

Fasting

Introduction

Muslims fast

Some Jews fast

But how many people do you know that fast?

How many sermons have you heard on this subject?

Fasting is not a subject you hear many people talk about.

My introduction to fasting happened after having been to the military.

I was involved in a mission organization that promoted at times the idea of fasting and using that time to then for prayer or specific devotions with the Lord.

And there were times that I fasted a few days.

I can also recall a pastor who had announced that he was spending 40 days in fasting.

I recall thinking that he must have been incredibly spiritual.

The question you may ask is what does God have to say about the Matter?

Are you required to fast as a believer?

Is it sin if you do not fast?

If you do fast, how should it be practiced.

Fasting is not approved by God, except for its end; it must be connected with something else, otherwise it is a vain thing. Men by private fasting's, prepare themselves for the exercise of prayer, or they mortify their own flesh, or seek a remedy for some hidden vices.

John Calvin (French Reformer)

Without a purpose, fasting can be a miserable, self-centered experience.

Donald S. Whitney

Before we dive into our practice, let's just recall some background information.

Historical Background

Jesus focused on the practice of righteousness in Ch 6.

He gave the principle in vs 1.

Matthew 6:1 LSB

¹ "Beware of doing your righteousness before men to be noticed by them; otherwise you have no reward with your Father who is in heaven."

In your practice of righteousness do so not to be noticed by people but by God.

As I reflect on this, I wonder now why a pastor would announce from the pulpit that he is fasting?

If your main target audience is to be seen by people, then it's hypocrisy.

Jesus then gave three examples:

- Vs 2-4 Charity
- Vs 5-15 Prayer
- VS 16-18 Fasting.

Fasting is the third area in which Jesus provided corrective instruction.

In practicing your righteousness (piety), you pervert God's standard when your focus and desire is for people to see you and praise you.

Fasting was practiced for many reasons.

Ancient pagans believed that demons could enter the body through food.

When they felt under attack by demons they would fast, to prevent the evil spirits from gaining access to the body.

Yogis in eastern religions often fast for long periods.

Rabbis compared fasting to sacrifice and considered the affliction of the body as the offering of one's blood and fat upon the altar.

In Modern western society fasting is popular for health and dieting reasons.

The Old Testament reveals many faithful believers fasted.

Moses, Samson, Samule, Hannah, David, Elijah, and many others fasted.

In the New Testament, Anna, John the Baptist, Jesus and even Paul fasted.

In the early church many of the early church fathers and later Luther, Calvin, Wesley and Whitfield had fasted.

Our passage this morning will shed some more light on the matter.

Passage

Matthew 6:16–18 LSB

¹⁶ “Now whenever you fast, do not put on a gloomy face as the hypocrites do, for they neglect their appearance so that they will be noticed by men when they are fasting. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. ¹⁷ “But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face ¹⁸ so that your fasting will not be noticed by men, but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you.”

Proposition

Two ways to approach fasting that either honors or dishonors God:

1. Artificial fasting vs 16
2. Authentic fasting vs 17-18

1. Artificial fasting vs 16

Matthew 6:16 LSB

¹⁶ “Now whenever you fast, do not put on a gloomy face as the hypocrites do, for they neglect their appearance so that they will be noticed by men when they are fasting. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full.

“16 “Now whenever you fast,

The grammar reveals a degree of doubt. If you might as is customary fast.

It's not commanded, but when practiced should be regulated by the principles Jesus gave.

To fast simply means to abstain from food.

Its withholding natural food from the body for a determined period of time voluntarily for religious or moral ends.

Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life Fasting Explained

Christian fasting is a believer's voluntary abstinence from food for spiritual purposes.

Fasts were sometimes total, sometimes partial and were accompanied by drinking water.

In the Bible, you only find it commanded to Israel as a national fast, one time a year as part of the day of atonement.

Leviticus 16:29 LSB

²⁹ “And this shall be a perpetual statute for you: in the seventh month, on the tenth day of the month, you shall humble your souls and not do any work, whether the native or the sojourner who sojourns among you.

Leviticus 23:27 LSB

²⁷ “On exactly the tenth day of this seventh month is the day of atonement; it shall be a holy convocation for you, and you shall humble your souls and bring an offering by fire near to Yahweh.

Four other fasting days were established to commemorate various sad events that happened to Israel.

Fast 4th (Tammuz), 5th(ab), 7th (Tishri), and 10th (Tebet).

These fast were only obligatory when the nation was under oppression according to

the Rabbis but not when there was peace.

Zechariah 7:3–5 LSB

3 speaking to the priests, who belong to the house of Yahweh of hosts, and to the prophets, saying, “Shall I weep in the fifth month and abstain, as I have done these many years?” 4Then the word of Yahweh of hosts came to me, saying, 5“Speak to all the people of the land and to the priests, saying, ‘When you fasted and mourned in the fifth and seventh months these seventy years, was it actually for Me that you fasted?’

Here we see the question asked, was it actually for me that you fasted? Highlighting the question... which audience are you seeking?

When you study the Scriptures, you see a variety of purposes for fasting: These include:

- Nehemiah 9:1-2, Psalm 35:13 Self humiliation and confession of sins.
- Judges 20:26, 2 Samuel 1:12 special petitions or times of great anguish or desperation
- 1 Corinthians 9:24-27, Phil 3:19 Christian self-discipline, subduing the lust of the flesh.

Both testaments speak favorably of fasting, but other than the day of atonement celebrated by the Jews it's not required.

It's a non-compulsory, rather than a voluntary act of devotion to God.

God being the intended audience.

But in Jesus's day fasting had become twisted away from Godly purposes.

We read on..." Now whenever you fast," ...

do not put on a gloomy face as the hypocrites do,

The grammar reveals that this is a command that should be kept as a reality of life.

The term gloomy face =skuthropos=grim, stern, face that's sad. BDAG to have a look suggestive of gloom or sadness, gloomy or sullen. SENSE characterized by dark and our (gloomy, unsmiling, sour) countenance.

Hypocrite= means someone who acts pretentiously, a counterfeit, BDAG = an actor, pretender SENSE = a person who professes beliefs and opinions that he or she does not hold in order to conceal her real feelings or motives.

Some Jews believed that since food is a gift from God, each person would be given an account on judgment day for every good thing they had not eaten.

This made them self-righteous and proud.

Other Jews fasted as a ritual to gain merit with God and the attention before people.

We see that the Pharisees fasted twice a week.

Luke 18:11–12 LSB

¹¹ "The Pharisee stood and was praying these things to himself: 'God, I thank You that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. ¹² 'I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get.'"

They normally fasted on the 2nd (Mondays) and fifth (Thursdays) days.

They claimed these were the days Moses received the tablets from God on MT Sinai.

But these two days happened to be two major Jewish market days, which would have filled the streets with farmers, merchants and shoppers.

These two days would have drawn large crowds and large audiences.

The next parse reveals the cause for the hypocrites putting on a gloomy face.

for they neglect their appearance

The grammar reveals they did this as a custom or a habit.

They neglect =aphanizo= to remove from sight, deform, disfigure their countenances, BDAG = cause to become unrecognizable through change in appearance, render invisible/unrecognizable of one's face SENSE to mar, spoil the appearance(as by uncleanness, unkemptness) or cover or hide.

They would wear old clothes, dishevel their hair, cover themselves with dirt, ash, and makeup to look pale and sickly.

They were doing what hypocrites do...acting.

so that they will be noticed by men when they are fasting.

So that indicates the purpose of their actions.

They wanted to be noticed = GreeK Phaino=light, give light, illuminate, to be seen, appear BDAG to become visible, appear Sense = to be made visible

The grammar reveals the mood of potentiality.

So that they might be made visible when they fast as a lifestyle.

When your heart is not right, fasting is a sham and a mockery.

They were pretentious and self-righteous.

Everything they did was centered on themselves.

God was not a part of their motive.

The reward they wanted was the applause from people.

Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full."

The grammar reveals that they have, as a timeless fact, received already their reward.

Application

A general implicational question one should ask yourself.

How much of your Christianity is merely acting.

Are you doing the right actions so others would think well with you.

It does not matter what action you do, whether charity, praying, fasting or any form of church service.

The question you should ask is why do you do it?

I've had the sad experience of having baptized some people who say all the right things and do all the right actions.

But over time it came out that it was all an act.

Not true Christianity.

If that's true in your heart.

Confess your hypocrisy to God and ask him like David asked.

Psalm 51:10 LSB

¹⁰ Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me.

Psalm 19:14 LSB

¹⁴ Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart Be acceptable in Your sight, O Yahweh, my rock and my Redeemer.

Psalm 139:23–24 LSB

²³ Search me, O God, and know my heart; Try me and know my anxious thoughts; ²⁴ And see if there be any hurtful way in me and lead me in the everlasting way.

Psalm 86:11 LSB

¹¹ Teach me Your way, O Yahweh; I will walk in Your truth; Unite my heart to fear Your name.

This brings us to authentic fasting.

2. Authentic fasting vs 17-18

Matthew 6:17–18 LSB

¹⁷ *“But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face*
¹⁸ *so that your fasting will not be noticed by men, but by your Father who is in secret; and your*
Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you.

“17 “But

The term but reveals a contrast with the previous section.

you, when you fast,

The grammar reveals this to be customary, a lifestyle.

Jesus’s statement that when you fast indicated that fasting was a normal part of Christian life.

He assumed his disciples at times would fast.

However, Jesus never gave it as a command.

Now since the validity of the day of atonement ceased when Jesus died on the cross, the single prescribed occasion for fasting ceased to exist.

Hebrews 10:10 LSB

¹⁰ *By this will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ*
once for all.

Fasting is mentioned favorably in the New Testament.

It was a form of spiritual devotion.

Now while Jesus was with His disciples, they did not fast.

John’s disciples asked Jesus.

Matthew 9:14–15 LSB

¹⁴ Then the disciples of John came to Him, asking, “Why do we and the Pharisees fast, but Your disciples do not fast?”

¹⁵ And Jesus said to them, “Can the attendants of the bridegroom mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them? But the days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast.”

Fasting however was an appropriate response in times of trial, testing and struggle.

It was appropriate in times of struggle, deep grief.

2 Samuel 12:16 David fasted while pleading for his infant's life.

2 Samuel 3:35 David fasted when Abner died.

Psalms 35:13 David fasted on behalf of his enemies.

Overwhelming danger prompted fasting.

2 Chronicles 20:3 Jehoshaphat fasted with the imminent attack from the Moabites and Ammonites.

Ester 4:16 Ester asked the Jews to fast before she went to the king to plead for their lives against Haman's wicked scheme.

Ezra 8:21 -23 Ezra fasted pleading for the safety of the exiles as they returned.

Penitence (remorse, contrition, sorrow, regret) often accompany fasting.

1 Kings 21:27 King Ahab fasted when Elijah confronted him.

Jonah 3:5 The people of Nineveh fasted in response to Jonah's preaching. Daniel 9:2-3.

Daniel fasted to receive special revelation from God.

For you and me to understand God's word better, might mean skipping a few meals to stay in the word until understanding comes.

Fasting accompanied the beginning of ministry tasks.

Jesus fasted for forty days when he was tested in the wilderness.

Acts 13:2-3 The church at Antioch fasted when the HS sent out Paul and Barnabas into missions.

Now in every fasting account, it is normally linked with prayer.

You can pray without fasting.

But you cannot fast without praying.

Fasting is often connected with intense prayer and struggle before God.

Zechariah gives some insight about fasting.

Zechariah 7:5–6 LSB

⁵ *“Speak to all the people of the land and to the priests, saying, ‘When you fasted and mourned in the fifth and seventh months these seventy years, was it actually for Me that you fasted?’*

⁶ *‘And when you eat and when you drink, are you not eating for yourselves and are you not drinking for yourselves?’*

If you fast, it should be directed to Yahweh alone.

Isaiah 58:5–9 LSB

⁵ *“Is it a fast like this which I choose, a day for a man to afflict himself? Is it for bowing one’s head like a reed And for spreading out sackcloth and ashes as a bed? Will you call this a fast, even an acceptable day to Yahweh?”*

⁶ *“Is this not the fast which I choose, to loosen the bonds of wickedness, to release the bands of the yoke, and to let the oppressed go free and break every yoke?”*

⁷ *“Is it not to divide your bread with the hungry and bring the afflicted homeless into the house; When you see the naked, you cover him; And not to hide yourself from your own flesh?”*

⁸ *“Then your light will break out like the dawn, and your recovery will speedily spring forth; And your righteousness will go before you; The glory of Yahweh will be your rear guard.*

⁹ *“Then you will call, and Yahweh will answer; You will cry, and He will say, ‘Here I am.’ If you remove the yoke from your midst, The pointing of the finger and speaking wickedness,*

Here we discover that God wants fasting in which:

- You loosen the bonds of wickedness: breaking away from sin.
- You may share your food with the hungry and care for the poor.

God wants fasting from a right heart, right living and right attitudes.

Jon Courson's Application Commentary Chapter 6

Physiologists tell us when there is no food in the stomach, there is greater blood flow to the brain. You can actually think clearly when you're not digesting burgers and fries. Once you overcome those first pangs of hunger, your thinking processes are more focused and clearer than ever. On the other hand, if you have two Whoppers and a couple of shakes, all you want to do is sleep!

As we return to our passage.

We see that Jesus said when you fast:

...anoint your head and wash your face...

The grammar reveals that both anointing your head and washing your face is a command.

Anointing the head and washing the face was the common practice of grooming.

This was normal body care.

The oils were scented like perfume.

This was the daily practice.

Jesus's point.

When you fast do everything to keep yourself looking normal.

Do nothing to draw attention to yourself.

Your desire to see God is diluted by your desires for human praise.

18 so that...

Reveals the purpose.

your fasting will not be noticed by men,

The grammar reveals that the mood is a degree of potentiality.

That you might not be noticed by men.

If you are serious about fasting, seek God's attention not man.

Christian fasting should God centered.

First, let fasting be done unto the Lord with our eye singly fixed on Him. Let our intention herein be this, and this alone, to glorify our Father which is in heaven.

John Wesley (Founder of the Methodist Movement)

Genuine fasting is simply concentrated intense prayer and concern for the Lord, His Name, His kingdom, His will.

but by your Father who is in secret.

But it reveals the contrast.

The Father, who is in secret, is best translated by the *Good News Translation*.

Matthew 6:18 GNB

¹⁸ *so that others cannot know that you are fasting—only your Father, who is unseen, will know. And your Father, who sees what you do in private, will reward you.*

The Bible reveals that God is spirit.

John 4:24 LSB

²⁴ *“God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth.”
And God is invisible.*

John 1:18 LSB

¹⁸ *No one has seen God at any time; the only begotten God who is in the bosom of the Father, He has explained Him.*

1 Timothy 1:17 LSB

¹⁷ *Now to the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and*

glory forever and ever. Amen.

Colossians 1:15 LSB

¹⁵ *Who is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation.*

The invisible God notices your invisible to man actions.

You are noticed by the invisible Father.

The one who is not seen by men, sees you and sees your heart and sees when you fast or do any deed of devotion to Him.

Noticed GK Phaino=light, give light, illuminate, to be seen, appear BDAG to become visible, appear Sense = to be made visible

The term noticed here is the same root term you find in vs 16

God not only sees, but God will never fail to reward you.

and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you.”

Connected with anointing and washing your head, your Father will reward what is done in private.

The following verse tells you where this reward is found.

But it also reveals where your heart is focused upon.

Matthew 6:19–21 LSB

¹⁹ *“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal.*

²⁰ *“But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves do not break in or steal;*

²¹ *for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.*

If you seek the praises of people, you're not seeking eternal reward.

Your heart is on earthly matters.

But if you seek eternal reward.

Your heart will be focused upon God and His concerns.

What we see here in the three examples of charity, prayer and fasting can either be hypocritical when you desire the attention of people, or God honoring when your focus is totally upon God.

Jesus' solution we see is not to abolish charity, prayer or fasting, but rather to call His followers to direct their religious devotion to God alone and not draw attention to yourself.

It's to be a personal matter between your soul and God.

Application

A good question to ask is.

What kind of Christian are you?

In your service at the church, do you do it for the praises of people or for God.

Is God your focus or man?

Remember Fasting is **not a command**.

It's a discipline that may enable to be more God focused, to pray more or even to find answers in God's word pertaining to major decisions, trials or responding to the big challenges in life.

If you plan to fast, remember:

- Be God centered not man.
- Do it for a specific godly purpose, without a godly goal, its only weight loss.

Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life Fasting Is to Be Done for a Purpose

Without a purpose, fasting can be a miserable, self-centered experience about willpower and endurance.

Some of these goals for fasting may include:

1. to strengthen your prayer
2. To seek God's guidance
3. To express grief
4. To seek deliverance or protection
5. To express repentance and return to God.
6. To humble yourself before God
7. To express concern for the work of God
8. To minister to the needs of others
9. To overcome temptation and dedicate yourself to God.
10. To express love and worship to God.

- Fill the time you would have eaten with prayer and reading God's word.
- Begin small.
- take in enough fluids.
- Do not fast for longer than 40 days.
- Refrain from fasting if your health is negatively affected.

Fasting can be more than just abstaining from food.

It can be a partial fast= maybe abstaining from chocolates,' because you find you're addicted to it.

Or without meat and only on veggies

Or without media, TV, a hobby for spiritual purposes.

If you think something has become an idol, may fast form it for some time.

In closing Witney stated

Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life to Express Love and Worship to God

Any blessing which is bestowed by the Father upon His undeserving children must be considered to be an act of grace. We fail to appreciate the mercy of the Lord if we think that by our doing something we have forced (or even coerced) God to grant that blessing which we have asked for.... All of our fasting, therefore, must be on this basis; we should use it as a scriptural means whereby we are melted into a more complete realization of the purposes of the Lord in our life, church, community, and nation.

Prayer is reaching out after the unseen; fasting is letting go of all that is seen and temporal. Fasting helps express, deepen, confirm the resolution that we are ready to sacrifice anything, even ourselves to attain what we seek for the kingdom of God.

Andrew Murray