

God Centered Prayer

Lesson Seven: Prayer and Fasting – A Humbling of the Soul

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Introduction: Should Fasting Accompany Our Prayers Today?

- A. Most often in Scripture, *fasting* means to abstain from food, but not water (on avg. 1-7 days; e.g., **1 Sam. 14:24; 2 Sam. 12:15-22; Dan. 6:18; Acts 27:33**).
- B. Commonly, God's people prayed *and* fasted in biblical times (**Ezra 8:21-23; Neh. 1:4; Ps. 35:13; Dan. 9:3; Lk. 2:37; 5:33; Act. 13:2-3; 14:23; 1 Cor. 7:5**).
- C. Should Christians fast? Is fasting a requirement of God or optional? Is it an outdated Jewish custom or does it have spiritual value for us today?

I. The Practice of Fasting in the Old Testament.

- A. Fasting was required by the Law once a year to observe the Day of Atonement.
 - 1. Sacrifices for atonement were made for all the sins of Israel, despite the periodic sacrifices of the past year (**Lev. 16:29-31; 23:26-32; Num. 29:7**).
 - 2. They were unable to atone for sin by animal sacrifices (**Heb. 10:1-4**).
 - 3. Fasting chastened, humbled, or “**afflicted their souls**” to remind them of their need for God's mercy (**Lev 16:29; Est. 8:21; Ps. 69:10; Isa 58:5**).
- B. God called people to fast to accompany genuine repentance (**Joel 2:12-13**).
 - 1. Fasting to obtain God's forgiveness or deliverance from punishment (**Deut 9:15-18; 1 Sam 7:6; 1 Ki 21:27; Neh 1:3-7; 9:1-3; Dan 9:3-19; Jon 3:5**).
 - 2. Meaningful fasts led to repentance and deeds of charity (**Isa. 58**).
- C. Fasting was practiced other times, even though they were not required by God.
 - 1. To receive help from the Lord to win battles in war or defeat their enemies (**Judges 20:26; 1 Sam. 7:6; 2 Chron. 20:3-17**).
 - 2. When loved ones were sick (**2 Sam 12:16-23; cf. Ps. 35:11-13**).
 - 3. When loved ones died (**1 Sam. 31:13; 1 Chron. 10:12; 2 Sam. 1:12**).
 - 4. Fasts for deliverance from danger (**Est. 4:3, 16; Ezra 8:21-23; Isa. 58**).
 - 5. Days of fasting were established by men to commemorate special days of history, usually days of hardship and tragedy (e.g., **Ester 9:31; Jer. 36:9; Zech. 7:3, 5; cf. 2 Kings 25:8; Jer. 41:2; 52:12-13 / Zech. 8:19**).

II. Does the Lord Expect His Disciples to Fast?

- A. These are “the days” for Christians to fast (**Mat. 9:14-15; cf. Luke 5:33-35**).
 - 1. “The days” Jesus refers to when disciples of Christ would fast is *not* the days between Jesus crucifixion and resurrection, but “the last days” before the return of the “Bridegroom” in Judgment (cf. **Mat. 25:1-13**).
 - 2. Only after Jesus ascended to Heaven (was “taken away” **Mt. 9:15b/Acts 1:9-11**) are Christians found fasting (**Acts 13:3; 14:23; 2 Cor 6:5; 11:27**).
 - 3. Jesus expected or at the very least anticipated that His disciples would fast when He said: “*Then they will fast*” (though no regular fast day given).
 - 4. “*The gospel of the kingdom*” (**Mt. 4:23**) Jesus preached emphasized His expectation for fasting: “*When you fast*” (**Mat. 6:16**), not “*If you fast.*”
- B. A new kind of fasting (**Mat. 9:16-17; cf. Luke 5:36-39; Also Mark 2:18-22**).
 - 1. The old way of fasting would not be suitable for Christians. The “old wineskins” cannot contain the “new wine” or fasting according to Christ.

2. Those accustomed to the old way of fasting (“*having drunk old wine*”) do not immediately desire this new fasting (“*The old is better*” –**Lk 5:39**).
3. The fasting Jesus prescribes is new and better, for it is established by the work Jesus completed as Savior in His new and better covenant (**Heb 8:6**).

III. The Purposes of Fasting Under the New Testament.

- A. Not in order to receive forgiveness of sins (cf. **Heb. 2:17; 7:25**).
 1. While fasting can certainly be a sign of repentance (e.g., **Acts 9:9**), it is not required in order to be forgiven, as under the Law (cf. **Lev. 16:29-34**).
 2. Jesus achieved our forgiveness and cannot be “earned” through fasting.
- B. A longing for the Lord.
 1. The “Bridegroom” has been taken away, therefore Jesus’ disciples fast (**Mat. 9:15**), *longing* for His return (**2 Tim. 4:8; cf. 1 Cor 16:22b**).
 2. Yearning to “*always be with the Lord*” (**1 Th 4:17; Phi 1:23; 2 Co 5:8**)
 3. Christians have fellowship with Christ, but long for a closer union with Christ, to be “*filled with all the fullness of God*” (**Eph. 3:14-19**).
 4. We long for a more perfect walk with God, a more full or complete fellowship in holy living. *Fasting can help aid us in our spiritual growth.*
 5. The fullness of joy in God is “the reward” of fasting (**Mt 6:18; Phi 4:4**).
- C. Fasting and prayer help to remind us who it is that is most important.
 1. We cannot be “*filled with all the fullness of God*” if we are too full of “*other things*” that render us spiritually unfruitful (**Mark 4:19**).
 2. In addition to sin, these “*other things*” include God’s gifts (**1 Tim. 4:3-5; Lk. 14:18-20**) which are too often elevated above God in daily living.
 3. Fasting and prayer is a way to examine our lives, to find out whether Christ is our *one and only* Master and Lord (**1 Cor. 6:12-13; Mat. 6:24**).
 4. Only God can truly satisfy our souls (**Ps. 42:1-2; 63:1; 73:23-26**).
- D. To humble us to see our need to depend on God.
 1. Christians are called to follow the example of Jesus (**1 Pet. 2:21**) and by way of example, Jesus teaches us the importance of fasting (**Mat. 4:1-4**).
 2. Jesus resembled Israel who became hungry in the wilderness (**Deut. 8:2-3**), who was humbled, tested, and taught to trust in God.
 3. Fasting reveals “what is in our hearts” (**Deut 8:2**), what it is that we trust in from day to day, what (or who) we depend on the most.
 4. Like Jesus (**Mat. 4:4**), we must learn to depend on God and not so much on ourselves in living the life of a Christian (**2 Cor. 12:9-10; Phil. 4:13**).
- E. As a *spiritual* weapon to combat temptation (**Mat. 4:1-2; Luke 4:1-2**)
 1. *The Spirit* led Jesus to fast to prepare against temptations of the devil.
 2. Fasting can be a spiritual weapon we use to fight against bodily desires (**1 Cor. 9:24-27**); a tool to develop discipline and self-control (**1 Cor 7:5**).
 3. Fasting is not for boasting in our willpower which is unprofitable (**Col. 2:20-23**), but a time to rely on the Holy Spirit for self-control (**Gal 5:23b**).
- F. To set apart disciples for a special work w/ God’s blessing (**Ac. 13:1-3; 14:23**).
 1. Fasting and prayer expresses our dependency on God for every mission.
 2. It also proclaims our trust in God to protect and care for His laborers.

Conclusion: God’s Way to Help Us to Surrender to Him and Depend on His Power.