

## **Seeking God Through Fasting** **Matthew 6:16-18**

We are in week #8 of our series on seeking more of God and satisfying our souls in him. As we've followed the book [Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life](#) we've looked at three habits we need to incorporate into our lives to experience a deeper relationship with God. We've also looked at three areas of spiritual fruit that will come as we seek the Lord and cooperate with him and what he's doing in our lives. And now we come back to a few more practices related to seeking God that will strengthen the ones we've already talked about.

The core habits we've talked about that we need to incorporate into our lives are meditating on God's Word, Prayer, and Worship. But God has also given us ways to strengthen those practices and that's what we'll be looking at in the next few weeks. Today we're going to look at the practice of fasting...

Fasting is really popular today. All kinds of people practice intermittent fasting because of the health benefits. A couple years ago I was at a 4<sup>th</sup> of July party and someone I hadn't met before told me all about intermittent fasting, ketones, and ketosis, and all the health benefits related to it. I had never heard about it before but then I started to see how big of a deal it was in the health community.

This morning we're going to talk about another kind of fasting – a kind that was popular and widely practiced long before the current trend, and that's the practice of spiritual fasting. Spiritual or religious fasting has been practiced for thousands of years in many different religions, including Judaism and Christianity. The Bible is filled with examples of people fasting for some kind of religious or spiritual reasons. It was practiced throughout the Old and New Testament times on many different occasions and was a regular and expected practice for the people of Israel.

I don't know if you practice spiritual fasting, but for the most part it appears to have fallen by the wayside for many Christians, likely due to a lack of understanding and uncertainty about its benefits. That pretty much describes where I've been. I've fasted occasionally over the past several years, but mostly because I've been encouraged to do so by denominational leadership

and not because I really understood what I was doing or why I was doing it. So at the end of fasting I didn't really see any value to it. But after studying it this week and seeing more clearly what it is and the purpose behind it, I can see its value in seeking a deeper relationship with God and it's something I want to incorporate into my life and I think you will too.

So I want to talk about what spiritual fasting is, what it means, and how we can incorporate it into our lives today.

What is spiritual fasting? After reading several articles about fasting in the Bible this week, I want to give you a summary of what I learned. If you do a survey of fasting in the Bible, you actually find very little direct teaching or instruction, but you do find a lot of examples and references to it. It was pretty common and there was a lot of variety.

You might be surprised, but there's only one time God actually commanded people to fast, and that was in Leviticus 23 on the annual Day of Atonement. What was more common was that an Israelite leader would command the people to fast. That happened many times. Neither Jesus nor the Apostles commanded the early Christians or churches to fast, yet it is clear that they practiced fasting at different times. So even without direct commands to observe fasting, it was seen as important and purposeful and people felt compelled to do it.

There were different kinds of fasts – people would abstain from different things – but by far the most common was the practice of abstaining from eating food and drink. The length of the fast was most often one day or from sunup to sundown, but it could include anything from one meal to several days. The longest fasts recorded in the Bible were 40 days, but these were extremely rare and included very unusual circumstances – such as Moses on Mt. Sinai or Jesus in the wilderness.

In the Old Testament, fasting was done annually on the Day of Atonement as a sign of penitence for sin. It was also commonly practiced during times of distress or mourning, such as during a drought, famine, war, spiritual renewal, or a leader's death. Prior to Jesus' ministry, historical writings indicate that the Jewish religious leaders would observe regular bi-weekly fasts and call the people to do the same. When Jesus taught his disciples

about fasting early on in his ministry in the Sermon on the Mount he spoke as if they were already involved in regular fasting and he was teaching them how to do it rightly, not to start doing it in the first place.

Fasting wasn't done by itself but it accompanied other acts of worship. Most common was prayer – fasting and prayer almost always went together. And those prayers had a certain flavor to them. People would be praying for deliverance from an enemy or impending threat. There would be prayers of confession of sin and crying out to God for mercy and forgiveness. Oftentimes people would fast and pray during times of mourning or distress. In addition to these prayers and fasting, people would put on sackcloth, or they might tear their clothes. They would sprinkle dust or ashes on their heads and sit in the dust on the ground. During Jesus' time they wouldn't wash or anoint their head on designated days of fasting like they would do on normal days.

After David's sin with Bathsheba, and the birth of their son, David went into a time of fasting. God had declared that because of his sin the child that was born to them would die. So after the child was born and became sick, David entered into a time of fasting. During that time he also prayed for the child and laid on the ground and wept.

All of these things indicate that fasting was an expression of grief, penitence for sin, humility, lowliness, desperation, devotion, dependance, need, and spiritual poverty. That expression might be directly related to a situation they were in at the time or commemorate a situation they had been in, in the past. Rather than just feeling those things and expressing them with their voices; they would also express them by going hungry and feeling the hunger pangs in their stomachs.

Jesus indicated the link between fasting and mourning in one of his two teachings about fasting. Matthew 9:14-15 says: *“Then the disciples of John came to him, saying, “Why do we and the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?”* <sup>15</sup> *And Jesus said to them, “Can the wedding guests mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them? The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast.”* He indicated that fasting was appropriate during times of mourning, but not times of celebration, like the events surrounding a wedding or his presence here on earth.

Fasting was deliberate, intentional, and had a unique purpose and expression. The contrast would be feasting where people would sing, celebrate, dance, and rejoice. Much, much different, and that helps you to see the meaning behind fasting. You don't fast when it's time to feast because they express the opposite things.

What does it mean? And what is its purpose? As noted, fasting is a very tangible expression of a person's feelings of need, desire, desperation, grief, and so on. But the most important part of that expression is that it's an expression to God. When we fast it isn't just an empty religious ritual, nor is it an expression that goes up to outer space or for other people to see. We are expressing ourselves to our heavenly Father. And that's at the heart of true, biblical fasting. It's about communing with God, relating to him, and seeking more of him.

Jesus made this clear in Matthew 6. In Verse 1 it says: *“Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven.”* He then gave three examples; the third was fasting. In Matthew 6:16-18 he says: *“And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. <sup>17</sup> But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, <sup>18</sup> that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.”*

Fasting isn't about expressing yourself to other people; it's about expressing yourself to God, and that's where it has value, purpose and meaning. Fasting is a way to express your true, heartfelt desire to God. It's a way to show God that you are serious, fully committed, and devoted to him. By fasting you are saying to God, “I need you and I want you more than anything else. I want to change; I need your help; I depend on you; and I trust you.”

As Christians, we also fast with the full understanding of the Gospel. It is not fasting that earns us favor with God because God's favor rests fully in the finished work of Christ on our behalf, which we receive by faith. This is one of the most common misunderstandings about fasting. God is not going to listen to you more or bless you more because you fast. Fasting isn't about influencing God or trying to compel him to do anything. It's about expressing

our need and longing for him. It's a way for us demonstrate dependence and devotion to influence our own hearts. The hunger we feel reminds us of our need for God. And that's why we fast.

So how should we seek to incorporate fasting into our lives? I want to encourage you to begin to observe a regular pattern of fasting in your life. Consider fasting once a month or once a week. Set aside a day on which you will give up at least one meal you would normally eat in order to seek the Lord. I recommend trying to fast for the full day if you don't have health issues that would make it unwise. Most of us can skip a meal and not really skip a beat – we might not even notice it. But most of us will notice very clearly if we don't eat for a day. You want to make yourself feel hungry as an expression of your need and longing for God. The hunger pangs are intentional and purposeful. They remind you of your soul's hunger and thirst for God. That's why you fast.

But it's also important that when you fast you set aside time for prayer, Bible reading, and worship. If all you do is fast, all you'll get is hungry. But if you take time for seeking God in prayer, reading Scripture, and worship, you'll receive nourishment for your soul. Throughout the time of your fast, whenever you feel hungry, use that to remind you to pray or worship the Lord.

I encourage you to fast for a particular purpose or need. Maybe it's just your general need for more of God; maybe you have a struggle or temptation you're dealing with. Maybe there's a difficult situation you or someone you love is in. If your heart is burdened for someone or about a situation in your own life, it would make sense to fast and pray for them or that situation.

It would be good for us to revive this forgotten practice as a way to go deeper in your relationship with God, to express your need for him, and your devotion to him.

Testimonies...