

Prayer and Fasting

Years ago when I was trying to figure out whether or not God was calling me into the pastoral ministry, I sought the advice of a friend. George was a wise and humble man, a friend who was also a janitor at the college library where I worked, and he was also a pastor. When I told him that I was trying to discern where God was leading, he said, “You know, when Jesus had an important decision to make, he fasted and prayed. Have you tried that?”

I had never fasted before in my life. So, I decided to try it for a day. I drank only water and spent most of the day in my room reading the Bible and praying. Nothing seemed to happen at first, and I was starting to get discouraged. But I was amazed when late that afternoon I was led to a passage of Scripture which addressed everything that was on my mind and made my decision clear. I felt that God was speaking to me through His Word, and if I hadn’t been fasting I would have missed it.

Fasting is a vital part of prayer that is often overlooked. But you see it throughout the Old and New Testaments; it’s so important that we need to spend some time on it. My friend George was right. Jesus *did* fast and pray. And when He taught about fasting in the Sermon on the Mount, He started with these words: “*When you fast*” (Matthew 6:16, italics added). Notice that Jesus didn’t say, “*If you fast.*” His expectation was that we would. Fasting is a way to pray that can enrich our relationship with God and help draw us closer to Him. It can also help us pray with power and a deeper awareness of God’s will. But because there are some common misunderstandings about fasting, it will help to begin by mentioning what fasting *is not*. Fasting is not something we do to twist God’s arm—as if that were possible—or to gain His approval. We already have been welcomed as His own children through Jesus. Neither is fasting just for a select group of Christians who are “super spiritual.” God has a lot to say in His Word about fasting with the wrong motives; and if we’re doing it with a mentality that says, “Look at me—how special and disciplined I am,” we’re missing the point of it altogether.

So, what *is* fasting exactly? *Fasting is going without food or something else we enjoy in order to focus our hearts and minds on God and His purposes.* Fasting, as practiced in the Bible, is a way

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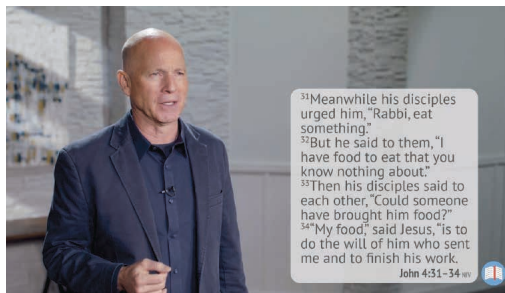
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of humbling ourselves before God and telling Him, "You matter more than anything else (even food), and I want Your wisdom and Your way above all." For the remainder of this lesson, we'll look at some key examples of fasting in the Bible, consider some of the benefits of fasting, and then dive into some practical "do's and don'ts" to help us when we fast. This is a challenging topic. But think of it this way: Don't place the emphasis upon what we're giving up when we fast. Instead, think about what we're gaining. God has given us fasting to help us walk closely with Him and delight in Him. Nothing matters more than that. Jesus points us there in the fourth chapter of John after a long journey on foot when He was no doubt hungry and tired:

"His disciples urged Him, 'Rabbi, eat something.' But he said to them, 'I have food to eat that you know nothing about.' Then his disciples said to each other, 'Could someone have brought him food?' 'My food,' said Jesus, 'is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work'" (John 4:31-34).

That was more sustaining to Jesus than even having something to eat. Fasting isn't easy, but it can be a way of going deeper in our relationship with our heavenly Father and realigning our spiritual priorities.

You see God's people fasting again and again in Scripture. Here are just a few examples: Moses fasted when he received the Ten Commandments from God (Deuteronomy 9). David fasted when he repented of the sin of adultery and sought healing for his child (2 Samuel 12:16-17). When Judah was invaded by a vast army and King Jehoshaphat wanted to ask for God's wisdom, he proclaimed a fast for the entire nation (2 Chronicles 20:3). Esther also fasted, seeking God's protection for God's people (Esther 4:15-17). Daniel fasted in order to plead for God's mercy for his people (Daniel 9:3). Ezra had the Jewish exiles fast and pray for safe travels on a dangerous road (Ezra 8:21-23). Jesus fasted when He was led by the Spirit out into the wilderness at the beginning of His public ministry (Matthew 4:1-2). Paul fasted after his conversion when Jesus appeared to him on the Damascus road (Acts 9:1-9). And the leaders of the early church fasted and prayed to discern God's leading before the very first mission effort of the church when Barnabas and Paul were sent (Acts 13:2-3). Remember, these are just a few examples, and there are many more. And they help us understand that this has always been a practice for God's people.

Now let's turn briefly to the benefits of fasting. I'd like to suggest

four different blessings that God often gives us when we fast:

First, God blesses us with greater power in prayer. As mentioned previously, fasting isn't something we do to get our way with God. It's more something we do to go His way. But it's clear from the number of times that you see it in Scripture that fasting and prayer are often meant to go together. It's often after a time of fasting and praying that you see God move in power—like when Jehoshaphat and Esther fasted and God protected a nation, as if He were waiting for His people to set their own strength aside and rely on Him.

The second blessing of fasting is that God uses it to help us to think more clearly and discern His wisdom. You see this in the lives of Daniel and also in the leaders of the early church. You might think that you would have difficulty concentrating when you're fasting because you're hungry, but you will find that God will use even going without a single meal to give you greater mental clarity. I've discovered that I often think better when I fast. It helps me set other things aside and focus on God.

A third blessing of fasting is increased strength in fighting temptation. When Jesus fasted in the wilderness, the devil tried to tempt Him again and again, but Jesus resisted him every single time. The fourth chapter of the gospel of Matthew starts the account with these words: "Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil" (Matthew 4:1–2). But notice that it's only after fasting forty days and nights that the tempter comes to Him. The devil thought that was his moment, but clearly fasting was the preparation that Jesus, empowered by the Spirit of God, used for that challenging time. He drew His sustenance from the Father, and that kept Him going.

The fourth benefit of fasting is a deeper understanding of our total dependence upon God. When we fast, we intentionally remove ourselves from one source of power—food—to rely on another. We're weaker physically and less filled with ourselves. Fasting is often used in Scripture as a way of humbling ourselves before God. David did this when he repented of his sin of adultery, and Paul did it when he was converted. When we deny ourselves food, God uses it to help us lean on Him more. As He told Paul, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Corinthians 12:9).

Now we're going to wrap up our look at fasting with some practical

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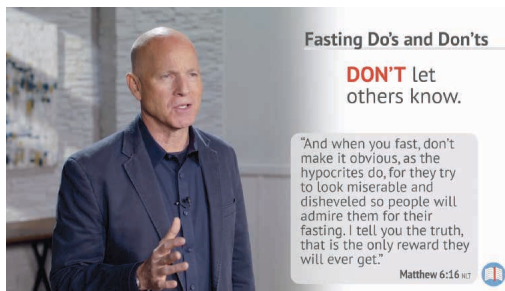
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- A deeper understanding of our total dependence on God.



do's and don'ts that can really help us when we pray.

First, if you're not used to fasting, *do* start small. Try skipping just one meal at first. If we try to do too much at once, we can be easily discouraged and give up.

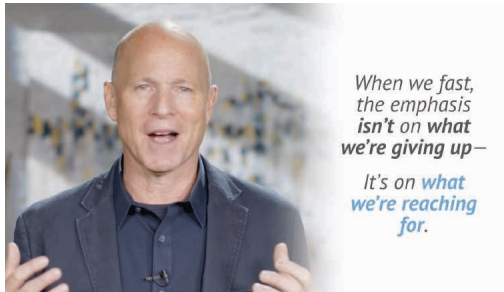
Next, when you fast, *don't* let others know that you are doing it unless you have to. Be very careful with your motives. Jesus said in Matthew 6:16, "And when you fast, don't make it obvious, as the hypocrites do, for they try to look miserable and disheveled so people will admire them for their fasting. I tell you the truth, that is the only reward they will ever get" (Matthew 6:16 NLT). God will reward our fasting if we do it unto Him, not with our focus on getting attention from others. And that brings us to the next *do*.

Do fast at a time when you can keep your focus on God. If it's a day when you will be very busy, or will have a lot of strenuous physical activity, it probably wouldn't be the best day to do it. Choose a time when you can read God's Word and quiet yourself in His presence. You'll find that you're able to hear Him better and be more aware of Him that way.

Next, *don't* give up on fasting if you cannot go without food for health reasons. You can also fast by abstaining from other things. You might give up television for a time or social media. But when you do it, make sure that you're making time to focus on God. 1 Corinthians 7:5 mentions married couples agreeing to abstain from sexual relations, "so that you may devote yourselves to prayer." So, there are ways to fast even if you can't give up food. You could give up meat, as Daniel did. Or you could give up your computer or anything else that's a source of distraction.

Next, after you've fasted, *do* break your fast slowly. You will be hungry after you've fasted, but don't eat a lot right away. Eat simple, natural foods, preferably fruits and vegetables, to give your body time to adjust.

Now for our last don't: *Don't* simply use fasting to pray for yourself, use it to bless others. My friend David Beaty, who gave me some helpful advice for this talk, is a pastor who has a habit of fasting and praying for his congregation. One day a week he will take the church directory and pray through a portion of it. We often see spiritual breakthroughs in others' lives when we fast and pray, so it helps to have specific goals in mind as we fast. My wife and I had a practice of fasting and praying for our children when we



were going through a particularly difficult time with them. Every Thursday at lunch we'd skip lunch and take that time to cry out to God wherever we were.

Lastly, *do* drink lots of water when you fast. This is a good health practice and will calm a growling stomach and help you go the distance. The examples of fasting without water for a long time in Scripture, like Moses on Mt. Sinai, are exceptional, supernatural instances of being sustained by God. Usually fasting is defined in Scripture as simply going without food.

Remember again, when we fast the emphasis isn't on what we're giving up—it's on what we're reaching for: more of God's wisdom, more of His strength, more love for Him in our hearts and lives, more of His kingdom come in the lives of those we love. Heaven has a way of touching earth when we fast and pray.