

# THE SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINE OF FASTING

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## Objectives for this course:

1. Understand the meaning of fasting, its various forms, and the Biblical foundation for the practice of fasting.
2. Understand the many reasons and benefits of fasting.
3. Learn how to begin a fast.
4. Inspire the student to make fasting a regular spiritual and physical discipline.

## Introduction:

Fasting was practiced in the Old Testament, New Testament, and in the life of the church during the first couple of centuries as a regular observance. Once again, in the renewal of the church it is being practiced.

### I. What is fasting?

#### A. Definitions:

1. To abstain from anything that hinders our communion with God.
2. To do without, to practice self denial.
3. Primarily means not to eat, but could include abstaining from T.V., etc.

#### B. Kinds of fasting:

1. The normal fast
  - a. Luke 4:2 – Abstaining from all forms of food for a specific period of time. Does not include abstaining from water.
2. The absolute fast
  - a. Acts 9:9 – To neither eat or drink.
  - b. Additional examples: Ezra 10:6; 9:3; Esther 4:16; Moses in Deu. 9:9, 18; Exodus 34:28.

(Note) – In the case of Moses, it was a supernatural experience to go without water for this length of time. In ordinary circumstances, the body cannot go without water after three days.

3. The partial fast – Emphasis is on restriction of diet rather than complete abstention.

a. Examples:

- Daniel, Daniel 1:12; 10:2,3 – vegetables and water
- Elijah, I Kings 17 - ate cakes made from meal and oil
- John the Baptist, Matthew 3:4 – diet of locust and wild honey
- A partial fast can be a stepping stone for a normal fast.

## II. Is fasting really commanded?

A. Fasting was taught by Jesus

1. Matthew 6:1-18 – “When you pray...give...fast” and not *if* you do these things.
2. Matthew 9:14-17 – During the ministry of Jesus on earth, his disciples did not practice fasting in contrast to the strict legalistic practice of the Pharisees. But Jesus said the day would come when they would practice it once again. And that time is now, the time between Christ’s Ascension and Second Coming.

B. Fasting was practiced by the apostles and early church.

1. Acts 13:2-3

“Fasting in this age is not an act of mourning for Christ’s absence, but rather is an act of preparation for his return.”

## III. Reasons for fasting:

A. To be heard on high.

1. Isaiah 58 – There are conditions to our fasting and being heard by God.
  - a. Our fasting must be combined with social justice.
2. Jeremiah 29:13-14 – “*With all our heart*” could include fasting. In other words, “...*with all our heart*” can mean setting aside bodily appetites to concentrate on praying.

3. Joel 2:12-17 – “...with all your heart” includes children and babies.

“Fasting helps to express, to deepen, and to confirm the resolution that we are ready to sacrifice ourselves to attain what we seek for the Kingdom of God.” Andrew Murray

4. Fasting is not a hunger strike to force God’s hand and get our own way! Fasting does, however, bring a note of urgency into our praying and give force to our pleading in the court of heaven.
- a. Prayer is warfare, wrestling against opposing forces.
  - b. We cry for justice in the court of heaven but the adversary is also represented. Job 1:6; 2:1; Zechariah 3:1
  - c. The “Judge” Jesus is willing to hear us, but the adversary must be overcome. Luke 18:1-8; Matthew 11:12
  - d. Other examples: Ezra 8:21, 23, 31; Saul in Acts 9:10-18

B. To change God’s mind.

- 1. Malachi 3:6 – God has inflexible laws in dealing with men. Sin leads to judgement but repentance leads to mercy. Jeremiah 18:7-8
- 2. Examples where God changed his mind as a result of fasting.
  - a. Jonah/Nineveh -Jonah 3:5-10
  - b. Ahab -I Kings 21:27-29
  - c. Joel -Joel 2:12-14

C. To free the captives

While Isaiah 58:6 is primarily speaking of human bondage, many people today are also in spiritual conflict and bondage. Even Christians can feel and be affected by oppressing forces. Fasting and praying is a means to spiritual liberation.

1. Luke 4:18 – Jesus came to set the captives free. We are called to do the works of Christ.
2. People today are living in all kinds of bondage: alcohol, drugs, impure sexual desire, gambling fever, spiritism and the occult, cults, pride, rebellion, religion, tradition that has lost its meaning, forms, bad habits, failure, success, inferiority...*GOD WANTS US FREE!*
3. How many Christians, including ourselves, still have “carry over” from the old life for which we need deliverance. We have victory in the name of Jesus to renounce and cast out these oppressing forces and sin, and at times it is necessary to fast. By fasting, our spirit becomes more sensitive and we can better discern what is hindering us. Fasting seems to provide the compelling to take dominion over the flesh and Satan.

D. For revelation

1. Fasting seems to enhance a sensitivity to the Holy Spirit for revelation. Revelation must always be in agreement with the Word of God. I John 4:1
2. Additional examples where fasting seemed to enhance revelation: Daniel 9:2-3; Acts 27:21-24
3. Acts 13:1-2 – Prayer and fasting is important in times of discernment when specific direction from the Lord is needed.

E. To get control of our fleshly desires

1. First, note the fact of man’s desire for unnecessary food.
  - a. The very first temptation had to do with food in the Garden of Eden. Genesis 3:6 “The cry of man’s stomach helped to drown the voice of God in the Garden of Eden.”
  - b. Esau sold his birthright. Genesis 25:29-34
  - c. The Children of Israel the Wilderness. Extreme craving and then abuse of food. Exodus 16:3; Numbers 11:4-5; 21:5  
 -note the response of God to their craving
  - d. Lust for food in the sanctuary of God. I Samuel 2:29
2. Food can put us in bondage. I Corinthians 6:12-13; II Peter 2:19
3. Overeating, along with drinking, is a form of idolatry. I Corinthians 10:6-7; Philippians 3:17-19

4. Jesus warned against overeating. Matthew 24:37-38; Luke 12:45-46; 21:34; Proverbs 23:2
5. Fasting is a means to buffet the body. I Corinthians 9:25-27

**"The body is ever to be our SERVANT and not our MASTER!"**

6. Examples of Jesus
  - a. Jesus in the wilderness. Matthew 4:1-4. Jesus, the last "Adam," met the same tempter, not in Eden with all of its provisions, but in the desolate wilderness where he was gripped by hunger and weakened in body. Where the first Adam failed, the last Adam triumphed! By the power of the resurrected Christ that dwells within us, we have the power to resist the tempter who would desire that we abuse our body with unnecessary or unhealthy food.
  - b. Jesus exercised self control at the well of Sychar. John 4:8, 31-34. Fasting can help to awaken a vision within us to see the needs in our lives, in our community, and in our world. The harvest time is NOW!

**F. For health and healing**

1. Isaiah 58:8 – Fasting will speed up our healing.
2. Fasting has physical benefits, particularly for those who have excess weight.
  - a. Without food intake, the body begins a purge to consume deposits of surplus fat, waste material, decaying tissues, etc. The body will "burn up" the inferior body material first. Even if a person is in good physical condition without excess body fat, a day or two of fasting will help to burn up interior materials in the body.
3. Fasting is not to be considered a pleasant experience as far as the natural mind and body is concerned.
  - a. Psalms 35:13 – David said, "I afflicted myself with fasting." The pores of the skin, the mouth, the lungs, the kidneys, the liver, and bowels, are all involved. It's like a housecleaning. Unpleasant taste and bad breath are part of the process.
  - b. Sometimes one may experience a dull headache from the cessation of tea or coffee or caffeine drinks, which in reality is a mild withdrawal symptom from the caffeine drug.

- c. Some may experience nausea, dizziness, and of course weakness. In the natural, fasting is not pleasant.
- 4. The end result of a prolonged fast will bring brightness of eye, pure breath, clear skin, and a sense of physical well being. The digestive system is renewed. Taste and smell senses are renewed. Mental powers are more alert.
- 5. It is extremely important that we get the mind of Christ before undertaking any fast. It is also extremely important that after we have made the sacrifice of a fast to achieve healing that we do not fall back into our former harmful eating habits. Rather, we should purpose to make new reforms and establish new habit patterns.

**Note:** If you are taking regular medication, it is good to consult a doctor about the effect of a fast. However, while all medication is not bad, perhaps a fast will help you to see the root cause of an illness and the need for the medication, and once that is dealt with, true healing could be experienced. This is not to say that some sin is the root of all sickness, but we should always be open to the God who wants to do miracles in our life.

#### **IV. How to begin a fast**

Fasting is God’s will for us, but we must be guided by the Holy Spirit as to when, how, and for what purpose. While it is easy to have good intentions to participate in this discipline of our Christian life, it is easy to put off until next week, or next month, or when I feel like it. Remember, Jesus didn’t say, “When you feel like fasting..” He said, “When you fast.” It requires purpose of the will, and determination enabled by the Holy Spirit, to put the discipline of fasting into action.

Here are some simple steps to help in beginning a fast:

- 1. Perhaps start with a partial fast, beginning with light meals the previous day.
- 2. Set certain goals or objectives for your fast. Then review them as you proceed in your walk with the Lord.
- 3. Have special prayer or reading from the Word during the time you would normally eat, which is helpful.
- 4. Never go without fluids for more than three days. It is good to eat plenty of fruit the day before a fast. When breaking the fast, exercise self control and eat foods that are easily digestible. Do not eat a lot of fried food or beans immediately after a fast. For an extended fast of three or more days, break the fast with juice and then soft foods. After a couple of days you can eat heavier food.

5. After a partial fast of several days, or a complete fast of two or three days, your stomach will shrink. Do not force yourself to consume the same amount of food you previously consumed. If self control is not taken, desired pounds lost can be regained very quickly and even more pounds added as the body grabs onto the fat for fear of starvation.
  
6. Do not allow hunger pangs, or other physical discomfort, discourage you. Remember, God wants us to control our body and not that the body has control of us. On an extended fast, the first two or three days are the most difficult.
  
7. Above all, enter your fasting with a positive faith that God will minister to you.
  - a. To “diligently seek Him,” (Hebrews 11:6) could include fasting.
  - b. If fasting is done from a right motive, the Father will promise to reward you.
  
8. Don’t wait for an emergency to fast. Fast when you are “up” and not “down.” On the other hand, God may lead you to fast when you are discouraged in order to experience a victory.
  
9. Make fasting a regular part of your discipline. Maybe once a week, once a month, or however the Holy Spirit is leading you. Remember, a fast could be something other than food.

**Conclusion:**

Am I willing to die fully to self, seek the Lord diligently, and ask His direction concerning fasting in my life? The grace of God makes a fasted life possible.

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