



Pray Give Fast

Matthew 6:1-18

Text

Matthew 6:16-18

Topic

Jesus pointed out to His disciples that fasting to be seen by men rather than by God gets you nowhere in your walk with God

Title

"Getting Nowhere Fasting"

Introduction

Proper diet for athletes has come a long way since Rocky Balboa got up early in the predawn hours and downed several raw eggs as a protein boost before his morning routine.

Dr. Samantha Stear was the national head for performance nutrition at the English Institute of Sport (EIS) that helped make the Beijing Olympics Britain's most successful games for a century.

Although performance nutrition was only introduced in 2005, it clearly had an impact on British sport.

- At the 2004 Olympic Games Britain won nine gold medals.
- at the 2008 games they won nineteen.

"A good diet isn't going to turn a mediocre athlete into a champion," she said, "but a champion eating a bad diet may just miss out."

See if you follow a comparison I'd like to make. Christians are often described in the New Testament by using athletic metaphors. Perhaps the most common is that of running a race.

We are therefore to consider ourselves spiritual athletes who keep ourselves in peak condition to compete and win the prize.

Like any performance athlete, the Christian must maintain a good diet. We could cite the Word of God as our necessary spiritual food and the Holy Spirit as our living water. Serving the Lord, especially in His church on earth, gives us regular exercise.

On a purely physical level, though we may enjoy all things we are to do so in moderation and with an eye to not offending others.

I would submit that there is one additional dietary practice that is important for the Christian athlete. It is fasting. When added to our intake of the Word of God, our dependence on the Spirit of God, our serving, and our daily discipline of taking all things in moderation, fasting might just be the thing we need to maintain our spiritual athleticism at peak performance and keep us from missing out on something God has planned for us.

Keep this comparison in mind as we discuss fasting from Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount.

Fasting is the last of three important things Jesus assumed we would do as His disciples - the other two being "giving" and "praying." As with the others, we'll see that there is a wrong way and a right way to practice fasting.

I'll organize my thoughts around two points: #1 You Don't Want To Be Rewarded For The 'Wrong' Way Of Fasting, and #2 You Do Want To Be Rewarded For The 'Right' Way Of Fasting.

#1 You Don't Want To Be Rewarded
For The 'Wrong' Way Of Fasting
(v16)

For our purposes, fasting means *abstaining from food for a spiritual purpose*. That was the 'normal' fast in the Old Testament. There were also partial and absolute fasts:

- The restricted diet of Daniel in chapter ten of his book was a partial fast. For "three full weeks" he "ate no pleasant food" and "no meat or wine."
- On rare occasions there was an absolute fast from food and even water. Moses and Elijah fasted that way, and must have needed divine help because their fasts lasted forty days.

You might be surprised to learn that the Old Testament only prescribed one annual day of fasting, the Day of Atonement.

Leviticus 23:27 "Also the tenth day of this seventh month shall be the Day of Atonement. It shall be a holy convocation for you; you shall afflict your souls, and offer an offering made by fire to the Lord.

The word for "afflict" was universally understood to prescribe fasting. In the Book of Acts, Luke refers to the Day of Atonement as "the Fast" (Acts 27:9).

As far as the extent of the fasting the Jewish Scribes would write,

On the Day of Atonement it is forbidden to eat, or to drink, or to bathe, or to anoint oneself, or to wear sandals, or to indulge in conjugal intercourse (cited by William Barclay).

Over the course of Old Testament history the practice of fasting for some spiritual purpose became popular so that we read about its occurrence at various other times throughout the calendar year. Eventually, by the time of Jesus, devout Jews were observing fasts twice a week.

Jesus noted how they were fasting and commented on it.

Matthew 6:16 "Moreover, when you fast, do not be like the hypocrites, with a sad countenance. For they disfigure their faces that they may appear to men to be fasting. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward.

"When you do fast," Jesus said. Just like with giving and praying, the Lord assumed it was a spiritual activity we would practice and therefore need instruction about to get it 'right.'

The "hypocrites" fasted on Monday's and Thursday's. They said it was because those were the days Moses ascended Mount Sinai on the two occasions he met with God there.

What a coincidence, however, that Monday's and Thursday's were also market days and the crowds would be the largest. They chose those days to be seen by more men than they would the rest of the week.

To be seen by men as doing something spiritual is a reward, but it's a paltry one compared to being rewarded by your Lord when you see Him face-to-face in Heaven.

If you are going to fast, do it as unto the Lord, for a spiritual purpose and not to appear to men to be fasting.

#2 You Do Want To Be Rewarded
For The 'Right' Way Of Fasting
(v17-18)

As I've pointed out each week, these three behaviors - giving, praying, and fasting - have fallen on hard times among believers.

- As for giving, in 2007 the Barna Group said that fewer than 5% of adults in America gave a tithe of their income. Another study estimated that 75% of giving to the church was being done by only 25% of its members.
- As for praying, it's not really something we can quantify, but most believers readily agree they pray less than they would like.
- As for fasting, it suffers from extremes which cause most believers to ignore it. A quote from John Wesley puts it into perspective: "Some have

exalted religious fasting beyond all Scripture and reason, and others have utterly disregarded it."

The Lord and His first followers fasted and assumed we would, too. Jesus was once asked by the disciples of John, "Why do we and the Pharisees fast often, but Your disciples do not fast?" He answered, "Can the friends of the bridegroom mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them? But the days will come when the bridegroom will be taken away from them, **and then they will fast**" (Matthew 9:15). Jesus was referring to Himself as the "bridegroom." Now that He has returned to Heaven, "then they will fast."

In our passage Jesus made it clear fasting would continue when He said, "when you fast."

We know from the Gospel accounts that Jesus practiced fasting.

His followers in the first century fasted. The apostle Paul is a good example. He once said of himself, in fact, that he was "in fastings often" (Second Corinthians 11:27).

At the same time I have to point out the fasting is nowhere in the New Testament prescribed as a duty. It's of grace. It's not that I *have to* fast, but rather that I *get to* if I so choose.

The single issue addressed by Jesus in Matthew is the outward demeanor if and when you do choose to fast.

Matthew 6:17 But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face,
Matthew 6:18 so that you do not appear to men to be fasting, but to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly.

In other words, be inconspicuous. Give no indication you are fasting. Jesus' words restored fasting to an activity between you and your Father.

That's a good way of approaching fasting - as an activity you and your heavenly Father participate in together. It's a comparison we can all understand. On earth you see dads doing stuff with their kids, spending

time together on activities they enjoy. Fasting ought to be like that on a spiritual level.

One more general comment. Fasting always seems connected with prayer in the Bible. There are times of prayer without fasting but not times of fasting without prayer.

Regarding prayer and fasting working together W.H. Griffith Thomas remarked, "Prayer may be said to be that by which we *attach* ourselves to God, and fasting that by which we *detach* ourselves from the world."¹

Another important question is this: "Should everyone fast?" At least with regard to food and water, the answer to that **must** be "No." J.C. Ryle had a good perspective on that when he wrote the following:

It seems to be left to everyone's discretion, whether he will fast or not. In this absence of direct command, we may see great wisdom. Many a poor man never has enough to eat, and it would be an insult to tell him to fast; many a sickly person can hardly be kept well with the closest attention to diet, and could not fast without bringing on illness. It is a matter in which every one must be persuaded in his own mind, and not rashly condemn others who do not agree with him.²

Your physical health must be taken into account. Not everyone will be able to fast. If you cannot, for health reasons, you are under no obligation and therefore under no condemnation.

Fasting may have health benefits but that is not its goal. It's not a Christian diet or nutrition plan. If you can fast, it will probably prove beneficial from a health standpoint. But that is not why you do it.

Neither is the primary goal in fasting to defeat the flesh. That has already been done by Jesus on the Cross. I am daily to reckon myself dead to the flesh and alive to God. I am daily to yield myself to the Lord and not to sin. I don't need fasting to accomplish what has already been done for me.

¹ W. H. Griffith Thomas, *Outline Studies in Matthew*, pg. 83.

² J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels*, pg. 55-56.

I do find that fasting always shows me just how strong and how deceitful my flesh is! Have you seen those *Weight Watchers* commercials where they depict your appetite for food as a little monster following you around? Whenever I have fasted, my flesh-monster definitely comes out.

So *when* and *why* might we voluntarily choose to fast?

In the Old Testament most of the fasts fall into three main categories.

First, fasts were carried out by a person or by a group accompanying prayer for God's help in some distress.

- In Second Samuel 1:12, for example, David and his men fasted and wept at the news of the deaths of Saul and Jonathan. Fasting often accompanied the news of someone's death or impending death (Second Samuel 3:35; 12:16-23).
- Israel fasted at Bethel in the war against the Benjamites (Judges 20:26), and at Mizpah in the war against the Philistines (First Samuel 7:6).

Second, fasts were carried out by a person or persons accompanying prayers when some danger was being faced.

- In Ezra 8:21-23, for example, Ezra proclaimed a fast as they readied for the dangerous unguarded return to Jerusalem.
- Esther called for a three day fast when she faced the danger of execution by going in to the king without being invited.

Third, fasts were carried out by a person or persons accompanying prayers for some revelation from the Lord.

- Daniel is a good example of this. In chapter nine of his book he realized that the Babylonian captivity was nearing its end. He fasted and God gave him revelation not just about the end of the captivity but about the End Times.

In the New Testament the fasts fall into two main categories.

First, fasting preceded some new direction in ministry.

- Jesus' forty-day fast followed His baptism and launched His three and one half year ministry leading to the Cross.
- The church at Antioch fasted and prayed over the Holy Spirit's directive to send out Barnabas and Paul on their first missionary journey (Acts 13).

Second, fasting accompanied spiritual decisions.

- On their missionary journeys Paul fasted and prayed when appointing the elders of the churches God established in the various cities.

These are just an observation of main categories. If you look at every reference to fasting in both testaments you'll find some additional reasons for fasting, e.g., sorrow for sin and as a sign of repentance.³ But we would be right in suggesting that fasting be practiced in times of distress, when facing danger, in times of decision, for direction, and when seeking fresh revelation from the Lord.

Remember the comparison we started with. You and I are spiritual athletes. We have a pretty good diet if we are in the Word and being led by the Spirit. If we are serving in the church we are getting regular exercise. We should already be enjoying all things in moderation so as to not offend others.

Fasting ought to be considered as an additional vital part of that spiritual regimen.

If you want some basics, the nuts-and-bolts, about how to fast, we recommend information available to you from *Campus Crusade for Christ*. Google 'how to fast + bill bright' and you will find the pertinent sites.⁴

³ for a listing of the fasts in the Bible visit <http://bible.org/seriespage/appendix-2-fasting-scripture>

⁴ <http://www.ccci.org/training-and-growth/devotional-life/personal-guide-to-fasting/index.htm>

Part of our 'mission readiness' here at Calvary Hanford has been to encourage a voluntary fast on the last day of each month. Some have also been fasting every Wednesday. Others have chosen a different day or days.

I'd urge you to consider fasting. You don't have to do it; *you get to do it!* If you do, you will be in good company with saints who came before you in both Testaments.

Do you have any distresses? Any decisions to make? Need any direction? Are you facing some danger?

Are you wanting new insight into the Word of God and about the character of God?

The answer to all those questions is "Yes!" Fasting may be just the activity you and your Father need in order to keep you running the race without missing a stride.

As Paul once said of our spiritual athleticism,

1 Corinthians 9:24 Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but one receives the prize? **Run in such a way that you may obtain it.**

We should not consider ourselves recreational runners. We're not simply in training for a race; **we're already in it!**

We are to consider ourselves finely tuned spiritual athletes who want to always be in peak condition.

Add fasting to your 'diet' regimen and run to **win**.