

This week we will look into the spiritual discipline of FASTING.

For our lesson and discussion on this matter, we will look into Donald Whitney's book *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*. In his book, Whitney designates an entire chapter to why fasting should be a practiced discipline in the life of every believer.

Read this provided chapter this week and be prepared to discuss key points from the chapter as well highlighted scriptures based around the topic of fasting.

CHAPTER NINE

FASTING . . . FOR THE PURPOSE OF GODLINESS



*Self-indulgence is the enemy of gratitude,
and self-discipline usually its friend and generator.
That is why gluttony is a deadly sin. The early desert
fathers believed that a person's appetites are linked:
full stomachs and jaded palates take the edge
from our hunger and thirst for righteousness.
They spoil the appetite for God.*

Cornelius Plantinga, Jr.

quoted in *The Reformed Journal* (November 1988)

Quick. What do people who fast look like? What kinds of people come to your mind? Do they appear a bit strange? Are they John the Baptist types? Legalists? Health nuts?

Does Jesus come to your mind when you think of fasting and "fasters"? Jesus both practiced and taught fasting, you know. And yet, fasting is the most feared and misunderstood of all the Spiritual Disciplines.

One reason fasting is feared is that many believe it turns us into something we don't want to become and causes things to happen that we don't want to happen. We fear that fasting will make us hollow-eyed fanatics or odd for God. We're afraid that it will make us suffer dreadfully and give us a generally negative experience. For some Christians, fasting for spiritual purposes is as unthinkable as shaving their head or walking barefoot across a fire pit.

The reason fasting is so misunderstood is due to the famine of contemporary awareness of it. Even though there's more interest in fasting today than during the last half of the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries, how many people do you know who regularly practice fasting? How many sermons have you heard on the subject? In most Christian circles you will rarely hear fasting mentioned, and few will

have read anything about it. And yet it's mentioned in Scripture more times than even something as important as baptism (about seventy-seven times for fasting to seventy-five for baptism).

Christians in a gluttonous, denial-less, self-indulgent society may struggle to accept and to begin the practice of fasting. Few Disciplines go so radically against the flesh and the mainstream of culture as this one. But we cannot overlook its biblical significance. Of course, some people, for medical reasons, cannot fast. But most of us dare not overlook fasting's benefits in the disciplined pursuit of a Christlike life.

FASTING EXPLAINED

* A biblical definition of fasting is a Christian's voluntary abstinence from food for spiritual purposes. It is *Christian*, for fasting by a non-Christian obtains no eternal value because the Discipline's motives and purposes are to be God-centered. It is *voluntary* in that fasting is not to be coerced. Fasting is more than just the ultimate crash diet for the body; it is abstinence from food for *spiritual* purposes.

There is a broader view of fasting that is often overlooked. This is the approach Richard Foster takes when he defines fasting as "the voluntary denial of a normal function for the sake of intense spiritual activity."¹ So then, fasting does not always deal with abstinence from food. Sometimes we may need to fast from involvement with other people, or from the media, from the telephone, from talking, from sleep, etc., in order to become more absorbed in a time of spiritual activity.

Martyn Lloyd-Jones concurs with this wider definition of fasting.

To make the matter complete, we would add that fasting, if we conceive of it truly, must not only be confined to the question of food and drink; fasting should really be made to include abstinence from anything which is legitimate in and of itself for the sake of some special spiritual purpose. There are many bodily functions which are right and normal and perfectly legitimate, but which for special peculiar reasons in certain circumstances should be controlled. That is fasting. There, I suggest, is a kind of general definition of what is meant by fasting.²

Strictly speaking, however, the Bible only refers to fasting in terms of its primary sense, that is, abstinence from food. In this chapter I will limit my remarks to that kind of fasting.

The Bible distinguishes between several kinds of fasts. Although it doesn't use the labels we frequently employ today to describe these fasts, each of the following may be found:

A *normal fast* involves abstaining from all food, but not from water. We're told in Matthew 4:2, "After fasting forty days and forty nights, he [Jesus] was hungry." It says nothing about Him becoming thirsty. Furthermore, Luke 4:2 says that He "ate nothing during those days," but it does not say He drank nothing. Since the body can normally function no longer than three days without water, we assume that He drank water during this time. To abstain from food but to drink water or perhaps fruit juices is the most common kind of Christian fast.

A *partial fast* is a limitation of the diet but not abstention from all food. For ten days Daniel and three other Jewish young men only had "vegetables to eat and water to drink" (Daniel 1:12). It is said of the rugged prophet John the Baptist that "his food was locusts and wild honey" (Matthew 3:4). Historically, Christians have observed partial fasts by eating much smaller portions of food than usual for a certain time and/or eating only a few simple foods.

An *absolute fast* is the avoidance of all food and liquid, even water. We're told that Ezra "ate no food and drank no water, because he continued to mourn over the unfaithfulness of the exiles" (Ezra 10:6). When Esther requested that the Jews fast and pray on her behalf, she said, "Go, gather together all the Jews who are in Susa, and fast for me. Do not eat or drink for three days, night or day" (Esther 4:16). After the Apostle Paul was converted on the road to Damascus, Acts 9:9 tells us, "For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything."

The Bible also describes a *supernatural fast*. There are two instances of these. When Moses wrote of his meeting with God on Mount Sinai, he said, "I stayed on the mountain forty days and forty nights; I ate no bread and drank no water" (Deuteronomy 9:9). First Kings 19:8 may be saying that Elijah did the same thing when he went to the site of Moses' miraculous fast: "So he got up and ate and drank. Strengthened by that food, he traveled forty days and forty nights until

he reached Horeb, the mountain of God." These required God's supernatural intervention into the bodily processes and are not repeatable apart from the Lord's specific calling and miraculous provision.

A *private fast* is the one referred to most often in this chapter and what Jesus was speaking of in Matthew 6:16-18 when He says we should fast in a way not to be noticed by others.

Congregational fasts are the type found in Joel 2:15-16: "Blow a trumpet in Zion, declare a holy fast, call a sacred assembly. Gather the people, consecrate the assembly." At least a part of the congregation of the church at Antioch was fasting together in Acts 13:2, as evidenced by Luke's words "While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting."

The Bible also speaks of *national fasts*. The response of King Jehoshaphat to an invasion in 2 Chronicles 20:3 is to call a national fast: "Alarmed, Jehoshaphat resolved to inquire of the LORD, and he proclaimed a fast for all Judah." The Jews were called to a national fast in Nehemiah 9:1 and Esther 4:16, and the king of Nineveh proclaimed a fast in response to the preaching of Jonah (3:5-8). Incidentally, during the early days of our nation, Congress proclaimed three national fasts. Presidents John Adams and James Madison each called all Americans to fast, and Abraham Lincoln did so on three separate occasions during the War Between the States.³

There was one *regular fast* that God commanded under the Old Covenant. Every Jew was to fast on the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16:29-31). While they were in Babylon, the leaders of the Jews instituted four other annual fasts (Zechariah 8:19). The Pharisee in Luke 18:12 congratulates himself in prayer for keeping the tradition of the Pharisees by saying, "I fast twice a week." Although without biblical warrant, it is well known that John Wesley would not ordain a man to the Methodist ministry who did not regularly fast every Wednesday and Friday.

Finally, the Bible mentions *occasional fasts*. These occur on special occasions as the need arises. This was the kind of fast Jehoshaphat, as well as Esther, called for. This is the kind of fast implied by Jesus in Matthew 9:15: "How can the guests of the bridegroom mourn while he is with them? The time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them; then they will fast."

The most common fast among Christians today would fall under the categories of normal (abstaining from food but drinking water), private, and occasional fasts.

FASTING IS EXPECTED

To those unfamiliar with fasting, the most surprising part of this chapter may be the discovery that Jesus expected that His followers would fast.

Notice Jesus' words at the beginning of Matthew 6:16-17: "And *when you fast*. . . But *when you fast*. . ." By giving us instructions on what to do and what not to do when we fast, Jesus assumes that we will fast.

This expectation is even more obvious when we compare these words with His statements about giving in that same passage, Matthew 6:2-3: "So *when you give*. . . But *when you give*. . ." Compare also His words about praying in the same section, Matthew 6:5-7: "But *when you pray*. . . *When you pray*. . . And *when you pray*. . ." No one doubts that we are to give and to pray. In fact, it is quite common to use this passage to teach Jesus' principles on giving and praying. And since there is nothing here or elsewhere in Scripture indicating that we no longer need to fast, and since we know that Christians in the book of Acts fasted (9:9, 13:2, 14:23), we may conclude that Jesus still expects His followers to fast today.

Plainer still are the words of Jesus in Matthew 9:14-15. Immediately after calling Matthew the tax collector to follow Him, Jesus was the guest at Matthew's house for a meal. The Pharisees came and asked how Jesus could eat with such a sinner. The disciples of John the Baptist had a problem with this too. Like John, they were single-minded men with coarse and simple diets. They shared in a ministry that called people to repentance, and fasting was a part of that. If they were to point people to Jesus as John did, it confused them how He could feast when they were supposed to fast. So they came to Him and asked, "How is it that we and the Pharisees fast, but Your disciples do not fast?" Jesus answered, "How can the guests of the bridegroom mourn while he is with them? The time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them; *then they will fast*" (emphasis mine).

Jesus said that the time would come when His disciples "will fast." That time is now. Until Jesus, the Bridegroom of the Church returns, He expects us to fast.

The only instructions He left in addition to those already mentioned are in Matthew 6:16-18. There Jesus gives us a negative command, a positive command, and a promise. The negative command is first:

"When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full." When you fast, you aren't to look like you're fasting. Don't look miserable. Don't look like you're suffering. And don't neglect your appearance.

The positive command is next: "But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to men that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen." Instead of looking like a hungry scavenger, present yourself so well that no one can tell by your appearance that you are fasting. The only Observer of your fast should be the Secret One. No one else should know that you are fasting unless it is absolutely unavoidable or necessary.

Then Jesus gives us a promise about fasting: "And your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you." As sure and as certain as any promise in Scripture is the promise that God will bless you and reward your fast when it's done according to His Word.

It's interesting that Jesus gives us no command regarding how often or how long we should fast. Just like all the other Spiritual Disciplines, fasting is not to be a legalistic routine. It is a privilege and an opportunity to seek God's grace that is open to us as often as we desire.

How long should we fast? It's up to you and the leadership of the Holy Spirit. In the Bible are examples of fasts that lasted one day or part of a day (Judges 20:26; 1 Samuel 7:6; 2 Samuel 1:12, 3:35; Nehemiah 9:1; Jeremiah 36:6), a one-night fast (Daniel 6:18-24), three-day fasts (Esther 4:16, Acts 9:9), seven-day fasts (1 Samuel 31:13, 2 Samuel 12:16-23), a fourteen-day fast (Acts 27:33-34), a twenty-one day fast (Daniel 10:3-13), forty-day fasts (Deuteronomy 9:9, 1 Kings 19:8, Matthew 4:2), and fasts of unspecified lengths (Matthew 9:14; Luke 2:37; Acts 13:2, 14:2-3).

FASTING IS TO BE DONE FOR A PURPOSE

There's more to a biblical fast than abstaining from food. Without a spiritual purpose for your fast it's just a weight-loss fast. You'll be just like the man who told one writer on fasting,

I've fasted on several occasions; and nothing happened. I just got hungry. . . . Several years ago I heard a couple of pastors

discussing fasting. On their recommendation I tried my first fast. They said it was commanded in the Bible and should be practiced by every Christian. Being a Christian, I decided to try it. After putting it off for several days, I mustered up enough courage to start. I couldn't go to the breakfast table with my family because I didn't think I would have enough willpower to abstain from eating, so I went on to work. The coffee break was almost unbearable, and I told a little white lie about why I didn't go with the group. All I could think about was how hungry I was. I said to myself, "If I ever get through this day, I'll never try this again." The afternoon was even worse. I tried to concentrate on my work, but all I could hear was the growling of my stomach. My wife prepared a meal for herself and our child, and the aroma of the food was all I could bear. I figured that if I could make it till midnight, I would have fasted all day. I did—but immediately after the striking of the hour of twelve, I dug into food. I don't think that day of fasting helped me one bit.⁴

Of course, he was probably right. This man had no purpose for his fast. And without a purpose, fasting can be a miserable, self-centered experience.

There are many purposes for fasting given in Scripture. I've condensed them into ten major categories. Whenever you fast, you should do so for at least one of these purposes. (Notice that *none* of the purposes is to earn God's favor. We cannot use fasting as a way to impress God and earn His acceptance. We are made acceptable to God through the work of Christ Jesus, not our work. Fasting has no eternal benefit for us until we have come to God through repentance and faith. See Ephesians 2:1-10 and Titus 3:5-7.)

To Strengthen Prayer

"Whenever men are to pray to God concerning any great matter," wrote John Calvin, "it would be expedient to appoint fasting along with prayer."⁵

There's something about fasting that sharpens the edge of our intercessions and gives passion to our supplications. So it has frequently been used by the people of God when there is a special urgency about the concerns they lift before the Father.

When Ezra was about to lead a group of exiles back to Jerusalem, he proclaimed a fast in order for the people to seek the Lord earnestly for safe passage. They were to face many dangers without military protection during their nine-hundred-mile journey. This was no ordinary matter to be brought to God in prayer. "So we fasted and petitioned our God about this," says Ezra 8:23, "and he answered our prayer."

The Bible does not teach that fasting is a kind of spiritual hunger strike that compels God to do our bidding. If we ask for something outside of God's will, fasting does not cause Him to reconsider. Fasting does not change God's hearing so much as it changes our praying. In his book *God's Chosen Fast*, Arthur Wallis remarked,

Fasting is calculated to bring a note of urgency and importunity into our praying, and to give force to our pleading in the court of heaven. The man who prays with fasting is giving heaven notice that he is truly in earnest. . . . Not only so, but he is expressing his earnestness in a divinely-appointed way. He is using a means that God has chosen to make his voice to be heard on high.⁶

God is always pleased to hear the prayers of His people. But He is also pleased when we choose to strengthen our prayers in a way He has ordained.

Nehemiah (in 1:4) "fasted and prayed before the God of heaven." Daniel (in 9:3) devoted himself to plead with God "in prayer and petition, in fasting." In a direct command through the prophet Joel, Israel was told, "'Even now,' declares the LORD, 'return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning'" (Joel 2:12). It wasn't until after "they had fasted and prayed" that the church in Antioch "placed their hands" on Barnabas and Saul of Tarsus and "sent them off" on the first missionary journey (Acts 13:3).

The most important aspect of this Discipline is its influence on prayer. You'll notice that in one way or another, all the other biblical purposes of fasting relate to prayer. Fasting is one of the best friends we can introduce to our prayer life. Despite this potential power, however, it seems that very few are willing to enjoy its benefits. To quote Wallis again,

In giving us the privilege of fasting as well as praying, God has added a powerful weapon to our spiritual armory. In her folly and ignorance the Church has largely looked upon it as obsolete. She has thrown it down in some dark corner to rust, and there it has lain forgotten for centuries. An hour of impending crisis for the Church and the world demands its recovery.⁷

To Seek God's Guidance

There is biblical precedent for fasting for the purpose of more clearly discerning the will of God.

★ In Judges 20 the other eleven tribes of Israel prepared for war against the tribe of Benjamin. The soldiers gathered at Gibeah because of a shocking sin committed by the men of that Benjamite city. They sought the Lord before going into battle, and even though they outnumbered the Benjamites by fifteen to one, they lost the battle and twenty-two thousand men. The next day they sought the Lord with prayer and tears, but again they lost the battle and with thousands of casualties. Confused, the third time they not only sought guidance from the Lord in prayer and with tears, but they also "fasted that day until evening" (verse 26). "Shall we go up again to battle with Benjamin our brother, or not?" they asked. Then the Lord made His will plain: "Go, for tomorrow I will give them into your hands" (verse 28). Only after they sought Him with fasting did the Lord give Israel the victory.

According to Acts 14:23, before Paul and Barnabas would appoint elders in the churches they founded, they first prayed with fasting to receive God's guidance.

David Brainerd prayed with fasting for the Lord's leadership regarding his entry into ministry. On Monday, April 19, 1742, he recorded in his journal: "I set apart this day for fasting and prayer to God for His grace; especially to prepare me for the work of the ministry, to give me divine aid and direction in my preparations for that great work, and in His own time to send me into His harvest."⁸ He said of his experience during that day,

I felt the power of intercession for precious, immortal souls; for the advancement of the kingdom of my dear Lord and Saviour in the world; and withal, a most sweet resignation and even consolation and joy in the thoughts of suffering hardships, distresses,

and even death itself, in the promotion of it. . . . My soul was drawn out very much for the world, for multitudes of souls. I think I had more enlargement for sinners than for the children of God, though I felt as if I could spend my life in cries for both. I enjoyed great sweetness in communion with my dear Saviour. I think I never in my life felt such an entire weanedness from this world and so much resigned to God in everything.⁹

Fasting does not *ensure* the certainty of receiving clear guidance from God. Rightly practiced, however, it does make us more receptive to the One who loves to guide us.

To Express Grief

Three of the first four references in the Bible to fasting connect it with an expression of grief. As mentioned in Judges 20:26, one of the reasons the Israelites wept and fasted before the Lord was—not only to seek His guidance—but to express their grief for the forty thousand brothers they had lost in battle. When King Saul was killed by the Philistines, the men of Jabesh Gilead walked all night to recover the bodies of the king and his sons. After the burial, 1 Samuel 31:13 says they mourned when they “fasted seven days.” The next chapter gives the response of David and his men when they heard the news: “Then David and all the men with him took hold of their clothes and tore them. They mourned and wept and fasted till evening for Saul and his son Jonathan, and for the army of the LORD and the house of Israel, because they had fallen by the sword” (2 Samuel 1:11-12).

Grief caused by events other than a death also can be expressed through fasting. Christians have fasted because of grief for their sins. We are not required to pay for our sins, because we cannot and because Christ has done that once for all (1 Peter 3:18). God has promised that “if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9). But that does not mean that confession is a light and easy thing, a simple mouthing of words, a verbal ritual. Mere admission is not confession. Christ is dishonored by a frivolous view of confession that does not appreciate how much our sin cost Him. Although it is not a spiritual self-flagellation, biblical confession does involve at least some degree of grief for the sin committed. And inasmuch as fasting can be an expression of grief,

it is never inappropriate for fasting to be a voluntary, heartfelt part of confession. There have been a few occasions when I grieved so deeply over my sin that words alone seemed powerless to say to God what I wanted. And though it made me no more worthy of forgiveness, fasting communicated the grief and confession my words could not.

Fasting also can be a means of expressing grief for sins of others, such as for the sins of people within your church or for sins by your country. When a jealous King Saul was trying unjustly to kill David, the response of his son Jonathan, according to 1 Samuel 20:34, was that “on that second day of the month he did not eat, because he was grieved at his father’s shameful treatment of David.”

Caffy and I have a friend who has been a Christian just a few years. When she veered away from her profession of faith, we expressed our grief and prayed for her through a mutual fast of several days. Although we’d confronted her about her situation several times, she said, after being restored, that knowing we fasted for her was one of the main turning points in returning to fellowship. Our church has observed some occasional fast days together, partially to express our grief to the Lord over the sins of our nation.

Since fasting is often a means of expressing to God the depth of our feelings, it is as appropriate for grief-stricken prayers to be accompanied by fasting as by tears.

To Seek Deliverance or Protection

One of the most common fasts in biblical times was a fast to seek salvation from enemies or circumstances.

After being notified that a vast army was coming against him, King Jehoshaphat was afraid and “resolved to inquire of the LORD, and he proclaimed a fast for all Judah. The people of Judah came together to seek help from the LORD; indeed, they came from every town in Judah to seek him” (2 Chronicles 20:3-4).

We’ve already read of the fast called by Ezra when he led a group of exiles back to Jerusalem. There we noticed that they fasted in order to strengthen their praying. But notice from the larger context of Ezra 8:21-23 that the reason they prayed with fasting was for God’s protection:

There, by the Ahava Canal, I proclaimed a fast, so that we might humble ourselves before our God and ask him for a safe

journey for us and our children, with all our possessions. I was ashamed to ask the king for soldiers and horsemen to protect us from enemies on the road, because we had told the king, "The gracious hand of our God is on everyone who looks to him, but his great anger is against all who forsake him." So we fasted and petitioned our God about this, and he answered our prayer.

The best known cooperative fast in Scripture is likely the one in Esther 4:16. It was called by Queen Esther as a part of her appeal to God for protection from the king's wrath. She planned to enter the court of King Xerxes uninvited in order to appeal to him for the protection of the Jews from mass extermination. She said to her uncle Mordecai, "Go, gather together all the Jews who are in Susa, and fast for me. Do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my maids will fast as you do. When this is done, I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish."

When our church has a day of fasting in grief for the sins of our country, we also include prayers asking the Lord to protect and deliver us from enemies that might result from our sins. We realize that He often disciplined Israel for her sins by allowing national enemies to gain advantage over her militarily or economically. Perhaps we don't think as often of the reality of national sin as we should, and how Christians will experience part of any national judgment that comes, even though we did not contribute directly to the national sin.

But not all fasts to seek from God deliverance or protection are corporate fasts. David wrote Psalm 109 as an appeal for personal relief from a group of enemies and their leader in particular. A private fast was accompanying his prayer, as indicated by verse 24: "My knees give way from fasting; my body is thin and gaunt." Apparently this was an unusually long fast.

Fasting, rather than fleshly efforts, should be one of our first defenses against "persecution" from family, schoolmates, neighbors, or coworkers because of our faith. Typically we're tempted to strike back with anger, verbal abuse, counteraccusations, or even legal action. But instead of political maneuvering, gossiping, and imitating the worldly tactics of our enemies, we should appeal to God with fasting for protection and deliverance.

To Express Repentance and the Return to God

Fasting for this purpose is similar to fasting for the purpose of expressing grief for sin. But as repentance is a change of mind resulting in a change of action, fasting can represent more than just grief over sin. It also can signal a commitment to obedience and a new direction.

The Israelites expressed repentance through fasting in 1 Samuel 7:6 when "they drew water and poured it out before the LORD. On that day they fasted and there they confessed, 'We have sinned against the LORD.'"

In Joel 2:12, the Lord specifically commanded His people to signify their repentance and their return to Him by fasting: "'Even now,' declares the LORD, 'return to Me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning.'"

Surely the most thorough fast ever recorded is the one in Jonah 3:5-8, and it is a fast to express repentance. After God blessed Jonah's preaching with a great spiritual awakening,

The Ninevites believed God. They declared a fast, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth. When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, took off his royal robes, covered himself with sackcloth and sat down in the dust. Then he issued a proclamation in Nineveh: "By the decree of the king and his nobles: Do not let any man or beast, herd or flock, taste anything; do not let them eat or drink. But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth. Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence."

Not only can fasting express repentance, but it can also be in vain *without* repentance. As with all Spiritual Disciplines, fasting can be little more than a "dead work" if we have persistently hardened our hearts to God's call to deal with a specific sin in our lives. We must never try to immerse ourselves in a Spiritual Discipline as an attempt to drown out God's voice about forsaking a sin. It is a perversion of fasting to try to use it to balance self-punishment for a sinful part of life we want to continue feeding. One of the stalwart Puritan pastor-writers, Thomas Boston, said,

In vain will ye fast, and pretend to be humbled for our sins, and make confession of them, if our love of sin be not turned into

hatred; our liking of it into loathing; and our cleaving to it, into a longing to be rid of it; with full purpose to resist the motions of it in our heart, and the outbreakings thereof in our life; and if we turn not unto God as our rightful Lord and Master, and return to our duty again.¹⁰

To Humble Oneself Before God

Fasting, when practiced with the right motives, is a physical expression of humility before God, just as kneeling or prostrating yourself in prayer can reflect humility before Him. And as there are times when you feel the need to express humility by praying on your knees or on your face before the Lord, so there are times when you may want to express a sense of humility before the Lord in every activity throughout the day by fasting.

Many who are accustomed to expressing humility in prayer by kneeling might ask why we would want to express humility all day by fasting. Conversely, John Calvin asked a better question: Why not? "For since this [fasting] is a holy exercise both for the humbling of men and for their confession of humility, why should we use it less than the ancients did in similar need? . . . What reason is there why we should not do the same?"¹¹

One of the most wicked men in Jewish history, King Ahab, eventually humbled himself before God and demonstrated it by fasting: "When Ahab heard these words, he tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and fasted. He lay in sackcloth and went around meekly. Then the word of the LORD came to Elijah the Tishbite: 'Have you noticed how Ahab has humbled himself before me? Because he has humbled himself, I will not bring this disaster in his day, but I will bring it on his house in the days of his son'" (1 Kings 21:27-29).

On the other hand, one of Israel's godliest men humbled himself before the Lord in exactly the same way. King David wrote, "I put on sackcloth and humbled myself with fasting" (Psalm 35:13).

Remember that fasting itself is not humility before God, but should be an expression of humility. There was no humility in the Pharisee of Luke 18:12, who bragged to God in prayer that he fasted twice a week. Author David Smith, in *Fasting: A Neglected Discipline*, reminds us,

By this we must not conclude that the act of fasting has some virtuous power, and that we have made ourselves more humble;

there is no virtue in fallen man by which he can make himself more godly; there is, however, virtue in the divinely appointed means of grace. If we, by the power of the Holy Spirit, mortify the deeds of the body (through fasting), we shall grow in grace, but the glory of such change will be God's alone.¹²

To Express Concern for the Work of God

Just as a parent might fast and pray out of concern for the work of God in the life of a child, so Christians may fast and pray because they feel a burden for the work of God in a broader scope.

A Christian might feel compelled to fast and pray for the work of God in a place that has experienced tragedy, disappointment, or apparent defeat. This was the purpose for Nehemiah's fast when he heard that despite the return of many Jewish exiles to Jerusalem, the city still had no wall to defend it. "They said to me, 'Those who survived the exile and are back in the province are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been burned with fire.' When I heard these things, I sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven" (Nehemiah 1:3-4). After his fast, Nehemiah then went to work to do something tangible and public to strengthen this work of God.

Daniel was also burdened for the return of the Jews from exile and the restoration of Jerusalem and he, too, expressed this by fasting: "So I turned to the Lord God and pleaded with him in prayer and petition, in fasting, and in sackcloth and ashes" (Daniel 9:3).

A devoted believer in this Discipline, David Brainerd's concerns for the work of God frequently found expression in fasting and prayer. In his journal entry for June 14, 1742, he demonstrated his concern for the work he believed God had called him to do.

I set apart this day for secret fasting and prayer, to entreat God to direct and bless me with regard to the great work I have in view, of preaching the gospel. . . . God enabled me to wrestle ardently in intercession for absent friends. . . . The Lord visited me marvelously in prayer; I think my soul never was in such an agony before. I felt no restraint, for the treasures of divine grace were opened to me. I wrestled for absent friends, for the ingathering of souls, for multitudes of poor souls, and

for many that I thought were the children of God, personally, in many distant places.¹³

Obviously we can't fast continually, but may the Lord at least occasionally give us a concern for His work so great that our normal concern for food will seem secondary in comparison.

To Minister to the Needs of Others

Those who think the Spiritual Disciplines foster tendencies of introspection or independence should consider Isaiah 58:6-7. In the most extensive passage in Scripture dealing exclusively with fasting, God emphasizes fasting for the purpose of meeting the needs of others. The people originally addressed in this section had complained to the Lord that they had fasted and humbled themselves before Him, but He had not answered them. But the reason why He had not heard them was their disobedience. Their lives were in hypocritical contrast to their fasting and praying. "Yet on the day of your fasting," says the Lord in verses 3-4, "you do as you please and exploit all your workers. Your fasting ends in quarreling and strife, and in striking each other with wicked fists. You cannot fast as you do today and expect your voice to be heard on high." Fasting cannot be compartmentalized from the rest of our lives. The Spiritual Disciplines do not stand alone. God will not bless the practice of any Discipline, including fasting, when we reject His Word regarding relationships with others.

What should we do? How does God want us to fast? "Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen," the Lord asks in verses 6-7, "to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—when you see the naked, to clothe him, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?" In other words, the kind of fasting that pleases God is one that results in concern for others and not just for ourselves.

"But," someone objects, "I'm so busy meeting my needs and those of my family that I don't have the time to minister to other people." That's where you can fast for the purpose of ministering to the needs of others. Fast for one meal or for one day and use that time for ministry. That way you haven't lost any of the time you say you must give to your other commitments. Several months ago I started scheduling a regular

fast each week and devoting one of the mealtimes during that day to meet for counseling or discipleship with others. I've been amazed at how convenient and preferable that late-afternoon period is for many people. The result is that this fasting time has become my single most productive, need-meeting, one-on-one ministry slot all week.

There are other ways of fasting to meet the needs of others. Many fast so that they can give to the poor or to some ministry the money they would have spent on food during that period. How could you minister to the needs of others with the extra time or money fasting could provide?

To Overcome Temptation and Dedicate Yourself to God

Ask Christians to name a fast by a biblical character and most will probably think first of the supernatural fast of Jesus prior to His temptation in Matthew 4:1-11. Verse two of that familiar passage tells us that Jesus fasted "forty days and forty nights." In the spiritual strength of that prolonged fast He was prepared to overcome a direct onslaught of temptation from Satan himself, the strongest He would face until Gethsemane. It was also during that fast that He privately dedicated Himself to the Father for the public ministry He would begin soon thereafter.

Nowhere in Scripture are we asked to fast for forty days, or for any specific length of time. But that doesn't mean there is nothing from Jesus' unique experience for us to apply to ourselves. One principle we learn from Jesus' example is this: Fasting is a way of overcoming temptation and of freshly dedicating ourselves to the Father.

There are times we struggle with temptation, or we *anticipate* grappling with it, when we need extra spiritual strength to overcome it. Perhaps we are traveling (or our spouse is traveling) and temptations for mental and sensual unfaithfulness abound. At the start of school or a new job or ministry there may be new temptations, or it may seem appropriate to dedicate ourselves anew to the Lord. Often we face decisions that place unusual temptations before us. Do we take a new job that will mean much more money but much less time with the family? Do we accept the promotion that includes a transfer that would end a significant ministry in our local church or when it means going where our family's spiritual growth may suffer? In times of exceptional temptation, exceptional measures are required. Fasting for the purpose of overcoming the temptation and of renewing our dedication to God is a Christlike response.

To Express Love and Worship to God

By now you may have associated fasting only with dire circumstances and great troubles. But the Bible also says that fasting may be an act of sheer devotion to God.

In Luke 2 there is an unforgettable woman whose entire eighty-four years are flashed before us in just three quick verses. Her name is Anna. The summary of her life is found in Luke 2:37: "She never left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying." Although Anna's story has its primary significance in the context of Mary and Joseph presenting the newborn Jesus at the Temple, how she lived from day to day is what concerns us here. Anna was married for only seven years before being widowed. Assuming she married as a young lady, this Godly woman devoted at least half a century, night and day, to a worship of God characterized by "fasting and praying."

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. This honors God and is a means of worshiping Him as God. It means that your stomach isn't your god as it is with some (see Philippians 3:19). Instead it is God's servant, and fasting proves it because you're willing to sublimate its desires to those of the Spirit.

Christians throughout history have fasted for this purpose in preparation for the Lord's Supper. In addition to the elements of repentance and humility before God in this kind of fast, it is also intended to help the person focus on adoring the One who is represented in the Supper.

Another way of fasting to express love and worship to God is to spend your mealtime in praise and adoration of God. A variation is to delay eating a particular meal until you have had your daily time of Bible intake and prayer. Just remember that your fast is a privilege, not an obligation. It is the acceptance of a divine invitation to experience His grace in a special way. If you can't fast with the faith that you will find more satisfaction and joy at that time than in delaying a meal, then freely eat in faith first (Romans 14:22-23). But may we yearn for days when God will cause us to crave the spiritual banquet of worship more than any smorgasbord.

Fasting must always have a spiritual purpose—a God-centered purpose, not a self-centered one—for the Lord to bless our fast. Thoughts

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of food must prompt thoughts for God. They must not distract us, but instead remind us of our purpose. Rather than focusing the mind on food, we should use the desire to eat as a reminder to pray and to reconsider our purpose.

There is no doubt that God has often crowned fasting with extraordinary blessings. Biblical, historical, and contemporary testimonies bear witness to God's delight in providing unusual blessings to those who fast. But we should be careful not to have what Martyn Lloyd-Jones called a mechanical view of fasting. We cannot manipulate God to do our bidding by fasting any more than we can by any other means. As with prayer, we fast in hope that by His *grace* God *will* bless us as we desire. When our fast is rightly motivated, we can be sure that God will bless us, but perhaps not in the way we wanted.

Again David Smith has it right.

Any blessing which is bestowed by the Father upon His undeserving children must be considered to be an act of grace. We fail to appreciate the mercy of the Lord if we think that by our *doing something* we have forced (or even coerced) God to grant that blessing which we have asked for. . . . All of our fasting, therefore, must be on this basis; we should use it as a scriptural means whereby we are melted into a more complete realization of the purposes of the Lord in our life, church, community, and nation.¹⁴

While fasting recently over concern for the work of God in the church I pastor, I began to pray about several critical matters. Suddenly I realized that while I *thought* I was praying in God's will about these things, it was possible that my understanding of things needed readjusting. So I asked the Lord to show me how to pray according to His will on these matters and to grant me contentment with His providences. This, I think, is what Smith meant by fasting being "a scriptural means whereby we are melted into a more complete realization of the purposes of the Lord." Fasting should always have a purpose, and we must learn to elevate His purposes over ours.

God-centered fasting is taught in Zechariah 7:5. A delegation was sent from Bethel to Jerusalem to inquire of the Lord. At issue was the continuance of two fasts the Jews had held to commemorate

the destruction of the Temple. For seventy years they had kept these fasts in the fifth and seventh months, but now they wondered if God wanted them to continue the fasts since they had been restored to their land and were building a new temple. The Lord's response to them was, "Ask all the people of the land and the priests, 'When you fasted and mourned in the fifth and seventh months for the past seventy years, was it really for me that you fasted?'" In reality, these fasts had become empty rituals, not God-centered experiences. Matthew Henry's comments on this passage are useful for our own fasting.

Let them all take notice that, whereas they thought they had made God very much their Debtor by these fasts, they were much mistaken, for they were not acceptable to Him, unless they had been observed in a better manner, and to better purpose. . . . They were not chargeable with omission or neglect of the duty, . . . but they had not managed [it] aright. . . . They had not an eye to God in their fasting. . . . When this was wanting, every fast was but a jest. To fast, and not to fast to God, was to mock Him and provoke Him, and could not be pleasing to Him. . . . If the solemnities of our fasting, though frequent, long, and severe, do not serve to put an edge upon devout affections, to quicken prayer, to increase Godly sorrow, and to alter the temper of our minds, and the course of our lives, for the better, they do not at all answer the intention, and God will not accept them as performed to Him.¹⁵

Before we fast we must have a purpose, a God-centered purpose. But even at our best we do not deserve what we desire, nor can we force God's hand. Having said that, however, let's balance that truth with the incontestable promise of Jesus in Matthew 6:17-18, "But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to men that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you." God will bless a biblical fast by any of His children. And whether or not you receive the blessing you hope for, one thing is sure: If you knew what God knew, you would give yourself the identical blessing that He does. And none of His rewards is worthless.

MORE APPLICATION

Will you confess and repent of any fear of fasting? There's something about saying, "I'm not going to eat today," that causes anxiety in many Christians. It seems that most believers would rather give an offering of money than give up food for a day. Do you have a mild case of fasting-phobia? It's silly when you put it in perspective. 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. Whenever we believe another activity is at that moment more important, we will go without food fearlessly and without complaint. We need to learn that there are times when it can be not only more important, but much more rewarding to feast on God than food (Matthew 4:4). We should not fear the blessings of fasting.

Will you fast as the Holy Spirit directs? Are you willing to obey God when He prompts you to fast? Because Jesus expected that His followers would fast, I believe that from time to time His Spirit will direct you to fast. Will you determine in advance that you will be obedient to His voice?

One of the ways the Holy Spirit prompts us to fast is through a need in our lives. If you need stronger prayer about a matter, that's an invitation from the Lord to fast. If you need God's guidance in an issue in your life, that's an encouragement to fast. If you need deliverance or protection, that's a time to fast. Will you do it? Or will you miss the unique opportunities for grace that He would extend to you through fasting?

Remember to get medical counsel where necessary. If you're planning an extended fast, or if you are expecting, nursing, diabetic, or have a physical condition that depends on a regular diet, talk to your doctor before starting your fast. And if you've never fasted before, start with a one-, two-, or at most three-meal fast. But start somewhere. Don't look for loopholes to avoid it. Look for ways to experience God's grace through fasting. Remember that God thought it was good enough to command every Israelite to fast for one whole day each year on the Day of Atonement, and that would have included people in all conditions and circumstances.

★ Like all the Spiritual Disciplines, fasting hoists the sails of the soul

in hopes of experiencing the gracious wind of God's Spirit. But fasting also adds a unique dimension to your spiritual life and helps you grow in Christlikeness in ways that are unavailable through any other means. If this were not so, there would have been no need for Jesus to model and teach fasting.

Will you plan a fast of dedication now as an expression of your willingness to fast from now on? Before you go any further, why not set a time of fasting soon that will symbolize your dedication to the Lord and your willingness to discipline yourself to fast in the future?

NOTES

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14. Smith, page 44.
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