

The Forgotten Practice of Biblical Fasting

Matthew 6:16-18; Isaiah 58:1-5

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Contemporary Christianity has little time for denying oneself, taking up a cross of suffering, and following Christ in loving Him and keeping His commandments (Mark 8:34). Jesus did not look at this as something for super-saints, but this is what all true Christians will do. **He did not promise** that we would have what we wanted in this life (He said we would have to deny ourselves and make sacrifices for Christ). **He did not promise** us a comfortable, easy, prosperous life (A cross is not a symbol of prosperity, but of suffering for Christ). **He did not tell us** to follow our dreams and whatever makes us happy (He commanded us to follow Him in loving obedience regardless of the cost).

One godly exercise of a sincere Christian that fails to be taught in contemporary churches is the biblical ordinance of fasting. Why they ask would we fast? “Biblical fasting means going without food. Now that’s not a positive message that is going to attract people, add to our membership, and bring in the offerings desired to build our programs and construct our buildings. We would rather promote feasting than fasting.”

Just as Jesus did not conform His message to those who were interested in gaining in this world what they will sooner or later lose, so He did not conform the biblical ordinance of fasting to the likes and preferences of those who were interested in an easy, comfortable Christianity. True Christians will fast just as they will give to those in need and just as they will call upon the Lord in prayer (in all three of these biblical exercises of our religion/faith, Jesus says, “When” not “If” (Matthew 6:2,5,16). Why would Jesus take the time to teach about fasting to the people who heard Him? What is so important about fasting?

Let us turn our attention to biblical fasting and in so doing seek to answer the following three questions: (1) **What** Is Biblical Fasting? (2) **When** Is Biblical Fasting to Be Done? (3) **How** Is Biblical Fasting to Be Done?

I. What Is Biblical Fasting?

A. Fasting is the third exercise of piety that Jesus mentions in Matthew 6: (1) Caring for the needy (Matthew 6:1-4); (2) Prayer (Matthew 6:5-15); Fasting (Matthew 6:16-18).

1. In each of these cases, Jesus reveals the hypocrisy of the Pharisees and warns us not to follow in their footsteps. Their religion was skin deep, superficial, and merely outward. They were actors.

2. The religion of the Pharisees did not proceed from a heart of faith, love, sincerity, and thanksgiving, but proceeded from a heart of pride and self-righteousness in wanting to be seen by man as being devout and religious (Matthew 6:1,5,16). Their religion might be summarized as a “Look at me” religion rather than a “Look at God” religion (true religion). They outwardly appeared to be pious, but the Lord does not judge our mere outward actions. He does judge our actions, but it is from the heart that true love for and obedience unto the Lord proceeds (John 4:24). What does the Lord see in your heart today as you gather for worship? That is what should matter most to us—what God sees rather than what man sees. True worship begins there.

B. What is biblical fasting? It is an ordinance of God wherein the natural appetite for food is denied to the body in order that we might turn our attention to our need for Christ and His truth. We turn from a physical hungering to a spiritual hungering for our merciful and gracious God (Matthew 4:4).

1. People may fast for various reasons—to lose weight, to improve physical and mental health, to save money, to sleep better etc. There is nothing wrong with fasting for those reasons, but that is not biblical fasting. Those types of fasting have the focus upon the body, but the focus of biblical fasting is

upon the Lord and our desperate need of Him.

2. The temporary denial of food in biblical fasting is simply a picture of our spiritual weakness and inability to meet our own needs. Our strength will fail (John 15:5), but His strength in us cannot fail (Philippians 4:13).

3. Biblical fasting is placing our bodily needs beneath our spiritual need to have God's power, wisdom, holiness, mercy, and help in our lives in facing distressing circumstances.

4. Biblical fasting is humbling ourselves before God that we might exalt Him and do His will rather than our own. It is to afflict the soul rather than to make the body as comfortable as possible (Isaiah 58:3). It is to say that some situation in your life (or in the life of others) or some event in the church or in the nation/world is of such consequence that we need to stop our ordinary business and humble ourselves before God and plead for His help and mercy.

5. Biblical fasting is ordained by God and practiced by His people in the Old Testament and in the New Testament (Joel 2:12-13; Matthew 6:16; Acts 14:23).

6. Biblical fasting is not a superstitious or mechanical way to get what we want from God. God does not promise that if we will but fast, He will automatically grant us what we have sought from Him. Biblical fasting is humbling ourselves before Almighty God and pleading with Him to help us in whatever the desperate need that is before us. It is taking a further step beyond prayer (though never separated from fervent prayer) to show our needy condition before God (Mark 9:29).

7. Biblical fasting is not meritorious in earning for us righteousness before God. To the contrary, biblical fasting reveals our utter need of Christ's righteousness not our own, Christ's resurrection power not our own, and Christ's wisdom not our own. Biblical fasting confesses our sin and our need for His mercy and forgiveness. Biblical fasting is turning away from our sin (repentance) and turning unto Christ. No doubt, much more might be said as to what biblical fasting is, but hopefully this brief summary will help you better understand what it is.

II. When Is Biblical Fasting to Be Done?

A. Though biblical fasting is ordained by God, God does not authorize in the period of the New Testament how often we should fast. The Pharisees fasted twice every week according to their own tradition, not according to God's Word (Luke 18:12). Private and public fasts are called forth by the providence of God in troubling or important events that we are facing (as individuals, families, church, or nation). There was a yearly fast in the Old Testament appointed by the Lord to be observed on the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 23:27), but there is nothing of the sort appointed by the Lord for a specific day in the New Testament. Therefore, we have no authority from Christ in His Word to establish an annual time of fasting and holy day called Lent. What is not authorized by Christ in His Word (i.e. His silence) is not permission, but prohibition. If the Lord wanted us to practice an annual fast, He would have stated so, just as He did in the Old Testament.

B. Biblical fasting may be a **private fast** upon occasions when some special need in your life or in the life of others calls for it (2 Samuel 12:16; Nehemiah 1:4). Private fasting is the specific type of fasting Jesus is addressing here in Matthew 6:16-18 (note verse 18). In a public fast within a church or a nation, it is appointed by those in power and known by all that a fast has been called. What Jesus is addressing here with the Pharisees was their private fasting in which they made known to all (by rubbing ash on their faces to look weak, and bore on their faces a gloomy countenance) that they were privately fasting.

C. Biblical fasting may also be a public fast when called for by a godly magistrate and/or by the church when some troubling event or judgment falls upon the church or nation (2 Chronicles 20:1-3) or when the church seeks God's wisdom and direction in pursuing His will (Acts 13:2-3).

III. How Is Biblical Fasting to Be Done?

A. Jesus summarizes for us in a few words how biblical fasting is to be exercised in Matthew 6:16-18.

1. Don't be hypocrites—don't be actors. God knows your heart and your motivation in fasting—whether to be seen by others as being spiritual or whether to be seen by the Lord in secret as being sincere, faithful, and needy. Biblical fasting is between you and the Lord. It is not a time to announce to everyone that we are fasting, as if we are doing some great deed. It is not show time in sharing with others around us how weak this fast has made us and how hard it is for us to fast. That may be true, but in sharing it with others are we not seeking the pity of others as opposed to the mercy of God?

2. Biblical fasting is not intended to be easy (though it may be easier for some than others). It is denying ourselves nourishment for a brief time (usually a day or a part of a day) and that can be unpleasant. The Pharisees fasted, but they wanted everyone to know they were fasting and how great a sacrifice it was for them to do so. Though Moses and Jesus fasted for 40 days, they were sustained by God's special help. Don't take that which is good (biblical fasting) and make it into something destructive by seriously harming or destroying yourself. That is not glorifying God. That is a violation of the Sixth Commandment.

3. Jesus says that when you fast you are not to draw attention to yourself (Matthew 6:16), but rather you are to clothe yourself, wash yourself, and anoint yourself with oil to prevent dry skin and to look fresh (Matthew 6:17). In other words, though you are denying your body briefly the nourishment it craves, you are to do so unto the Lord in secret. Thus, you are to present yourself to others as you would normally do, so as not to make a spectacle of yourself. This is the same principle Jesus gave in caring for the poor (Matthew 6:3).

4. Then Jesus closes out this portion of His sermon by highlighting whose reward we should desire: man's or our Father's? The Pharisees fasted to be seen by man and that was their only reward—a perishable, temporary pat upon the back. They would receive no reward from God, but rather they rested under His condemnation. On the other hand, those who fast in secret before God, taking all of the light off of themselves and rather shining that light upon God will be rewarded with the glory and blessing of heaven that shall never end. God is not looking for how long you fast, or how much you suffered weakness during the fast. He is looking at your heart. Is it broken and contrite or is it filled with pride over what you have done?

B. I close by noting that we cannot have a biblical fast while we are at enmity with one another. A biblical fast is not only repenting of sin committed against God, but is also removing enmity, sinful divisions, gossip, and tearing down one another out of anger, bitterness, or pride (Isaiah 58:1-5a). Biblical fasting seeks the good of brethren, and it speaks the truth in love. When we brethren up for derision and make a mockery of them, we are not seeking their good. We are tearing them down, and the Lord calls it sin. God help us to see that a biblical fast is also a fast that promotes healing in relationships within families and among brethren. That is the kind of fast God calls us to and the kind of fast that He blesses. Amen.

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