we find it hard to live without it. What really is essential? The truth—the more you can live without—the freer our lives! When all things—become essential—good food—expensive—lavish—life-styles—winning teams—winning elections—we crave certain pleasures—we demand certain outcomes—we stomp our feet and shake our fists—when our bellies are empty—or our pleasures unfulfilled. When all things are essential—we are at their mercy. When luxury becomes necessity—we are in bondage. Fasting may not be limited to food—it might include other things! Could you go without a car? Could you survive without Television or the Internet? How long can you stay away from that game console?

Can you march into the shopping Mall—and look —at that thing—and say “I don’t need you.”

Fasting Can Create Genuine Appreciation For What You Have

One of the great ways to appreciate what you have is to go without. Have you ever spent the night on a park bench or in a public park? Have you ever rummaged through a dumpster to find food thrown away by the fast food restaurant? Most never will. I hope you never do. Most would not want to go without brushing their teeth for weeks—just to see what its like to have foul breath and a disgusting smile! But what if there were no water—and the only water you had was far to precious to simply brush your teeth?

“It may be that there was a time in life when some pleasure came so seldom that we really enjoyed it when it did come (*like going to a movie—drive in theatre—restaurant etc Gino*). It maybe nowadays the appetite is blunted; the palate dulled; the edge is gone off it. What was once a sharp pleasure has become simply a drug which we cannot do without. Fasting keeps the thrill in pleasure by keeping pleasure always fresh and new” (Barclay p. 238).

I seldom meet Christians who fast. Jesus condemned wrong fasting—but I don’t think either Jesus or the New Testament ever meant to eliminate fasting altogether.

Conclusion

Why fast? For the person who never requires direction—never requires discipline—never requires liberation—never requires appreciation—they will never fast. We don’t fast to impress each other. We don’t fast to manipulate God. We don’t fast don’t have power over God or power with God or pressure God. The object of fasting—is to discern God’s will—and appropriate God’s power—for life—to clarify our thinking—and a willingness—to discern the principles in the Bible that lead to good decision making. We fast in special times of testing, trial, decision making. When David sinned with Bathsheba, he fasted, as he pleaded for the life of the child—conceived in disobedience. In that circumstance—David’s fast did not change

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God's decision—but rather David's perspective. David also fasted when Abner died (see 2 Sam. 3:35)—David even fasted for his enemies. “When they were sick, my clothing was sackcloth; I humbled my soul with fasting; and my prayer kept turning to my bosom” (Psalm 35:13).

If you decide to skip a meal—or a few meals—or forgo certain pleasures—make sure you occupy that time—with prayer—and study of God's wonderful Word. You may want to think about a time of fasting—before beginning a new ministry—a life-long commitment—or a brand new direction for you life or the life of your family or new service for Jesus.

On a TV show a small boy was asked if he had any pets. “Well” he replied, “I did have some goldfish but some water softener got into the aquarium and they softened to death.” So also, self-indulgence, laziness, indifference and lack of self-discipline can become a part of our lives. Our spiritual muscles become so soft—so flabby—we are easy prey to temptation and sin.

When you fast—you must have a right heart—a right motive—right living—right attitude.