

How We Grow: Implementing the Spiritual Disciplines

Week 2 - Prayer

March 24, 2024

Additional Teaching Notes

From Richard Foster's book - Celebration of Discipline, "In a culture where the landscape is dotted with shrines to the Golden Arches and an assortment of Pizza Temples, fasting seems out of place, out of step with the times."

Why Has Fasting Faded From our Focus?

We would rather indulge than fast. We prefer to gratify every desire rather than exercise discipline in our bodies and souls. We tend to eat too much, and we even waste about twenty-five percent of our food every day. The constant propaganda fed us today convinces us that if we do not have three large meals each day, with several snacks in between, we are on the verge of starvation. We do not like self-discipline and self-control. It can be uncomfortable. Fasting is one of the disciplines of abstinence. When you abstain from something, you miss it and feel its absence.

Is fasting mandatory for Christians?

Although I do not think that fasting is mandatory for believers today, I do believe the discipline is available to strengthen you spiritually and to help you overcome barriers that might keep you from living the victorious Christian life. There simply are no biblical laws that command regular fasting. However, in the context of giving and praying, Jesus gave instruction on fasting. And he said "when you fast" not "if you fast". (Matthew 6:16) Jesus does not, though, say "you must fast". In another text a question by the disciple of John the Baptist questions Jesus about fasting. Matthew 9:15 indicates that it is only when the bridegroom has been taken away that the disciples would fast. Jesus expected his disciples to fast after he was gone.

1. What Is Fasting?

Fasting is abstinence from food – or anything that is legitimate in and of itself – for some spiritual purpose. Biblical fasting always centers on spiritual purposes. In Scripture it is abstaining from all food, solid or liquid, but not from water. A partial fast is a restriction of diet but not total abstention. (Daniel 10:3). Absolute fasts: abstaining from food and water (Esther 4:16; Acts 9:9). This fast is the exception, and should be engaged for no more than three days.

Fasting is a means of worship to God. Fasting is not an end to itself; it is a means by which we can worship the Lord and submit ourselves in humility to Him. We don't make God love us any more than He already does if we fast, or if we fast longer. "When ye fasted...did ye at all fast unto me, even to me?" (Zechariah 7:5) Fasting must be centered on God. It must be God-initiated and God-ordained. Fasting can be an expression of finding your greatest pleasure and enjoyment in life from God. That's the case when disciplining yourself to fast means that you love God more than food, that seeking Him is more important to you than eating.

2. Why Fast?

Over Indulgence

One of the major problems in our country is that we have such an abundance of everything. We are an indulged society. Jesus warns us about the dangers of living in a society such as ours. In Luke 21:34 he said, "Be careful, or your hearts will be weighed down with dissipation, drunkenness and the anxieties of life, and that day will close on you unexpectedly like a trap." He was speaking to the church. What was he warning them about? Dissipation. Drunkenness. Eating and drinking more and more.

Appetites

One of the areas of modern life in America where we have a great battle on our hands is in the area of Jesus' Lordship over our appetites. Every time our stomach's growl or feel the slightest bit empty our natural reaction in our culture of plenty is to feed it. It is not unusual for us to eat three meals a day and snack in between and after. Obesity is a plague in our country and Christians ...are often the worst offenders. In so many ways our bellies have become our gods. When that lord speaks or even gives the slightest whisper we rush to its aid to give immediate comfort and satisfaction. We simply do not know how to tell our stomach's "no, you are not lord."

Gluttony

In Titus 1:12 we read that the Cretans were known as lazy gluttons. It is quite easy to practice gluttony in our society. We live in an age of gluttony. Here we can eat again and again, even in the middle of the night. And we eat even when we are not hungry. Have you ever noticed how, when you are watching a movie or television program in which people are eating, all of a sudden you will go into the kitchen to find something to eat even when you are not hungry? This is our problem, and the spiritual discipline of fasting will help us to learn and exercise the self-control we need.

Mastery

"Fasting reveals the measure of food's mastery over us – or television or computers or whatever we submit to again and again to conceal the weakness of our hunger for God."

Priorities

Fasting helps us define and establish godly priorities. Jesus, who was the perfect example of someone with godly priorities, started his ministry with fasting. Matthew 4:1ff. We often mention that Jesus was prepared for his confrontation with the devil by his knowledge of scripture but he also prepared for it through fasting. If you knew you would be tempted by the devil for 40 days, wouldn't you want to be well fed and prepared? When

Jesus prepares to go into the wilderness to face the devil, he fasts for 40 days to prepare himself.

Spiritual Fullness

But fasting is just as much about filling up as it is about emptying. You don't want to remain empty. You want to fill yourself up with God's word and with prayer. You may want some time to meditate and think about God for an hour or so each day while you fast. (Dabbs)

Survival

Fasting reminds us that we are sustained "by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God" (Matthew 4:4).

3. When Should We Fast ?

On Predetermined Days

During the time of Jesus, Some Pharisees, such as the one who prayed to himself in Luke 18:12, fasted twice a week. Mondays and Thursdays were market days and these Pharisees would also go to the market in this gloomy and miserable condition. Why do you think they did that?

Often

Paul was in "fastings often" (2 Corinthians 11:27).

When facing sickness and death, wars or serious disasters like long-term droughts or plagues

(Judges 20; 1 Samuel 31; Nehemiah 1; 2 Chronicles 20; Joel, 2 Samuel 12)

When needing guidance

In Acts 13 and 14 the apostles fasted and prayed for guidance before they sent out Paul.

When preparing to serve God

Jesus fasted forty days in preparation for his ministry.

In longing for the appearance of Jesus

Jesus prophesied that his disciples would fast in his absence. (Matthew 9:14-15)

4. Qualities of Christian Fasting

Fasting is voluntary and private.

We should fast as we are led by the Spirit of the living God, and, thus, our fasting ought not to be mechanical and Pharisaical.

It is a means to accomplish spiritual purposes.

It trains us in self-denial, which is a key mark of a Christian.

It empties us so we become hungry for things that really matter.

The discipline of abstinence teaches us to be in the world but not of the world.

Negative qualities:

We should never fast in order to be seen and applauded by men.

We ought not to appear sad and gloomy.

Fasting is not meritorious.

Fasting is not a way to spiritually twist God's arm so that he will do something for you. As a spiritual discipline it can help you practically

develop humility, dependence on God and a prayerful spirit as you learn to feed on Christ.

5. Spiritual Activities During Fasting

Bible reading

Confession of sins

In 1 Samuel 7:6 we read how the Israelites fasted and confessed their sins before the Lord. "We have sinned against the Lord," they said.

Mourning and grieving

Ezra fasted and wept for the unfaithfulness of Israel, as we read in Ezra 10:6, "Then Ezra withdrew from before the house of God and went to the room of Jehohanan son of Eliashib. While he was there, he ate no food and drank no water, because he continued to mourn over the unfaithfulness of the exiles." There is a mourning, a grieving, because we feel that we have offended God.

Humble ourselves

In Psalm 35:13 we read, "Yet when they were ill, I put on sackcloth and humbled myself with fasting."

Accompanied by serious prayer

We see this in Ezra 8, Psalm 35, and Acts 13. Fasting must be accompanied by worship and prayer. Fasting and prayer go hand in hand.

Should be done in the context of loving God and his people. We are to help the poor, cover the naked, practice justice and mercy, and so on, as we read in Isaiah 58.

6. Prayers During Fasting

Sickness

We pray for those who are ill.

Revival

We read about that in Ezra 10, Nehemiah 1, and Daniel 9.

Guidance

We should pray with fasting for guidance. The New Testament church engaged in this activity of prayer and fasting before they sent out missionaries, as we read in Acts 13 and 14.

Deliverance

We are to fast and pray for deliverance from our enemies. Mordecai, Esther, and others fasted for seventy-two hours without eating or drinking, and God brought about great deliverance.

The salvation of our loved ones.

7. How to Fast

Imperfectly

You don't have to be Olympic-skilled. You might begin by fasting from people (solitude), conversation (silence), spending (frugality), media or using the telephone. Perhaps you'd like to experiment with abstaining from overpackaged highly processed foods, from lack of exercise (or fitness mania), or from living with an overpacked schedule. Or you may attempt a partial fast of eating no rich food, meat, or wine (Daniel 10:3).

Start Small

You could start by skipping one meal or fasting for one day. You could start fasting for a night or for three days. For a one-day fast you could try a noon-to-noon fast, or to begin after the noon meal one day and break the fast at the noon meal the next. In that case you are actually only skipping

the evening and morning meal. Or maybe - begin with a partial fast of 24 hours ... lunch to lunch. Drink fresh fruit juices during the fast. Do this once a week for several weeks. Monitor the inner attitude of the heart. Break your fast with a light meal of fresh fruits and vegetables and a good deal of inner rejoicing. Keep progressing.

Media

It is good also to fast sometimes from the television, radio, newspapers, and magazines.

Personal

Fasting is a personal matter between the individual and God. When you fast, you should tell only those who need to know. "For instance, I generally only let my wife know when I am going to fast so that she can pray for me. She is usually careful not to eat in front of me or to cook anything really savory while I am fasting. I suggest that you ask at least one other believer to be praying for you when you plan to fast because my own experience has taught me that it can be a powerful spiritual battleground." (Feldman)

8. Beginning Your Fast

Physical condition

If you have any kind of physical problems, you should consult with your doctor before you begin to fast. If you have diabetes, high blood pressure, or any other physical condition that would be affected by fasting, you should not begin to fast without medical advice.

Objectives

We must pray for something, and it is good to begin with our own needs. Tell God how oblivious you are to your own sins and needs and ask him to reveal them to you. You should pray for the needs of your family and the

needs of the church. You should pray for the needs of our nation and the world.

Perseverance

Be sure to persevere in it. We are not used to fasting, and we may experience headaches or other discomforts that make us want to quit. But we should persevere as we seek God. Eat lightly before and after fasting. Eat fruits and light foods rather than heavy foods like steak. You want to ease your body into the fast and break it gradually.

Drink

Drink lots of fluids—water and juice—during your fast.

Repent

Repent, confess, pray, and intercede for others during the fast.

Private

Avoid showmanship when you fast. Look normal and don't call attention to your fasting.

9. Benefits of Fasting. What, then, are the benefits to be gained from the practice of fasting?

Self Discipline

Fasting for spiritual purposes teaches us self-discipline. Jesus said to deny ourselves, meaning we must say "No" to the demands of our flesh. We are to say "No" to illegitimate demands as well as to certain legitimate ones. Fasting enables us to have self-discipline so that we can say "No" and make it stick. And it trains us to say "Yes" to God in terms of prayer, confession, and doing what is right.

Dependence

Fasting helps us to understand how much we depend on God. When we stop eating, what happens? We experience pain and trouble. We may even think we are about to die. When we fast, we begin to understand that we need God to give us daily bread, and that realization should give us a little humility. We realize that we live, move, and have our being in God.

Time

When we fast, there is more time to seek the kingdom of God . There is no cooking, no eating, and no washing of dishes. A lot of time is released so that we can really engage in spiritual activity.

Sympathy

Fasting enables us to endure suffering and sympathize with others. As we feel pain from fasting, we can better sympathize with others who are suffering.

Money

Fasting generates money. When we fast, we save money that would otherwise be used for food. In the second century the church used such money for the relief of the poor.

Alertness

Fasting contributes to spiritual and mental alertness. When we fast, our minds and perception get sharper because we are focusing less on temporal things and more on eternal realities. We are not rushing through our prayer. We are really thinking things through. Our souls become more alert.

Earnestness

Through fasting we are telling God that we are earnest in our prayer. Fasting signals earnestness and urgency. Prove yourself by serious fasting and prayer, and see whether or not God will help you. Fasting demonstrates our earnestness, urgency, and diligence.

Self-Examination

Fasting enables us to perform true self-examination. We are a generation that is steeped in the philosophy of self-esteem. We dislike the concept of sin and are always whitewashing ourselves. But when we fast and pray, God shows us in increasing degrees our own corruption. And when that happens, we are enabled to confess and forsake our sins.

Conclusion: Do you have a mild case of fasting-phobia? We think about missing a meal or two for the sake of becoming more like Jesus and we get anxious. And yet we willingly miss meals sometimes while shopping, working, recreating, or otherwise occupied.