

Fasting (Part 1)

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... It is the popular belief that it is a positive virtue to satisfy every human appetite, has made fasting seem obsolete. Anyone who seriously attempts to fast is bombarded with objections...

Richard J. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*

What is Fasting?

1. Christian Fasting is a believer's **voluntary abstinence from food for spiritual purposes.**

- There is a broader belief that Christian Fasting is abstinence from other areas of enjoyment in one's life (e.g. TV, Media, Hobbies, Sports, Sleep, Sex, etc.).

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. – Martyn Lloyd-Jones

- While there might be legitimate reasons to take breaks from some of these activities, that even result in spiritual growth, Biblical Fasting refers exclusively to voluntary abstinence of food.

2. Christian Fasting is **for believers, rooted in a relationship with Christ and practiced with the desire and purpose of spiritual growth and godliness.**

Purpose and Spiritual Benefits of Fasting

1. Fasting Disciplines Us in the Faith that God Alone is Our Security

Matthew 4:4

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. ²And after He had fasted for forty days and forty nights, He then became hungry. ³And the tempter came and said to Him, "If You are the Son of God, command that these stones become bread." ⁴But He answered and said, "It is written: 'Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes out of the mouth of God.'"

John 4:31-34

³¹Meanwhile the disciples were urging Him, saying, "Rabbi, eat *something*." ³²But He said to them, "I have food to eat that you do not know about." ³³So the disciples were saying to one another, "No one brought Him *anything* to eat, did he?" ³⁴Jesus *said to them, "My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me, and to accomplish His work."

2. More than any other Spiritual Discipline, Fasting Reveals the Things that Control Us.

More than any other Discipline, fasting reveals the things that control us. This is a wonderful benefit to the true disciple who longs to be transformed into the image of Jesus Christ. We cover up what is inside us with food and other good things, but in fasting these things surface. If pride controls us, it will be revealed almost immediately. David writes, "I humbled my soul with fasting" (Ps. 69:10). Anger, bitterness, jealousy, strife, fear—if they are within us, they will surface during fasting. At first we will rationalize that our anger is due to our hunger; then we will realize that we are angry because the spirit of anger is within us. We can rejoice in this knowledge because we know that healing is available through the power of Christ.

Richard J. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*

3. Fasting Help Us Keep Appropriate Balance in Our Life.

1 Cor. 6:12

All things are permitted for me, but not all things are of benefit. All things are permitted for me, but I will not be mastered by anything.

1 Cor. 9:24-27

Run in such a way that you may win. Everyone who competes in the games exercises self-control in all things... I strictly discipline my body and make it my slave, so that, after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified.

4. Fast When Seeking God for Answers and His Will

- Israel in Battle

Judges 20:18-28

¹⁸ Now the sons of Israel set out, went up to Bethel, and inquired of God and said, "Who shall go up first for us to battle against the sons of Benjamin?" Then the Lord said, "Judah shall go up first."

¹⁹ So the sons of Israel got up in the morning and camped against Gibeah. ²⁰ The men of Israel went to battle against Benjamin, and the men of Israel lined up for battle against them at Gibeah. ²¹ Then the sons of Benjamin came out of Gibeah and struck to the ground on that day twenty-two thousand men of Israel. ²² But the people, the men of Israel, showed themselves courageous and lined up for battle again in the place where they had lined themselves up on the first day. ²³ And the sons of Israel went up and wept before the Lord until evening, and inquired of the Lord, saying, "Shall we again advance for battle against the sons of my brother Benjamin?" And the Lord said, "Go up against him."

²⁴ So the sons of Israel came against the sons of Benjamin on the second day. ²⁵ And Benjamin went out against them from Gibeah the second day and struck to the ground again eighteen thousand men of the sons of Israel; all of these drew the sword. ²⁶ Then all the sons of Israel and all the people went up and came to Bethel, and they wept and remained there before the Lord, and fasted that day until evening. And they offered burnt offerings and peace offerings before the Lord. ²⁷ And the sons of Israel inquired of the Lord (for the ark of the covenant of God was there in those days, ²⁸ and Phinehas the son of Eleazar, Aaron's son, stood before it to minister in those days), saying, "Shall I yet again go out to battle against the sons of my brother Benjamin, or shall I stop?" And the Lord said, "Go up, for tomorrow I will hand them over to you."

- Choosing Shepherds/Elders to Lead the Church in Antioch, Iconium, and Lystra

Acts 14:23

When they had appointed elders for them in every church, having prayed with fasting, they entrusted them to the Lord in whom they had believed.

5. Fasting is A Way to Express Grief

- David's Grief Over Saul & Jonathan's Death and Humiliation

1 Samuel 31:8-13

It came about on the next day, when the Philistines came to strip those killed, that they found Saul and his three sons fallen on Mount Gilboa. ⁹ They cut off his head and stripped off his weapons, and sent *them* throughout the land of the Philistines, to bring the good news to the house of their idols and to the people. ¹⁰ They put his weapons in the temple of Ashteroth, and they nailed his body to the wall of Beth-shan. ¹¹ Now when the inhabitants of Jabesh-gilead heard what the Philistines had done to Saul, ¹² all the valiant men got up and walked all night, and they took the body of Saul and the bodies of his sons from the wall of Beth-shan, and they came to Jabesh and burned them there. ¹³ And they took their bones and buried them under the tamarisk tree in Jabesh, and fasted for seven days.

2 Samuel 1:11-12

Then David took hold of his clothes and tore them, and *so* also *did* all the men who *were* with him. ¹² And they mourned and wept and fasted until evening for Saul and his son Jonathan, and for the people of the Lord and the house of Israel, because they had fallen by the sword.

6. Fasting is A Powerful Way to Express Repentance & Humility Before God

- Ninevah (Jonah 3:5-8)

- King Ahab

1 Kings 21:25-29

There certainly was no one like Ahab who gave himself over to do evil in the sight of the Lord, because Jezebel his wife incited him. ²⁶ He also acted very despicably in following idols, conforming to everything that the Amorites had done, whom the Lord drove out from the sons of Israel.

²⁷ Yet it came about, when Ahab heard these words, that he tore his clothes and put on sackcloth and fasted, and he lay in sackcloth and went about despondently. ²⁸ Then the word of the Lord came to Elijah the Tishbite, saying, ²⁹ "Do you see how Ahab has humbled himself before Me? Because he has humbled himself before Me, I will not bring the disaster in his days; I will bring the disaster upon his house in his son's days."

7. Fasting to Seek Deliverance, Protection, or Breakthrough

- **Ezra Protecting the Exiles Returning to Jerusalem**

Ezra 8:21-23

Then I proclaimed a fast there at the river of Ahava, to humble ourselves before our God, to seek from Him a safe journey for us, our little ones, and all our possessions. ²² For I was ashamed to request from the king troops and horsemen to protect us from the enemy on the way, because we had said to the king, "The hand of our God is favorably disposed to all who seek Him, but His power and His anger are against all those who abandon Him." ²³ So we fasted and sought our God concerning this *matter*, and He listened to our pleading.

Types of Fasting in the Bible

- **The Common Fast**

- Abstaining from all food (but not water).

Matthew 4:2 "After fasting for forty days and forty nights, he was hungry..."

Luke 4:2 Jesus "ate nothing during those days."

- **The Partial Fast**

- A limitation of food, but not abstinence from all food.

- Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego (**Daniel 1:12**)

"vegetables to eat and water to drink..."

- John the Baptist (**Matthew 3:4**)

"his food was locusts and wild honey..."

- **The Absolute Fast**

- Abstaining from both food and drink.

- Ezra (**Ezra 10:6**)

"Ezra withdrew...neither eating bread or drinking water for he was mourning over the faithlessness of the exiles."

- Esther (**Esther 4:16**)

"Go, gather all the Jews to be found in Susa and hold a fast on my behalf, and do not eat or drink for three days, night or day."

- Paul (**Acts 9:9**)

"for three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank."

- **The Private Fast**

- Not to be seen or known about by others.
- True for most types of fasting.

Matthew 6:16-18

“Now whenever you fast, do not make a gloomy face as the hypocrites *do*, for they distort their faces so that they will be noticed by people when they are fasting. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. ¹⁷ But as for you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, ¹⁸ so that your fasting will not be noticed by people but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees *what is done* in secret will reward you.

- **Congregational Fasts**

- **Practicing fasting as a community of believers.**

- Joel’s Call to God’s People (**Joel 2:15-16**)

- “Blow a trumpet in Zion, Consecrate a fast, proclaim a solemn assembly, Gather the people, sanctify the congregation...”

- The Church at Antioch Fasting for Paul & Barnabas (**Acts 13:2**)

- “While they worshipping the Lord and fasting...”

- **National Fasts**

- **A fast on a national level for national concerns.**

- Jehoshaphat Calls for a National Fast Before Enemy Invasion (**2 Chron. 20:3**)

- “Jehoshaphat was afraid and turned his attention to seek the Lord; and he proclaimed a period of fasting throughout Judah.”

- Ninevah’s King Called for a National Fast and Repentance (**Jonah 3:5-9**)

- “Then the people of Nineveh believed in God; and they called a fast and put on sackcloth, from the greatest to the least of them. ⁶ When the word reached the king of Nineveh, he got up from his throne, removed his robe from himself, covered *himself* with sackcloth, and sat on the dust. ⁷ And he issued a proclamation, and it said, “In Nineveh by the decree of the king and his nobles: No person, animal, herd, or flock is to taste anything. They are not to eat, or drink water. ⁸ But *every* person and animal must be covered with sackcloth; and *people* are to call on God vehemently, and they are to turn, each one from his evil way, and from the violence which is in their hands. ⁹ Who knows, God may turn and relent, and turn from His burning anger so that we will not perish.”

- *Interesting historical note that Congress called for national fasts multiple times under the leadership of the presidents John Adams, James Madison, and Abraham Lincoln.*

- **Recurring Fasts**

- Formally Established Annual Fasting

- While in Babylonian Exile Four Annual Fasts Established (**Zechariah 8:19**)

- Then the word of the Lord of armies came to me, saying, ¹⁹ “The Lord of armies says this: ‘The fast of the fourth, the fast of the fifth, the fast of the seventh, and the fast of the tenth *months* will become joy, jubilation, and cheerful festivals for the house of Judah; so love truth and peace.’

- **Occasional Fasts**

- Fasts for special occasions, events, or concerns

- When Jesus Leaves His Disciples (**Luke 9:15**)

- And Jesus said to them, “The attendants of the groom cannot mourn as long as the groom is with them, can they? But the days will come when the groom is taken away from them, and then they will fast.

Practicing the Disciplines

- **Do a Common fast for 1-2 days**

- Choose the Specific Spiritual Purpose for your fast

- Journal About:

- Any inner struggles revealed
 - Aspects of the difficulty of Fasting
 - Value and benefits

- Come to class next week ready to discuss 😊