

FASTING AND THE FOLLOWERS OF JESUS

Matthew 6:16-18 - "And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. [17] But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, [18] that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you."

- 1) **FASTING, WHILE IMPORTANT, DOESN'T WORK LIKE MAGIC** - Fasting is particularly easy to corrupt with *superstition*. The balance of the teaching of Scripture is that fasting becomes corrupted and useless when it's used to *automatically* open the doors to Father God. The spiritual dynamic of fasting is connected to the heart - the *motives* - of the one fasting. Doing without food isn't magic. It's only link to spiritual power is the denial of ordinary appetites for the sake of a deeper feasting on God. Lesser hungers make room for deeper.

Fasting never works when treated as a stand-alone superstitious practice. This is perhaps most clearly stated in **Isaiah 58:2-8** - "Yet they seek me daily and delight to know my ways, as if they were a nation that did righteousness and did not forsake the judgment of their God; they ask of me righteous judgments; they delight to draw near to God. [3] 'Why have we fasted, and you see it not? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you take no knowledge of it?' Behold, in the day of your fast you seek your own pleasure, and oppress all your workers. [4] Behold, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to hit with a wicked fist. ***Fasting like yours this day will not make your voice to be heard on high.*** [5] Is such the fast that I choose, a day for a person to humble himself? Is it to bow down his head like a reed, and to spread sackcloth and ashes under him? Will you call this a fast, and a day acceptable to the Lord? [6] ***"Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? [7] Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh?"*** [8] Then shall your light break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up speedily; your righteousness shall go before you; the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard."

Look again at **verses 6-7** - "Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? [7] Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh?"

The question can be asked, "In what sense are these actions *fasting*?" They release the one fasting to pursue obeying and concentrating energies on God alone and pleasing God in a deeper way because at least some of the normal concerns of self have been temporarily set aside.

People who separate their fasting from a life of consecration and obedience to the Lord will always find it an empty, disappointing enterprise. It can, if done carelessly, increase *judgment* rather than bring *blessing*.

See **Luke 18:12-14** - "I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.' [13] But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' [14] I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted."

Two men are at prayer. One fasted 104 times a year. The other, never. And the other met God and was justified. The lesson? You can work hard at fasting ***as an end in itself*** without devoting your being to God.

We are warned about fasting as a *legalistic* exercise to earn favor with God:

1 Timothy 4:1-3 - "Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons, [2] through the insincerity of liars whose consciences are seared, [3] who forbid marriage and require abstinence from foods that God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth."

Colossians 2:20-21 - "If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the world, why, as if you were still alive in the world, do you submit to regulations— [21] "Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch"

The value of fasting lies elsewhere. Fasting *can*, if done out of devotion to Christ, help bring the appetites of our bodies under control. When our material desires master our will they become our gods:

Philippians 3:19 - "Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, ***with minds set on earthly things.***"

Our minds get set - fixed - on earthly things just through our repeated established habits of life in a material world. Fasting *denies* these normal routine desires momentarily and helps remind us of their *secondary* place.

Our lack of hunger for God isn't from any lack of glory in Him, but in the dulling of our appetites with other things (see **Mark 4:18-19** - "And others are the ones sown among thorns. They are those who hear the word, [19] but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches and the desires for other things enter in and choke the word, and it proves unfruitful.").

- 2) **FASTING IS CORRUPTED WHEN IT'S USED FOR RELIGIOUS SHOW** - It is this particular danger Jesus singles out in the Sermon on the Mount. Like alms giving and prayer, fasting, ***because it looks like such a spiritual activity***, is particularly useful to gain

the outward appearance of Godliness. This is a temptation that must be avoided at all cost. In fact, Jesus specifically says that the person fasting should do everything possible to **hide the fact** that he or she was on a fast. Do whatever you have to do to keep the appearances of your normal routine and bearing in tact.

- 3) **THE DANGER OF A LEGALISTIC APPROACH TO THE SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINE OF FASTING** - Take a look at the teaching of Jesus in **Matthew 9:14-17** - "Then the disciples of John came to him, saying, "Why do we and the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?" [15] And Jesus said to them, "Can the wedding guests mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them? The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast. [16] No one puts a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old garment, for the patch tears away from the garment, and a worse tear is made. [17] Neither is new wine put into old wineskins. If it is, the skins burst and the wine is spilled and the skins are destroyed. But new wine is put into fresh wineskins, and so both are preserved."

It's interesting to note that what bothered the Pharisees was not so much that Jesus' disciples weren't fasting, but that Jesus' disciples weren't fasting **while they were**. Reflected in their words is an attitude we all have to confront in our walk with Jesus. There is such a strong tendency to feel that because we are led into some spiritual grace, and perhaps have even found great help in it, **that we are to mandate what we have found helpful as a compulsory activity for the rest of the church as well**. If the Pharisees and John the baptist's disciples were fasting, then Jesus' disciples should as well.

Notice also the way fasting is changed by the coming of Christ's kingdom. The motive isn't **law**, but **savoring Christ**. This is the new wineskin of the Spirit. The heart is desirous to **feed on Christ**. Fasting isn't the **goal**, but the **means** to the greater glory of a pure heart. Under the law one could fast out of sheer duty. In Christ's new kingdom fasting is of value only as an expression of my love for a greater good - Christ and His presence in deeper measure in my heart.

- 4) **KNOWING THE TIMES AND THE SEASONS** - Again, when fasting is practiced **carelessly** it loses its effectiveness. Jesus' disciples weren't fasting because they were rejoicing in the actual presence of their Lord. It was a time for celebrating, not fasting. So in our own Christian walk we are to be sensitive to the leading of the Holy Spirit in regard to the practice of fasting. Everyone should feel the call to fasting at some point. But you and I may not fast at the same time. Each must be sensitive to the needs of the other.

- 5) **OUTWARD DISCIPLINES ARE POWERLESS TO CHANGE THE SOUL UNLESS THE HEART IS TOUCHED BY THE SPIRIT OF GOD** - See **Colossians 2:16-23** - "Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. [17] These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ. [18] Let no one disqualify you, insisting on asceticism and worship of angels, going on in detail about visions, puffed up without reason by his sensuous mind, [19] and not holding fast to the Head, from whom the whole body, nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments, grows with a growth that is from God. [20] If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the world, why, as if you were still alive in the world, do you submit to regulations— [21] "Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch" [22] (referring to things that all perish as they are used)—according to human precepts and teachings? [23] These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh."

This does not mean that all religious observances are useless. Paul is not teaching that Christians can be careless and undisciplined in their dealing with the flesh. Paul is dealing with the kind of religious observance we looked at in **point one**. All of the religious rituals in the world (both **good ones** and **bad ones**) will be ineffective without a corresponding attentiveness to the will and Spirit of God, and personal attachment to Christ Jesus.

- 6) **EXAMPLES OF FASTING IN THE EARLY CHURCH** - **Acts 13:1-3** - "Now there were in the church at Antioch prophets and teachers, Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen a member of the court of Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. [2] While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." [3] Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off."

Also, **Acts 14:23** - "And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed."

In both of these situations fasting seems to be used by the body and by individuals when **important decisions were being made**. Leadership was being installed in the churches. Missionaries were being sent out. The Body of Christ needed a clear vision from the Lord and fasting seemed pertinent because it **strips life of distractions**. It **focuses on spiritual issues**. It trains normal human desires into second place. It's very hard to take God seriously - or to seek God seriously - when **every whim and hankering of the body is immediately gratified**.

Notice that Jesus **assumes that His disciples will fast**. In the Sermon on the Mount He says, "**WHEN you fast...**" (6:16). But it's to be a **private, Spirit-led discipline in my life**. True, there are times when the church will fast **corporately**, but even then its focus is **off** self and **on** the blessing and direction of God on His Kingdom's growth and fruitfulness.

Whether private or corporate, when it's properly exercised, the promise is God sees and rewards appropriately - **Matthew 6:18** - ".....that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you."