

FASTING 101

Joe Keller

Fasting is a lost art in pursuit of the spiritual disciplines and one that seems quite distant from everyday life in modern western culture. However, when we look to Scripture there is an expectation that believers would fast as a part of the Christian life (Matt. 6:16; 9:15). So, before you dismiss this practice as only for Tibetan monks...let's explore a few of the "whys and hows" of fasting so that we might enrich our spiritual development and the lives of those whom we walk alongside.

Fasting Orientates Our Appetites

(Matt. 5:6; Col. 3:1-3; Rom. 12:1-3; 1 Cor. 6:12)

The discipline of fasting awakens our spiritual senses and re-orientates our hearts to the realities of the kingdom of God. The constant reminder of hunger prompts the heart to consider what it truly longs for and desires. It is a practice that both reminds and re-orientates the soul within an environment of everyday distractions to focus on the singular desire to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. Along with the other spiritual disciplines (Bible intake, prayer, Sabbath rest, and the Lord's Table) regular participation in fasting becomes a habit that intentionally re-orientates the soul that can easily become disorientated by the undercurrent of worldly cultural influences.

Fasting Develops Our Appetites

(1 Cor. 9:24-27; Titus 2:11-14; Eph. 6:10-20)

Fasting develops the pallet of our heart to refine our appetite for greater spiritual realities. Self-control is not simply denying or going without, rather it is the intentional commitment to deny the self of a lesser thing to gain something greater. The process of spiritual development is not just the journey of mortification of sin, but the pathway away from ungodly sinful expressions and desires to enjoy delight and pleasure in God. In fact, our entanglements in life are not always from overtly sinful prohibitions, but from idolatrous pursuits of ordinary and good gifts from God. Misuse and comfort-seeking use of food is one of the new respectable sins in our western evangelical society. The discipline of fasting gives us the opportunity to practice the development of our desires to long for greater expressions of our spiritual appetite...even our appetites for reasonable and good things.

Have Realistic Expectations

When you begin fasting, first set realistic expectations about your time. There is a spectrum to fasting. There are times when there are deep spiritual experiences and insights, while other times are more distracted and focused on perseverance. All of these expressions are profitable. Be thoughtful and set reasonable expectations on what you desire out of a season of fasting, and allow for what the Lord would do through your time. The more you incorporate fasting as a regular expression of your spiritual disciplines the more refined and accurate your expectations become. Give yourself

space to explore and develop this expression of your spiritual life before you decide “it doesn’t work”.

Prepare a Plan

David Mathis rightly states that “without a purpose and a plan; it’s not Christian fasting; it’s just going hungry.”^[1] Before you begin, consider the following questions to help guide your season of fasting.

How long and what kind of fast should I do? There are some Christians who should not fast or should limit the scope of their fast according to their medical conditions. Consult with your physician before fasting if there is any concern that your body might respond adversely. Consider beginning with a small fast (one meal to one day), developing a longer period over time. While there are “dry fasts” that include abstaining from both water and food, I would not recommend it. Drinking fluids keeps your body hydrated and healthy throughout your fast. Over time you will find the appropriate expression of fasting that is enriching. I have found that a minimum of a 30-48 hour fast gives me the amount of time to detox my heart and mind in the early hours of the fast to realize the spiritual benefits I am pursuing.

What do I say to my family and friends? Fasting is primarily a private and solitary pursuit. However, the Bible does speak of both individual, small group, and corporate fasting. The guideline of Mathew 6:16-18 is not that if someone finds out that you are fasting that it doesn’t count, but that we are not to flaunt spiritual pursuit to gain attention or favor from others. Consider your family and friends as you design a season of fasting. If you have a family, coordinate your time so that it does not unintentionally disrupt meal planning and organization. If you have standing lunches or meals with your friends, give consideration on how and when you fast as to not give undue distraction or conflict. For the most part, you can design a season of fasting that goes unnoticed by those around you. If you are asked “why are you not eating?” you can reply that you prefer to eat later and/or simply state that you are fasting. The issue is not that others know you are fasting, but why and how you communicate your reasons. In the end, fasting increases your appetite for God; therefore, give consideration to how you communicate to those around you in a manner that accomplishes that end.

How do I organize my day? Take the time that would normally be spent eating to enjoy time of biblical intake, meditation, and prayer. Depending on the length and nature of the fast, proactively identify a particular theme or portion of Scripture to reflect and respond to. Also consider clear and simple reflections that you can reference when the involuntary hunger strikes. Is there a particular matter of prayer you would like to consider? A portion of Scripture that you are meditating upon? A matter of reflection and wisdom issue you are considering? Give consideration and planning to your activities of the day. This is not the season that you should plan activities that require extra exertion or effort. That is not to say you can’t go to work or engage in everyday activities...just don’t underestimate the physical and mental impact of fasting and adjust accordingly.

Also, keep in mind your breath is impacted as well, so help those around you by stocking up on breath mints.

Re-enter well

When your season of fasting ends, don't immediately jump into a large meal and overeat. Your body needs to adjust and it could make you sick. In addition, take some time immediately after your season of fasting to consider your time; journal several observations or insights you gained during the fast. This will help you digest your experience in ways that apply to your everyday life.

Fasting is a peculiar joy in the journey of the Christian life. Consider how to implement these principles into your intentional habits for spiritual health and development. Ask those in your fellowship about their experiences in fasting and look to implement helpful ways to promote this discipline into your life. In the end, you will not only feel your physical appetites being refined, but advanced in a blessed hunger for God Himself.