

Practice Makes Perfect (Almost): Fasting

Mike Hagan

Definition

Fasting is abstaining from food or material things for spiritual purposes.

- Willard 1988, 161: “Fasting confirms our utter dependence upon God by finding in him a source of sustenance beyond food.” Cf. John 4:32, 34.
- It is deemphasizing the material aspects of life (2 Co 4:16, 18)

It is practiced by many religions and even by weight-loss gurus, but it is a spiritual practice that should be exercised carefully and with a physician’s advice.

Biblical Fasts

Examples

- Day of Atonement, Lev 23:27 on 10th day of 7th month [Ex 30:10; Lev 16; Num 29:7-11; today 20 fasts in Judaism]
- National emergency, Joel 2:15; 2 Chron 20:1-4; Jonah
- Safety in travel, Ezra 8:21-23
- Regular fasts? Zech 8:19
- Inward discipline of devotion? Matt 6:16 “when”, along with giving and prayer.
- Decisions, Acts 13:2; 14:23 [praying and fasting]
- *Didache* – prescribes Wednesday and Friday.
- John Wesley – asked converts to fast W/F

Summary of Kinds

1. Do without food, but not water – Jesus.
2. Partial fast, Dan 10:3 (or ch. 1).
3. Absolute fast (no food, no water), Esther 4:16; Acts 9:9; Moses (Deut 9:9) and Elijah (1 Kgs 19:8).

Command?

- (1) Assumption of devotion → Matt 6:16 “when”
- (2) Assumption of practice, Matt 9:15 “they will fast”

Motive? Matthew 6:16-18

- (1) Not hypocritically ← “impression management”

(2) To God, Lk 2:37 and Anna; Acts 13:2.

- Zech 7:5
- Desert fathers, “if you want to keep the fires hot, don’t open the door often.”

(3) Balance, 1 Co 9:27; 6:12; Ps 35:13

Results?

- Effective intercessory prayer
- Guidance in decisions
- Increased concentration
- Deliverance from bondage
- Physical well-being
- Revelations
- Closeness to God
- Sense of suffering

Practice Hints?

Make it a habit especially focused on direct service to God, prayer, or other service.

(1) Start some form of self-denial – lunch to lunch with partial fast [fruit juices]

(2) Normal fast (24 hours) [only water]

(3) 3-7 days? Break with fruits or veggie juice.

Experiment with different forms of fasting.

- Fast from hobbies
- Fast from media
- Fast from work (if workaholic)
- Fast from married sex (1 Co 7:5)
- Fast from discretionary shopping
- Fast from credit cards
- Fast from driving a car

Bibliography

Richard Foster 1978, ch. 4.

Klaus Issler 2001.

Dallas Willard 1988, 166-68.

Handout #4 Practice Makes Perfect (Almost): Fasting

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1. Interact with the following definition for fasting. What do you find intriguing? What seems to be problematic to your lifestyle? What purposes?

“Fasting is abstaining from food or material things for spiritual purposes.”

2. If you were to experiment with fasting, what do you think you would find about yourself? What part does self-denial play? What part does suffering have?

3. Examine the following verses to learn more about fasting:

- 2 Samuel 12:23
- Psalm 35:13
- Psalm 69:10
- Psalm 109:24
- Joel 1:14; 2:12, 15
- Jeremiah 14:12
- Jeremiah 36:6, 9
- Zechariah 8:18-19
- Ezra 8:21-23
- Mark 2:18-19
- Luke 5:33-35

Bibliography

Richard Foster 1978, ch. 4.

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