

# SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES

## FASTING

### INTRODUCTION

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- *These notes are excerpts from Todd Dykstra's Sermon from Matthew 6:16-18 on 3/27/2022.*
- To avoid the topic or to throw ourselves at fasting for the wrong reasons... Often the tendency of a reaction is to swing the pendulum too far to one or the other side
- But what is fasting? There is probably some confusion about it!

### What Fasting is Not

- There is a kind of fasting that is not at all what is practiced in Scripture
  - **NOT an eating plan** - an eating plan that switches between fasting and eating on a regular schedule
  - **NOT a spiritual gateway** - opening the door to a deeper, more intimate, more powerful relationship with God
  - **NOT a tradition** – rules and rote practices because you have to
- The purpose of a biblical fast is not to lose weight...or to see breakthroughs in healing, finances, unhealthy dependencies or family relationships

It is also not something that just needs to be done as an end in itself...it is not something that you have to do on certain days or times during the year because you are a Christian

- It's not something that has to be practiced simply because it is part of the Christian religion...as if there are certain traditions that need to be practiced...certain periods of the year that you need to abstain from food
- That's why we don't practice Lent...we don't do things merely for the sake of doing them

### WHAT IS FASTING?

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**Matthew 6:16-18** ~ Whenever you fast, do not put on a gloomy face as the hypocrites do, for they neglect their appearance so that they will be noticed by men when they are fasting. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. 17 But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face 18 so that your fasting will not be noticed by men, but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you.

- The point of this text is that, like giving and praying, fasting must not be done to draw attention to yourself

## Definition

- **Fasting is the private, voluntary, occasional abstinence from food for a time for spiritual purposes**
- **PRIVATE:** it is usually not something done with other people
  - even other believers...
  - even those within the same church
  - Matthew 6:18 ~ “in secret” - the same way giving is done (Mt 6:3-4) and prayer is done (6:6)
- **VOLUNTARY:** it is not coerced
  - not forced on you
  - not an activity on a religious calendar
  - something you choose to do
- **OCCASIONAL:** it is not something done on a regular schedule
  - not structured
  - not following a set schedule
  - it is often spontaneous
  - when the need arises
- **IT IS FOR A TIME:** it should be limited to a set time
  - especially when fasting from food
  - extended periods of time without eating can be harmful to the body
- **FOR A SPIRITUAL PURPOSE:** (See Neh 1:4; 2 Sam 12:16; Dan 9:3; Lk 2:37)
  - It seems like fasting was largely connected to seasons of **sorrow** and **intense prayer**
    - and often done in times of penitence and **repentance over sin**
    - You can pray without fasting, but you cannot fast biblically without praying.
  - It was often done in connection with laying some special **petition before the Lord**
    - Sometimes anguish, danger, or desperation
    - since overwhelming grief or distress often produces loss of appetite
  - Most people do not feel like eating during times of deep grief
    - their appetite is gone
    - and food is the last thing they are concerned about
  - This is what gives fasting its purpose
    - it is a time to express ourselves in intensive devotion to the Lord and to the concerns of spiritual life
- Fasting really has no spiritual value in and of itself...there is nothing inherently spiritual or godly about abstaining from food
- **Legitimate fasting always had a spiritual purpose...it takes place when eating would be an intrusion into that which is immeasurably more important**

- Calvin in Institutes 2:1242: “whenever men are to pray to God concerning any great matter, it would be expedient to appoint fasting along with prayer. Their sole purpose in this kind of fasting is to render themselves more eager and unencumbered for prayer...with a full stomach our mind is not so lifted up to God”

## WHAT CAN WE LEARN ABOUT FASTING?

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### **Jesus assumed his disciples will give to the poor, pray, and fast.**

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- It appears that fasting is to be a spiritual discipline that God intends us to practice
  - it is assumed that fasting would be part of the religious life of disciples of Christ
- OT Examples:
  - Jews were commanded to take a national fast on one day of the year (Lev 16:29-31)
  - During the Babylonian exile, Jews instituted regular fasts of remembrance (Zech 7:3-5; 8:19)
- However, we are not under the Mosaic law that required it during the Day of Atonement
- Jesus' disciples did not fast because Jesus was still with them (Matthew 9:14-15)
  - Fasting was not necessary as long as Christ was with them
  - because fasting was often associated with mourning...
  - other times of consuming spiritual need or anxiety
- Early church examples:
  - Paul after his conversion (Acts 9:9)
  - Antioch Church before sending out missionaries Paul and Barnabas (Acts 13:2-3)
  - Paul and Barnabas in commending churches to the Lord (Acts 14:23)
- We are commanded to give (1 Cor 16)...and we are commanded to pray (Eph 6:18)
- But there is no explicit command to fast.

## WHAT TO DO WITH FASTING:

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- fasting is something you can do if you want, but it is not required
- It is not wrong to do so
  - especially in difficult times of life when there are special times of testing, trial, or struggle
  - or when you are grieved over your sin
  - or when you are facing a major decision
- It can be a practice that is good, beneficial, and profitable
  - it is a normal and acceptable part of the Christian life
- So if you want to voluntarily engage in fasting from time to time, it is a good practice
  - read the Word
  - pray
  - meditate on Scripture
  - take some time away from the distractions of the world to focus on the Lord
- If you sense a need to focus the entirety of your being on God during a particularly important time in your life to seek Him, worship Him, ask for His wisdom...that is the time to fast.
- But it is also not something you are required to do since there is *no biblical command* that followers of Jesus Christ must fast
- It is not a spiritual duty to be regularly observed...it is not required
- In fact, it might not be something you are able to do if you are a diabetic...or if you have other medical conditions

## **Fasting can be a way of setting aside the issues of the world and focusing on the things of the Lord**

Matthew 6:16 ~ Whenever you fast, do not put on a gloomy face as the hypocrites do, for they neglect their appearance so that they will be noticed by men when they are fasting. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full.

- However, it can also be abused and done for the entirely wrong motives
- that's exactly what the Scribes and Pharisees were doing
  - just like giving and praying,
  - they adulterated the practice of fasting to appear more spiritual than others
  - They turned it into a show, a performance, a way to impress others, and a way to parade their religiosity
- This is always the motivation for hypocrites
  - Matthew 6:1 ~ Beware of practicing your righteousness **before men to be noticed by them;** otherwise you have no reward with your Father who is in heaven.
- They will have their "reward in full" (vs 2 re: giving; vs. 5 re: praying; vs. 16 re: fasting)
  - Hypocrites want to be rewarded, and Jesus says they will be
  - There will be no heavenly reward to come...**the one reward from men cancels the other from God**
  - Man's praise is all they will ever get

## **Fasting should be done in natural, God-pleasing way**

Matthew 6:17-18 ~ But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face so that your fasting will not be noticed by men, but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you.

- Go about your normal day to day routine of taking care of yourself
  - Look normal
  - don't do anything to attract attention to yourself
  - everything is to be outwardly normal
- When you fast, just be natural
  - Forget other people entirely when it comes to fasting
  - don't worry about the impression you are making
  - Just forget yourself and give yourself entirely to God
  - be concerned only about Him and pleasing Him
  - Be concerned only about His honor and glory
- The goal is not to make an impression on others...it's not self-glorification
- Fasting is not something for you to impress others with
  - it's something between you and the Lord
  - It's simply part of concentrated, intense prayer and concern for the Lord...and His will...and His work
- God will reward those who honor Him in secret: v. 18 ~ and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you
- God never fails to notice fasting that is done from the heart...and He never fails to reward it