

# FASTING

## FIRST THINGS FIRST

Take a minute to pray for God to guide you as you study...

In the last lesson, we focused on worship and reverence. In this lesson, we are going to dive into a subject that is often overlooked and misunderstood...fasting.

Fasting is an early church teaching that has generally been forgotten by most followers of Jesus here in the United States. In a culture where most social gatherings revolve around food it's easy to see how many Christians would just simply never fast. Whereas in the time of Jesus and His disciples, fasting was one of the most common faith disciplines by followers of God.

Jesus not only wanted His followers to fast but expected them to. Look at what He says in the sermon on the mount.

**Matthew 6:16-18:** " \_\_\_\_\_ you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show others they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. But \_\_\_\_\_ you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to others that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you."

Jesus doesn't say "**If you fast**" but He says "**When you fast.**" He assumes you and I **WILL** fast! There must be more to this teaching if that's the case. So let's lay out a biblical understanding of fasting. What it is, why Jesus expects us to, and how can we actually do it.

### WHAT IS FASTING?

According to the dictionary there are three key points of "fasting."

#### **Fasting:**

*Verb* - abstaining from all or some kinds of food or drink, especially as a religious observance (Webster's Dictionary).

What three points do you see in this definition? (answers at the end of lesson)

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Fasting is starving the flesh to focus ourselves on God. Notice the definition. We abstain or restrain ourselves from something we all enjoy, food and drink, for religious reasons. What could those religious reasons be? Could it be that those religious reasons to fast are so that we can focus on God?

Before we go any further it is important to note that fasting doesn't mean "no food for 24 hours." In the Bible and Jewish culture, fasting consists of abstaining for 12 hours or during the daylight hours of the day. However there are instances, and we will see some of them in this lesson, where someone fasts for "days and nights." However, generally fasting is a 12 hour period or during the daylight hours.

In the book of Acts, the disciples fasted to focus on God and seek His will when it came to important decisions.

**Acts 14:23:** "Paul and Barnabas appointed elders for them in each church and, with prayer and \_\_\_\_\_, committed them to the Lord, in whom they had put their trust."

**Acts 13:2:** "While they were worshiping the Lord and \_\_\_\_\_, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them."

Those early church leaders were using fasting, abstaining from food and drink, as a way to help them focus on God and listen for His will in their lives. That really is the whole point of fasting, and it still is valuable today!

### WHY FAST?

Jesus shows us why we should fast as He experiences it, and its rewards, first hand after His baptism. I find it interesting that Jesus' first action after baptism is to be alone with His Father, removing any distraction so that He could have clarity on His calling in life.

**Matthew 4:1-11:** "Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. The tempter came to him and said, 'If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread.' Jesus answered, 'It is written: 'Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.' Then the devil took him to the holy city and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. 'If you are the Son of God,' he said, 'throw yourself down. For it is written:

'He will command his angels concerning you, and they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.'

Jesus answered him, 'It is also written: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.' Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. 'All this I will give you,' he said, 'if you will bow down and worship me.' Jesus said to him, 'Away from me, Satan! For it is written: 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.' Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him."

### BASIC POINT

Fasting is starving the **flesh** to focus ourselves on **God**.

Can you imagine not having eaten anything for 40 days and 40 nights!? How weak do you think Jesus was when Satan came to tempt Him? Notice how Satan doesn't come to Jesus until Jesus seems to be at His weakest point. But Jesus actually isn't weak at all! In fact, Jesus is hungry but after having gone such a long time denying himself He has **strengthened** Himself in God to the point that to continue is actually easier.

Notice which temptation comes first, the one concerning food, and Jesus responds that instead of living on physical bread He's been living on spiritual bread. Jesus has strengthened Himself with His Father by denying Himself (fasting) to focus on His Father. Here Jesus shows us why we should fast and why He would assume in His sermon on the mount that we will fast.

As Christians who desire an intimate relationship with God, we should practice fasting so we are stronger at denying ourselves when Satan tempts us as well as so we drown out the worldly noise to focus on the will of our Father.

### HOW DO I FAST?

The early Christians fasted every Monday and Wednesday. Isn't that incredible? That must have been some amazing commitment to do it that often and that regularly. It also makes me wonder how they were able to do this. Here are some very practical ways to help you fast successfully.

1. **Fast in community.** There is nothing more difficult than to walk a path alone. Fasting in community will not only give yourself an accountability partner but will also allow you to share your journey with another.
2. **PRAY.** When the hunger pains come, take that as an opportunity to pray or meditate on scripture. I find it no coincidence that David in Psalm 55:17 says, "Evening, morning and noon I cry out in distress, and he hears my voice." When we fast, sometimes our stomachs start to cause us distress, and it is a ripe opportunity to go to God in prayer.
3. **Start small and then grow.** If this is our first time fasting, maybe try skipping one meal and using that time to focus on God (we need to be responsible with our health, so if you start to feel anything other than hungry, you should eat something and try again another time.) By starting small, you'll be able to get a feel for fasting and see results from your dedicated time with God.

As you embark on a new practice in your journey as a disciple, may you experience God in a new, clear way that is unclouded and focused. May your fasting draw you closer to Christ, and may you be richly blessed by your time focusing on God.

In closing, John Cassian writes a poem about fasting that really captures the blessing that comes from holding back from food. Here's what he writes...

*"Let us not believe that an external fast from visible food alone can possibly be sufficient for perfection of heart and purity of body unless with it there has also been united a fast of the soul. For the soul also has its foods that are harmful. Slander is its food and indeed one that is very dear to it. A burst of anger also supplies it with miserable food for an hour and destroys it as well with its deadly savor. Envy is food of the mind, corrupting it with its poisonous juices and never ceasing to make it wretched and miserable at the prosperity and success of another. Vanity is its food which gratifies the mind with a delicious meal for a time but afterward strips it clear and bare of all virtue. Then vanity dismisses it barren and void of all spiritual fruit. All lust and shift wanderings of heart are a sort of food for the soul, nourishing it on harmful meats but leaving it afterwards without a share of its heavenly bread and really solid food. If then, with all the powers we have, we abstain from these in a most holy fast our observance of the bodily fast will be both useful and profitable." - John Cassian*

*Answers: 1. Abstaining, 2. Food & Drink, 3. For Religious Purposes*

## FUNDAMENTAL QUESTIONS

1. What is your reaction to the concept of fasting?
2. Does fasting sound easy or difficult? Why?
3. Spend some time as a group praising God for Who He is.

### LESSON 5: FASTING

