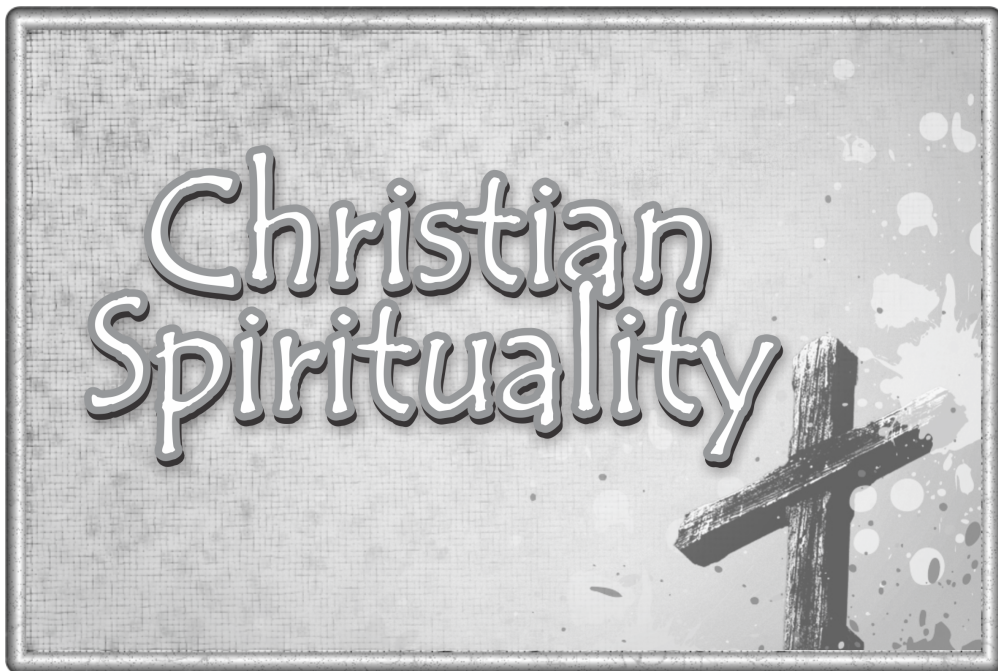


Spiritual Disciplines:

Fasting



How to Experience Intimate Communion with God

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I. The Discipline of Fasting

A. Definition

A broad definition is: The abstinence of something you need (e.g., food) or enjoy (watching television) for a higher spiritual objective or purpose (i.e. to draw closer to God or to seek His guidance).

Biblical fasting differs from ordinary fasting in that it has a higher spiritual objective whereas ordinary fasting is just plain abstinence. Examples of ordinary fasts are diets which are done for the sake of losing weight or hunger strikes to make political statements.

B. Types of Fasts

1. *Normal fast*: No food but free use of water. Jesus went on such a fast during the wilderness because physiologically He could not have stayed without water for 40 days. (Luke 4:1-2)
2. *Partial fast*: Limited selection of foods, free use of water - Daniel 10:3. This is the most practical form of fasting.

The true fasting which should be recommended to all, is abstinence from every stimulating kind of food, and the proper use of wholesome, simple food, which God has provided in abundance.¹

They [the people of God] should set aside days for fasting and prayer. Entire abstinence from food may not be required, but they should eat sparingly of the most simple food.²

3. *Absolute fast*: No food, no water. See Esther 4:16, Acts 9:9. Don't go on this fast unless you know it is God's specific will. Also if you choose this fast, the maximum period suggested is about 3 days because anything beyond that can be hazardous to life. Severely limit your activities, especially where the lives of other people are involved. For example do not drive a truck or control a crane when on this type of fast. In some cases, medical advice is suggested.
4. *Supernatural fast*: We cannot choose this form of fasting, it is something that God does. An example is in Exodus 34:28 (Deuteronomy 9:9) where Moses was called to spend 40 days in God's presence and did not eat or drink during that whole period. God somehow supernaturally nourished his body cells with His presence. See also 1 Kings 19:8.
5. *Lifestyle fast*: There are other things that you may choose to stay away from other than food or drink, e.g., television, magazines, sexual activity, absorbing hobbies and interests, etc. An example of this kind of 'fast' is found in 1 Corinthians 7:5 where it says: "Abstaining from sex is permissible for a period of time if you both agree to it, and if it's for the purposes of prayer and fasting..." (The Message). This fasting is once again for the sake of a higher purpose or objective, i.e. to draw nearer to God.

C. In the Teachings of Jesus

With your learning partner study the following passages of Scripture: Matthew 6:16-18 & 9:14-15. Answer the question, "What can we learn about fasting from the teachings of Jesus? Take notes in the space below.

D. Wrong Reasons to Fast

1. To draw attention to self

Matthew 6:16-18 says: "When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting.... But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to men that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret will reward you."

2. As an act of merit

We do not earn God's favour or mercy by fasting. We are told that: "Fasting was practiced by the Jews as an act of merit."³ The Jews had a false concept of God and their fasting evidenced this. We must remember that God loves us whether we fast or not – we therefore do not have to earn His favour by not eating. An Old Testament example of fasting with this wrong motive is found in Isaiah 58:3 where the Israelites asked God: "Why have we fasted... and you have not seen it?" They wanted God to notice them and to reward them for their 'good' deeds.

3. To force or twist God's Hand to answer our prayers

God is already interested in answering our prayers. We do not have to force Him into a corner by refusing to eat.⁴

E. When did People Fast in the Bible? ⁵

1. During private afflictions - 2 Samuel 12:16-17
2. During the afflictions of others - Psalm 35:13
3. Afflictions of the church – Mark 2:20
4. Approaching danger - Esther 4:16; Joel 1:14-15
5. Times of bereavement - 2 Samuel 1:11-12; 1 Samuel 31:13
6. For protection - Ezra 8:21
7. Consecration of church leaders - Acts 13:2-3; 14:23
8. When guidance needed - 2 Chronicles 20:2-4; Daniel 10; Ezra 8:21

Let brethren unite in fasting and prayer for the wisdom that God has promised to supply liberally ⁶

9. When leaders were concerned for the state of God's people - Ezra 10:6; Nehemiah 1:1-4; Daniel 9:3-20

F. What Fasting is Accompanied by ⁷

1. Prayer – Ezra 8:23; Daniel 9:3
2. Confession of sin – 1 Samuel 7:6; Nehemiah 9:1-2; Daniel 9:3-4; Jonah 3:5-8
3. Mourning - Joel 2:12
4. Humiliation - Psalm 35:13; Deuteronomy 9:18; Ezra 8:21

G. Other Reasons to Fast

1. To clear the mind

Digestion takes a great deal of energy from the system, so when we fast, we free up that extra energy to be used by the mind. Speaking of the early days of the Advent message, we are told: "Often we fasted, that we might be better fitted to understand truth."⁸

2. To cleanse the heart

For certain things, fasting and prayer are recommended and appropriate. In the hand of God they are a means of *cleansing the heart* and promoting a

receptive frame of mind. We obtain answers to our prayers because we humble our souls before God.⁹

3. To promote health

Intemperate eating is often the cause of sickness, and what nature most needs is to be relieved of the undue burden that has been placed upon her. In many cases of sickness, the very best remedy is for the patient to fast for a meal or two, that the overworked organs of digestion may have an opportunity to rest. A fruit diet for a few days has often brought great relief to brain workers. Many times a short period of entire abstinence from food, followed by simple, moderate eating, has led to recovery through nature's own recuperative effort. An abstemious diet for a month or two would convince many sufferers that the path of self-denial is the path to health.¹⁰

There are some who would be benefited more by abstinence from food for a day or two every week than by any amount of treatment or medical advice. To fast one day a week would be of incalculable benefit to them.¹¹

4. When beset by temptation

When Christ was the most fiercely beset by temptation, He ate nothing. He committed Himself to God, and through earnest prayer, and perfect submission to the will of His Father, came off conqueror. Those who profess the truth for these last days, above every other class of professed Christians, should imitate the great Exemplar in prayer.¹²

5. To remind us of the fearful results of appetite indulgence and warn us not to make appetite an idol.

By fasting we are also reminded of the danger of giving free rein to our appetites, remembering what it did to our original parents. This was uppermost in the mind of Christ during His 40 days of fasting in the wilderness:

His [Christ's] anguish [during the long period of fasting and suffering in the wilderness] was not so much from the pangs of hunger as from His sense of the fearful result of the indulgence of appetite and passion upon the race. He knew that appetite would be man's idol and would lead him to forget God and would stand directly in the way of his salvation.¹³

H. A Major Characteristic of Fasting: Obedience

1. See Isaiah 58:6-8; Jeremiah 14:11-12; Zechariah 7

The spirit of true fasting and prayer is the spirit which yields mind, heart, and will to God¹⁴

Fasting and prayer will accomplish nothing while the heart is estranged from God by a wrong course of action¹⁵

I. Extremes

Do not go to extremes. We do not have to fast like Christ for 40 days.

You are not called upon to fast forty days. The Lord bore that fast for you in the wilderness of temptation. There would be no virtue in such a fast; but there is virtue in the blood of Christ ¹⁶

J. An Example of a 24 hour Partial Fast

1. Begin your fast with prayer, opening your heart to God in humility and confession. Lay the issue you are bringing before the Lord and ask Him to solve it in His particular way.
2. Eat a wholesome breakfast of the most simple foods or drink fruit juices.
3. Drink plenty of water during the day.
4. When hunger pangs hit, use it as a reminder to pray. Keep the communication lines to heaven open at all times.
5. Break your fast the next day with a light meal of fresh fruit and a special time of praise and thanksgiving to God.
6. Do not gorge yourself by overeating before a fast in order to be hungry for fewer hours. This behaviour is counter-productive.

K. Commitment

How would you like to include fasting as part of your devotional experience? Consider the different types of fasting. Some suggestions are: I would like to fast every Wednesday for my unsaved family and mention them by name to the Lord that day? I would like to do a fruit fast (i.e. eat only fruit) on Mondays for my children, or a digital fast once a week for....

II. Endnotes

1. White, *Counsels on Diet and Foods*, pg 90.
2. Ibid, pg 188.
3. White, *Desire of Ages*, pg 276
4. Venden, *The Answer is Prayer*, pg 157.
5. Torrey, R. *The New Topical Text Book*
6. White, *Counsels on Diet and Foods*, pg 188.
7. Torrey, R. *The New Topical Text Book*
8. White, *Counsels on Diet and Foods*, pg 187.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid, pg 189.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid, pg 186.
13. White, *Confrontation*, pg 51.
14. White, *Counsels on Diet and Foods*, pg 189.
15. White, *Healthful Living*, pg 236.
16. White, *Counsels on Diet and Foods*, pg 189.

For a complete bibliography of this devotional series, see the last module, viz., **Spiritual Disciplines: Scripture Memorization**