

WHEN YOU FAST – MATTHEW 6:16-18

INTRODUCTION

1. We want to continue our study about training ourselves for godliness through various spiritual disciplines we see Jesus, the apostles, and the early church engaging in **(1 Tim. 4:6-8)**.
2. Today we want to consider one that perhaps we don't think about often.
3. We want to consider the practice of fasting in the life of the faithful **(Matt. 6:16-18; Acts 13:1-3; 14:23)**.

DISCUSSION

I. FASTING IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

- A. Fasting in the Bible usually involves abstaining from food for a certain time and sometimes from both food and drink.
- B. It was certainly present among the people of God.
- C. There was only one fast commanded by God under the Old Covenant and it was on the Day of Atonement **(Lev. 16:29-31; 23:27-32; Num. 29:7; Ps. 69:10; Acts 27:9)**.
 - i. This was the day when Israel confessed their sins.
 - ii. Fasting seems to be an expression of their mourning, repentance, and humility, and perhaps even empathy with God's pain over their sin.
- D. But as one reads the Old Testament, we see God's people voluntarily fasting in a variety of situations and contexts.
- E. When someone was sick, we see people fasting **(2 Sam. 12:15-23; Ps. 35:11-13)**.
- F. When someone died or in times of grief there was fasting **(1 Sam. 31:13; 2 Sam. 1:12; Esth. 4:3; 9:31; 1 Chr. 10:12)**.
- G. And in expressing repentance and seeking forgiveness people fasted **(Jonah 3:4-10; Dan. 9:3-5; Neh. 9:1-3)**.
- H. Also, there are times when people fast because they are in danger or in need of God's guidance **(Judg. 20:26-27; 1 Sam. 7:6; 2 Chron. 20:3)**.
- I. It is no surprise when we see this that fasting often accompanies prayer **(2 Sam. 12:16, 21-23; Isa. 58:4; Jer. 14:12; Esth. 4:16; Ezra 8:21, 23; Neh. 1:4)**.
- J. In the Old Testament fasting appears to be a practice of self-denial that involves humbling oneself before God in times of great grief or need.
- K. It is "the natural, inevitable response of a person to a grievous sacred moment in life" seeking communion, guidance, and comfort from God.¹
- L. But like every good thing that God has given His people, fasting can be misused and so there are warnings about that **(Isa. 58:1-4; Zech. 7:5-6)**.
- M. Outside of the day of Atonement, fasting wasn't commanded or regulated so we see different ways of doing it.
 - i. There are partial and absolute fasts **(Dan. 10:2-3; Est. 4:16)**.
 - ii. There are fasts for one, three, seven, and even forty days **(Judg. 20:26; Est. 4:16; 2 Sam. 12:16-18; Exo. 34:28)**.
- N. From this brief survey we can see that fasting was an important part of the life and practice of God's people in the Old Testament.

II. FASTING IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

¹ McKnight, Scot. Fasting: The Ancient Practices . Thomas Nelson. Kindle Edition.
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- A. As we turn our attention to the New Testament, we will see that fasting continues to be a part of the life of God's people.
- B. We see people like the prophetess Anna who fast regularly (**Luke 2:36-37**).
- C. Even Jesus fasted for forty days when He endured temptation in the wilderness (**Matt. 4:1-2; Luke 4:1-2**).
- D. He also taught about fasting in the Sermon on the Mount (**Matt. 6:16-18**).
- E. Jesus' teaching and practice concerning fasting brought Him into controversy with many in His day (**Mark 2:18-20; Luke 5:33-35; 18:12**).
- F. And after the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus fasting does continue to have a place in the lives of believers.
- G. Cornelius and Saul fasted (**Acts 9:9; 10:30 (KJV, NKJV)**).
- H. In the life of the early church, we find Christians fasting (**Acts 13:1-3; 14:23**).
- I. The apostle Paul fasted, and he spoke about how others might also choose to fast (**1 Cor. 7:5 (KJV, NKJV); 2 Cor. 6:4-5; 11:27**).
- J. And as was the case in the Old Testament, both Jesus and Paul warn about misusing fasting (**Matt. 6:16-18; Col. 2:20-23**).
- K. When we look at the New Testament it appears that fasting was expected to play some part in the life of the disciples of Jesus.

III. FASTING TODAY

- A. So, what are we to do?
- B. There is no command for all Christians to fast on any set day nor are there any regulations about the type (partial, absolute) or the duration (one, three, seven days, etc.).
- C. But if we are serious about the teachings and example of Jesus then we should recognize that there are times when we should fast (**Matt. 6:16-18; Acts 13:1-3; 14:23**).
- D. We see God's faithful fast in times of danger, illness, doubt and when they have sinned.
- E. We see fasting when dealing with temptation but also in times of worship and in times of seeking God's guidance in making important decisions.
- F. We see that in our individual lives and in our congregational lives there are times where fasting is appropriate.
- G. But as we contemplate fasting, we should always remember its proper purpose and practice.
- H. We should not fast to be seen of men or in such a way that it is an empty ritual divorced from true faithfulness to God (**Matt. 6:16-18; 9:14-17; Isa. 58:1-9**).
- I. Nor should we fast to try and manipulate God into getting what we want.
- J. "Fasting is a response to a sacred moment, not an instrument designed to get desired results."²
- K. It is about humbling ourselves before the mighty hand of God in time of need.

CONCLUSION

1. Fasting is probably not a traditional practice for most of us.
2. But if we will avoid abuses and extremes and allow God's word to guide us, fasting can be a valuable practice to help us in our walk with Jesus and our relationship with God (**Matt. 6:16-18; Acts 13:1-2**).
3. May God help us to prayerfully consider how the discipline of fasting can help us as we train in godliness (**2 Tim. 4:6-8**).

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