

Fasting (Matt. 6:16-18)

A Small Group Outline



1. **Praise** (*Purpose: To worship God*)
 - What are you thankful for this week? (*let the group's secretary write these down in an A4 hardcover or some notebook*)
 - Song Service
 - Sing a few songs of praise to God
2. **Pray** (*Purpose: To carry each others' burdens and to seek the Lord*)
 - What challenges did you have this week? (*write these down in an A4 hardcover or some notebook*)
 - Go into a season of prayer
3. **Review** (*Purpose: To learn accountability*)
 - Tell us how it went with what you promised to do in last week's meeting? (*e.g. Who did your share your faith with this past week? Who did you minister to? How did actioning your I WILL STATEMENT go?*)
 - *Where people have failed to fulfil what they said they would, do not be harsh with them but gently encourage them to try again in the coming week. Give them more support by phoning or joining them in the week.*
4. **Give** (*Purpose: To be good stewards of our monies*)
 - This is the time to return tithes and offerings. If done electronically, kindly ensure that you get the bank account details of your local church from your treasurer. Don't forget to complete an envelope and to send the breakdown to him/her.
5. **Discover** (*Purpose: To learn to listen to God, and be obedient to His Word*)
 - **Notes for the facilitator**
 - Read *Thoughts from the Mount of Blessings (MB)*, pp. 87-88
 - In the time of Jesus, the Pharisees fasted twice a week – on Mondays and Thursdays. These just so happened to be market days, and some walked through the streets with their hair uncombed and clothes deliberately disarranged. Fasting became an act of spiritual pride instead of an act of humility (*George Knight, Walking with Jesus on the Mount of Blessing*)
 - Vs 16: Jesus said 'when you fast' implying that He expects His disciples to fast
 - Hypocrites: This word is used here again, as in the previous verses. Hypocrites were Greek actors who wore different masks to play different roles. In this context they were pretending to honour God, while actually honouring self (*George Knight*)
 - "The fasting which the word of God enjoins is something more than a form. It does not consist merely in refusing food, in wearing sackcloth, in sprinkling ashes upon the head. He who fasts in real sorrow for sin will never court display [i.e. try hard to get attention]" (MB 87)
 - "The object of the fast which God calls upon us to keep is not to afflict the body for the sin of the soul, but to aid us in perceiving the grievous character of sin, in humbling the heart before God and receiving His pardoning grace. His command to Israel was, 'Rend your heart, and not your garments, and turn unto the Lord your God.' Joel 2:13" (MB 87)
 - Vs 17: "Whatever is done to the glory of God is to be done with cheerfulness, not with sadness and gloom. There is nothing gloomy in the religion of Jesus. If Christians give the impression by a mournful attitude that they have been disappointed in their Lord, they misrepresent His character and put arguments into the mouth of His enemies" (MB 88)
 - Types of Fasts (*Derek Morris, unpublished paper*)

- **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)
- **Partial fast:** Limited selection of foods, free use of water - Daniel 10:3. This is the most practical form of fasting. "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" (*Counsels on Diet and Food, p. 90*)
- **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.
- **Supernatural fast:** We cannot choose this form of fasting, it is something that God does. An example is in Ex. 34:28 (Deut. 9:9)
- **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 Cor 7:5.
- Wrong reasons to fast (*Ibid*)
 - To draw attention to self (Matt. 6:16-18)
 - As an act of merit (see Isa. 58:3)
 - To 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.
- When did people fast in the Bible? (*R. Torrey, The New Topical Text Book*)
 - During private afflictions - 2 Sam. 12:16-17
 - During the afflictions of others – Ps. 35:13
 - Afflictions of the church – Mk. 2:20
 - Approaching danger – Est. 4:16; Joel 1:14-15
 - Times of bereavement - 2 Sam. 1:11-12; 1 Sam. 31:13
 - For protection - Ezra 8:21
 - Consecration of church leaders - Acts 13:2-3; 14:23
 - When guidance needed - 2 Chron. 20:2-4; Dan. 10; Ezra 8:21
 - When leaders were concerned for the state of God's people - Ezra 10:6; Neh. 1:1-4; Dan. 9:3-20
- What Fasting is Accompanied by (*Ibid*)
 - Prayer – Ezra 8:23; Dan. 9:3
 - Confession of sin – 1 Sam. 7:6; Neh. 9:1-2; Dan. 9:3-4; Jonah 3:5-8
 - Mourning - Joel 2:12
 - Humiliation – Ps. 35:13; Deut. 9:18; Ezra 8:21
- Other Reasons to Fast
 - **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 (*Counsels on Diet and Food, p. 187*).
 - **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" (*Ibid, p. 189*).
 - **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” (*Ibid*, p. 186).

- **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 (*see Confrontation*, p. 51)
- A major characteristic of fasting is obedience. See Isa. 58:6-8; Jer. 14:11-12; Zech. 7
- Do not go to extremes. We do not have to fast like Christ for 40 days. There would be no virtue in such fasts.
- An example of a 24 hour partial fast (*Derek Morris, unpublished paper*)
 - 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.
 - Eat a wholesome breakfast of the most simple foods or drink fruit juices.
 - Drink plenty of water during the day.
 - When hunger pangs hit, use it as a reminder to pray. Keep the communication lines to heaven open at all times.
 - Break your fast the next day with a light meal of fresh fruit and a special time of praise and thanksgiving to God.
 - Do not gorge yourself by overeating before a fast in order to be hungry for fewer hours. This behaviour is counter-productive.
- *Read Matt. 6:16-18. Preferably let one person read it. Let everyone then put down their Bibles and get the group to reconstruct the passage in their own words. This teaches the group to be careful in quotation Scripture correctly and to use it as the basis of their discussions.*
- **Discussion Questions** (*use only a few*). *The notes in italics after some of the questions below are for the facilitator, and not to be read out to the group.*
 - What do you think are some good reasons for fasting?
 - What do you believe are some bad reasons for fasting?
 - If Christians are sad or gloomy when fasting, what impression does that give to the onlooking world about their faith?
 - What do you think is the modern equivalent of the phrase ‘anoint your head’ (vs 17)?
 - Why do you think the spiritual discipline of fasting is seldom practised?
 - Why is it tempting for people to show that they are fasting, or discuss the length of their fasts?
 - What is the advantage of not broadcasting our fasts? [*Note: not all fasting can be kept secret, especially if one is fasting as a corporate church body, or as spiritual partners*]
- **Application Questions** (*select a few depending on your time. One has to be the I WILL STATEMENT*)
 - Share what fasting means to you in your Christian journey?
 - Relate an experience when fasting brought blessing (comfort / guidance / perspective / strength) to you?
 - For what need in your own life, or in the life of a loved one would you be willing to skip a meal, or deny yourself of something in order to devote yourself to prayer?
 - I WILL STATEMENT: Formulate an I will statement in response to what you have discovered in the Word. Let the group’s secretary also record these in an A4 notebook. Ensure that everyone gets a chance to give their I WILL STATEMENT. You have to be specific. E.g. “I will practise a lifestyle fast and stay away from all social media for the next 2 weeks, and use that time to intercede for others.”

6. Share (*Purpose: To be witnesses of our faith*)

- Do you have anyone you could share today’s lesson with this week? *Be specific.*

7. Closing prayer