

FOCUS ON PRAYER

FASTING by Patty McGarvey

God is so good. He has given each of us the incredible privilege of knowing Him intimately and partnering with Him in His work. We all know that the spiritual disciplines of prayer, Bible study, tithing, fellowship, etc. are vital to growing in this relationship with Him, but what about the discipline of fasting? Fasting seems to have been “out of vogue” for the past 150 years or so, and has just recently begun to gain acceptance again among evangelical Christians. But what is it and how do we do it? Is it even biblical, or is it one of the “laws” from which we are now set free in Christ?

The Priority of Fasting

1. Surprisingly, a particular day for fasting was commanded in Scripture only once—on the Day of Atonement (Lev. 16). Nowhere else in Scripture is there a command to fast at a specific time or on a specific occasion.
2. But, fasting is assumed by the New Testament. In the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 6), Jesus’ teaching on fasting is in the context of His teaching on giving and praying: “When you give ...,” “When you pray ...,” “When you fast...” We wouldn’t question the validity of praying and giving, but we often ignore fasting as an optional discipline, something others can do if they want to, but not one that we necessarily need to commit to ourselves. Jesus, however, made the assumption that His people would fast.

The Purpose of Fasting

1. First, fasting is NOT a way to get God to do what we want. The people in Jeremiah’s time thought they could manipulate God, and God’s response was, “Although they fast, I will not listen to their cry... I will not accept them” (Jer. 14:12). In the New Testament, religious men planning to kill the apostle Paul took a vow to fast, but God didn’t hear their prayers and their plan didn’t work (Acts 23).
2. Biblical fasting centers on God, not on what we want to get from God. Anna the prophetess “worshiped day and night, fasting and praying” (Lk. 2:37). The believers in Antioch were “worshiping the Lord and fasting” when God revealed that they were to set apart Barnabas and Saul (Acts 13:2). Biblical fasting always centers on the worship of God.
3. There are many other values of fasting that numerous people have experienced, such as increased effectiveness in intercessory prayer, guidance in decisions, increased concentration, deliverance for those in bondage, spiritual insights, physical well-being, etc. But these must never replace God as the focus of our fasting. John Wesley declared, “Let our intention herein [in fasting] be this, and this alone, to glorify our Father which is in heaven...” (John Wesley, Sermons on Several Occasions, p. 301).

The Principles of Fasting

1. Fasting should be done in a manner of humility and secrecy. Jesus exhorted his followers to fast “so that it will not be obvious to men, but only to your Father...” (Matt. 6:18). A “look-at-how-spiritual-I-am” exercise of fasting is hypocrisy.
2. Fasting and prayer are always mentioned in the Bible together—ALWAYS. You can pray without fasting, but you cannot biblically fast without praying. Merely “not eating” does not constitute biblical fasting. Outwardly you can be performing the regular duties of your day, but inwardly you will be in prayer and adoration.

3. Fasting is an expression of wholeheartedness. It is a physical way of saying that food and the other things of life are not as important to you as seeking after God. The Lord exhorted the people of Israel through the prophet Joel, “Yes even now,” says the Lord, “return to me with all your heart, with fasting ...” (Joel 2:12).

Repentance becomes an outflow of time spent in fasting, as God reveals sin to the heart made tender by the discipline of fasting. David shared this experience when he declared, “I humbled my soul with fasting” (Psalm 69:10).

The Practice of Fasting

1. There are Scriptural examples of three varieties of fasting:
 - A. the normal fast, which includes abstinence from food but not water/juice (Jesus fasted forty days and was hungry);
 - B. the partial fast, where the emphasis is on restriction of diet rather than abstaining completely from eating (Daniel and his friends eating only vegetables and drinking only water);
 - C. the absolute fast in which the person refrains from both food and water (Esther and her household). This type is never to exceed three days except upon direct, divine guidance.
2. There are Scriptural examples of both corporate (group) and individual fasting:
 - A. Samuel called a corporate fast: “Gather all Israel’ ... and they gathered... and fasted” (I Sam. 7:5-6).
 - B. Saul, as an individual, did not eat or drink for three days after he was blinded on the way to Damascus (Acts 9:9).
3. There are Scriptural examples of various lengths of fasts:
 - A. one night (Dan. 6:18);
 - B. one day (I Sam. 7:6);
 - C. three days and nights (Esther 4:16);
 - D. seven days (I Sam. 31:13);
 - E. fourteen days (Acts 27:33-34);
 - F. twenty-one days (Dan. 10:3-13)
 - G. forty days (Moses—Ex. 24:28; 34:28; Elijah—I Kings 19:8; Jesus—Matt. 4:2)

Too overwhelming, you say! With all of these options, how do we know what to do? Richard Foster, in his book, **Celebration of Discipline**, says, “*As with all the Disciplines, a progression should be observed; it is wise to learn to walk well before we try to run*” (p. 49). Here, then, is one simple plan for incorporating fasting into your life of spiritual disciplines:

1. Observe a normal fast for one day a week, or one day a month. You would not eat two meals (e.g., lunch to lunch would mean foregoing a supper and breakfast), but you would drink water/juice.
2. Having achieved several fasts with a degree of spiritual success, you could move on to a thirty-six hour fast (three meals).
3. With that accomplished, you can seek the Lord as to whether He wants you to go on a longer fast. Or maybe He would have you complete a partial fast, where you abstain from certain foods, or those that have some measure of control over you.

Most importantly, seek God daily and pursue Him with your whole heart. Fasting can become one of the disciplines by which He is glorified in your life, and through which your relationship with Him matures and grows.