

Fasting: The Misunderstood Discipline

Permissions

Afraid of becoming a hollow-eyed fanatic if you fast? You'll be surprised to know that fasting is given as much importance in Scripture as prayer.

by [Donald S. Whitney](#)

Quick. What do people who fast look like? What kinds of people come to your mind? Do they appear a bit strange? Are they John the Baptist types? Legalists? Health nuts?

Does Jesus come to your mind when you think of fasting and "fasters"? Jesus both practiced and taught fasting, you know. And yet, fasting is the most feared and misunderstood of all the spiritual disciplines.

Many believe fasting turns us into something we don't want to become and causes things to happen that we don't want to happen. We fear that fasting will make us hollow-eyed fanatics or odd for God. We're afraid that it will make us suffer dreadfully and give us a generally negative experience. For some Christians, fasting for spiritual purposes is as unthinkable as shaving their heads or walking barefoot across a fire pit.

Fasting is so misunderstood because of the famine of contemporary awareness of it. Even though there's more interest in fasting today than during the last half of the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries, how many people do you know who regularly practice fasting? How many sermons have you heard on the subject? In most Christian circles you will rarely hear fasting mentioned, and few will have read anything about it. And yet it's mentioned in Scripture more times than even something as important as baptism (about seventy-seven times for fasting to seventy-five for baptism).

Christians in a gluttonous, 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. Of course, there are some people who, for medical reasons, cannot fast. But most of us dare not overlook fasting's benefits in the disciplined pursuit of a Christlike life.

Fasting Explained

The Bible defines fasting as a Christian's voluntary abstinence from food for spiritual purposes. It is *Christian*, for fasting by a non-Christian has no eternal value since the discipline's motives and purposes are to be God-centered. Fasting is *voluntary* in the sense that it is not to be coerced. Fasting is more than just the ultimate crash diet for the body, it is abstinence from food for *spiritual* purposes.

Fasting Is Expected

Notice Jesus' words at the beginning of [Mt. 6:16-17](#), "*When you fast...*" By giving us instructions on what to do and what not to do when we fast, Jesus assumes that we *will* fast.

Compare these words with His statements about giving and praying in the same passage, "*So when you give...*" ([Mt. 6:2-3](#)), "*But when you pray...*" ([Mt. 6:5-7](#)). No one doubts that we are to give and to pray.

Plainer still are Jesus' words in [Mt. 9:14-15](#). The Pharisees asked Him, "'How is it that we and the Pharisees fast, but Your disciples do not fast?' Jesus answered, 'How can the guests of the bridegroom mourn while He is with them? The time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them; *then they will fast*'" (emphasis mine). That time is now. Until Jesus, the Bridegroom of the Church returns, He expects us to fast.

Purposes for Fasting

Scripture gives many purposes for fasting. I've condensed them into several major categories. Whenever you fast, you should do so for at least one of these purposes. Notice that not one of the purposes is to earn God's favor. We cannot use fasting as a way to impress God and earn His acceptance. We are made acceptable to God through the work of Christ Jesus, not our work. Fasting has no eternal benefit for us until we have come to God through repentance and faith ([Eph. 2:1-10](#), [Titus 3:5-7](#)).

To Strengthen Prayer

There's something about fasting that sharpens the edge of our intercessions and gives passion to our supplications.

When Ezra was about to lead a group of exiles back to Jerusalem, he proclaimed a fast in order for the people to seek the Lord earnestly for safe passage. They were to face many dangers without military protection during their nine-hundred-mile journey. "So we fasted and petitioned our God about this," says [Ezra 8:23](#), "and he answered our prayer."

The most important aspect of this discipline is its influence on prayer. 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. You'll notice that in one way or another, all the other biblical purposes of fasting relate to prayer.

Nehemiah (in [1:4](#)) "fasted and prayed before the God of heaven." Daniel (in [9:3](#)) devoted himself to plead with God "in prayer and petition, in fasting." In a direct command through the prophet Joel, Israel was told, "'Even now,' declares the LORD 'return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning'" ([Joel 2:12](#)). It wasn't until after "they had fasted and prayed" that the church in Antioch "placed their hands" on Barnabas and Saul of Tarsus and "sent them off" on the first missionary journey ([Acts 13:3](#)).

To Seek God's Guidance

There is biblical precedent for fasting to more clearly discern the will of God. In [Judges 20](#) the other eleven tribes of Israel prepared for war against the tribe of Benjamin. Through prayer they sought the Lord before going into battle. Even though they outnumbered the Benjamites by fifteen to one, they lost the battle and twenty-two thousand men. It wasn't until they prayed and *fasted* that the Lord told them: "Go, for tomorrow I will give them into your hands" (v. [28](#)).

According to [Acts 14:23](#), before Paul and Barnabas would appoint elders in the churches they founded, they first prayed with fasting to receive God's guidance.

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.

To Express Grief

Three of the first four references in the Bible to fasting connect it with an expression of grief. As mentioned in [Jdg. 20:26](#), the Israelites wept and fasted before the Lord not only to seek His guidance, but also to express their grief for the forty thousand brothers they had lost in battle.

When King Saul was killed by the Philistines, the men of Jabesh Gilead "fasted seven days" after his burial ([1 Sam. 31:13](#)). When David and his men heard the news, they took hold of their clothes and tore them. They mourned and wept and fasted till evening for Saul and his son Jonathan, and for the army of the LORD and the house of Israel ([2 Sam. 1:11-12](#)).

We may also fast because of grief over our sins. Although it's not a spiritual self-flagellation, biblical confession does involve at least some degree of grief for the sin committed. And inasmuch as fasting can be an expression of grief, it can serve as a voluntary, heartfelt part of confession. There have been a few occasions when I've grieved so deeply over my sin that words alone seemed powerless to say to God what I wanted. And though it made me no more worthy of forgiveness, fasting communicated the grief and confession my words could not.

Fasting also can be a means of expressing grief for the sins of others, those you know or society in general. When a jealous King Saul was trying unjustly to kill David, Jonathan did not eat for a day, "because he was grieved at his father's shameful treatment of David" ([1 Sam. 20:34](#)).

To Seek Deliverance or Protection

One of the most common fasts in biblical times was a fast to seek salvation from enemies or circumstances.

After being notified that a vast army was coming against him, King Jehoshaphat was afraid and proclaimed a fast for all Judah. People from all over Judah came together to seek help from the Lord ([2 Chron. 20:3-4](#)).

We've already read of the fast called by Ezra when he led a group of exiles back to Jerusalem. There we noticed that they fasted in order to strengthen their praying. But notice from the larger context of [Ezra 8:21-23](#) that they prayed with fasting for God's protection: "I proclaimed a fast, so that we might humble ourselves before our God and ask him for a safe journey for us and our children, with all our possessions."

The best-known cooperative fast in Scripture is the one in [Est. 4:16](#). It was called by Queen Esther as part of her appeal to God for protection from the king's wrath. She planned to enter the court of King Xerxes uninvited to appeal to him for the protection of the Jews from mass extermination.

When our church has a day of fasting to grieve for the sins of our country, we also include prayers asking the Lord to protect and deliver us from enemies that might result from our sins. We realize that He often disciplined Israel for her sins by allowing national enemies to gain advantage over her militarily or economically. Perhaps we don't think as often of the reality of national sin as we should, and how Christians will experience part of any national judgment that comes, even though we did not contribute directly to the national sin.

Fasting, rather than fleshly efforts, should be one of our first defenses against "persecution" from family, schoolmates, neighbors, or coworkers because of our faith. Typically, we're tempted to strike back with anger, verbal abuse, counteraccusations, or even legal action, instead of appealing to God with fasting for protection and deliverance.

To Express Repentance and a Return to God

This is similar to fasting to express grief for sin. But as repentance is a change of mind resulting in a change of action, fasting can also signal a commitment to obedience and a new direction.

The Israelites expressed repentance through fasting in [1 Sam. 7:6](#) when "they drew water and poured it out before the LORD. On that day they fasted and there they confessed, 'We have sinned against the LORD.'"

In [Joel 2:12](#), the Lord specifically commanded His people to signify their repentance and their return to Him by fasting: "'Even now,' declares the LORD, 'return to Me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning.'"

Not only can fasting express repentance, it can be in vain without repentance. As with all spiritual disciplines, fasting can be little more than a "dead work" if we have persistently hardened our hearts to God's call to deal with a specific sin in our lives. We must never try to immerse ourselves in a spiritual discipline as an attempt to drown out God's voice about forsaking a sin. It is a perversion of fasting to try to use it to balance a sinful part of life we want to continue feeding.

To Humble Oneself 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.

One of the most wicked men in Jewish history, King Ahab, eventually humbled himself before God and demonstrated it by fasting: "When Ahab heard these words, he tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and fasted. He lay in sackcloth and went around meekly." As a result, God resolved to delay His judgment ([1 K. 21:27-29](#)).

One of Israel's godliest men humbled himself before the Lord in the same way. King David wrote, "I put on sackcloth and humbled myself with fasting" ([Ps. 35:13](#)).

Remember that fasting itself is not humility before God, but should be an *expression* of humility. There was no humility in the Pharisee of [Lk. 18:12](#), who bragged to God in prayer that he fasted twice a week.

To Express Concern for the Work of God

Just as a parent might fast and pray out of concern for the work of God in a child's life, 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. This was the purpose for Nehemiah's fast when he heard that despite the return of many Jewish exiles to Jerusalem, the city still had no wall to defend it. After his fast, Nehemiah then went to work to do something tangible and public to strengthen this work of God.

To Overcome Temptation and Dedicate Yourself to God

Ask Christians to name a fast by a biblical character and most will probably think of the supernatural fast of Jesus prior to His temptation in [Mt. 4:1-11](#). Verse two of that familiar passage tells us that Jesus fasted "forty days and forty nights." In the spiritual strength of that prolonged fast He was prepared to overcome a direct onslaught of temptation from Satan, the strongest He would face until Gethsemane. It was also during that fast that He privately dedicated Himself to the Father for the public ministry He would begin soon thereafter.

Nowhere in Scripture are we asked to fast for forty days, or for any specific length of time. But that doesn't mean there is nothing from Jesus' unique experience for us to apply to ourselves. One principle is this: Fasting is a way of overcoming temptation and of freshly dedicating ourselves to the Father.

There are times we struggle with temptation, or we *anticipate* grappling with it, when we need extra spiritual strength to overcome it. Perhaps we are traveling (or our spouse is traveling) and temptations for mental and sensual unfaithfulness abound. At the start of school or a new job or ministry there may be new temptations, or it may seem appropriate to dedicate ourselves anew to the Lord. Often we face decisions that place unusual temptations before us. Do we take a new job that will mean much more money but much less time with the family? Do we accept the promotion and transfer that would end a significant ministry in our local church? In times of exceptional temptation, exceptional measures are required. Fasting to overcome temptation and renew our dedication to God is a Christlike response.

To Express Love and Worship to God

By now you may have associated fasting only with dire circumstances. But the Bible also says that fasting may be an act of sheer devotion to God.

In [Luke 2](#) there is an unforgettable woman whose entire eighty-four years are flashed before us in three verses. Her name is Anna. The summary of her life is found in [Lk. 2:37](#): "She never left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying." Although Anna's story is significant primarily in the context of Mary and Joseph presenting the newborn Jesus at the Temple, how she lived from day to day is what concerns us here. Anna was married for only seven years before being widowed. Assuming she married as a young lady, this godly woman devoted at least half a century, night and day, to a worship of God characterized by "fasting and praying."

Fasting can be an expression of finding your greatest pleasure and enjoyment in God. Fasting honors God and is a means of worshiping Him as such. It means that your stomach isn't your god as it is with some (see [Phil. 3:19](#)). Instead it is God's servant, and fasting proves it because you're willing to sublimate its desires to those of the Spirit.

Christians throughout history have fasted in preparation for the Lord's Supper. In addition to the elements of repentance and humility before God in this kind of fast, it is also intended to help the person focus on adoring the One who is represented in the Supper.

Another way of fasting to express love and worship to God is to spend your mealtime in praise and adoration of God. A variation is to delay eating a particular meal until you have had your daily time of Bible intake and prayer. Just remember that your fast is a privilege, not an obligation. It is the acceptance of a divine invitation to experience His grace in a special way. If you can't fast with the faith that you will find more satisfaction and joy at that time than in delaying a meal, then freely eat in faith ([Ro. 14:22-23](#)). But may we yearn for days when God will cause us to crave the spiritual banquet of worship more than any smorgasbord.

Before we fast we must have a God-centered purpose. But even at our best we do not deserve what we desire, nor can we force God's hand. Having said that, however, let's balance that truth with the incontestable promise of Jesus in [Mt. 6:17-18](#) that God will bless a biblical fast by any of His children. And 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. And none of His rewards are worthless.

Ready, Set, Begin!

Will you confess and repent of any fear of fasting? There's something about saying, "I'm not going to eat today," that causes anxiety in many Christians. Most believers would rather give an offering of money than give up food for a day. Do you have a mild case of fasting-phobia? It's silly when you put it in perspective. We willingly miss meals sometimes while shopping, working, or playing. Whenever we believe another activity is more important, we will go without food fearlessly and without complaint. We need to learn there are times when it can be not only more important, but much more rewarding to feast on God than on food ([Mt. 4:4](#)).

Will you fast as the Holy Spirit directs? Are you willing to obey God when He prompts you to fast? Because Jesus expected His followers to fast, I believe that from time to time His Spirit will direct you to fast.

One of the ways the Holy Spirit prompts us is through a need in our lives. If you need stronger prayer about a matter, that's an invitation from the Lord to fast. If you need God's guidance, that's an encouragement to fast. If you need deliverance or protection, that's a time to fast.

How long you fast is up to you and the leadership of the Holy Spirit. Just like all the other spiritual disciplines, fasting is not a legalistic routine. The Bible describes fasts that lasted anywhere from part of a day to forty days.

Remember to get medical counsel where necessary. If you're planning an extended fast, or if you are expecting, nursing, diabetic, or have a physical condition that depends on a regular diet, talk to your doctor before starting your fast. And if you've never fasted before, start with a one-, two-, or at most, three-meal fast. But start somewhere. Don't look for loopholes to avoid it. Look for ways to experience God's grace through fasting. Remember that God thought it was good enough to command every Israelite to fast for one whole day each year on the Day of Atonement, and that would have included people in all conditions and circumstances.

Like all the spiritual disciplines, fasting hoists the sails of the soul in hope of experiencing the gracious wind of God's Spirit. But fasting adds a unique dimension to your spiritual life and helps you grow in Christlikeness in ways that are unavailable through any other means.

Why not set a time of fasting soon that will symbolize your dedication to the Lord and your willingness to discipline yourself to fast in the future.



Don Whitney, pastor of Glenfield Baptist Church in Glen Ellyn, Illinois, wrote about fasting "to confront a prosperous and often self-indulgent society with the biblical discipline of self-denial." This article was adapted from his new book, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life* ([NavPress](#), 1991). He wishes Christians would read more because "learning is a spiritual discipline—It develops thinking because the mind creates its own images and is less passive."

On Your Own: Fasting: Who Me?

1. Before you read this article, how would you have described your attitude toward fasting?

That was something they did a long time ago. It's not for today.

I'd like to find out more about it, but I'm kind of afraid to.

I'd really like to learn about it, but I don't know anyone who practices it.

I want to try it, but I haven't gotten around to it.

I tried it once and that was enough.

Fasting is an important part of my spiritual life.

2. Why do you think fasting is not widely practiced among Christians today?

3. After reading the article, how would you describe your attitude toward fasting?

4. As you read the nine scriptural reasons for fasting, did any of the reasons stand out as a need in your life for which you might fast? How might you fast for this purpose? Record length of fast, type of fast, a time you might do it, etc.

Do you feel that God may be prompting you to fast? Commit the matter to Him in prayer. A new dimension to your life in Christ may be about to begin.

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