

The Church at Myrtle Lake

The Power of Fasting

*“Presenting the Whole Counsel of God and the Truth of the Gospel
In the Time of Christ’s Soon Return”*



*Watchmen
On the Wall*

Lesson 1 Notes

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The King James
Bible is used
throughout this
study series.

Sunday
February 11, 2024

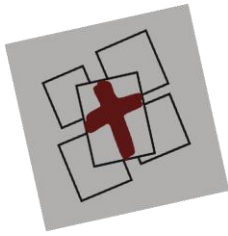
Webster’s Dictionary: Fast: abstain from all or some kinds of food or drink, especially as a religious observance.

In our culture, this is where we get the term “breakfast”, a shorthand way of saying: “breaking the fast”.

The observance of fasting is evident throughout the Scriptures. “For thousands of years, biblical fasting has been the practice of abstaining from food for spiritual purposes. Especially as Americans, if you’re used to a routine of “three meals a day,” going without food as a spiritual practice may sound strange. But fasting was a common religious practice when the Bible was written. Christian fasting is the hunger of, or a homesickness for God. Christian fasting is not only the spontaneous effect of superior satisfaction in God, it is also a chosen weapon against every force in the world that would take that satisfaction away.”¹

Does God Command Fasting? Ans: The one time God commanded the Israelites to observe a fast is in the book of Leviticus 16:29-31: *“And this shall be a statute for ever unto you: that in the seventh month, on the tenth day of the month, ye shall **afflict your souls**, and do no work at all, whether it be one of your own country, or a stranger that sojourneth among you: For on that day shall the priest make an atonement for you, to cleanse you, that ye may be clean from all your sins before the Lord. It shall be a*

¹ Cru (Campus Crusade for Christ) International in the U.S Website



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sabbath of rest unto you, and ye shall afflict your souls, by a statute for ever.”
(*Emphasis Added*) Note: “Afflicting your souls” is the equivalent of fasting.

This Commandment from God was part of the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur), one of the Feasts of the Lord, where once per year the high priest would enter the Holy of Holies and sprinkle blood on the altar (and the ground) to atone for the sins of the people for the year. *For details, reference our previous study series on the Feasts and Festivals of the Lord.*

Does God Command Fasting for Christians in the New Testament? Scripture does not command Christians to fast. God does not require or demand it of believers. At the same time, the Bible presents fasting as something that is good, profitable, and beneficial. The book of Acts records believers fasting before they made important decisions ([Acts 13:2; 14:23](#)). Fasting and prayer are often linked together ([Luke 2:37; 5:33](#)). Too often, the focus of fasting is on the lack of food. Instead, the purpose of fasting should be to take your eyes off the things of this world to focus completely on God. Fasting is a way to demonstrate to God, and to ourselves, that we are serious about our relationship with Him. Fasting helps us gain a new perspective and a renewed reliance upon God.

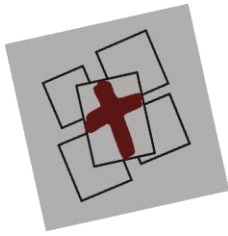
Although fasting in Scripture is almost always a fasting from food, there are other ways to fast. Anything given up temporarily in order to focus all our attention on God can be considered a fast ([1 Corinthians 7:1-5](#)). Fasting should be limited to a set time, especially when fasting from food. In short, by denying the flesh (our carnal selves) something we normally crave/desire, it quiets us down/turns down the noise in our lives in order that we may be able to hear the sometimes quiet whisper of the Holy Spirit.

- Extended periods of time without eating can be physically harmful.

- Fasting is not intended to punish the flesh, but to redirect attention to God.

- Fasting should not be considered a “dieting method”. The purpose of a biblical fast is not to lose weight, but rather to gain deeper fellowship with God. Anyone can fast, but some may not be able to fast from food (diabetics, for example).

- Everyone can temporarily give up something in order to draw closer to God.



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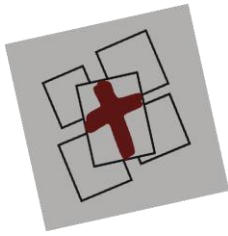
In the New Testament, Jesus teaches about fasting, suggesting that it is a personal choice rather than a requirement for all believers. For example, Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount: *“When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show others they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. But when 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”* - Matthew 6:16-18

This passage suggests that **proper** fasting is a personal spiritual discipline that is meant to be between an individual and God rather than a means of seeking attention or approval from others. Some use this verse to say that all Christians should fast since it says, **When you fast, not IF you fast.**

As often happens, we humans think we should add to, or pile onto what God commands. Fasting was one practice among many, where the Pharisees added to God’s original instruction (Day of Atonement). In Matthew 6, Christ deals with three commonly abused religious practices in Israel—giving, praying, and fasting. The religious leaders had made things that were good in and of themselves into bad things. The rituals of giving, praying, and fasting had become a form of self-worship. They did those acts to be seen and praised by men instead of to honor God and receive his approval.

In Jesus’ day, Pharisees made a habit of fasting twice a week, usually Monday and Thursday. In doing so, they put on airs, messed up their faces, put ashes on their heads and generally had a miserable, sullen, disheveled appearance in order to broadcast to the public that they were fasting. They (Pharisees) claimed that the reason was because Moses ascended and descended from Mount Sinai, where he received the law, on those days. However, those days just “happened” to be major market days, where people from the country would crowd the towns to buy and sell. As you can guess, those were the days the religious leaders had the biggest audience. Christ called them “hypocrites,” which was a word used of actors. Their fasting was about putting on a show and receiving applause. They had received their reward (the praise of people), but they would receive no reward from God. Therefore, Christ warned his disciples to not fast like them.

As a result, Jesus teaches about a **proper and an improper fast** in Matthew 6:1-16 *“Take heed that ye do not your alms before men, to be seen of them: otherwise ye have no reward of your Father which is in heaven. Therefore when thou doest thine alms, do not sound a trumpet before thee, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may have glory of men. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward.*



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*But when thou doest alms, let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth: That thine alms may be in secret: and thy Father which seeth in secret himself shall reward thee openly. And when thou prayest, thou shalt not be as the hypocrites are: for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and in the corners of the streets, that they may be seen of men. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward. But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly. But when ye pray, use not vain repetitions, as the heathen do: for they think that they shall be heard for their much speaking. Be not ye therefore like unto them: for your Father knoweth what things ye have need of, before ye ask him. After this manner therefore pray ye: Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil: For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen. For if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you: But if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses. **Moreover when ye fast, be not, as the hypocrites, of a sad countenance: for they disfigure their faces, that they may appear unto men to fast. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward.**” (Emphasis added)*

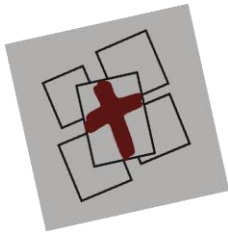
To expound further, in Matthew 6, Christ deals with three commonly abused religious practices in Israel—giving, praying, and fasting. The religious leaders had made things that were good in and of themselves into bad things. The rituals of giving, praying, and fasting had become a form of self-worship. They did those acts to be seen and praised by men instead of to honor God and receive his approval.

It is appropriate that right after teaching about proper prayer, Christ focuses on fasting. One can pray without fasting, but one cannot fast biblically without prayer. They go together. Therefore, in one sense, Christ is continuing his teaching on prayer.

Bottom line: Fasting is not a way to appear more spiritual than others. Fasting is to be done in a spirit of humility and a joyful attitude.

By taking our eyes off the things of this world, we can more successfully turn our attention to Christ.

- Fasting is not a way to get God to do what we want.
- Fasting changes us, not God.



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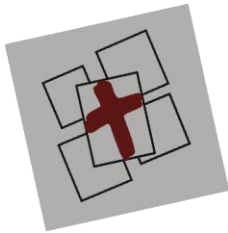
Next, we read about an episode pertaining to fasting and Christ's apparent rejection of the practice, at least in the eyes of the people. Both John the Baptist and the Pharisees were known for engaging in fasts ([Mark 2:18-20](#)). John's fasting fit with His role as the final old covenant prophet whose message centered on repentance. After all, there are several examples of fasting in the Old Testament where people abstained from food while they repented for sin ([Neh. 9:1-3](#); [Jonah 3](#)). In Luke 5: 33-39, we read *“And they said unto him, Why do the disciples of John fast often, and make prayers, and likewise the disciples of the Pharisees; but thine eat and drink? And he said unto them, Can ye make the children of the bridechamber fast, while the bridegroom is with them? But the days will come, when the bridegroom shall be taken away from them, and then shall they fast in those days. And he spake also a parable unto them; No man putteth a piece of a new garment upon an old; if otherwise, then both the new maketh a rent, and the piece that was taken out of the new agreeth not with the old. And no man putteth new wine into old bottles; else the new wine will burst the bottles, and be spilled, and the bottles shall perish. But new wine must be put into new bottles; and both are preserved. No man also having drunk old wine straightway desireth new: for he saith, The old is better.”*

Despite the onerous burdens the Pharisees created with their interpretations, the common people held a favorable view of them. So, it makes sense why they would question not only why Jesus' disciples did not fast as John's disciples did, but also why they did not fast as the Pharisees did.

Notice the Lord's response - He did not say that fasting was inherently improper. Neither did He condemn the Pharisees for their additional fasts, though He certainly would have stood firm against any attempt to mandate their additional fasts as something God required for everyone. Instead, we see Christ viewed their fasts as taking place during the wrong time. Likening Himself to a bridegroom, Jesus reminded them that no one in His day ever fasted during a wedding celebration, which could involve feasting for as many as seven days ([Mark 2:19-20](#)). A time for fasting would come—when the bridegroom was gone—but it was not yet. He was referring to His return to the Father's right hand after His resurrection.

Finally, don't miss the significance of Jesus' comparing Himself to the bridegroom. It is an implicit claim to deity, for the bridegroom of ancient Israel was God Himself ([Isa. 62:5](#)).

John Calvin comments that "fasting and prayers are adapted to sorrow and adversity." When the bridegroom was present, it was time to celebrate, and we will celebrate at the marriage supper of the Lamb when we see Jesus face-to-face ([Rev. 19:1-8](#)). Until then, while He is visibly absent, fasting is appropriate when we want to indicate the serious



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nature of particular prayers. While we wait for Christ's return, there are right times to fast.

Summary:

Fasting literally means “not to eat.” It is giving up food to focus on seeking God over some matter. It is to be so consumed with this matter that it becomes more important than food. Fasting, is a way to enhance our prayer life and our relationship with God.

Like all forms of prayer, fasting seeks God’s presence, wisdom, and guidance in our lives. But it is important to remember that God is not a vending machine or a magical genie in a bottle who grants wishes. Fasting should not be approached with the expectation that it will automatically produce a particular outcome or result.

According to the Bible, God does things when He wants to and how He wants to. He has perfect timing and knows what is best even when we think we know better. For that reason, while fasting can be a powerful tool for seeking God’s will and guidance, it is crucial to approach it with humility and recognize that we are not in control of the outcome.

Obviously, in the NT, we no longer practice the Day of Atonement, as Christ paid for our sins once and for all on the cross. With that said, though we are never commanded to fast in the NT, it is clear that Christ expected that believers would fast. In Matthew 6:16, he said, “when you fast,” implying that we would. Also, in [Matthew 9:15](#), Christ declared that while he was alive, his disciples had no reason to fast, but after his death, they would fast.

I’ll leave you with this: If Christ fasted, why shouldn’t we?

Next week, we’ll dive into Isaiah 58; explore four major types of fasts in the Bible as well as other fasts the Hebrews observed (not commanded by God, but observed by Jews nonetheless) and finish with some practical application.