

Self-Humbling

Fasting Part 1

Matthew 6:16-18 1-9-11

Fasting is a strange subject in God’s Word. It is never commanded in the New Testament. All the godliest people in the Bible did it; yet they did not tell us to do it. Acts 14 is the last time we see fasting mentioned in the Bible. Throughout all the epistles, which are for the specific purpose of teaching how to live and how to worship, fasting is never mentioned. If it is important at all, why wouldn’t it be discussed in the epistles? If it is not important, why did Jesus do it? And why did He promise reward if we do it? But if it is a good thing, why didn’t He do it more? This message will show you the purposes of fasting and when it is appropriate and when it is inappropriate.

Excerpt:

Eating for comfort is a malfunction of our hearts. That is not God’s design. Feasting in a time of sorrow is out of place. There is a connection in Scripture between pride and feasting when there should be fasting (in times of sorrow). You cheapen your pain when you try to address it with a superficial remedy. The prideful man sees himself as the fulfiller of his appetites and desires and sees himself as the solution to the problem of his own emptiness. That emptiness you feel in times of sorrow is designed to drive you to God, the Bread of life. But when we turn to some other remedy we are saying, “I don’t need You God, I got this.” Sorrow comes into my life and exposes this gaping hole of emptiness inside me, and I look at that and say, “Oh, I can fix that. I can use the resources around me to fill that emptiness. I don’t need God - all I need is some French fries, or a batch of cookies, or a couple beers or a movie or a nap...” That belittles God. We mock Him when we attempt to replace the Bread of life with a bag of Fritos - and the Spring of living water with a latte.

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Matthew 6:16 When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting. I tell you the truth, 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

men 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.

Introduction - Questions

Fasting is a strange subject in God's Word. On the one hand, it seems so important; on the other hand, it is never commanded in the New Testament. All the godliest people in the Bible did it; yet they did not tell us to do it. Here are the fasters in God's Word (how would you like your name to be in this list?): Hannah, David, Daniel, Moses, Elijah, Ezra, Barnabas, the Apostle Paul, the rest of the Apostles, John the Baptist, the early Church, and the Lord Jesus Christ. All those people fasted. Fasting was not eliminated after Jesus' resurrection because we see the early Church fasting in Acts 14. But on the other hand, Acts 14 is the last time we see fasting mentioned in the Bible. Throughout all the epistles, which are for the specific purpose of teaching how to live and how to worship, fasting is never mentioned. Prayer, Scripture, fellowship, and worship are referred to countless times – but never fasting. If it is important at all, why wouldn't it be discussed in the epistles? If it is not important, why did Jesus do it? And why did He promise reward if we do it? But if it is a good thing, why didn't He do it more? We have no knowledge that Jesus ever fasted any other time. Even the night before the crucifixion we do not see Him fasting; instead, He enjoys a big meal with the disciples. Let's look to God's Word and see if we can find some answers.

Review

If you have not been with us since last August then you may not remember the context here. So let's go back to the beginning of chapter 6 to refresh our memory. Jesus stated His point very clearly right off the bat in verse 1.

Matthew 6:1 "Be careful not to do your 'acts of righteousness' before men, to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven.

That is His point, and then He takes the next seventeen verses to give three illustrations of that point.

2 when you give to the needy...

5 when you pray...

16 When you fast...

Giving, praying, and fasting were considered the three pillars of Jewish piety. Ask any Jew what godly living is all about and they would say, "Giving, praying, and fasting." Remember Jesus' parable about the Pharisee praying at the Temple?

Luke 18:11 The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men-robbers, evildoers, adulterers-or even like this tax collector. 12 I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.'

He stood up and prayed, he tithed, and he fasted twice a week. Giving, praying, and fasting were the three pillars of Jewish piety, so Jesus uses those three examples to illustrate His point about the right and wrong ways to do religious actions. And He says exactly the same thing about all three. In

each case He says, “When you do it, do not do it to be seen by men. Do it for God’s reward alone, not for human applause.”

Now, if it seems to you like it has been a long time since we have talked about that principle, that is because when Jesus got to the second illustration – the one on prayer – He went off on a rabbit trail. It is the greatest rabbit trail any preacher has ever gone on. We got the Lord’s Prayer in that rabbit trail, and that took us some time to study. Then He took another rabbit trail off of that about forgiveness. But now Jesus brings us back to the point in verse 16. So let’s take a look at what He says about fasting.

16 When you fast

I think those three words might be the most important three words in the whole New Testament on fasting, because they let us know we should be fasting. Jesus assumes we will be fasting. If fasting were part of the Old Testament law only and it did not have a place in the Church, I cannot imagine Jesus would include a section on it in the Sermon on the Mount which is a sermon about what righteousness looks like in the Kingdom of the Messiah. So fasting is for us, which is why you see the Church doing it in the book of Acts. They do not seem to do it very much, but on at least a couple occasions we do see it.

But the Epistles do not teach about it, so evidently the Old Testament understanding of fasting simply carries over directly into the New Testament. Now, Jesus does make an adjustment to that understanding, but before we can understand Jesus’ adjustment we need to understand the Old Testament concept. If Jesus’ teaching on fasting is, “It’s pretty much the same as what you are used to in the Old Testament, with one modification...,” then we first need to make sure we have a good grasp of the Old Testament teaching.

What is it?

Self-Humbling

So let’s begin with a definition. Fasting is voluntarily going without food and other earthly comforts for the purpose of humbling yourself. The very first time fasting is mentioned in Scripture is in Leviticus 16, and the word “fast” is not even used.

Leviticus 16:29 On the tenth day of the seventh month you must humble yourselves ... 30 because on this day atonement will be made for you, to cleanse you. ... 31 It is a sabbath of rest, and you must humble yourselves

Nine different times in Scripture we read about humbling your own soul, and it is always connected with fasting.¹ One of them is Isaiah 58. The people say to God:

Isaiah 58:3 'Why have we fasted and you have not seen it? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you have not noticed?'

So God does the same thing – uses the word “fast” and the phrase “humble yourself” interchangeably when He answers in verse 5. So fasting is a means of self-humbling. It is a way of reminding ourselves of our weakness and neediness and dependence and creatureliness.

¹ The Hebrew word is ANAH (אָנָה), a very common word meaning “to afflict or humble.” ten times it is used in a context of self-humbling. Lv.16:29, 31, 23:27,32, Nm.29:7, 30:13, Isa.58:3,5, Ps.35:13, see also Dan.10:12.

Forsaking earthly comforts

So there is more to it than just going without food. Listen to what the angel said to Daniel:

Daniel 10:12 Since the first day that you set your mind ...to humble yourself before your God, your words were heard

The angel says he humbled himself. What did that look like? Go back to verse 3.

3 I ate no choice food (lit. desirable bread); no meat or wine touched my lips; and I used no lotions at all until the three weeks were over.

He did not go without food; he just went without tasty food. That's the way I have to fast because I have blood sugar problems. If I go without food altogether I can get into trouble, but I can still do this kind of fast. I just eat plain oatmeal - no sugar or flavoring of any kind. Talk about a tasteless food. Doing that is just enough to keep me from having a blood sugar crash, but I still feel hungry through the day (because there's only so much plain oatmeal you can eat without gagging). Daniel also went without meat and wine and lotion for his skin. When David humbled himself he said no to food and to his bed (he slept on the floor), and to bathing and to clean clothes and also lotion for his skin - all the normal things you do to make yourself comfortable. In 1 Corinthians 7 there is a reference to married couples going for a brief time without physical relations for a time of prayer. There are a lot of ways to humble yourself. But when should you humble yourself with fasting? Jesus said it is not appropriate in some contexts, so when should we do it?

When should you do it?

Times of Sorrow

It is always important for us to realize our neediness and dependence on God, but there are some times when it is especially important, and that is when you fast. The first one is times of great sorrow.

Matthew 9:14 Then John's disciples came and asked him, "How is it that we and the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?"¹⁵ Jesus answered, "How can the guests of the bridegroom mourn while he is with them? The time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them; then they will fast.

They say, "Why don't Your disciples fast?" and Jesus said, "Because they are not sad. You don't fast during a time of celebration. When I am taken away from them, then they will have a reason to be sad and it will make sense for them to fast." Over and over and over throughout the Old Testament you see people fasting in times of grief and weeping and sorrow.²

The opposite of feasting

Fasting is the opposite of feasting, and feasting is connected to joy and celebration. That is why we all dragged our extra five pounds of holiday cheer in with us this morning. Christmas is a time of celebration, and celebration is a time of feasting. And that is by God's design. He wants us to enjoy the bounty He has provided for us. False teachers order people to fast and to avoid marriage.

² Joel 1:14, 2:12, 2 Chronicles 20:3-10, Esther 4:3, 9:31, 2 Samuel 12:16-23, 1 Samuel 1:7, Nehemiah 1:4, Judges 20:26, 1 Samuel 31:13, 2 Samuel 1:12.

1 Timothy 4:2 Such teachings come through hypocritical liars ... They forbid people to marry and order them to abstain from certain foods, which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and who know the truth. For everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, because it is consecrated by the word of God and prayer.

For the believer, eating is a sacred act. There are teachers today who make it sound like fasting is the solution to everything, and that it is always a good thing to do. They can really get carried away (“If only Eve had been fasting...”). Sometimes the most spiritual, godly thing you can do is feast! Eating is an important part of the Christian life. Scripture speaks far more about eating than about fasting. In the Old Testament, God was forever commanding the people to have feasts.

Deuteronomy 16:13 Celebrate the Feast ... 14 Be joyful at your Feast

Eat a lot of food and like it! Jesus knocks at the door wanting to come in and eat. It is obvious just from creation that God wants us to enjoy food. He created such an infinite variety of food and capacity of the tongue to appreciate tastes. He could have just made us all eat dirt, but instead He made more different flavors of food than any one person could ever sample in a lifetime, and while other religions focus on abstaining from this and abstaining from that and all kinds of required fasts, God is commanding feast after feast for His people. In the New Testament, those feasts were all replaced by the Lord’s table which was celebrated with what they called a Love Feast – a huge potluck fellowship meal. Even on the night before the crucifixion Jesus did not fast. Instead He enjoyed a big meal with the Disciples.

Luke 22:15 I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you

When Jesus talked about heaven, He could hardly mention it without talking about food. And there is no mention of fasting in heaven.

God’s design

God designed us to eat when we are happy. There are people today who teach about fasting as if it had almost a magical power. It doesn’t. There is absolutely no spiritual benefit in fasting in and of itself.

1 Corinthians 8:8 food does not bring us near to God; we are no worse if we do not eat, and no better if we do.

So just as feasting is appropriate for times of celebration, so fasting is appropriate for times of sorrow. God designed us to have a reduced appetite when we are sad. When a terrible calamity strikes, or some great sorrow or fear or anxiety – appetite diminishes - or disappears altogether. Sometimes someone loses a loved one and they do not want to eat at all – for days in some cases. When that happens people all around them are saying, “Come on, you need to eat.” No, they don’t. Let them fast – that is God’s design.

In fact, I think you can even see some physiological signs of that. I read one study this week that seemed to show a connection between anxiety and leptin levels.³ That is interesting because leptin is the hormone that gives you the feeling of being satisfied when you have eaten and are full. It makes you not want to eat anymore. In this study they did things to create anxiety in the rats, and the rats lost interest in sugar water, which is one of their favorite treats. And then when they adjusted the leptin

³ <http://www.dana.org/news/brainwork/detail.aspx?id=120>

levels in the rats their appetite for sugar water returned. I am certainly no scientist, and you can take that for whatever it is worth, but even without any physiological evidence I think it is plain from Scripture that God designed sorrow to go along with reduced appetite and fasting.

Now, some of you might be thinking, "In my experience, it is the exact opposite. Feasting for celebration – I'm with you there. I do that, but when I am sad, or mad, or anxious, or worried, or upset – I eat even more." I hope you wore your steel-toed boots to church this morning because this might sting a little., but I have to tell you, I am convinced that eating for comfort is a malfunction of our hearts. That is not God's design. Feasting in a time of sorrow is out of place. In fact, researchers were surprised to discover that there is actually excess leptin in obese people. When you eat too much it causes your body to produce too much leptin and then the body becomes resistant to it - just like a type 2 diabetic is resistant to insulin. But if we follow God's design there should be a decrease in appetite. So it is actually an arrogant thing to do because we are not submitting to God's design. And so you see that connection in Scripture between pride and feasting when there should be fasting (in times of sorrow).

The pride of eating for comfort

Isaiah 22:12 The Lord, the Lord Almighty, called you on that day to weep and to wail, to tear out your hair and put on sackcloth. ¹³ But see, there is joy and revelry, slaughtering of cattle and killing of sheep, eating of meat and drinking of wine! ¹⁴ ... till your dying day this sin will not be atoned for.

"You're pigging out on beef and lamb chops and wine at a time that should be a time of sorrow and repentance. I will never forgive you for that."

Why? What is so prideful about eating for comfort? It is prideful because suffering creates an emptiness in your life, and using food or any other earthly comfort to fill that emptiness is an act of self-reliance and self-sufficiency.

Psalm 10:2 In his arrogance the wicked man ... ³ boasts of the cravings of his appetite ...⁴ In his pride the wicked does not seek [the LORD]

The prideful man sees himself as the fulfiller of his appetites and desires and sees himself as the solution to the problem of his own emptiness. That emptiness you feel in times of sorrow is designed to drive you to God, the Bread of life. But when we turn to some other remedy we are saying, "I don't need You God, I got this." Sorrow comes into my life and exposes this gaping hole of emptiness inside me, and I look at that and say, "Oh, I can fix that. I can use the resources around me to fill that emptiness. I don't need God - all I need is some French fries, or a batch of cookies, or a couple beers or a movie or a nap..." That belittles God. We mock Him when we attempt to replace the Bread of life with a bag of Fritos - and the Spring of living water with a latte. So just as fasting goes along with humility in Scripture, overeating goes hand-in-hand with pride.

Deuteronomy 8:11 Be careful that you do not forget the Lord your God, failing to observe his commands, his laws and his decrees that I am giving you this day. ¹² Otherwise, when you eat and are satisfied ... ¹⁴ your heart will become proud and you will forget the Lord your God

If your heart is not focused on God's Word then eating and having all the earthly comforts you need leads to pride and self-reliance. And that is exactly what happened to Israel.

Ezekiel 16:49 Now this was the sin of your sister Sodom: She and her daughters were arrogant, had abundance of food, and comfortable ease, and did not help the poor and needy.

With their abundance of food and comfortable ease came arrogance and selfish pride. The NIV translation is “**She and her daughters were arrogant, overfed and unconcerned.**” Those all go together. When we feel sorrow or grief or fear or some other kind of emptiness, one of the purposes of those kinds of feelings is to awaken us to our hunger for the nearness of God’s presence. They are designed to make us desperate enough to seek God with all our heart. When you experience the emptiness that goes along with sorrow or anxiety or some great need, it should drive you to fill that emptiness. And the only thing that can fill it is the Bread of life. Sorrow awakens us to the thirst of the soul, and only the Spring of living water can quench that thirst. The problem is our hearts are idol factories. So when we feel the emptiness of fear or sorrow or pain we start looking to all kinds of earthly pleasures to numb those spiritual hunger pangs. For some people it might be television, for others it is recreation, or music, or hanging out with friends, or sex or alcohol or marijuana or painkillers; and for many people it is food. You get upset – you hit the refrigerator. You have a rough day, you say, “I deserve a treat.” You get angry – you take it out on an entire bag of potato chips. God teaches us to use food for the purpose of celebration; but I do not think there is any place in Scripture that teaches us to use food for comfort. We are to look to God for comfort, not food. And the best posture from which to seek comfort from God is a posture of physical hunger. We turn our backs on earthly food as a way of saying, “That is not enough for me right now. The strength and joy and fullness that come from physical food will not cut it for me right now. This hunger I feel in my stomach is a small sample of the massive hunger and weakness of my empty, emaciated soul and I’m starving for an experience of the presence of God. I am not going to eat or turn to earthly comforts because none of that is enough for what I need right now.”

Cheapens your suffering

There is a sense in which you cheapen your pain when you try to address it with a superficial remedy. Have you ever gone to someone with some huge, deep problem and they fire off this cheesy, shallow solution off the top of their head after thinking about it for five seconds? And then they walk away thinking they solved everything? That is demeaning. It is like they are calling you an idiot – “In all your twenty years of wrestling with this problem you should have just thought of this little thing I came up with in five seconds.” When people do that, it cheapens your suffering. And we do the same thing to ourselves. When we go for an earthly remedy to a spiritual longing we cheapen our own suffering. So we fast to teach our soul not to take big things lightly. Just like when you have a young child who is joking around about some really serious matter and you have to teach him that this is something he needs to take seriously. When we throw food (or television or any other earthly comfort) at the deep longings of the soul, it is like a little child who is oblivious to reality.

Not as much sorrow in the New Testament

So back to the question we started with - why is fasting mentioned so seldom in the New Testament? It is not emphasized nearly as much as prayer and giving - why? Is it because there is not as much sorrow in the New Testament era? Yes – that is exactly why. That is what Jesus said.

Matthew 9:14 Then John's disciples came and asked him, "How is it that we and the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?" 15 Jesus answered, "How can the guests of the bridegroom mourn while he is with them? The time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them; then they will fast.

Now, does that time of sorrow when Jesus was taken away extend all the way until the Second Coming? Or is it just talking about the three days Jesus was in the tomb? I am convinced the period of sorrow is that three-day period when Jesus was in the tomb. I get that from the explanation Jesus gives in the next verse.

16 "No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment, for the patch will pull away from the garment, making the tear worse. 17 Neither do men pour new wine into old wineskins. If they do, the skins will burst, the wine will run out and the wineskins will be ruined. No, they pour new wine into new wineskins, and both are preserved."

The point of all that is the new and the old cannot be put together. Evidently the old wineskins and the old cloth represent the old system, where it was appropriate to have fasting as a regular routine. But now things are different. Is it still fitting to fast in times of great sorrow - like when Jesus was crucified? Yes. But when Jesus rose again He inaugurated a whole new era of great joy.

Matthew 28:8 So the women hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy, and ran to tell his disciples.

“What about after the ascension? Wasn’t that a sad moment when Jesus was taken away into heaven?”

Luke 24:51-52 While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven. 52 Then they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy.

Romans 14:17 For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit,

It is true that we cannot see Him now, and we long to see Him face to face. But the fact that we cannot see Him now does not kill our joy.

1 Peter 1:8 Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy

“But what about trials and affliction? Doesn’t the New Testament say that we will have great suffering? Yes, but that does not destroy our joy either.

James 1:2 Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds

2 Corinthians 7:4 I am greatly encouraged; in all our troubles my joy knows no bounds.

So that is the adjustment Jesus made to the Old Testament practice of fasting. It is not as frequent now; it is not as heavily emphasized, because this is an era dominated by joy.

Intensive Prayer

So fasting is mainly about sorrow and grief, which is why we do not do it as much in this age of great joy, however times of sorrow are not the only occasion for fasting. There is another kind of fasting that is just as fitting now as ever. Many times in Scripture fasting is a component of some especially intensive prayer and communion with God. When Jesus was preparing to begin His public ministry the first thing He did was fast for forty days in the desert (Matthew 4:2). In Acts 13 they were worshipping and fasting, and the Lord told them to set apart Paul and Barnabas for the work He had called them to (Acts 13:2-3). And later when Paul and Barnabas were appointing elders in each church they committed those elders to the Lord with prayer and fasting (Acts 14:23). The entire forty days Moses was up on Mt. Sinai meeting with God he had no food or water (Ex.34). In Luke 2:37 Anna

worshipped day and night, fasting and praying. And in Acts 10 Cornelius was fasting and praying and God heard his prayers and sent Peter to tell him the gospel.

Requesting something important

Several times in Scripture people have fasted when they were asking God for something that was extremely important to them. And God is very responsive to that. When the people of Israel were released from captivity, they had a problem. How do you take an entire nation - men, women, and children - one thousand miles on foot across the Arabian Desert, without any armed escort to protect them from bandits and all the various dangers of the desert?

Ezra 8:23 So we fasted and petitioned our God about this, and he answered our prayer.

God responds to fasting. He even had mercy on wicked Ahab when Ahab fasted after getting the news of his punishment in 1 Kings 21. When the Benjaminites committed a terrible sin, God commanded the rest of Israel to attack them. So they obeyed, attacked the Benjaminites, and lost. Then they prayed, asking God if they should do it again. He said, "Yes." They tried again and were routed again. The third time they prayed the same prayer but this time they fasted. And *then* they won. So fasting is something you do when you are really, really, really serious about asking for something from God. When David was told by God that his child by Bathsheba would die, he fasted.

2 Samuel 12:16 David pleaded with God for the child. He fasted and went into his house and spent the nights lying on the ground. 17 The elders of his household stood beside him to get him up from the ground, but he refused, and he would not eat any food with them.

Finally after a week of that the baby died, and the servants did not want to tell David because they were afraid he would lose control and do something crazy.

19 David noticed that his servants were whispering among themselves and he realized the child was dead. "Is the child dead?" he asked. "Yes," they replied, "he is dead." 20 Then David got up from the ground. After he had washed, put on lotions and changed his clothes, he went into the house of the Lord and worshiped. Then he went to his own house, and at his request they served him food, and he ate. 21 His servants asked him, "Why are you acting this way? While the child was alive, you fasted and wept, but now that the child is dead, you get up and eat!" 22 He answered, "While the child was still alive, I fasted and wept. I thought, 'Who knows? The Lord may be gracious to me and let the child live.' 23 But now that he is dead, why should I fast?

So that is another example of fasting in a situation where there is an especially intense desire for a "yes" answer to the prayer.

Times of Repentance

So the times to fast are times of great sorrow or times of intensive prayer. So probably the best time of all to fast is in times of repentance, because repentance combines both. When I sin...

- I grieve the Holy Spirit.
- I dishonor the name of Christ.
- I distance myself from God.
- I inhibit my ability to worship
- I deaden the love and intimacy I have with God
- I put myself in a pattern of being more vulnerable to that temptation the next time
- I make it more difficult to think on things above and look at things from a right perspective
- I must face all kinds of consequences – often other people suffer from my sin as well

- I inhibit my ability to pray
- It saps the power from my ministry

So when we fall into sin it is a time of both great sorrow and great neediness. We are crushed with remorse and regret and sadness over having offended God, and we are earnestly begging God for mercy and for deliverance from that sin.

So repentance combines both kinds of fasts, so it is no surprise that many times in Scripture we see fasting associated with repentance. When Jonah proclaimed to Nineveh that judgment from God was coming in forty days, they repented with fasting, and God had mercy on them (Jonah 3:5). When Elijah told Ahab that God's punishment was on its way, Ahab fasted.

1 Kings 21:27 When Ahab heard these words, he tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and fasted. He lay in sackcloth and went around meekly. ²⁸ Then the word of the Lord came to Elijah the Tishbite: ²⁹ "Have you noticed how Ahab has humbled himself before me? Because he has humbled himself, I will not bring this disaster in his day

Ahab humbled himself with fasting, and God had mercy on him. Moses fasted on behalf of the nation of Israel because of their sin (Dt.9:18). Nehemiah 1:4, 9:1, Psalm 69:10, Daniel 9:3-4, Psalm 35:13 - all examples of fasting as a part of repentance. In Leviticus.16:29-34, 23:26-32, and Numbers.29:7-11 fasting was a spiritual preparation for the Day of Atonement.

God is so gracious and so forgiving and so patient with us that it is easy to become cavalier about our sin. We know we should be crushed and broken and weep, but instead we spend about ten seconds confessing the sin and that is about it. Fasting can help with that. When my heart is not properly humble, I can fast to humble myself and bring myself to a point of grave seriousness and genuine repentance. God calls us to this when we sin.

Joel 2:12 "Even now," declares the LORD, "return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning."

When your conscience malfunctions and does not humble you sufficiently, you can use fasting to humble yourself. Now, please do not misunderstand. I did not say to use fasting to punish yourself. Punishing is God's business. We do not punish ourselves for our sin. But we are called to humble ourselves. There is a vast difference between trying to stimulate your conscience and trying to pay for your own sin. If you fast as an act of penance - trying to punish yourself to pay for your sin, that is a mockery of the cross. But when there is a need to knock down the pride in your heart, fasting can be just the ticket.

What does it accomplish?

So, what is fasting? It is a decision to go without food and other comforts for the purpose of humbling yourself. When is it appropriate? In times of great sorrow and in times of especially intensive prayer and communion with God. Now one last question - why do it? What are you trying to accomplish when you fast?

Cooperates with God in times of sorrow

Well, if it is a fast because of sorrow then the goal is simply this - to cooperate with what God is doing in sending that hardship into your life. One of the chief purposes of suffering and pain and sorrows in life is to humble us and to remind us of how incapable we are of taking care of ourselves and how much we need God. And the decision to fast is you saying, "Yes" to that. When the sorrow comes into your life that is God saying, "You are weak and needy and dependent in desperate need of Me and Me alone..." and when we fast we say, "Yes, Lord." And it is also a way we preach to our

own soul. God says, "You are weak and dependent and in need of Me" and by fasting we say, "Did you catch that, soul? Are you paying attention, body? Are you getting this? We are empty and God alone can fill us."

Express earnestness, humility, and dependence in prayer

What about if it is the other kind of fast? The other kind of fast has the purpose of expressing earnestness, humility, and dependence in prayer. The first time I ever fasted was in high school. I was told that fasting helps bring you into deeper communion with God, so you can focus much more intensely on prayer. So I did a twenty-four hour fast - and I spent about twenty of those hours thinking about food and about how hungry I was. I found it ten times more difficult to focus on prayer.

I do not know of any verse in Scripture that promises increased ability to concentrate if you fast. Fasting does not improve your concentration - it just increases your weakness and sense of neediness and dependence. And it can also be a very helpful memory cue. If you are like me, you can discover the most amazing truth in God's Word, or be shaken to the core by a wonderful time of prayer - and then an hour later fasting is the farthest thing from my mind because I am engrossed in what I am doing. The great thing about hunger pangs is they come with just the right frequency to continually remind you that you are humbling yourself before God. So if you are really serious about something you are asking from God - fast.

Now, remember - God is not a vending machine who can be manipulated or controlled through fasting or anything else. David fasted when he was asking for God to spare his child and God still said no. But generally in Scripture when someone fasts God grants them what they ask for. Why? Because fasting is a magical formula? No, the reason God is so responsive to the good kind of fasting is because God is responsive to a humble, dependent heart. When fasting is used to humble your heart it is that humble dependence upon God that God responds to - not the fasting. When God told the Israelites to attack the tribe of Benjamin they lost not because they were eating food, but because they were self-confident. They outnumbered the tribe of Benjaminites eleven tribes to one. It seemed like a piece of cake, so they did not sense any great need for help from God. But after getting routed twice they got desperate - desperate enough to humble themselves with a fast. And then God gave them victory.

God already knows how humble and dependent we are. But fasting can help increase your humility. And it can reveal to you how much earnestness you really have. You are praying hard for something, you are grieving over some sin that you just cannot seem to overcome..., you beg God to deliver you from it, you say, "I am really serious about this God..." How serious are you, really? Does it drive you to fasting? When you think about fasting do you find yourself hesitating because there is some really yummy thing in the refrigerator - that gives you an idea how earnest you really are.

But what if you cannot fast because going without food is just too hard for you? Going any significant period without food is just so unthinkable, your whole being just resists it. This entire sermon you have been doing nothing but looking for any and every excuse to avoid having to fast. How do you reduce your dependence on constant eating enough to where your soul can be sensitive and responsive in those times when a fast is called for? And what if you have low blood sugar or some other health problem? And why does Jesus offer reward for fasting? We will plan on tackling all that next time.

Benediction: 1 Peter 5:5 clothe yourselves with humility ... because, "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble." ⁶ Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time.

Summary

Fasting is abstaining from food and other comforts and refreshments for the sake of self-humbling. It is done in times of sorrow (God's design - so the feeling of emptiness drives you to God. Substituting food or some other comfort cheapens the suffering and insults God, and is the pride of self-sufficiency) and intensive prayer (especially when making a very important request). The combination of both is times of repentance. Fasting in times of sorrow cooperates with what God is doing with the sorrow, and fasting in prayer expresses earnestness and dependence.