
Spiritual Formation Part 32

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Matthew 6: 16-18

Fasting that Delights God Part 1

When you take a look at our culture, fast food places on almost every corner and countless opportunities to eat whatever you wish, even a committed Christian may never consider Fasting. Yet, one of the classic, Christian aspects of growing deeper in the faith is Fasting. Our minds are cleared to seek Christ without distractions and interruptions. Even though we may feel distraction with our stomach aching and growling, we can more easily pour ourselves out to the Lord.

This passage tells us that Fasting is important, but Jesus sternly warns of abusing it by using it for a *show and tell* game to draw attention to oneself, thus missing the real purpose, that of drawing close to God, and seeking His Will for your life and church. This passage is in the context of pleasing God, where Jesus places Fasting in the ranks of prayer, spiritual commitment, and trusting Him, making it a vital, if not paramount component of spirituality, of growing deeper in Christian formation/spiritual growth.

- *When you fast.* Jesus is assuming we will be following the Mosaic Law that required the Jews to Fast at least once annually. This was to be done on the *Day of Atonement* (Lev. 16:29-31). This was a Fasting of contrition, which means coming before God, having remorse for one's sins, seeking His forgiveness, and pledging repentance, penance (following the requirements of the Law for atonement such as sacrifices of food or animal) and to not do them (sins) again.
- Moses, Elijah, and Jesus all Fasted for 40 days! The Bible records that Fasting was not just for the super leaders, rather it was practiced by most, such as during the Judges (Jug. 20:26; 1 Kings 21:27).
- Isaiah challenged the Jews, prior to their captivity, that their fasting was empty of purpose, pretentious, vain, and not pleasing to God, (Isa. 58) just as Jesus does here. Isaiah further expounded that because of their pious, fraudulent behavior, they corrupted themselves, and that justice and virtue became absent in the land where God's love, and rule was to be shown to the world. Such decadence led to their seventy-year captivity under the Babylonians.
- John the Baptist Fasted regularly as a testimony to piety that was real, heartfelt, and pointed to God, not to himself (Matt. 3:11).
- Paul listed Fasting among other things that proved he was a minister of Christ (1 Co 11:1; 2 Co 11:23-28).

- *Put oil on your head and wash your face:* Jews put ashes on their heads and wore *sackcloth* (from the Hebrew *sak*, a coarse cloth similar to burlap, dark in color, and usually made of goat's hair--a very cheap and itchy material) when Fasting. They did this to show their piety and reverence; however, it was usually a show, with no real meaning under that itchy material. What we are called to do now is maintain our regular appearance, as Fasting should not be done in a pretentious or showy way. Be sincere in your heart, not with your garments and looks!
- *Anointing your head* in this context was the daily routine of hygiene. The Jews did not shower or bathe as we do (which was not a daily routine in western culture until the early 20th century, and still not in most parts of the world), but put olive oil on themselves, then scraped off the sweat and dirt. This kept them clean, and their skin smooth and sunburn free in their hot climate. When they Fasted, they did not anoint (clean) themselves (Dan. 10:3). Anointing can also mean rejoicing (Psalm 23:5; 45:7; 61:3; 104:15).
- In the New Testament, Fasting was practiced when one was faced with temptations (Jesus), in serving the Lord and beginning a new ministry (Antioch), and, when selecting and appointing elders (Galatia).
- The effects of Fasting with prayer when it is real and heartfelt is that it humbles us (Psalm 35:13), disciplines and corrects our wrong behaviors and thinking (Psalm 69:10), and even though we have grace, I believe when we are humble, God is more likely to respond to our prayers. (Ezra 8:21-23)!
- We should Fast and persist in prayer whenever we are truly seeking Him and His help, just as it is modeled in the Scriptures (Luke 18:1-8). Such situations would include difficult temptations, when sending out missionaries, when choosing leaders, seeking the start of a new ministry or direction, or a serious illness of a loved one, to name a few reasons. Individuals, a small group, or the entire congregation can practice Fasting.

Fasting was meant to draw one near to God. Thus, if it is only for show, or only to keep one away from pleasures, with no purpose behind it, it is empty and foolish! Fasting also meant removing themselves from any pleasure-- even their work in some cases. Hence, it could be manipulated to enable one to avoid responsibilities! Although Daniel did this sincerely, most did this to appear more pious than they were. Some did not drink water either. However, this was very unhealthy. Some did what is called *ascetic* (severe) fasting that was meant to wear themselves down, as some Monks did in the Middle Ages. This is unbiblical and dangerous.

Should Christians Fast today? The answer is a big, **YES!!!** Keep in mind that Jesus, Himself, Fasted (Luke 4:1-2)! He assumed His disciples would Fast, as He said *when*, not *if* (Mt 6:16-17; 9:14-15)! When Fasting is done properly, it will glorify and please God! Fasting includes prayer, and seeking God's Will (Matt. 17:20-21)!

Questions:

1. Have you ever practiced Fasting? If so, what were your experiences on it? If you never have, why not?
2. One of the classic Christian aspects of growing deeper in the faith is Fasting. Why does this strike fear and apprehension in some Christians?
3. Why would some question whether Fasting is something for Christians today?
4. What could Fasting do for you if you occasionally practiced it?
5. Can you think of ways Christians today try to appear more pious than they really are? What would be their motivations for doing this?
6. Why does Jesus sternly warn us not to abuse Fasting, which He says right after warning us not to abuse prayer, and right before warning us not to abuse possessions?
7. What would happen if you and your church incorporated Fasting with real, authentic devotion and sacrifice? What would happen in your neighborhood?
8. What are some of the dangers and similarities you have observed in churches that reflect what Isaiah is saying? What can be done about it?
9. God is pleased with deeds done through a heart of sincerity and honesty, and not for the purpose of self-promotion. How can you make sure your motives are on the right track?
10. How can your hygiene and appearance help you and others experience spiritual growth, or can it? How can you balance being clean and inoffensive to others while not being pretentious and showy, so you are sincere in your heart, not with your garments and looks?
11. There will be times when you will go through stress and confusion in your Christian walk. How can Fasting help you in those dire times?
12. Draw up a plan for Fasting, how you will start, when you will do it, what will it entail.