

Fasting: Hungering for God

Matthew 6:16-18

A Google search on *fasting* reveals that this topic garners interest from many directions, including health and fitness, psychology, and politics. Jesus, however, mentions fasting in the Sermon on the Mount as an example of a *religious* practice that had—unfortunately—been used as a way to heighten one’s public status as an exceptionally pious person.

Just as with prayer (Matthew 6:5-15) and charitable giving (6:1-4), fasting should be done for the audience of God alone. “When you fast,” Jesus taught, “do not look gloomy like the hypocrites.” Instead, “anoint your head and wash your face, that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret” (Matthew 6:16-18).

A brief survey of fasting will help orient us to Jesus’ teaching on this topic

Fasting in other Cultures and Times

Fasting has been common practice in cultures both ancient and modern. In ancient times, people often fasted motivated by the belief that demons could somehow gain mastery over them through eating. It was also used to achieve a higher level of concentration, leading to ecstatic experiences, and, supposedly, interaction with the divine. In modern times, fasting has been used as a political tool, as well as an expression of religious devotion (Ramadan, for example).

Fasting in the Old Testament

In the Old Testament, people would hold a fast in times of sorrow or crisis. For example, David fasted when he learned of the death of Saul and his sons (1 Samuel 31:13), and when he feared the death of his infant son (2 Samuel 12:16). Ahab fasted when he was told that God would send judgment on him (1 Kings 21:27).

There was only one fast, however, that was prescribed by the Law—a yearly day-long fast on the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 23:32). But throughout Israel’s history, more fasts were added (see Zechariah 8:19). By the time between the testaments (300s and later), the sect of the Pharisees had made it their practice to fast twice a week—on Monday and Thursday (for example, see Luke 18:12).

False Fasting

The Old Testament prophets make it clear that God is not pleased when people fasted merely for the sake of fasting, much less as a mask for their evil behavior. In fact, God had scathing words for those who held fasts but refused to repent: “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.” Instead, God wanted a “fast” that involved letting “the oppressed go free,” and “shar[ing] your bread with the hungry and bring[ing] the homeless poor into your own house” (Isaiah 58:4-7).

Fasting in the New Testament

The New Testament has relatively little to say about fasting, but what it *does* say gives us rich insights into the nature of the gospel and of the Christian life. Pious Anna fasted, presumably in her longing for the Messiah (Luke 2:37). The early church fasted before sending Paul and Barnabas on their missionary journey (Acts 13:2-3).

But perhaps the most important text for understanding fasting is Matthew 9:14-17. Here we learn that fasting is reserved for a time when Jesus is “taken away” (9:15), referring to the times in which *we* live. Jesus does not do away with fasting, but calls for a new kind of fasting—a fasting that is prompted and motivated by the fact that we *have* enjoyed the feast of his salvation, but still long for its fullness to arrive.

John Piper puts it well when he writes: “As an act of faith, Christian fasting is an expression of dissatisfied contentment in the all-sufficiency of Christ. It is an expression of secure and happy longing for the all-satisfying fullness of Christ. Christian fasting does not tremble in the hope of earning anything from Christ. . . . Christian fasting is not self-wrought discipline that tries to deserve more from God. It is a hunger for God awakened by the taste of God freely given in the gospel.”¹

Christian fasting, then, is *the temporary, abstaining from normal nourishment for the purpose of expressing dependence on, delight in, and desire for God, especially in light of a particular opportunity for or obstacle to the advance of God’s kingdom*. Or, to put it more briefly, it means to not eat for a while because we so badly want God’s will to be done.

I say “especially in light of a particular obstacle to or opportunity for God’s glory” because the two mentions of fasting in the book of Acts are in the context of opportunities and obstacles.

Questions for Discussion and Application

1. Many people understand fasting for health purposes. What are the differences between the fasting Jesus is talking about and, say, intermittent fasting? Why is it important to maintain the distinction?
2. What other spiritual disciplines do we find it tempting to “flaunt”? How might Jesus’ teaching about the right approach to fasting apply to those areas as well?
3. The central issue of fasting is one’s desire for God. Read Psalm 63, and consider how David expresses his longing for God. How might we cultivate a greater desire for God?
4. What kinds of activities or pursuits tend to “dull” one’s appetite for God? What kinds of activities or pursuits can serve to “whet” one’s appetite for God?

¹John Piper, *A Hunger for God: Desiring God through Fasting and Prayer* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2013), 44–45.