

“When Ye Fast...”

(Adapted from *Path to Righteousness* by Linda Poitras)

“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. But thou, when thou fastest, anoint thine head, and wash thy face; 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”
(Matthew 6:16-18).

Introduction

The key verse is from Jesus’ famous “Sermon on the Mount.” Here the Lord is talking about “when” we fast, and is letting us know that if it is not practiced correctly, it will not do us any good. Jesus did not take time to explain fasting to the people He was talking to, so they must have already known what He meant. What is it, and how do you do it?

What is Fasting?

Many people fast for lots of different reasons. People like Socrates, Plato, Polycarp, early Egyptians, Arab physicians, American Indians, and biblical Hebrews all practiced fasting. They fasted:

- To preserve good health and youthful appearance, to get in a creative mood,
- To enhance their mental faculties,
- As a cure for certain diseases, and
- To induce mystic visions and appease their gods

Even people today practice fasting for many reasons. Why did Jesus speak of it in His Word and what did He say to His followers?

In the Bible, fasting refers to the discipline of completely avoiding food (not eating) for spiritual purposes. Most of the time, fasting was linked with prayer, but we should consider it as something on its own also. We can call fasting “prayer without words.”

Three main forms of fasting are in the Bible:

- 📖 **The normal fast:** abstaining from all food, solid or liquid, but not from water (Matthew 4:2 – after Jesus fasted forty days, He was “*an hungered*” but the Bible says nothing about His being thirsty).
- 📖 **The absolute fast:** abstaining from both food and water (Esther 4:16; Acts 9:9 – This type of fast should last no more than three days. The body cannot go without water any longer than this without beginning to dehydrate.) Moses and Elijah practiced the absolute fast for

longer than three days, but only under supernatural conditions (Exodus 34:28; Deuteronomy 9:9, 18; 1 Kings 19:8).

📖 **The partial fast:** a restriction of diet rather than complete absence of food (Daniel 10:3).

Why Should I Fast?

The Bible records a number of reasons for fasts. These are almost always accompanied by prayer. The two fit together. Neither one should be avoided. Both are necessary disciplines of a Christian's life if he wants to draw closer to the Lord. When joined together, they are powerful! Jesus practiced this discipline, and it made a difference in His ministry. Before He fasted, Luke 4:1 says: "*And Jesus being full of the Holy Ghost returned from Jordan...*" But *after* he had fasted, just a few verses later, Luke 4:14 says: "*And Jesus returned in the power of the Spirit into Galilee...*" As our perfect example, Jesus was showing us what happens when we put these two weapons together and use them against the devil – we have more power.

Never make the mistake of believing that when you fast, you gain favor with God. Fasting will not give you special points in God's eyes. It will, however, make your flesh humble and put your mind and heart in a place where you can hear from God and understand His voice more clearly. Anytime we put our flesh under subjection, God is exalted. His plan, purpose, and will become more important than our personal, physical needs. Fasting brings that selfish "me" under subjection. It is something I choose to do.

So why choose to humble myself? The *Full Life Study Bible* note for Matthew 6:16 says I humble myself:

- 📖 To honor God (Zechariah 7:5; Luke 2:37; Acts 13:2)
- 📖 To humble one's soul before God (Ezra 8:21; Psalm 69:10; Isaiah 58:3)
 - In order to receive more grace (1 Peter 5:5)
 - To get closer to God and feel His presence (Isaiah 57:15; 58:6-9)
- 📖 To mourn over personal sin and failure (1 Samuel 7:6; Nehemiah 9:1-2)
- 📖 To seek grace for a new task and to reaffirm our consecration to God (Matthew 4:2)
- 📖 To seek God by drawing near to Him and prevailing in prayer against opposing spiritual forces (Judges 20:26; Ezra 8:21,23,31; Jeremiah 29:12-14; Joel 2:12; Luke 18:3; Acts 9:10-19)
- 📖 To show repentance and to make a way for God to change His declared intentions of judgment (2 Samuel 12:16,22; 1 Kings 21:27-29; Jeremiah 18:7-8; Joel 2:12-14; Jonah 3:5,10)
- 📖 To save souls from the bondage of evil (Isaiah 58:6; Matthew 17:14-21; Luke 4:18)
- 📖 To gain revelation, wisdom, and understanding concerning the will of God (Isaiah 58:5-6, 11; Daniel 9:3,21-22; Acts 13:2-3)
- 📖 To open the way for the outpouring of the Spirit and Christ's return to earth for His people (Matthew 9:15)

Should We Fast Today?

God's Word is full of examples of people who fasted. In fact, in the Bible, it was a way of life. No one questioned it – they practiced it.

The nation of Israel had one compulsory annual fast, the Day of Atonement. God explained to Moses: *"It shall be a Sabbath of rest unto you, and ye shall afflict your souls by a statute forever"* (Leviticus 16:31). "Afflicting the soul" was another term for fasting. This was a time to deprive the natural appetites and divert attention inward to more pressing needs. If all were going to rest, no one could be cooking and washing pots. God's people were supposed to be denying themselves the usual comforts and distractions of eating. They were to come before God and experience sorrow for their sin and express it by fasting and weeping. It was an emotional time. It was a time when a whole nation looked to God, instead of looking after their personal needs.

Some understood more about why they were doing it, and that always helps to bring better results. Jesus fasted, as did the first church (Acts 13:2-3; 14:23; and 27:33).

What happens to someone who fasts? Does he starve to death? No! When practiced properly and with the correct motives, fasting is good for your health.

The men and women in the Bible who practiced fasting learned that when they refused natural food, they were freer to focus on God. They saw things spiritually and understood better than they ever had in the rush and worry of routine living. God focused on them too, with a more direct quickening of His Spirit in their hearts and lives.

When we deliberately turn our attention from food and look toward God, we are concentrating on something much more important.

What are some of the good things that happen during a fast?

1. Physical health actually improves:

- Overweight people lose weight.
- We conserve the energies of the body that are regularly used in the digestive system and send them to be used in other areas of the body.
- There is a physiological rest for your body – a rest of the digestive, glandular, circulatory, respiratory, and nervous systems. When no food is eaten, all these systems have less work to do.
- The fast is the best way of increasing the elimination of waste from the blood and tissues.

2. Fasting does wonderful things for the mind. The five senses become more acute during a fast.

3. Fasting helps retain a youthful complexion and appearance. We are only as old as the number of dead cells in our body. Fasting converts dead cells into food fuel and burns them off.

4. The power of evil spirits can be broken or “cast out” through combined efforts of prayer and fasting. Medical science in recent years has documented what Christ said all along about fasting: *“And he said unto them, This kind can come forth by nothing, but by prayer and fasting”* (Mark 9:29). Habits such as smoking, drinking, and drug abuse are actually evil spirits through which Satan gains control of a person. Through the power of God’s Spirit, these evil spirits are destroyed. However, the lingering physical effects have become part of the physical body. As the body is purified through fasting, there seems to be a built-in resistance against once again polluting it.

With all these physical benefits, there must be a spiritual side to something practiced so frequently and by so many in the Bible.

What Are the Spiritual Benefits?

Drawing closer to God has innumerable benefits. Anytime we get “self” out of the way and focus on God, we will truly know Him in His power and glory. From the Portable Bible School lesson “Fasting Facts,” (by Rev. Jim Poitras), we learn some of the ways we benefit spiritually:

- 📖 Fasting is a vital spiritual discipline for all believers. Jesus did not say, *“If you fast,”* but He said, *“When you fast...”*
- 📖 The Apostle Paul knew fasting helped to control his flesh. Paul fasted often because he wrote, *“In fastings often”* (2 Corinthians 11:27). In 1 Corinthians 9:27, he said it best: *“But I keep my body, and bring it into subjection: lest that by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be a castaway.”*
- 📖 Fasting keeps us humble before God (Isaiah 58:5; Psalm 69:10).
- 📖 Fasting will bring spiritual determination and understanding as we ask God to give us help and direction in our problems (Joel 2:12).
- 📖 Fasting is our way of telling God how hungry we are for the things of the Spirit rather than the things of the flesh (Galatians 5:16-17; Job 23:12; Matthew 4:4).

How Do I Begin Fasting?

With all these benefits and blessings, I surely want to begin. But it is not easy to start denying myself.

1. If you are new to fasting, try easing into it gradually.

- 📖 First, decide on a day to fast. It will be best if it is a day you can devote to prayer and time to get into God’s Word.
 - Skip the first meal of the day.
 - Drink water when you feel hungry.
 - Spend time in prayer and Bible study.
 - You can break your fast when you normally eat your second meal.
 - This is only a few hours, but it is an important first step.
- 📖 Repeat this exercise a week later.

- 📖 After four weeks, you should feel comfortable about skipping one meal.
- 📖 You can then go on to the second step – a whole day.
 - Take as much time as possible in prayer and Bible study.
 - At the end of the day, eat a light meal. (Fruit or porridge may be best.)

2. Have a plan for fasting.

- 📖 Set a goal/purpose for your fasting. Why am I doing this?
- 📖 Repent of any sin in your life. The death to “self” will usually bring to mind any wrong that is being practiced. Lay it on the altar before God, and leave it there.
- 📖 Prepare physically. Begin with smaller fasts, and work your way to more extensive ones.
- 📖 Limit your activities. There is nothing wrong with resting more during a fast, since your whole body system is at rest during this time.
- 📖 Plan prayer times. If you do not plan to pray, something will always come up to hinder you.
- 📖 Plan times of Bible reading. During a fast, more than ever, God’s Word is “food for your soul.”

“When you practice some appetite-denying discipline to better concentrate on God, don’t make a production out of it. It might turn you into a small-time celebrity, but it won’t make you a saint. If you ‘go into training’ inwardly, act normal outwardly. Shampoo and comb your hair, brush your teeth, wash your face. God doesn’t require attention-getting devices. He won’t overlook what you are doing. He’ll reward you well” (Matthew 6:16-18, *The Message*).

Conclusion

Many who have vaguely heard of this practice, and do not understand it, believe it is something one does to gain favor with God. Ephesians 2:8-9 tells us: *“For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God: not of works, lest any man should boast.”* Nothing we do, not even denying our physical self in fasting, can make God love us more or want to answer our prayers sooner. Fasting is for my benefit. It helps me humble myself, and get a clearer picture of Jesus. I can hear His voice more clearly with “self” out of the way, and I am ready to do His will more quickly.

You are not heard because you fast, but because of God’s mercy. Walking on the “Path to Righteousness” will make fasting easier, and the results more certain. Let us draw near to God, get “self” out of the way, and walk *“in the power of the spirit”* that comes through fasting.

Study Questions

1. Give a brief explanation of fasting. Include some people from history who practiced it, and share their reasons for fasting. _____

2. Define fasting, the Bible way. _____

3. List and briefly explain the three (3) main forms of fasting mentioned in the Bible.
1) _____

2) _____

3) _____

4. Give a brief explanation of why prayer and fasting go together, as recorded in the Bible.

5. Explain the following statement: "Fasting will NOT give you special points in God's eyes."

6. List nine (9) reasons why we should fast. Give Scripture reference for each.
1) _____

2) _____

3) _____

4) _____

- 5) _____
- 6) _____
- 7) _____
- 8) _____
- 9) _____

7. Name and briefly describe (with Scripture reference) the one annual fast required by God for the children of Israel during Old Testament times. _____

8. List four (4) good things that happen when I fast.
- 1) _____
 - 2) _____
 - 3) _____
 - 4) _____

9. List four (4) benefits for physical health that happen when I fast.
- 1) _____
 - 2) _____
 - 3) _____
 - 4) _____

10. How many spiritual benefits are received by drawing closer to God through fasting?
