

What About Fasting?

Franklin Church of Christ
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PM Assembly

Introduction:

On the second Sunday of each month, we devote our evening assembly to answering submitted questions by members or guests. If you have a question you would like covered, you may give it to me personally, leave it in the box outside my office or e-mail it to me. In this lesson, we deal with a question I have been holding on to for some time. What about fasting? Fasting is mentioned about 40 times in the Bible, but does the Bible demand us to fast? If so, how, when and why? If not, should we fast?

Discussion:

- I. What is fasting?
 - A. Fasting is going without a physical desire or need. Most commonly we view fasting as going without food. Consider **II Samuel 12:16, 21**. David fasted, then when he quit, he started eating. However, **I Corinthians 7:5** demonstrates a sexual fast. Some today suggest you may have very specific food fasts where you abstain from specific kinds of food like having a sweets fast or a coke fast. While that may be good for you, I haven't seen any indication in the Bible that anyone fasted by abstaining from a particular kind of food or drink while continuing to eat and drink in general.
 - B. While the word "fast" can refer to any abstinence for whatever reason, in the Bible, fasting almost always referred to abstaining from a physical desire or need in order to focus on a spiritual need or desire.
 1. Consider the passage in **I Corinthians 7:5** where the couple abstains from sexual relations to devote themselves to prayer. Thus, going a week without sexual relations is not a Biblical fast. Praying together instead of having sexual relations is.
 2. Look again at **II Samuel 12:16, 21**. David fasted while he pleaded with the Lord to save his child.
 3. In **I Kings 21:27**, Ahab fasted in repentance. So did Saul in **Acts 9:9-11**. While fasting, Saul was praying.
 4. In **Psalms 35:13**, David fasted when he prayed for those who were sick.
 5. **Psalms 69:10** and **Ezra 8:21** demonstrate fasting was a means of humbling one's self before the Lord. The idea being that when we are depriving ourselves of our wants and needs to focus on God and His will, we are humbling ourselves before Him.
 6. With that in mind, we are not surprised to find out fasting was considered a form of worship or at least considered to correspond with worship—**Luke 2:37** and **Acts 13:2**.
 - C. Having said that, we do notice exceptions. There were what we might consider natural fasts, that is, fasts that didn't happen so much because the people decided to fast but simply because fasting was the natural reaction to what had happened.
 1. In **I Samuel 31:13** and **I Chronicles 10:12**, the inhabitants of Jabesh-gilead fasted as they mourned the death of Saul and Jonathan.
 2. In **Esther 4:3**, the Jews fasted in their mourning about the decree against them.
 3. In **Daniel 6:18**, King Darius fasted the night Daniel was in the lions den.
 4. These were not necessarily decisions to fast as much as people lose hunger or are so worried or distracted they either can't or don't eat in moments of great trial and sorrow. This kind of fast is not necessarily a spiritual activity.
 - D. Finally, we must not labor under the delusion that a fast is only a fast if it lasts a long time. There is no set time for fasting in the Bible.
 1. Moses and Jesus fasted 40 days (**Exodus 34:28; Deuteronomy 9:9; 9:18; Matthew 4:2**), however I believe they had miraculous help over those periods.
 2. The men of Jabesh-gilead fasted for seven days (**I Samuel 31:13**).
 3. Esther and her people fasted for three days in **Esther 4:16**, as did Saul in **Acts 9:9**.
 4. In **II Samuel 12:16-18**, David fasted seven days. However, he wasn't fasting for a particular amount of time, he merely fasted as long as the child lived, seeking the Lord's favor.
 5. In **Ezra 9:3-5**, it appears that Ezra fasted for less than one day, from the moment he heard of the people's sin to the evening sacrifice.

6. You may fast for several days, one day or you might fast through one meal only. If you take time you would have devoted to eating or some other physical need or desire and instead devote it to prayer, singing, study or meditation upon God's word you are fasting. By the way, it is not a fast to rush to Bible class instead of eating and then eat after class is over. Fasting is when you completely replace your time of eating with spiritual activity.

II. Must we fast?

- A. Despite the number of times fasting is discussed in the Bible, it is never commanded in either covenant with the possible exception of **Leviticus 16:29, 31; 23:29, 32**. Some suggest the afflicting, humbling or denying of self in these verses refers to fasting (there is merit to this argument—in **Isaiah 58:5, 10** fasting is connected with this term for affliction or humbling). If that is the case, then there was only one command to fast and it was only for one day of the year—the Day of Atonement, that is on the 10th day of the 7th month. As Jesus is our atonement and we no longer observe this day of sacrifice, then there is no command for us to fast. I think this is important to note, especially for those with health issues. If you're pregnant, hypoglycemic, diabetic or anemic God does not command you to fast putting your health in danger.
- B. However, in the New Testament, fasting seems to be expected. That is, though it was not commanded Jesus simply presumes His disciples will fast on occasion. Consider **Matthew 6:16**. Jesus did not say, "If you fast..." but "When you fast..." This corresponds with "When you pray..." and "When you give to the needy..." While Jesus was not commanding His disciples to fast in this passage, He certainly expected us to fast as part of our natural walk with the Lord just as our walk with the Lord will naturally lead us to pray and to give to the needy, if we are able.

III. Some guidelines for fasting.

- A. According to **Joel 2:12-13**, fasting is to be a matter of the heart. We can go through outward motions, but if the heart is not responding to God in humility, then our fasting is no good.
- B. In **Matthew 9:14-17**, Jesus demonstrated that fasting was not to be done ritualistically, but to be done when it was appropriate. Fasting was not something that would be done in moments of great joy, but in moments of grief or pleading. The Pharisees did not grasp this. They fasted twice a week whether they needed to or not (cf. **Luke 18:12**). Fasting was not a reaction to anything for them, it was merely an action to check off their duty list.
- C. According to **Matthew 6:16-18**, when we do fast, we are not to go around letting everyone know. Rather, we dress as usual, pretty up as usual and act as usual. No one should be able to tell we are fasting except God.
- D. **Isaiah 58:2-14** demonstrates that fasting must be part of a greater life of serving God. We cannot live however we want for our pleasure and then believe we will manipulate God to our side by fasting now and then. Certainly, fasting may some times be a part of our repentance, however, fasting itself does not somehow cancel out our sins.

IV. Times we might fast.

- A. **I Samuel 31:13; Esther 4:3**—we often fast when we are mourning. This may be a decision, then again it may just happen naturally.
- B. **I Kings 21:27; Acts 9:9**—as we repent and mourn our sins, fasting is appropriate. I am not suggesting if we haven't fasted, we haven't repented. However, how many of us have ever been so devastated by our own sin that instead of eating we sought God's forgiveness through confession, humbling ourselves before the Lord?
- C. **II Chronicles 20:3; Ezra 8:21-23**—when we want to petition God, we may fast. Have you ever wanted God's favor so badly you would pray instead of eat to seek it?
- D. **Psalms 35:13**—David fasted when he prayed for the illnesses of others. We are quick to let others know we will pray for them. However, has their health ever been so important to us that we would go without eating in order to pray for it? Also, keep in mind David is talking about his enemies here.
- E. **Acts 13:2**—These Christians were worshipping and fasting. In fact, this looks like a congregation wide fast. There is no reason given other than they were worshipping. Have we ever viewed God as so important that instead of eating we would gather with the saints to worship Him? I

really think this would be tough for us. After all, if a worship assembly even puts our lunch plans behind by 15 minutes we get upset. I find it interesting that we like to have breakfast Bible studies where we meet some place, eat and talk (which is perfectly lawful), but what would happen if we said we would start having a meeting for anyone who wanted to come over their lunch hour one day a week and instead of eating, we would glorify God in songs and prayers? How many of us would be interested in that?

- F. **Acts 13:3**—the church in Antioch fasted and prayed as they sent Paul and Barnabas on their way for their first missionary journey. Is there any part of the work we are doing that is so important to us that we will abstain from eating while we pray God's blessing upon it? What about our meetings, Fall Focus, VBS? What about praying for the men we support as we send them our support?
- G. **Acts 14:23**—Paul fasted as he appointed elders in every city. Have we ever viewed the assignment of roles in the congregation as anything so important that we would avoid eating in order to pray about it or meditate on God's word about it? What about when appointing elders or deacons? What about when bringing in preachers? What about appointing teachers? Is any of that important enough to us that we will miss a meal or more in order to devote ourselves to prayer?
- H. I think it is important to notice one reason for which we never see anyone fasting. I point this out because so often I hear people say fasting is good for this and yet we never once see anyone in the Bible fasting for this reason. Fasting is never used as a means to demonstrate or gain self-control. If you are dealing with the sin of gluttony, fasting is not your answer. You will not gain self-control in your eating by skipping meals. In fact, just skipping meals, as we have already pointed out, is not really fasting in the Biblical sense. If all you are doing is trying to demonstrate self-control by fasting, you will merely prepare yourself for a fit of gluttony the moment your fast is over.

Conclusion:

As I pointed out, fasting is not commanded. Please don't take this lesson to mean if you have never fasted you are not serving God. However, I do think we should take it to heart that Jesus assumed we would fast. Let's make sure when we fast, we are doing so in service to God, humbling ourselves before Him, focusing on the spiritual. It is not enough to merely skip meals, we must replace them with spiritual work. How many opportunities we have to fast. How many needs there are for which fasting might be the appropriate response. Think of it this way—how many of us have ever skipped a meal because we were working and didn't have time? On the other hand, how many of us have ever so devoted ourselves to spiritual endeavor that we missed our physical needs or desires? Let us learn to fast but do so appropriately.