

## Christian Fasting

### Thesis statement:

Christian fasting is done not to earn merit with God, but to seek the pleasure of the presence of God and to seek his intervention and guidance in the important issues of life.

Thank you for the honor of speaking to you today.

To learn about the Christian practice of fasting, I think the best way to understand this is to go directly to the source, to see what Jesus, that is *Isa*, says about it.

We read in the Injil, that is, in the Gospel of Matthew, Chapter 9:

***14 Then the disciples of John came to him, saying, "Why do we and the Pharisees fast,<sup>[a]</sup> but your disciples do not fast?" 15 And Jesus said to them, "Can the wedding guests mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them? The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast."***  
(verses 14-15)

What do we have here? We have a group of disciples of John the Baptist. They come to Jesus to ask him a question. Their leader had taught them to fast. To fast, of course, means to go without food for a period of time.

And the most religious men in their nation, the Pharisees, also practiced fasting. But Jesus' disciples were not fasting at all! This surprised these disciples of John. So one day they came to Jesus and asked him about this.

What was Jesus' answer? He painted for them a picture of a wedding celebration. It is a time of great happiness. A time for the bridegroom, the man being married, to rejoice with his friends. It is not a time to fast. It is not a time to be deprived of food and drink. It is a time to enjoy good food and drink. It is a time to celebrate and be joyous.

So Jesus' answer was that while he was with his disciples, it was not the time to fast. Later when he would be taken away from them, then they would fast.

What exactly was the Pharisees' attitude about fasting? We read about one Pharisee in the Gospel of Luke, chapter 18: ***11 The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. 12 I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.'*** (v. 11-12, NIV)

This Pharisee was proud of himself because he thought he was more righteous than other people. He pointed to the fact that he even fasted two days a week. He believed that his fasting earned him merit with God. He believed it earned him favor with God.

But Jesus taught us the proper way to fast in the Gospel of Matthew, Chapter 6:

***16 “When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show others they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. 17 But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, 18 so that it will not be obvious to others 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.” (v. 16-18)***

Jesus calls these people who make a show of their fasting “hypocrites.” A hypocrite is someone who tries to impress other people how holy and righteous they are when they may not be as holy and righteous as they would like others to think.

Jesus, however, instructs us as to how we *should* fast. He says, in essence: look and dress and act as you normally would. Don’t let others know you are fasting. You are doing this to please God, not to impress people. So do it in secrete before God and he will reward you.

Indeed, Jesus was taken away from his disciples. He was crucified by being killed on a cross, he died, and he was buried. Then on the third day he rose from the dead. Over the next 40 days he appeared in his resurrected body to his disciples on 10 different occasions. All these occasions are recorded in the four Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

On the 40<sup>th</sup> day after his resurrection, Jesus was taken up to heaven before the eyes of his disciples. There he sat down at the right hand of God. After 10 more days he poured out from heaven the Spirit of God on his disciples in Jerusalem.

From there in the power of the Spirit of God the disciples went out into all the world preaching good news. Their message was that God had raised Jesus from the dead. Therefore, forgiveness of sins was now being offered through faith in Jesus’ name.

It was then that his disciples began to fast. We read in the Book of Acts chapter 13 about a group of men in the church at Antioch in Syria:

***While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.”***

Here we get here a glimpse of fasting as it was practiced in the early church, in the middle of the 1<sup>st</sup> century. These men were worshipping the Lord and in conjunction with worship they were fasting. And it was in the midst of this experience of worship that the Holy Spirit let it be known that he wanted them to set apart two particular men to go forth from there and preach the gospel.

So these men were not fasting to obey some rule about fasting like the Pharisees were. They were not trying to gain merit with God. They simply desired to worship God and be obedient to whatever he may have wanted them to do.

This, I believe, gives us some key insight into the nature of Christian fasting. The Christian is a person who has put their faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. He or she has received forgiveness of sins and eternal life. They do not need to earn merit with God to make themselves acceptable to God. They have trusted in Jesus Christ to cleanse them of sin, to make them clean and righteous and accepted by God.

So the Christian fasts not because he or she needs to earn merit with God, but because it has become a part of their spiritual DNA to please God, to seek him in prayer and worship, and present to him the needs of their lives, and the needs of others.

Perhaps I can summarize the Christian view of fasting like this:

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I hope this was helpful. Thank you for your attention.

-Jeff Gregory  
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