

TREK 101

Christian

Discipleship

SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES FOR THE CHRISTIAN LIFE

Lesson 8 FASTING

“Work hard to show the results of your salvation,
obeying God with deep reverence and fear.”
Philippians 2:12b (NLT)

A Ministry of Rockpointe Church

Lesson 8

FASTING

(This Lesson Adapted From Donald Whitney's *Spiritual Disciplines For The Christian Life*)

"Fasting begets prophets and strengthens strong men. Fasting makes lawgivers wise; it is the soul's safeguard, the body's trusted comrade, the armor of the champion, the training of the athlete." - Basil, Bishop of Caesarea (AD 330-379)

If there is one area of the Spiritual Disciplines where most Christians are inexperienced, fearful, confused or all three - it most likely is the Discipline of fasting. Though many Christians have read about the ministry of fasting in both the Old and New Testaments, the concept of fasting for spiritual purposes are far removed from the modern Christian mind. However, it is to our own spiritual demise that we neglect the Discipline of fasting since God expects that on certain occasions we would practice a controlled fast for a spiritual purpose. In other words, nowhere in the Bible has it ever occurred to Jesus or His disciples that a believer in Christ would not fast. Even today, all these years later, God has not changed His mind concerning the Spiritual Discipline of fasting. In fact, Jesus expresses His desire that all believers would be faithful to fast: Jesus says, *"when [not IF] you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting. I tell you the truth, they have [already] received their reward in full"* (Matthew 6:16-18).

Jesus assumes that believers will fast! If this is an area of your life where you are inexperienced, untested, or fearful perhaps now is the time in your Christian journey where you will absolutely trust God as never before and "risk" the experience of fasting for God's glory and your benefit. Why not try it and allow God to show you how powerful an experience fasting and praying will be in your life as you quiet your life, abstain from food for a meal or food for the entire day and listen intently to God speak? In the quietness of the moment (undistracted by food, or media, or talking, or whatever), allow God to show you more of Himself and His purposes for your life: The Bible teaches that we are to "Be still and know that He is God" (Ps. 46:10). Consider Psalms 112:7-8.

A. WHAT IS FASTING?

The Spiritual Discipline of Fasting can be described as any *voluntary abstinence from necessary or normal functions of life for a spiritual purpose*. Most people think of fasting as it pertains to skipping meals for medical reasons or for blood testing, but food is not the only necessary function from which we can choose to fast. We can voluntarily refrain from different types of food (i.e. junk food or certain treats, meat(s), and even from certain meals within the day),

from regular practices of watching television, using the internet, listening to the radio, playing video games, talking, or talking within certain groups of friends. Many of us have tried media fasts or social media fasts for certain seasons in order to demonstrate (spiritually) that those areas of our life do not “rule” us and that we are not enslaved to them (Gal. 5:15-18).

- As you think about it, **ask** the Holy Spirit to show you any area of your life where you might have an addiction or unhealthy relationship with a practice, person, or object. Perhaps God would call you to fast for a season from that unhealthy issue in your life. Who knows if God has been trying to get your attention over the years, but you have been distracted by an addiction and have missed God and His best for your life?

- **ACTION POINT:** This week when you are alone before God, have a blank piece of paper ready to take notes. As you pray, ask the Holy Spirit to bring to mind specifically anything in your life that is not pleasing to God. Write down whatever the Spirit reveals to you. Be specific. Then, as you confess those things as sin in your life and as you ask God for help in removing them from your daily life, ask God to help you abstain from them (one at a time); as you “fast” from those areas of addiction or unrighteousness, allow God to heal and bring holiness and wholeness back to your life – so that you will be more equipped to obey God and be used for His glory as you minister to others. Repeat this Discipline in your life every six weeks or as needed. Remember, “we never drift toward excellence or holiness in our lives.” Rather, we tend to drift toward what is unholy and unhelpful in our spiritual lives. The spiritual practice of Fasting can yield unbelievable results in your life as God cleans you, brings you close to Him, and as you seek Him undistracted (by life, sin, or poor habits).

Perhaps now is the time to attempt a fast and seek the heart of God to see if there is anything standing between you and Him? Consider David’s request and heart for his relationship with God: “Lord, try me, test me, search my heart and see if there be any wicked way!” (Ps. 139:23). The Apostle John states that as Christians we are to “test every spirit” in order to determine if they are of Christ or of self (1 Jn. 4:1); further, Paul says we are to examine ourselves to see whether or not we are in the Faith” (2 Cor. 13:5). The practice of Spiritual Disciplines entail self evaluation and asking God the Holy Spirit to show you any ungodliness, sinful habits, and unconfessed sin in your life. God desires to cleanse us (1 Jn. 1:9) and restore us to a right relationship with Him (fellowship). God uses the Disciplines of prayer (entreaty = asking Him to show you more of yourself) and fasting in order to accomplish further godliness in your life. Do not neglect any further anything spiritual action which God desires to accomplish in your life!

- 1) Describe what you think fasting can or should include other than food. Include what you consider to be positive and negative aspects of fasting.

- 2) Describe what you have learned about fasting from other Christians.

B. THE PURPOSE OF FASTING:

Fasting is introduced by God to help us have more of God's attention. When we are desperate in any situation (fear, trouble, suffering, pain, loss etc., God uses that crisis to get our attention and help us focus on the spiritual reality that He alone can help us, save us, and heal our broken lives (Ps. 46:1-3; Is. 41:10). Fasting is a particular way of causing neglect in one area of our life that we are used to for the purpose of reminding us that IN that particular area God is in control; further, through fasting and neglect in those areas of our life that we normally take for granted, God helps remind us that we are absolutely dependent on Him and His grace for everything we have (including our very being).

Through Fasting, we:

- 1) **Strengthen our prayer life.** There's something about fasting that sharpens the edge of our intercessions and gives passion to our supplications. So it has frequently been used by the people of God when there is a special urgency about the concerns they lift before the Father. The Bible does not teach that fasting is a kind of spiritual hunger strike that compels God to do our bidding. If we ask for something outside of God's will, fasting does not cause Him to reconsider. Fasting does not change God's hearing so much as it changes our praying.
- 2) **Seek God's guidance.** There is biblical precedent for fasting for the purpose of more clearly discerning the will of God. Fasting does not ensure the certainty of receiving clear guidance from God. Rightly practiced, however, it does make us more receptive to the One who loves to guide us.
- 3) **Express grief.** As mentioned in Judges 20:26, the Israelites wept and fasted to express grief for the forty thousand brothers they had lost in battle. Grief caused by events other than a death can also be expressed through fasting. Christians have fasted because of grief for their sins and as a means of expressing grief for sins of others.
- 4) **Seek deliverance or protection.** One of the most common fasts in biblical times was a fast to seek salvation from enemies or circumstances. Fasting, rather than fleshly efforts, should be one of our first defenses against persecution because of our faith.
- 5) **Express repentance and the return to God.** Fasting for this purpose is similar to fasting for the purpose of expressing grief for sin. But as repentance is a change of mind resulting in a change of action, fasting can represent more than just grief over sin. It can signal a commitment to obedience and a new direction.

6) **Humble yourself before God.** Fasting, when practiced with the right motives, is a physical expression of humility before God, just as kneeling or prostrating yourself in prayer can reflect humility before Him.

7) **Express concern for the work of God.** Just as a parent might fast and pray out of concern for the work of God in the life of a child, so Christians may fast and pray because they feel a burden for the work of God in a broader scope. A Christian might feel compelled to fast and pray for the work of God in a place that has experienced tragedy, disappointment, or apparent defeat.

8) **Minister to the needs of others.** Those who think the Spiritual Disciplines foster tendencies of introspection or independence should consider Isaiah 58:6-7. In the most extensive passage in Scripture dealing exclusively with fasting, God emphasizes fasting for the purpose of meeting the needs of others.

9) **Overcome temptation and dedicate yourself to God.** Ask Christians to name a fast by a biblical character and most will probably think first of the supernatural fast of Jesus prior to His temptation in Matthew 4:1-11. There are times we struggle with temptation, or we anticipate grappling with it, when we need extra spiritual strength to overcome it. Fasting for the purpose of overcoming the temptation and of renewing our dedication to God is a Christ-like response.

10) **Express love and worship to God.** Fasting can be an expression of finding your greatest pleasure and enjoyment in life from God. That's the case when disciplining yourself to fast means that you love God more than food, that seeking Him is more important to you than eating. This honors God and is a means of worshiping Him as God.

There is no doubt that God has often crowned fasting with extraordinary blessings, but we should be careful not to have what Martyn Lloyd-Jones called a mechanical view of fasting. We cannot manipulate God to do our bidding by fasting any more than we can by any other means. As with prayer, we fast in hope that by His grace God will bless us as we desire. God will bless a rightly motivated, biblical fast by any of His children. Whether or not you receive the blessing you hope for, one thing is sure: If you knew what God knew, you would give yourself the identical blessing that He does.

If we choose not to fast: (for spiritual, not medical reasons)

There are times in our lives when we intentionally neglect our relationship with God. In these times, we miss so much of all that God desires for us. Even as we strive to please God and at times "feel closer" to God in our Christian journeys, many of still do not realize how our subtle attitudes, fears, and ignorance actually hurt our connectivity to the Lord. Consider this quote by Whitney:

"Christians in a gluttonous, denial-less, self-indulgent society may struggle to

accept and to begin the practice of fasting. Few Disciplines go so radically against the flesh and the mainstream of culture as this one. But we cannot overlook its biblical significance. Of course, some people, for medical reasons, cannot fast. But most of us dare not enjoy fasting's benefits in the disciplined pursuit of a Christ-like life."

C. TYPES OF BIBLICAL FASTS:

A *normal* fast involves abstaining from all food, but not from water (Mt. 4:2; Lk. 4:2)

- A *partial* fast is a limitation of the diet, but not abstention from all food.
- An *absolute* fast is the avoidance of all food and liquid, even water. (Ezra 10:6; Esther 4:16). One would not recommend an absolute fast for more than three days. In Scripture, absolute fasts lasting more than three days (i.e. 40 days) were considered to be supernatural fasts as having divine intervention from God for survival.
- Thus, the Bible also describes a *supernatural* fast that requires God's supernatural intervention into the bodily processes (Deut. 9:9; 1 Kings 19:8)
- A *private* fast is what Jesus was speaking of in Matthew 6:16-18 when He says we should fast in a way not to be noticed by others.
- *Congregational* fasts are the type found in Joel 2:15-16 and Acts 13:2.
- The Bible also speaks of *national* fasts. See 2 Chronicles 20:3, Nehemiah 9:1, Esther 4:16, and Jonah 3:5-8.
- There was one *regular* fast that God commanded under the Old Covenant: Every Jew was to fast on the Day of Atonement – Yom Kippur (Leviticus 16:29-31).
- Finally, the Bible mentions *occasional* fasts. These occur on special occasions as the need arises (2 Chr. 7:14; Mt. 9:15)

D. HOW DO I BEGIN FASTING?

With this call to enter into an extended season of fasting, we must prepare ourselves adequately so that the fast can honor God and fulfill its purpose. Here are some items to help and encourage you:

1. **Seek advice and permission before the fast.** Seek medical advice before the fast, especially if you have any existing medical concerns or conditions. If you are under 18 years of age, discuss your desire to fast with your parents. Spiritual

covering, submission, and unity are important factors when fasting. Discuss your plans with your church leaders. Remember, fasting is an attitude of the heart! Ask them if they would consider fasting with you!

2. Fast and pray in order to humble yourself and purify your worship. In fasting we are not trying to get something from God, but rather we are seeking to realign our hearts' affections with His. In fasting we can more readily say, "We love you Lord, more than anything in the world." Lust of any kind is perverted worship, but fasting enables us to cleanse the sanctuary of our hearts from every other rival.

3. Don't boast about your fast. Let people know you won't be eating only if you need to (Matthew 6:16-18).

4. Do the fast with someone else. Two are better than one! We encourage roommates and friends to fast together. We encourage parents and kids to consider fasting together. People fasting and praying together has a powerful impact!

5. Have a clear target as your prayer focus. Without a vision (a clear, prophetic prayer goal) the people perish. Write down your vision, so you can run with it (Habakkuk 2:2).

6. Make your commitment and determine the length. You can fast in many different ways. Pray and ask God what he will give you faith for as far as the length of time.

- A Daniel fast, with vegetables and water, is good for those carrying a heavy workload, such as students.

- A fruit or vegetable juice fast allows you to enter into fasting but still gives enough energy to function. Out of consideration for their health and metabolism, we encourage young people to use juice and protein drinks to sustain them. If you have sugar sensitivities or problems, consult your physician before attempting this fast.

- A water-only fast has been done by many people. We would not encourage this without strong medical supervision, particularly for young people.

- A total fast is without water. Do not go beyond three days without water. Discuss your plans with your doctor, church leaders, close friends, and spouse or parents. We do not encourage this type of fast without specific confirmation from the Lord through your parents and church leadership.

7. Prepare physically. Two days before you fast, limit your intake of food to fruit and vegetables. Fruit is a natural cleanser and easy to digest. Stop drinking coffee before the fast. Drink lots of water to help your body detoxify. Prepare yourself for mental discomforts such as impatience, crankiness, and anxiety. Expect physical discomforts. You may experience dizziness, headaches and different kinds of pains. The headaches are not a sign to stop fasting. Your body

is working to cleanse itself of impurities.

8. Take time to pray and read the Word. This may seem obvious, but busyness and distractions can keep you from devotions. Reading books with testimonies of victories gained through fasting will encourage you too. *Shaping History through Prayer and Fasting* by Derek Prince, *God's Chosen Fast* by Author Wallis, *Hunger for God* by John Piper, and *The Rewards of Fasting* by Mike Bickle are just some of the helpful books about fasting that are available.

9. Expect to hear God's voice in the Word, dreams, visions and revelations. Daniel prepared himself to receive revelation through fasting (Daniel 10:1-2). Revelation is a reward of fasting (Matthew 6:18).

10. Prepare for opposition. On the day of your fast you can bet donuts will be at the office or in class. Your roommate (or your mom) will suddenly be inspired to cook your favorite meals. Press through. Many times you may feel more tension build at home. Satan tempted Jesus on the fast, and we must expect the same. Discouragement may come in like a flood, but recognize the source and take your stand on the victory of Christ.

11. If you fail, don't give in to condemnation. The "to fast or not to fast" dilemma can be a major tool of the enemy. Even though you may fail several times, God always extends grace. Just hit the "delete" button and continue on your fast!

12. Feel free to **rest a lot** and continue to exercise with supervision.

13. Breakthroughs often come after a fast, not during it. Do not listen to the lie that nothing is happening. It is our conviction that every fast done in faith will be rewarded.

14. Break the fast slowly over several days with fruit juice or light soups. On a light juice fast or a water fast, your digestive system shuts down. This can be dangerous if you eat too much too soon. Break the fast with several days of diluted, non-acidic juice, then regular juice, followed by fruit and vegetables.

E. AXIOMS OF BIBLICAL FASTING:

Consider the biblical encouragement and spiritual reality of fasting:

-God has hard-wired the universe to function in prayer (Jas. 4:2; 5:17; Mt. 7:7-8)

-God answers the prayer of the humble (Judges 20:14-18; Jas. 4:4)

-God uses fasting to humble you, to get your attention, and through you (genuine sincerity and spirit-filledness) He works and answers prayer for His glory

(Lk. 18:9-14)

- Recall, "*Prayer is not a substitution for the work of God; prayer IS the work of God*" - Henry Blackaby
- How does this quote connect with fasting? What else in your life do you do that is "work," yet yields a great reward?

As you begin to seek the face of God and how you can change your life to become more like the Son (Ro. 8:29), consider God's heart for fasting. What role will fasting play in your life in the future?

- What do you really believe God wants from you in the Discipline of fasting?

READ: 2 Chronicles 7:13-15ff

God says: "If I shut up the heavens so that there is no rain, or if I command the locust to devour the land, or if I send pestilence among My people, and IF My people who are called by My name humble themselves and pray and seek My face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, will forgive their sin and will heal their land. "Now My eyes will be open and My ears attentive to the prayer offered in this place...."

As you meditate on this passage and research the context for when and why God commanded this, do you think He will still heal, forgive, and change lives today?

- What type of attitude is the Church to have IF God will do this on our behalf? What then is the role for prayer, fasting, and seeking God's face anew?
- Will you consider embracing the spiritual practice of fasting?
- Will you begin to pray for our church and those who do not know Christ?
- Will you ask God to break your heart such that through fasting you would feel the angst of the lost, the needy, the broken, the hurting, and those who would be saved?
- What will it take to break your heart to beg God for mercy, change, and redemption for the lost all around you? Will you fast and pray?

REMEMBER: Prayer & fasting is the way we defeat the devil (Luke 22:32; Mk. 9:28-29).

Prayer & fasting is the way we help to save the lost (Luke 18:13).

Prayer & fasting is the way we acquire wisdom (James 1:5).

Prayer & fasting is the way a backslider gets restored (James 5:16-20).

Prayer & fasting is how the saints get strengthened (Jude 1:20, Matt. 26:41).

Prayer & fasting is the way we get laborers out to the mission field (Matthew 9:38).

Prayer & fasting is how we cure the sick (James 5:13-15).

Prayer & fasting is how we accomplish the impossible (Mark 11:23-24).