

# Sermon on the Mount: How to Fast (Matt 6:16-18, Is 58:5-12)



## A. The Missing Key to Vibrant Spiritual Life?

Is fasting the most helpful yet unloved teaching to many? Possibly.

- Is fasting an illogical practice? What is God going to gain from us going hungry? God is NOT sadistic! And why do we even call it 'fasting'? Time slows down when we don't eat!
- Jesus' teaching on fasting is brief. He doesn't give a lot of explanation. He simply expects His followers to fast, but in the right way. He teaches, '*WHEN you fast,*' and '*WHEN you pray.*' (Matt 6:5-6, 6:16-18)
- There was a strong '*culture of fasting*' in Jesus' days. But we live in the '*culture of feasting*'. Pious Jews and early Christians fasted regularly twice a week. Every Jew is expected to fast on the Day of Atonement (Lev 16:29-30). Wesley expected all his ministers to fast twice a week, Wednesdays and Fridays until 4pm.
- Fasting is not for the special elites, but part of a normal Christian life just as prayer is. 'When you fast...' Not 'If you fast...'* We need to cover some basics to make sense of 'Why' & 'How do we fast?'

## B. What is Fasting?

Biblical Definition: 'Abstaining from food for some definite spiritual purpose.'

- Partial fasting (a.k.a. Daniel fast) - Abstaining from pleasure eating. E.g. 21 days of controlled eating (No meat or delicacies, simple bread and water.)
- Full fasting (a.k.a. Normal fast) - Abstaining from solid food, but drinking plenty of water, which flushes out kidneys and gets rid of toxins.
- Total fasting (a.k.a. Esther fast) - Abstaining from solid food and liquid. E.g. Moses and Elijah fasted for 40 days but during the direct supernatural encounter with God. The only such case recorded in the Bible under natural circumstances is limited to 3 days.

## C. Spiritual Purpose of Fasting (Isaiah 58:5-7) 'Is it (not) a fast...?' (x3)

- Self-humbling (Is 58:5, Lev 16:29) - God commanded Israelites to fast once a year on the Day of Atonement. i.e. '*afflicting our souls*' = self-humbling before God. David said, '*I humbled my soul with fasting*' (Ps 35:13). *Fasting is a biblical and practical way of humbling ourselves before God,* which opens the door to receiving more grace from God. '*God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble.*' (James 4:6)
- Deliverance from Oppression (Is 58:6) '*and that you break every yoke*' Intensified prayer - Fasting combined with prayer adds greater earnestness to seeking God. There are countless testimonies of deliverance after fasting in the Scriptures and many Christians' lives.
- Remember and Identify with the Poor (Is 58:7) Not only do we remember the suffering of the poor, but identify with their hunger and share our food with the hungry. *Principle of Incarnation.*

## D. Rewards of Fasting (Is 58:8-12)

- (1) Light (revelation of God's will & deeper understanding of the Word); (2) Healing (physical, emotional, spiritual healings); (3) Righteousness (ability to resist sin & evil in the heart); (4) Glory (power of the Spirit, Matt 17:21); (5) Answered Prayer (Dan 10:3ff); (6) Guidance (Acts 13:1-2); (7) Satisfaction & Refreshing (ability to enjoy blessings of life); (8) Repairing & Restoration (intercessory role. Joel 2:15)
- 'The Father's Rewards' - How wrong the Pharisees were, fasting to impress people! Isaiah pointed out the problem of fasting to bolster one's self-righteousness. It resulted in *pointing of the finger* and *not caring for the poor*! Just like the rewards for prayer, the Father's reward will be (1) External; (2) Internal; and (3) Eternal. We don't fully comprehend it all in this age!

## E. Seven Different Types of Fast in Scripture (C.F. 'The Rewards of Fasting' by Mike Bickle)

- To experience God's power (Luke 4:1-2, 14; Matt 17:21; 11:18; 2 Cor 6:5, 11:26)

- b. To receive guidance & direction, and minister to the Lord (Acts 13:1-2)
- c. To seek protection for dangerous mission (Ezra 8:21-23; Esther 4:3, 16)
- d. To understand God's end-time prophetic revelation (Dan 9:3, 22; 10:3, 12)
- e. To avert national crisis & the outpouring of the Spirit (Jonah 3:5, 10; Joel 1:13-14; 2:12-15, 28)
- f. To see the fulfilment of God's promises for a city and nation (Neh 1:4, 8-11)
- g. To prepare the heart to grow in intimacy with Jesus (Mark 2:18-22)

## **F. Fasting for Intimacy with Christ (a.k.a. The Bridegroom Fast, Mark 2:18-22)**

- a. The old and new wineskin teaching of Jesus was in the context of fasting. The wineskin, like our hearts, was prone to hardening and then breaking. If new wine is poured into the old wineskin of an unrenewed heart, it cannot retain the fermenting wine and will break, and the wine will be wasted. *Our heart requires continual renewing with prayer & fasting like the wineskins of the old days.*
- b. Jesus' disciples enjoyed His physical presence to the full. But Jesus told them that this 'joy' of having His *physical nearness* would turn to 'mourning' when He was taken from them. And the day would come when His disciples would 'miss' and 'long' for 'His presence' more than the necessary 'food'. For this, we would fast – in order to experience more of His presence! In Acts 13:2, the early church leaders '*ministered to the Lord and fasted.*'

Under the new covenant the Spirit dwells in each believer, bringing fasting to a new dimension because the indwelling Spirit of God would reveal and share with us the depth of the longing of God (1 Cor 2:10). *The fast of the 4<sup>th</sup> month, 5<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup> month, shall be joy and gladness and cheerful feasts for the house of Judah. (Zech 8:19)*

- c. Does God have a hunger that He doesn't tell us about? (Ps 50:12) Does God's hunger, longing and passion transferred and imparted to us by the Spirit?

*'As the deer pants for the water brooks, so pants my souls for You O God.'* (Ps 42:1)

*'O God, You are my God; early will I seek You; My soul thirsts for You; My flesh longs for You in a dry and thirsty land where there is no water. Thus I have looked for you in the sanctuary, to see Your power and Your glory...'* (Ps 63:1-2)

*How do we express such a deep spiritual hunger for God? By combining prayer with fasting. 'Lord, put this hunger from my stomach and put it into my heart.' (Bob Mumford).*

Is the Lord refraining from the fullness of joy in heaven until we join with Him in His kingdom. *'But I say to you, I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in My Father's kingdom.'* (Matt 26:29) We partake of His longing as the Bride of Christ as we develop our spiritual hunger and passion for Christ.

## **G. Practical Tips for a Successful Fasting**

- a. A positive mental attitude is important. If your mental state is fearful, '*I'm going to suffer or starve to death...*', then you will find yourself hungry faster and groping for food in just a few hours. Positive faith says, '*It is God's will for me to fast. And God will bless me when I fast in accordance with His will.*'

Be determined and don't give in easily. You are not going to die for missing a couple of meals! Fasting is widely known to be very beneficial for our health if we do it right. It cleanses our digestive system. If you have certain medical conditions (such as diabetes) you should check with your doctor before you fast.

- b. Start with small steps and build it up gradually. e.g. My friend started out with a big ambitious goal of fasting for 40 days just like Jesus. He didn't make it. After about 20 days he abandoned it. Then he ate too much too fast. He said, '*I was a wreck after that.*'

Start with missing one meal – skip breakfast.

Then try to miss two meals – skip breakfast and lunch, and you have fasted 24 hours.

If you miss 3 meals (breakfast, lunch, dinner) then you have fasted for about 36 hours. After this, if you still want to go further, then seek God's guidance for a longer period of fasting.

But the key is a slow build-up and regular routine. It's better to practice fasting regularly than to do a very long one infrequently. During fasting, I find taking light exercise is good, like strolling. However, doing heavy work during a long fast is not recommended.

- c. Spend time in prayer and the Word during fasting. If you are working, you can use lunchtime to pray and read the Word. If you have a specific prayer request, you can write them down. Beware of the extra spiritual forces loosed against you during fasting – strange depression, doubt, fear, loneliness, etc. Take it as a backhanded compliment from the devil.
- d. Break the fast slowly. After breaking fast, don't overeat immediately. You can undo all the good you did to your body during fasting, and even harm your body. This is just as important as fasting.

## H. Excerpts from 'The Rewards of Fasting'

- a. '...The early Church fasted twice a week, on Wednesdays and Fridays, to experience more power with God. Throughout Church history, many anointed men and women practiced regular fasting as they led great revivals. Andrew Murray, the famous South African Church leader, said that we could learn much from these anointed leaders, who dedicated themselves to God by separating themselves from the spirit and pleasures of the world through regular fasting with prayer.
- b. Charles Finney was one of the most powerful preachers in America's history. Tremendous anointing of conviction rested on his preaching. He reported leading more than 500,000 people to the Lord in 8 weeks during the great New York revival of 1857.

Finney wrote that when the grace of prayer left him, his preaching became as weak as other men. When this happened, he would spend several days in prayer and fasting, until the spirit of prayer returned, along with power on his preaching. He proclaimed that the power on his preaching was connected to regular times of prayer with fasting. Finney wrote, 'I was led into a state of great dissatisfaction with my own lack of faith and love. I felt myself weak in temptation and needed frequently to hold days of fasting and prayer in order to retain communion with God that would enable me to work in revival with power.'

Many well-known preachers of the past exemplified this same principle. They were blessed with an unusual anointing of the Spirit that always included special power on their preaching for soul-winning. In some cases, they were anointed with signs and wonders. Examples include George Whitfield, Jonathan Edwards, David Brainerd, Charles Wesley, Marie Woodworth-Etter, and Aimee Simple McPherson.

- c. One of the most outstanding examples of a person whose life illustrates the connection between much fasting and prayer and the release of signs and wonders is John G. Lake, who ministered in the early 1900s. The Lord stirred this insurance man from Chicago to pray and fast until he experienced several major breakthroughs of power in his preaching and signs and wonders. God released unusually powerful miracles through him for many years. He went to South Africa for five years and birthed hundreds of churches, seeing an estimated 500,000 healings, which included people being raised from the dead. He led untold thousands of people to Christ in those days.
- d. The Lord is looking for people today who will seek Him with all of their hearts. He can entrust such people with His power. He spoke prophetically to one man in our midst, saying that to a people without mixture, He would give the Spirit without measure. The fasted lifestyle is an important part of our pursuit to be such a people in this hour.

## I. Reflection Questions

- i. What is biblical fasting? What is the wrong way to fast? How do we fast the right way?
- ii. What is the main purpose of fasting? What are the benefits of fasting? Do you have a plan for fasting for the rest of this year? Why?
- iii. Can you share your experience with fasting and the outcome? *Ps 63:1-2 (David)*,