

The Sermon on the Mount

DEVOTIONAL STUDIES FROM THE
MEN'S MORNING FELLOWSHIP

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.

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.

Let's begin with a little quiz on the subject of fasting:

1. Who was the first person who fasted in the Bible? Moses was the first recorded faster.
2. What was the longest length of time of a fast? According to Deuteronomy 9:9 & 18 it was eighty days! Moses fasted forty days when he received the tablets of stone; but then, coming down the mountain, he saw the sin of the people, broke the original tablets, then returned to the top of the mountain for an additional forty days.
3. Who were the three people who fasted for 40 days each? Moses (twice), Elijah, and Jesus.

Fasting has come under attack in recent years. Certain Christian scholars and intellects have decided that fasting is no where commanded as a binding obligation.

They make some biblical sense. For example:

Jesus' disciples did not fast as commonly practiced. Some asked why Jesus' disciples did not fast (Mark 2:18). Jesus replied, "While the bridegroom is with them, the attendants of the bridegroom do not fast, do they? So long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast. But the days will come when

the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast in that day" (Mark 2:19-20). Fasting as currently practiced was associated with sorrow for sins. Jesus stated that His coming was associated with joy and not grief, and that mandatory fasting would be inappropriate. He came to liberate us from sin, not to have us grovel in it. If fasting was absolutely mandatory as a spiritual duty, Jesus and his disciples would have been fasting. "When the bridegroom is taken away from them" refers to His violent seizure in His arrest and death (not after when He ascends to heaven). The disciples had joy in Jesus' triumphant ascension (Luke 24:50-53). Jesus seizure in Gethsemane was an unhappy separation. It would prompt fasting from sorrow among the disciples. In times of distress, our appetites may very well leave us and it is then natural to fast in such a time of sorrow. Jesus went on to state His new covenant message would not patch up old Judaism (Mark 2:21f).¹

We might also note that a particular day for fasting was commanded in Scripture only once - on the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16). The fast on the Day of Atonement was connected with a deep mournful spirit in confessing sin. Now in the New Covenant, Jesus Christ has become our atonement offering, so we no longer even need to observe the Leviticus 16 Day of Atonement! In all the rest of the Bible there are no other Scriptures which command fasting at a specific time or on a specific occasion.

Still it seems better and more biblical to see fasting as one of the trifecta. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus said **When you give...** **When you pray...** and He said **When you fast.** He didn't say "If," and it is clear that we are still expected to both give and pray.

On a very practical level, however, it's safe to say that the majority of Christians do not practice fasting of any kind on a regular basis. It is a dormant discipline.

Jesus first looked at the wrong way to fast:

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.

The Pharisees - the ones who blew the trumpet when they gave their gifts and prayed on street corners because they couldn't wait to get to church - fasted every Monday and Thursday. You could always tell

¹ W. Frank Walton, <http://iwhome.com/spiritualquest/articles/hpblfast.htm>

when they were fasting because they walked around with long faces, drawn cheeks, unbrushed teeth, and uncombed hair.

The **reward** for letting people know you are fasting is that people know you are fasting! It's a reminder to not try to appear more spiritual than you are. Don't go around blowing your own horn, drawing attention to yourself, portraying your spiritual discipline. It is hypocritical and can even be harmful to others.

Tucked-away in Jesus' rather comical description is an important point about fasting. It is not a physical punishment of our sinful flesh. It's not denying our flesh because we are so wicked. That's the wrong focus entirely. As we'll say in a moment, the focus is spiritual and, as an aside, you fast from the physical to concentrate on the spiritual.

Matthew 6:17 But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face,

The Jews and all neighboring nations were much in the habit of washing and anointing their bodies. This washing was performed at every meal; and often the head, or other parts of the body, was daily anointed with sweet or olive oil. In a warm climate, exposed to the great heat of the sun, this practice preserved the skin smooth and tender and afforded a most grateful sensation and odor

- being changed to bring change -
In other words, *keep it a secret*. Don't fast on the day that everyone goes to lunch together, then sit there and not order anything but water! Fasting is between you and God and should be your secret.

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.

It always returns to relationship with God. Giving, praying, and fasting are things you do with your Father looking on. He's like the dad teaching you to walk or (later) ride a bike. He works with you, hands-on, to encourage and increase your abilities to go farther. In our case, it is to go farther in our walk with Him. No one else matters. We want His **secret**, or I would say *intimate*, **reward**. It's enough to spend time with Him, draw closer to Him, through giving and praying and fasting. There is no greater reward.

For His part God will show His love **openly**. I think primarily this manifests itself as that intangible ‘there’s something about you’ that indicates to others you have been in God’s presence. It cannot be faked.

What is fasting? Biblically, fasting seems to be abstaining from food, drink, sleep or sex to focus on a specific period of spiritual growth.

In the Scriptures, we see fasting primarily for two reasons.

The first is for direction. Examples in the Old Testament are found in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. In the New Testament, we see the examples not only in the life of Jesus but also in the Book of Acts. When people desired to know God's will or direction, they fasted. For example: We will see a group of men at the Church at Antioch in the Book of Acts fast when they are praying about sending out Paul and Barnabas on their first mission.

A second reason for fasting is for liberation. Jon Courson writes:

When you feel oppressed, bound, or hassled by some sin or problem, fasting is a powerful weapon in your spiritual arsenal. Why? When you say no to your stomach and start praying instead, something dynamic begins to happen. Saying no to your physical appetites helps you say no to the other temptations that hassle you. If you are plagued by temptation, I encourage you to begin to explore the discipline of fasting. When your stomach starts demanding, just say "No," and start praying. You will find a power and a liberty that will help you overcome whatever temptations are seeking to enslave you. There's real power in fasting. If you need direction, if you hunger for liberation, skip lunch, and seek the Lord.

A fast was usually for one day. In addition to the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 23:32) you can see examples of one day fasts in Judges 20:26; 1 Samuel 14:24; 2 Samuel 1:12; and 2 Samuel 3:35. The Jewish day was counted from sunset to sunset, so this meant that the fast would be broken (that is, food could be eaten) after sundown.

Some fasts were longer:

1. The fast of Esther continued three days, both day and night.
2. At the burial of Saul the fast was seven days (1 Samuel 31:1).

3. David also fasted seven days when his child was ill (2 Samuel 12:16-18).
4. The longest fasts we find in the Bible are for forty days and eighty days (assuming Moses did not snack in-between trips to receive the Law!).

The Biblical principle here is that the length of time you fast is determined by your own desires and the occasion or purpose of the fast. The duration can be that which the individual or group feels led to set. There is a great deal of freedom in the Lord here. However, the more common practice of a "normal fast" appears to be one day.

If honest we would probably admit we don't give or pray or fast 'enough,' if at all!

These should accompany our transformed lives. Get alone with the Lord and ask Him how you can get jump-started in these disciplines.



