

Don't Fast out, Fast In

Matthew 6:16-18

In Mat 6:1, Jesus introduces a series of faith-prompted practices with a warning.

“Beware of practicing your righteousness before men to be noticed by them; otherwise you have no reward with your Father who is in heaven.”

Jesus is not as such interested in the act itself, but rather points out that the manner by which each act of righteousness is carried out reveals the motive of the actor's heart.

Fasting, like praying and giving, is a legitimate spiritual discipline. But the way it is performed reveals a lot about what is taking place into a person's heart.

If they are being done to impress others, to be noticed, they are empty.

So Jesus uses 'fasting' as a third avenue through which we can learn to forsake pretending, forsaking playing Christianity, and truly worship God from the heart. to teach further about forsaking 'hypocrisy' and 'making a show of religion'.

The Practice of Fasting (v.16a / 17a)

“Whenever you fast...”

As you fast, when you do your regular practice of fasting.

Fasting = νηστεύω/nesteuo To abstain from eating. It is a voluntary abstinence from food as a religious exercise.

- In the Bible

There is only 1 commanded in Scripture to Fast...on the Day of Atonement.

Lev. 23:27 **“you shall afflict your souls, and offer an offering made by fire to the Lord.”** [Afflict your souls is synonymous to fasting here]

By the NT time the Jews had turned this into twice a week (tax collector & the Pharisee)

Muslims do for a whole month, Ramadan, sun up to sundown.

But there are many instances and examples of people fasting for different reasons:

1. War, or threat of it - Philistine war at Mizpah. 1 Sam.7
2. Sickness - David's son.
3. Mourning - Men of Jabesh-Gilead for 7 days over Saul's death.
4. Safety in Travel - Ezra 8:21-23, when Israel was out of captivity.
5. Repentance - Ezra & the people from the captivity. Neh.9:1-3
6. Impending danger - Esther & Mordecai before she went to the king.
7. Calamities - Burning of the Temple, Jer.52:12,13

8. Continuous Devotion - Anna did Lk.2:36,37 There was also a prophetess, Anna...she never left the temple but worshipped night and day, fasting and praying.

9. Preparation for an important spiritual mission - Jesus fasted for forty days and forty nights before starting his earthly ministry. Also, Moses fasted before receiving the 10 commandments. The church in Antioch fasted before sending Paul & Barnabas on their mission trip in Acts 13.

Since the Day of Atonement has been fulfilled in Jesus...should we still fast? Yes

Lk.5:33-35 ***“One day some people said to Jesus, John the Baptist’s disciples fast and pray regularly, and so do the disciples of the Pharisees. Why are your disciples always eating and drinking? Jesus responded, Do wedding guests fast while celebrating with the groom? Of course not. But someday the groom will be taken away from them, and then they will fast.”***

Fasting has been given to us for this period of time between Jesus’ first coming and our reunion with Him, to be an expression of the desire, the longing of the bride to be reunited with the bridegroom.

And we can see examples of that in the NT:

Married Couples can fast from sexual intimacy, yet only for a short time, & is to be accompanied w/prayer & fasting. 1Cor.7:5

Spiritual Attacks Mrk.9:29 This kind can come out by nothing but prayer & fasting

The bible describes 3 main forms of fasting:

1. The Normal fast, abstinence from food.
2. The Absolute fast, abstinence from both food and water.
3. The Partial fast, a restriction of diet rather than complete abstinence

- In current Christian practice

Jesus does not command us to fast, but He assumes that this ought to be a regular practice in the life of Christians (“whenever you fast...”). It is really concerning that many Christians today have rejected fasting because of others abusing this practice, or because they don’t want to be too legalistic, or because of lack of time, or for whatever reason.

How often we practice it is not prescribed, because that too is between the believer & God. When we desire to seek God’s face more than we want dinner, that will be the proper time to fast. Fasting is you declaring that you need more of God than anything else. Fasting is always associated with prayer and communion with God.

- ➔ Thus, Fasting has been given to us to help us have our minds set on things above (Col 3), longingly expecting the return of Christ.

The Posture of Fasting (v.16b/ 17b)

“Whenever you fast, do not put on a gloomy face as the hypocrites do. for they neglect their appearance so that they will be noticed by men when they are fasting.

The Pharisees, who were the conservative religious leaders in Jesus’ day, fasted twice a week. And apparently when they fasted, they:

- First tried to look as sad as they could → gloomy. Which basically mean that they put on a face to display how humble they are. They proudly put forth their humility.
- Second, the word for “neglect” here in the NASB can also mean that they discolored their face with make-up or ashes. This may be a way for them to further the Old Testament practice of sack cloth and ashes, but in all cases, it was visible for everybody to see! In short, they made sure everybody knew they were fasting.

So Jesus says “Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full.”

They were after human praise for their external religiosity, they got it.

But Jesus’ overall assessment of them was that they were hypocrites. See in Mat 23:25-28

“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside they are full of robbery and self-indulgence.

26 “You blind Pharisee, first clean the inside of the cup and of the dish, so that the outside of it may become clean also.

27 “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which on the outside appear beautiful, but inside they are full of dead men’s bones and all uncleanness.

28 “So you, too, outwardly appear righteous to men, but inwardly you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.

We can learn a lot from what is said in Isaiah 58:1-12. After addressing the leaders in Isa 57, now God turns to the people, with his own commentaries on their religious practice of fasting.

V2: They do what is right, they delight in what they know about God, and they like to pray.

V3-5 shows that in addition to prayer, they made fasting one of their regular practices.

Yet, they are getting it all wrong. While fasting:

V3b: they indulge in their own selfish desires in other areas and treat others harshly.

V4: they were even fighting with other people, to the point of fist fights.

They were fasting, but as hypocrites. Wanting to look great on the outside, forgetting that God sees the inside too. They were fasting to be noticed, not to be humbled before God.

That kind of fasting was not acceptable to God.

- ➔ Fasting has been given by God as a tool to expose our hypocrisy and any wrong motives we might have for religious practices.

The Purpose of Fasting (v.17-18a)

“But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face so that your fasting will not be noticed by men, but by your Father who is in secret;”

Our appearance during fasting is an expression of how we feel about fasting. How do we feel about spending dedicated time of prayer and communion with the Lord? Hopefully not gloomy! At the contrary, the anointing of the head and the washing of the face shows someone who has joy, who is ready, who is made strong by the Lord, who knows He is in a blessed place as He communes with his God.

In Isaiah 58 from v.5 to 7, God is going to give 3 rightful purposes or outcomes of fasting:

- 1- Growth in Humility (v.5)
- 2- Intercession for liberation from sin and its resulting wickedness (v.6)
- 3- Increase altruism, thinking about the needs of others (v.7). People need food, hospitality, clothing, vulnerability, love.

➔ Fasting is thus a tool to help us grow in humility, making less of ourselves and more of God and others in our lives.

“when you fast, fast from vainglory, ambition, pride, & self-glorification” Brian Bell

The Power of Fasting (v.18b)

“so that your fasting will not be noticed by men, but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you.”

Note first that fasting is done to be noticed by God. Not by men, but by God. God takes notice and takes pleasure in faithful acts of submission to Him. God delights in us seeking to spend time to discover more of Him.

But also, God promises a reward to those who fast in secret and in truth.

Back to Isa 58:8-12, we can see there a few of these rewards:

- v.8a & 10: effective testimony
 - v.8b: Divine protection
 - v.9: Answered prayers
 - v.11: God’s provision, strengthening and care
 - v.12: Restoration of what has been broken
- ➔ Fasting also:
- Enlightens awareness of God’s continual presence
 - Increases discipline in our daily walk before God
 - Enables Access to Future blessings. The text clearly says that there are future blessings for those

In this passage Jesus deals with both the practice of fasting and the motive for doing it.

I would encourage you to include that discipline in your life

Richard Foster said: “It is sobering to realize that the very first statement Jesus made about fasting dealt with the question of motive. To use good things to our own ends is always the sign of false religion...Fasting must forever center on God. It must be God-initiated and God-ordained...

Fasting reminds us that we are sustained by ‘every word that proceeds from the mouth of God’ (Matt. 4:4)...Therefore, in experiences of fasting we are not so much abstaining from food as we are feasting on the word of God. Fasting is feasting!”