

WHAT ABOUT FASTING?

In Matthew 6:16-18, Jesus addresses the subject of fasting. Fasting and prayer often go together, but not always. Fasting is never commanded in the NT, but neither is it forbidden. It is never commanded, but on some level, it is assumed.

Fasting is a little bit of a misnomer. As a matter of playing on words, instead of “**fast**” I think we should call it “**slow**” because the idea of fasting is essentially the idea of giving up food for a period of time in order to SLOW DOWN and focus on God. So, the normal routine of life is SLOWED to focus on God. Fasting is indicative of setting aside the normal routine of life, including eating, to intensely seek after God.

Matthew 6:16 (NKJV)

16 “Moreover, when you fast, do not be like the hypocrites, with a sad countenance. For they disfigure their faces that they may appear to men to be fasting. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward.

Jesus warns that fasting is not to be done with hypocritical showmanship. Spiritual hypocrites do everything for SHOW. It’s all about them. Recall, Jesus made this same emphasis regarding giving and praying earlier in the chapter in verses 2 and 5.

Likewise, in the matter of fasting, Jesus says don’t be a play-actor. Don’t be a phony hypocrite who puts on a show like you are all pious when in reality you are not. Jesus really calls out these hypocrites.

They made themselves look all sad and disfigured their faces to be sure and make it obvious to everyone around that they were fasting. How perverse. True fasting is all about intensely seeking God, but these people were making it all about the promotion of SELF.

“This [disfiguring their faces] was often done with dust and ashes (cf. Isa. 61:3; [cf. 2 Sam. 13:19]) and is similar to the modern Roman Catholic concept of Ash Wednesday.” – ***Liberty Bible Commentary***

Jesus said, “Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward.” That’s it! That is all they are ever going to get. Before God this counts for NOTHING. They have no lasting reward.

In contrast, Jesus says...

Matthew 6:17–18 (NKJV)

**17 But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face,
18 so that you do not appear to men to be fasting, but to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly.**

Note that Jesus assumes that His disciples may at times fast, saying, **“when you fast”** (cf. Mt. 9:14-15). They are to go about like normal, applying their regular hygiene regimen. They are not to seek attention. God knows. Keep it between you and God, and God will reward you.

Fasting is to be done unto God, which, of course, is the whole point anyway. Make it a matter of worship between you and God.

In verse 18, we have the tenth use of the word **“Father”** in verses 1-18. This is all about how God’s children are to carry on in the matter of pious living regarding almsgiving, prayer, and fasting. Our focus is to be on God and God alone. We are to live for an audience of ONE – namely God Himself.

Briefly, let us consider the theology of fasting and make an application for today. In the OT there was only one time where fasting was commanded and that was on the Day of Atonement (cf. Lev. 16:29-31; 23:27-32; Num. 29:7). It is described in these terms: In Lev. 16:29 and 31 it says regarding fasting, **“you shall afflict your souls”** (cf. Lev. 23:27). Thus, they were to humble themselves before the Lord. However, there is no parallel prescribed self-humiliating emphasis related to fasting in the NT.

In addition, the Jews had added other times of fasting to their calendar in the OT (cf. Zech. 7:3-5; 8:19). Even so, God rebuked them for not having God-oriented fasts in Zech. 7:5.

Zechariah 7:5 (NKJV)

5 “Say to all the people of the land, and to the priests: ‘When you fasted and mourned in the fifth and seventh months during those seventy years, did you really fast for Me—for Me?’

In the NT, we see that some of the Pharisees fasted twice a week as a means of promoting their own self-righteousness (cf. Lk. 18:12). But there are not many verses related to the Church that specifically address “fasting”.

However, there are a number of verses where inferior manuscripts have inserted the word “fasting”, such as in Mt. 17:21; Mk. 9:29; Acts 10:30; and 1 Cor. 7:5.

In the Church Age, there have been many assertions about fasting that are not really borne out in the text of Scripture. There are no examples of “**religious fasting**” in the epistles and only two examples in the book of Acts (cf. Acts 13:1-3; 14:23). In Acts 13:1-3 the Church was fasting prior to sending out the first missionaries, but no instructions are given. It is a general statement. In Acts 14:23, elders were appointed with prayer and fasting, but again, no instruction is given.

Perhaps one reason fasting is acknowledged but not elaborated on is because of the persistent danger of ascetism, ritualism, and mysticism (cf. 1 Tim. 4:3). In the early second century a Christian instruction book called the Didache said, “Let not your fasts be with the hypocrites, for they fast on Mondays and Thursdays [the practice of pious Jews], but do you fast on Wednesdays and Fridays” (Didache 8:1). That was to completely miss the point as it just exchanged one set of days for another.

In recent times, fasting has become a big emphasis in relation to the Spiritual Formation Movement. There is lots of hype promoting it as an important part of sanctification. There is lots of hype but not much Scripture that rightly divides the Word.

Matthew 9:14–15 (NKJV)

14 Then the disciples of John came to Him, saying, “Why do we and the Pharisees fast often, but Your disciples do not fast?”

15 And Jesus said to them, “**Can the friends of the bridegroom mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them? But the days will come when the bridegroom will be taken away from them, and then they will fast.**”

Pastor Gary Gilley writes:

“Consider that Jesus had promised His disciples that when He went away He would send the Holy Spirit ([John 14:16](#), [17](#); [16:7](#)) who would be another helper (Gk: Paraclete) – just like Him. As a matter of fact Jesus said that it would be to their advantage for Him to leave and send the Holy Spirit to them ([John 16:7](#)). It seems to me that the period of time between the crucifixion and the coming of the Holy Spirit to indwell the believers best fits Jesus’ description of a time of mourning that would require fasting.

The issue is this: since the Holy Spirit has come and since we are again in the presence of the Bridegroom (in the form of the Holy Spirit) should not Christians rather rejoice than fast today? If Jesus' disciples avoided fasting and feasted instead in the presence of the Bridegroom why should not the Christian do the same now that the Holy Spirit indwells him, especially in light of Jesus' promise that it was to our advantage that He go away and send the Spirit?

There are strong opinions on both sides of this issue. Some believe that fasting is the missing ingredient in the spiritual life of Christians today. If we would but fast as the Old Testament saints fasted we would know God's power in ways that we do not now. But as we examine Scripture pertaining to the church age we discover some interesting things. While fasting is never prohibited in the epistles, neither is it ever promoted. There is no instruction to fast and there are no prescribed fasts for the church.

We must conclude, in the absence of either command or instruction in the New Testament concerning this subject, that fasting is not prohibited and therefore a believer is free to fast if he chooses. But since it is never commanded or even recommended for the church age we must assume that it is not a necessary ingredient for the Christian walk. As a matter of fact, fasting seems to be one of the areas specifically addressed by Paul to be a matter of personal conviction ([Rom 14:5-9](#); [Col 2:16-23](#)). If you want to fast do so. But don't require it of others, or make it a test of spirituality, or expect it to aid in your sanctification. Jesus' emphasis was not on fasting, but on the joy of His presence. In the presence of Jesus, through the ministry of the indwelling Holy Spirit, who could not be joyful?"

-Pastor Gary Gilley

"To imply, as some do, that fasting is an essential ingredient in effective prayer cannot be substantiated biblically. In the New Testament much is said about prayer but very little about fasting. Prayer is commanded but fasting is not. The Book of Acts refers to many instances of prayer where no indication of fasting is mentioned." – **Curtis C. Mitchell**

"The theology of fasting is a theology of priorities in which believers are given the opportunity to express themselves in an undivided and intensive devotion to the Lord and to the concerns of spiritual life." –

Gotquestions.org

Thus, we see that sometimes fasting is coupled with prayer signifying an intense time of focused prayer being in view. But as Jesus taught this is

never to be done for show. There are two examples of the Church fasting and praying, but that is it. There are many more examples of praying, such as the dramatic prayer meeting in Acts 4:23-31, where there is no hint of fasting.

I take it there may well be intense times of fasting and prayer, but it is not the norm, and there are no formulas given in the NT for how specifically you should carry out a fast. It is up to you – really between you and God. As you intensely seek God in this way – keep it between you and Him and He will reward you accordingly.

Someone has well said, *“If you want to put the average Christian to shame, just ask him or her about their prayer life.”*

Someone else has written: *“Prayer. Is any other practice so universally extolled, yet so often left undone by Christians? And in an age when true followers of Christ increasingly are marginalized, mocked and despised, can we continue to act as if we don’t need to cry out for God’s help?”*

Fellow Christian: How is it with your prayer life? Let us pray as Jesus instructed, but whether or not to pray is not an option. Jesus said, ***“In this manner pray”***. Pray in the right manner, but by all means let us pray!

We all need prayer, and we all need to pray!