PRAYER & FASTING

“THE PRACTICE OF CHRISTIAN FASTING”

By: H.B. Charles, Jr.
Fasting is one of the most neglected, misunderstood, and complicated of the spiritual disciplines that Christians practice. Some people disregard fasting as a foolish and meaningless ritual. Others view fasting as an offense to the spiritual liberty that is ours through faith in Jesus Christ. And other people view fasting almost superstitiously; erroneously thinking that fasting can manipulate God and guarantee the desired answer to their prayers. This confusion places most of Christians, who are somewhere in the middle of these extremes, at a lost when it comes to fasting. But I want to encourage you to embrace fasting as a practical expression of your devotion to God and a spiritual discipline to further your maturity in Christ.

We live in a day where greed consumption, and overindulgence reign. Many people are dominated by two desires:

1. I want it ALL.
2. I WANT IT NOW.

The self-centeredness of the culture we live in should not surprise us. We should expect the world to be the world. But the sad indictment is that the spirit of the age has slipped and slithered like a snake into the church of Jesus Christ. But the Lord has not placed the cost of discipleship in the fine print of his call to follow him. In Matthew 16:24, Jesus says: “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.” To follow Jesus Christ is to go the narrow way of self-denial, not the easy way of self-indulgence. In Philippians 3:17-19, Paul exhorts the church: “Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us. For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds on earthly things.” Christ is the central figure of history. And the cross is the central factor of history. So to be called an enemy of the cross of Christ is arguably the worst thing that can be said about a person. And one of the marks of a person who is an enemy of the cross of Christ is that their god is their belly. That is, their appetites rule them. So we must strive to set our minds on things above as followers of Jesus Christ (Philippians 4:8). Fasting is a spiritual discipline that points us beyond the things of this world. Let’s consider together the fundamentals of fasting.
WHAT IS FASTING?

Fasting is the voluntary and intentional abstinence from food, or any other normal function, for a specific period of time as an expression of devotion to God. It is voluntary, meaning that you should not allow anyone to impose the practice of fasting on you as a requirement for access to God. 1 Corinthians 8:8 says, “Food will not commend us to God. We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do.” It is intentional in that you have fasted with purposeful devotion to God. However, it is not intentional if you fast because you forgot to eat or did not have time or opportunity to eat. Fasting is a deliberate decision to go without food for a specific period of time for spiritual reasons.

Specifically and primarily, fasting involves abstinence from food. But the spirit of fasting can be observed by abstaining from other things such as TV, the telephone, certain reading materials, the computer or Internet, or even from other people. The priority of fasting is not so much on the thing you go without as it is about the one for whom you fast. In the first sentence of the introduction on his book on fasting, A Hunger for God, JOHN PIPER writes: “The Birthplace of Christian fasting is homesickness for God.” I don’t know if it can be put any better than that. Our fasting from food or something else is to be a practical expression of our great desire to feast on God alone. The focus of our fasting is to be full on God. And this leaves a great deal of room for different forms of fasting.

YOUR FAST CAN VARY IN ITS METHOD.

One of the first concerns many have when considering fasting is about what you can or cannot eat and drink when you fast. But you should not think of fasting in rigid, systematic, or legalistic terms. There are various different ways you can fast. Here are the three most basic forms of fasting.

• THE ABSOLUTE FAST. An absolute fast abstains from food and drink altogether. You neither eat nor drink anything. It is to go without feeding your body anything.
• THE NORMAL FAST. A normal fast is to go without solid foods, while drinking liquids, be it water and/or juices. This seems to be the way Jesus fasted in the wilderness, according to Matthew 4:2 and Luke 4:2.
• THE PARTIAL FAST. A partial fast is to cut out certain elements from your diet, without totally abstaining from food and drinks. Daniel and his friends fasted this way, when they refused to eat
certain delicacies from the king’s table (Dan. 1). And John the Baptist fasted this way, eating only locusts and wild honey. Likewise, the evangelist John Wesley would fast by only eating whole grain bread and drinking water. And many Christians today adopt a partial fast in observance of LENT—the forty days leading up to Easter. They give up something, like sweets, for forty days, in a partial fast.

Let me stop here to address those of you who have a medical condition that requires a specific diet. You may wonder what to do about the sickness you have and the medications you must take. Here is my pastoral advice: Do what your doctor tells you to do! In fact, if you are considering an absolute fast or an extended fast for the first time, I would encourage you to consult your physician first to get his advice about if, how, and when you should fast.

YOUR FAST CAN VARY IN ITS DURATION.

Scripture mentions many one-day fasts. In fact, the Lord commanded the people of Israel to fast on the Day of Atonement. It also mentions fasts that lasted for three days. Scripture even tells us that Moses, Elijah, and the Lord Jesus himself fasted for forty days. And there are many times when fasting is mentioned in scripture without specifying the length of the fast. These different time periods teach us that your fast can vary its duration. Of course, if you are considering fasting for the first time, do not try to start out with a forty day fast. I know you want to be like Jesus. But if you try to fast for the first time for forty days, you may immediately end up in heaven like Jesus. I would even recommend that you don’t start out with a three day fast. It would be best that you begin with a simple one day fast. Better yet, you may want to consider fasting for the first time by skipping a meal or two in the course of a day.

YOUR FAST CAN VARY IN ITS NATURE.

To fast literally means to abstain from food. But fasting does not have to be limited to food and drink. For the sake of setting your affections on God, you may fast from a variety of differing things.

Do you watch too much television? Consider fasting from TV for a day or week. Or maybe give up watching your favorite shows for a certain period. Do you spend an inordinate amount of time on the computer or the Internet? How about going a couple of days without turning on the laptop. Or maybe you can choose to go offline for twenty-four hours. Do you have people in your life who distract
you from the things of God? Have you ever considered fasting from people? Actually, it’s the spiritual discipline of practicing solitude, in which you get alone with God for prayer and meditation on scripture. Think about closing yourself in your office during lunch to commune with God. Or maybe go to a park by yourself and spend some quiet time with God.

DOES THE BIBLE COMMAND CHRISTIANS TO FAST?

That question can be answered in one word: No. Scripture does not command Christians to fast. And it gives no specific instructions concerning when or how Christians should fast. In fact, the New Testament is filled with warnings about the spiritual dangers associated with fasting. 1 Timothy 4:1-3 says: “Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons, through the insincerity of liars whose consciences are seared, who forbid marriage and require abstinence from foods that God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth.” JOHN PIPER begins the preface of his book on fasting, A Hunger for God, with this ironic statement: “Beware of books on fasting.” His concern that we do not adhere to any teaching that would impose fasting as a legalistic obligation for getting to God. Colossians 2:20-23 says, “If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the world, why, as if you were still alive in the world, do you submit to regulations – “Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch” (referring to things that all perish as they are used) – according to human precepts and teachings? These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh.”

So far from commanding us to fast, scripture also warns us not to get caught up in any type of legalism or asceticism. However, even though the New Testament does not command Christians to fast, scripture does give clear evidence that fasting is a legitimate, expected, and beneficial discipline for Christians to practice. Fasting was not taught or practiced in the church I grew up in. But when I first read and heard about fasting, I accepted it and implemented it into my practice of the spiritual disciplines without question or delay. But my practice of fasting was put on pause for some years after I heard a tape on fasting by a well-respected Bible teacher. He argued that fasting was an Old Testament practice and that it was primarily a sign of grief and mourning. And he concluded that it does not have a place in New Testament Christianity. I did not agree with all of his conclusions. But I did need to take some time to process what I had heard in my own heart and mind. Consequently, I did not fast for several years.
My turning point came as I read and studied THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT. In Matthew 6, Jesus discusses how righteous people should perform religious acts. In Matthew 6:16-18, Jesus addresses the subject of fasting. Matthew 6:16 begins, “And when you fast.” And verse 17 begins, “But when you fast.” Notice that Jesus does not say, “If you fast.” He says, “When you fast.” This is the same way Jesus speaks of charitable giving and prayer in the previous verses of Matthew 6. Verse 2 says, “When you give to the needy.” And verse 3 says, “When you give to the needy.” Likewise, in verse 5, Jesus says, “And when you pray.” And verse 6 says, “But when you pray.” When I considered these passages, I had no problem concluding that it is the Lord’s expectation that his followers would give and pray. And the logical flow of the progression of the text leads to the conclusion that the Lord also expects that we will fast. This settled the matter for me. The Lord does not command his disciples to fast. But he does assume that they will fast.

In Matthew 9:14-15, however, Jesus seems to contradict this expectation that his disciples will fast: “Then the disciples of John came to him, saying, “Why do we and the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?” And Jesus said to them, “Can the wedding guests mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them? The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast.” The question presented to Jesus tells us that the disciples did not fast. The question was why? Jesus answers that when the bridegroom arrives at the wedding feast, it is not time for grief and mourning. In this statement, Jesus affirms that fasting was typically or traditionally understood as an expression of sorrow under the old covenant. But now, he says, the bridegroom has come. It is not time to fast. It is time to celebrate! In other words, the disciples had no reason to fast, because the Lord Jesus Christ was with them and among them. But there would come a time when the Bridegroom is taken away. I do not believe this reference alludes to the Lord “being taken away” as the period between his death, burial, and resurrection. Rather, it refers to the period after his ascension, during which the disciples would long and look for his return. And during this time, the disciples will fast.

In the book of Acts, after the Lord’s ascension back to the right hand of the Father, we find that the early church did indeed practice fasting. For instance, Acts 13:2-3 says, “While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, ‘Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.” Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off.” And Acts 14:23 says: “And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed.”
WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF FASTING?

Fasting is a big deal these days for various people and groups that have no connection to any religious emphasis. There are those who fast for political reasons, protesting against some issue or supporting some cause. In these instances, it is often called “a hunger strike.” But it is a fast, nonetheless. Others fast out of concern for their diet, fitness, or vanity… I mean, beauty. Many books, magazines, doctors, nutritionists, and fitness gurus recommend fasting programs to cleanse your colon, to get rid of those stubborn pounds you can’t lose, or to get back into that dress that you never thought you would wear again. These are wrong and unworthy reasons for Christians to fast.

When the children of Israel were in Babylonian captivity, they fasted every fifth and seventh month, to mourn the fact that they were unable to worship God in the temple of Jerusalem that had been destroyed. After they were delivered from bondage and restored to their homeland, they rebuilt the temple. And they asked, “Should I weep and abstain in the fifth month, as I have done for so many years?” Zechariah 7:5-6 says, “Then the word of the Lord of hosts came to me: ‘Say to all the people of the land and the priests, When you fasted and mourned in the fifth month and in the seventh, for these seventy years, what is for me that you fasted? And when you eat and when you drink, do you not eat for yourselves and drink for yourselves?’” The Lord asked these rhetorical questions to say that whether they fasted or not did not matter if they were not doing it for him. True fasting is for God. 1 Corinthians 10:31 says, “So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.” We are to feast and fast for the glory of God. But even when the focus of your fasting is God, there are still several spiritual dangers you must be on guard against.

DO NOT FAST TO IMPRESS GOD FOR FAVOR

In Matthew 9:14-15, Jesus answers the question about why his disciples did not fast. You don’t mourn when the bridegroom is present. You celebrate. But when the bridegroom is taken away, his disciples would fast. But after he makes this point, Jesus addresses the assumption behind the question that his disciples ought to fast because John’s disciples and the Pharisees fasted. In Matthew 9:16-17, Jesus says: “No one puts a piece of unshrunk cloth on any old garment, for the patch tears away from the garment, and a worse tear is made. Neither is new wine put into old wineskins. If it is, the skins burst and the wine is spilled and the skins are destroyed. But new wine is put into fresh wineskins, and so both are preserved.” These two mini-parables are not about fasting, per se. Rather,
they are about the large issue of the relationship between the old covenant and the new covenant that Jesus came to establish. The Pharisees subscribed to a system of works righteousness in which they tried to earn God’s favor through good works. And although John the Baptist preached a message of repentance in preparation of the coming of the kingdom, John’s disciples understanding of the new way was not fully developed. So Jesus makes it clear that the way of the kingdom was not the old covenant dressed up in different clothes. The kingdom was a new, different thing. And the two must not be simply merged, or you will mess both of them up.

In the Old Testament, many people fasted out of grief for the sins they committed. But Jesus Christ has opened a new and living way to God for us. When you run to the cross, and put your faith in Jesus, his atoning blood becomes the basis of your access to God. 1 John 1:9 says: “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”

DO NOT FAST TO IMPRESS OTHERS.

Matthew 6:16-18 says: “And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites. For they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.” In Matthew 9:14-15, Jesus says: Then the disciples of John came to him, saying, “Why do we and the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?” And Jesus said to them, “Can the wedding guests mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them? The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast.” Fasting should focus on finding pleasure and delight in God not people pleasing.

WHAT ARE THE SPIRITUAL BENEFITS OF FASTING?

Can you expect to get great benefits out of fasting? Absolutely. But you must not practice fasting merely for what you can get out of it. This is how the Lord has set up the spiritual disciplines to work. The principle comes with a promise. But if you follow the principle only to get the promise, you forfeit the promise.
FASTING IS A HELPFUL PARTNER TO PRAYER.

Fasting aids prayer by heightening our sense of dependence upon God. This is the most essential element of believing prayer. You cannot pray the way you ought to pray without a heavy sense of your absolute neediness for God. No wonder scripture often mentions prayer and fasting together. Fasting uniquely helps us to develop this sense of dependence upon God. In his book Sense and Nonsense about Prayer, LEHMAN STRAUSS writes: “In prayer we draw near to God; in fasting we detach ourselves from something that could keep us from praying.”

But let me put a qualification here. While fasting is a helpful partner in prayer, we must not be deceived into thinking that fasting somehow guarantees that the Lord will answer our prayers according to our desires or petitions. To attempt to use fasting in this way is no more than another form of religious hocus-pocus that disregards and dishonors the sovereign authority, infinite goodness, and perfect wisdom of God. Furthermore, you misunderstand the nature of prayer if you fast in an attempt to twist God’s arm to answer your prayer. Prayer is not overcoming God’s reluctance. It is laying hold of his gracious willingness to help us and meet our needs. In Matthew 7:11, Jesus says, “If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!”

FASTING REVEALS THE THINGS THAT CONTROL US

WILLIAM WILLIMON was teaching on sexual morality to a group of college students. One young man was offended by what he heard. He complained that the standards of sexual purity that WILLIMON taught were no more than attempts to bind him to religious rules. And he insisted that he was free to commit a particular sexual sin any time he wanted. WILLIMON responded by asking, “But are you free to stop doing it?” This piercing question confronts the great error of our view of human freewill. Indeed, God created us to be free moral agents, who can choose between right and wrong. But our wills have been bound by sin. Consequently, we are free to do as we desire. But we are not free to do as we ought. And fasting exposes the things that have a controlling influence in our lives. 1 Corinthians 6:12-13 says: “All things are lawful for me,” but not all things are helpful. “All things are lawful for me, but I will not be enslaved by anything. “Food is meant for the stomach and the stomach for food” – and God will destroy both one and the other. The body is not meant for sexual immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body.”
FASTING DEVELOPS THE DISCIPLINE OF SELF-CONTROL IN OUR LIVES

In 1 Corinthians 9:24-27, Paul teaches: “Do you not know that in a race all the runners compete, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. So I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air. But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified.” Fasting is a tool God graciously uses to discipline our spiritual appetites and strengthens our dependence on the Holy Spirit for strength.

WHAT SHOULD I DO AS I FAST?

I remember one of my early attempts at fasting. It was a twenty-four hour fast. I picked a day when I did not have much to do. And I tried to stay in bed and sleep as long as I could, so that when I finally got up and started my day, I would not have that long to fast. I did not eat anything that day. But I do not believe the Lord was honored by that fast. On another occasion, when I did a twenty-four hour fast with several colleagues, we made a date to meet at Johnny’s Pastramis Restaurant at midnight. By the time the sun was down that evening, we were discussing if it would officially break the fast if we met at the restaurant before midnight and order our food so that I came out right after midnight. Again, I do not think the Lord was honored by the fast. On yet another occasion, several buddies and I were fasting, when our discussion turned into an extended conversation about things we have absolutely no business talking about. Finally, someone reminded us that we were supposed to be fasting. Convicted, we prayed and repented. But I do not think that the Lord was honored by that fast either.

I draw these conclusions in light of Isaiah 58, which is the fullest mention of the subject of fasting in the Bible. There, the Lord responds to his people who complain that it seems as if they have fasted for nothing. Isaiah 58:3-8 says: “Why have we fasted, and you see it not? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you take no knowledge of it?” Behold, in the day of your fast you seek your own pleasure, and oppress all your workers. 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. Is such the fast that I choose, a day for a person to humble himself? Is it to bow down his head like a reed, and to spread sackcloth and ashes under him? Will you call this a fast, and a day acceptable to the Lord?
Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh? Then shall your light break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up speedily; your righteousness shall go before you; the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard.”

The Lord says a lot about true and false fasting in Isaiah 58 that you should meditate on. But at the core of the graphic and dramatic statements about fasting in this chapter, the Lord makes it clear that when you fast, he is not just watching to see if you eat or not. The Lord is looking at the attitude of your heart and the manner of your conduct. In other words, your disposition and conduct as you fast are more important to God than the fact that you are fasting. So let me close by offering you several practical suggestions for what you should do as you fast.

**PRAY.**

I know this is the obvious thing to say. But you can never say it too much, as far as I am concerned. Pray as you fast.

- Praise and thank God in prayer as you fast.
- Confess your sins to God in prayer as you fast.
- Humble yourself before God in prayer as you fast.
- Give your needs, desires, and burdens to God in prayer as you fast.
- Seek God’s will and wisdom in prayer as you fast.

If your time of fasting is to be meaningful, give yourself to much prayer. Schedule time to pray as you fast. Use the time you would be eating to talk to God. When hunger begins to set in, pray to God for strength, focus, and diligence.

**GET INTO THE WORD OF GOD.**

Psalms 119:11 says: “I have stored up your word in my heart, that I might not sin against you.” Indeed, one way to break free of natural desires that strive to enslave us is to treasure the word of God above everything else. Fasting is good and powerful time to set your affections on the riches of God’s word. As you fast, spend time reading the word of God. Meditate on scripture so that it will take root in your heart and mind. Even memorize portions of scripture that will arm you for spiritual warfare. 1 Peter 2:1-3 say: “So put away all malice and all
deceit and hypocrisy and envy and all slander. Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up to salvation – if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good.” Use fasting as a time to prayerfully put away sinful things so that your appetite for the word of God will grow.

FIND A WAY TO SERVE OTHERS.

Isaiah 58:6-7 explicitly states one of the primary ways we practice fasting by proclaiming “Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh?” There is not a better time to empathize and sympathize with those on the margins of society or under the trials of life as we undergo the process of self-denial through fasting. Fasting makes us spiritually sensitive through the weakening of our flesh. As a result, periods of fasting coupled with service to our neighbors is truly liberating and eye-opening to the selfish blind spots we may have in our life.
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