

Fasting and Prayer – Mark 2:18-20

The following is from a sermon I preached on October 10, 2004. During an extended fast, I asked persons who had questions about fasting to send them to me. The message was a Questions & Answer format in response to the questions that I received. At the end is a good internet resource (including recipes for juice, broth, etc.).

Introduction

While I am fasting, I don't normally say much about the fast. I plan to fast when it draws the least attention. However, the New Testament says more about fasting than it does about repentance and confession. Jesus taught more on fasting than He did about baptism and communion. And fasting is a real blessing to many.

How much weight do you lose?

Generally I have lost the following: 40 days = 28-30 lbs.; 21 days = 18-20 lbs.; 7 days = 8-10 lbs. Now the disclaimer... results may vary depending on the type of fast you undertake, the length of time of the fast, and personal physical attributes - some persons lose weight more easily than others. NOTE: This is not a particularly good weight loss approach! I generally don't keep the weight off. The body responds to the resumption of eating by storing food more effectively.

Do you get hungry??

Yes... and cranky! There is something about fasting that highlights your character flaws! One purpose for fasting is to become more focused on God's shaping and molding in your life and to become MORE like Jesus. So having your character flaws highlighted makes it easier to identify them and deal with them!

Doesn't fasting make you weaker?

Yes... fasting reminds us of our humanity. Fasting causes us to come to God with a sense of weakness. Weakness is NOT a handicap but a head start. It makes us more dependent on God. Fasting humbles us as we deny ourselves and we depend more on God.

Doesn't it bother you when you meet with somebody who is eating?

Sometimes. Generally I keep the same work schedule during a fast. This time I am setting the last week aside without meetings. There are moments when certain smells are quite tempting... like meeting with Kirk Hanger at Baja Fresh (Mexican) in Baltimore or several meals that Rebeca made. Then there are moments when I'm just feeling hungry or the unexpected smell that catches you by surprise.

Didn't Jesus tell His disciples that they didn't need to fast?

Not exactly. Read Matthew 17:1-21 or Mark 2:18-20 and note the phrase "then they will fast."

(18) Now John's disciples and the Pharisees were fasting; and people came and said to him, "Why do John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?" (19) And Jesus said to them, "Can the wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them? As long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast. (20) The days will come, when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast in that day (Mark 2:18-20 - RSV).

In other words... there is a time to party and there is a time to fast! Jesus himself fasted (example: 40-days in the wilderness before beginning His earthly ministry). And the disciples fasted as well (see examples in Acts).

The issue was that we are not to fast like the Pharisees fasted. The Pharisee in the Temple (Luke 18) was pleased with himself and how good he was before God.

(11) The Pharisee stood apart by himself and prayed, "I thank you, God, that I am not greedy, dishonest, or an adulterer, like everybody else. I thank you that I am not like that tax collector over there. (12) I fast two days a week, and I give you one tenth of all my income (Luke 18:11-12 - Good News).'

Many Pharisees fasted twice a week (Luke 18:12). Jesus described their fasting.

(16) And when you fast, don't make it obvious, as the hypocrites do, who try to look pale and disheveled so people will admire them for their fasting. I assure you, that is the only reward they will ever get. (17) But when you fast, comb your hair and wash your face. (18) Then no one will suspect you are fasting, except your Father, who knows what you do in secret. And your Father, who knows all secrets, will reward you (Matthew 6:16-18).

Why do you talk about fasting... isn't it supposed to be done in secret?

JOKE: I sometimes tell people... the only rules we have about fasting are: Don't chew, don't tell!

Fasting and prayer is a great blessing! I want to be an encouragement to those who would like to receive such a blessing. The issue isn't about how secret it should be. It has to do with our motives and for whom we are fasting! Jesus was calling the Pharisees on the carpet for wrong motives. They were fasting to be seen by others and to be admired. They went out of their way to make sure that as many people as possible saw that they were fasting.

They fasted two days each week - the market days! Then they went and hung out in the market dressed in their special "fasting attire." They neglected personal hygiene. They smeared ashes on their faces to make them look as pale as statues. They had horrible pain-filled expressions on their faces as though it was some big burden to follow God! Their purpose was to draw attention to the fact that they were fasting!

Fasting is not a super-secret activity for super-spiritual people. Fasting is a normal part of our interaction with God - like worship, giving, praying, or reading our Bible. Jesus was unhappy with those who made fasting a sign of their spirituality. Jesus apparently didn't mind talking about fasting or even about His own fasting. NOTE: Jesus went to the wilderness by Himself. Somehow Matthew and Mark knew about it to write the story...

Clearly there are times when everybody knows. Longer-term fasts are difficult to hide! Corporate fasts are great times of community (our Week of Prayer & Fasting is one of our highlight events each year). The Old Testament contains examples of corporate fasts such as when the nation was called to a fast. Our week of Prayer and Fasting is another example.

So Jesus says the plain truth. Your motives when you fast will limit what you receive. In other words, if you fast to impress others, that's all you'll get! Or for our context... if you fast to lose weight, that's all you get! So... what was Jesus teaching about fasting?

1. Don't change your appearance... keep your routines!
2. Don't do it for show... fasting is a time of drawing near to God!
3. Don't settle for small rewards... go after God's reward!

Aren't you supposed to only drink water? Does it still count as fasting if you drink juice? How about Slim-FAST?

It's easy to dismiss certain efforts at fasting. It's even easier to NOT fast because what we consider to be proper fasting is too hard for us to even try. There are different variations to fasting. Some variations are:

Physical considerations. If you are taking medication or have special medical conditions, you should consult your doctor before fasting. Pregnant women or nursing moms should not fast.

Absolute Fast (no food or water). Moses had an absolute fast for 40 days (Exodus 34:28). Outside of a supernatural miracle, the maximum is about three days. In the Bible it was primarily for spiritual emergencies. Some examples: Moses (Exodus 34:28; Deuteronomy 9:9, 18); Elijah (1 Kings 19:8); Ninevites (Jonah 3:7); Exiles in Persia (Esther 4:16); Ezra (Ezra 10:6); and, Saul (Acts 9:9).

Water-only Fast (no food or other drink). A healthy person can go with only water for a maximum duration of about 40 days. Some examples: Jonathan (1 Samuel 20:34); David (2 Samuel 3:35); and, Jesus (Matthew 4; Luke 4).

Normal Fast (drink liquids but no solid food). A juice fast (fruit and vegetable juices) is best for people who fast for an extended time. That is what I generally do. It helps to keep one's energy level up. People with blood sugar problems should be careful about entering into this type of fast since many juices have high levels of sugar.

Daniel fast. Daniel ate "no pleasant bread." Was that like giving up Mexican sweet bread ☺? Daniel and his three friends gave up sweets, meat and wine, eating only vegetables and drinking water all the while seeking the Lord (Daniel 1:12-13).

Partial Daniel-type fast (Daniel 10:3) can be continued indefinitely. It's a matter of cutting out certain foods, generally rich foods, and living on a simple food diet.

John the Baptist fast is drinking water and eating bread, water, juices, honey and nuts (and I suppose locusts ☺!).

"Idols" Fast. Some people may not be able to do a dietary fast so they give up specific pleasures or distractions, generally something that is meaningful in their life.

Sundown Fast. You cut back to one meal a day, often eaten after sundown. You can go a long time on this fast. NOTE: it's harder than it sounds!

There are not set patterns to fasting... so pick one and try it and see!

Can children fast?

Of course! If children want to fast, a good place to start is with an "idols" fast or a partial Daniel-type fast. As they get older, perhaps a sundown fast would be good...

Will you get sick if you fast too long?

Yes, you could. Whether or not you get sick is as much a matter of how long you fast as it is how you fast and what your physical condition is. A simple example is a friend who had never fasted so he decided to try it for one day. He had heard us talk about drinking juices when we fast, so he decided to do the same. Unfortunately he chose to fast while drinking only milk and prune juice... ☺

How long should I fast?

It depends on why you are fasting and what your health issues are. Some fasts in the Bible were:

One day. The most common fasts were for one day and were from sunset to sunset (Judges 20:26; I Sam. 14:24; II Sam. 1:12). A fast could also be for one night (Dan. 6:18).

Three days. Some fasts were for three days. These tended to be for personal preparation. For example, the fast of Esther continued for three days (Esther 4:16).

Seven days. Seven day fasts were sometimes called for corporate purposes. This is why we have chosen to have a week of prayer and fasting at the start of each year. Biblical examples are the fast by Jabesh Gilead for seven days (I Sam. 31:13; I Chron. 10:12) and David's seven day fast (II Sam. 12:16-18).

Twenty-one days. Daniel fasted for twenty-one days as part of his spiritual warfare (Daniel 10:3-20).

Forty days. The longest fasts that we find in the Bible were forty day fasts. Some who fasted forty days were Moses, Elijah, and Jesus (Ex. 34:28; Deut. 9:9; I Kings 19:8; Matt. 4:2; Luke 4:2).

Will God give me what I ask for if I add fasting to my prayers? Isn't fasting kind of like going on a hunger strike with God?

Fasting does not place God under any obligation to satisfy your requests. Fasting is not a spiritual way to twist God's arm to do something. Fasting does not earn us spiritual points to get what we want. And fasting does not inspire or provoke God to love you. He already does!

Can a person be sexually intimate during fasting?

ONLY IF YOU ARE MARRIED!

What the Bible says about sex during a fast is IF the person who is fasting feels a need to abstain for some reason and BOTH husband and wife are in agreement, then it is ok to abstain, but not for too long! In other words, instead of being a command to abstain, it is permission to abstain IF and WHEN both agree.

Do not deprive one another except with consent for a time, that you may give yourselves to fasting and prayer; and come together again so that Satan does not tempt you because of your lack of self-control (1 Corinthians 7:5).

Fasting often brings couples closer together and abstaining may not be a particularly useful choice if that is the case! An observation: I have noticed that some of those who were on an extended fast seemed closer to their spouse, holding hands more, sitting closer together, talking more. That is not unusual... prayer is all about intimacy with God and God's love and intimacy is the greatest bond a marriage can have.

What am I learning from this fast?

Fasting requires a lifestyle change for a season. The closest example is cutting weight in wrestling. It changes your lifestyle. It causes you to focus. Life is easier without a lot of extras.

Like every fast... this one has a life of its own. I began with hearing God. Then there was a period of spiritual warfare followed by breakthroughs. Many of the breakthroughs were not things we were praying for. Some were for things we had given up on, were no longer praying for and didn't even think to pray about. But there is something about fasting that helps make intercession. It joins us with the Holy Spirit groanings which cannot be uttered (Romans 8:26).

Likewise the Spirit also helps in our weaknesses. For we do not know what we should pray for as we ought, but the Spirit Himself makes intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered (Romans 8:26).

Now I'm receiving clarity and strategy for the future as well we dealing with those things that control me - that's the hard part! Fasting reveals things that control us and really drive our lives. Things are exposed through a fast that typically stay buried. It is a humbling experience because it reveals what's really inside. Sometimes what we find isn't so pretty, but God wants to flush those things out of us.

Why should I fast? Do you fast because God is asking you to or do you fast because you want to hear from God, so you take it upon yourself to "request" to hear some answers for things heavy on your heart?

It's good for personal needs such as healing, family issues, work and finances...

It's good for your relationship with God. It helps us to seek God and hear God better. It helps us to worship God more fully. And it permits us to get closer to God, making sure that we are going the same direction as God.

It's good for you as a person. It helps to shape your character and causes you to deal with the tough stuff in your life. It also helps us to become more like Jesus!

It's an important part of spiritual warfare - for BREAKTHROUGH for yourself, your family, the church, your place of employment, the region, country, etc...

It's useful in getting direction from God. It helps us to take stock, hear God through prophetic revelation and greater clarity in the Word, get strategy, and discover God's desires for us.

It sharpens our ministry. We become better vessels for God's power by being better able to hear God's voice. It increases our faith and opens us to Holy Spirit power. When Jesus ended His 40-day fast, He ministered in the power of the Holy Spirit. It provides us with an advantage in spiritual warfare (Mt. 9:23-29). For example, Jesus noted that some demons only come out by prayer and fasting.

Why does God Shepherd have a Week of prayer and fasting each year?

(1) The congregation in Antioch was blessed with a number of prophet-preachers and teachers: Barnabas, Simon, nicknamed Niger, Lucius the Cyrenian, Manaen, an advisor to the ruler Herod, Saul. (2) One day as they were worshipping God - they were also fasting as they waited for guidance - the Holy Spirit spoke: Take Barnabas and Saul and commission them for the work I have called them to do." (3) So they commissioned them. In that circle of intensity and obedience, of fasting and praying, they laid hands on their heads and sent them off. (4) Sent off on their new assignment by the Holy Spirit, Barnabas and Saul went down to Seleucia and caught a ship for Cyprus (Acts 13:1-4).

This fasting was done by a group together. It proved to be an occasion for the Holy Spirit's special guidance and changed the course of history. We desire to follow the patterns that produce the kind of church that was established at Antioch... a church that is sensitive and obedient to the Holy Spirit and that has a heart for the nations. Fasting exposes our hearts and expresses our hunger for God Himself.

Isaiah 58 quotes God's promises to those who fast the right way:

1. Spiritual breakthrough - revelation-truth takes over in our lives (v. 8a, 10b)
2. Wholeness and Strength (v. 8b,11b)
3. God-filled life!!! (v. 8c)
4. Answered Prayer (v. 9)
5. Divine Guidance (v. 11)
6. Satisfaction (v. 11b)
7. Freshness and Growth
8. Effective Life and Ministry (v. 12)
9. Joy in the Lord (v. 14)

One thing I have learned... when you fast, expect results!

Additional material:

Old Testament Examples

- * Moses (Exodus 34:28; Deuteronomy 9:9, 18) fasted during his time on Mount Sinai while waiting to receive the Ten Commandments.
- * All Israel (Judges 20:26; 1 Samuel 7:6; Jeremiah 36:9) fasted on various occasions.
- * Jonathan (1 Samuel 20:34) fasted because he was grieved at his father's mistreatment of David.
- * Saul (1 Samuel 28:20) fasted because he was seeking direction.
- * Warriors from Jabesh-Gilead (1 Samuel 31:13; 1 Chronicles 10:12) fasted at the death of Saul.
- * David and his men (2 Samuel 1:12) fasted at the death of Saul.
- * David (2 Samuel 3:35; 12:16) fasted at the death of Abner and when seeking mercy from the Lord concerning his sick child.
- * Elijah (1 Kings 19:8) fasted while traveling to Mount Horeb to meet with God.
- * The Elders of Jezreel (1 Kings 21:12) fasted - and they were evil men who followed the decree of Jezebel to fast as part of a conspiracy to kill an innocent man.
- * Ahab (1 Kings 21:27) fasted as an act of humility and contrition before the Lord.
- * The exiles who returned to Jerusalem (Ezra 8:21-23; Nehemiah 9:1-2) fasted to seek God's protection as they made their way back to their homeland. Later they fasted as they confessed their sins to God.
- * Ezra (Ezra 10:6) fasted as he mourned over the unfaithfulness of the returned exiles.
- * Nehemiah (Nehemiah 1:4) fasted when we heard the news about the condition of Jerusalem.
- * The Jews in captivity (Esther 4:3) fasted on behalf of Queen Esther as she prepared to approach the king.
- * Darius (Daniel 6:18) fasted when Daniel was thrown into the lion's den.
- * Daniel (Daniel 9:3; 10:3) fasted for revelation and understanding.
- * The people of Nineveh (Jonah 3:7-10) fasted in repentance at the preaching of Jonah.

New Testament Examples

- * Anna (Luke 2:37) fasted as an act of worship.
- * Jesus (Matthew 4:2; Luke 4:2) fasted in preparation for His public ministry.
- * The disciples of John (Matthew 9:14; Mark 2:18) fasted as a regular habit.
- * The Pharisees (Matthew 9:14; Mark 2:18; Luke 18:12) fasted primarily as a means of demonstrating their "righteousness" to others.
- * Paul (Acts 9:9; 13:1-3; 14:23; 27:21, 33; 2 Corinthians 6:5; 11:27) fasted on a number occasions; it was a regular part of his lifestyle.
- * Prophets and teachers at Antioch in Syria (Acts 13:1-3) fasted and worshiped the Lord.
- * Barnabas (Acts 13:1-3; 14:23) fasted when faced with the task of appointing church leadership.
- * The crew on the stormy sea with Paul (Acts 27:21, 33) fasted more out of fear than anything else; perhaps a carryover from pagan religious rituals.

Good resource on fasting: Campus Crusade for Christ has an extremely helpful and detailed guide on fasting at www.ccci.org/howtofast. Check it out!

Allan Yoder
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