

Fasting and praying

Pastor Wyley Jenkins

I will never forget when I first began to fast. Though I knew many Christians growing up, I never knew of any that fasted. I read the bible and puzzled at passages where people fasted. Why would they do that? Before our first child was born in Guatemala, my wife and I led many Bible studies there. One was with my father in law. He was an unbeliever who would move between saying he was an atheist and at other times a Catholic. I do not remember why or how, but we decided to fast and pray for his salvation. My wife and I worked together every day, so we would get away during lunch and pray for him instead of eating. That is the only time we fasted. I admit that I had never fasted before that time.

Two weeks after fasting for lunch and praying during that time, we received a phone call from her father: "I am in the hospital. I have broken both of my ankles. Please come." According to my wife, my father-in-law had never broken a bone in 60 years. We were curious to see what had happened. At the same time, we were hosting a Pastor from the USA, so we all went together to visit him. My father in law was so happy to see us. He told us what happened: "I was standing in front of the mirror brushing my teeth, and my ankles both broke." I said, "what do you mean? How did they break?" He said, "I was not jumping or carrying a heavyweight. I was not kicking anything or dancing. There is no reason. God just broke my ankles."

Before, I had argued with him. I had tried to convince him that God was real. We had and still have a great relationship, and I learned a valuable lesson. I am not enough to save people. That day I watched my father in law with two broken ankles begging God to forgive his sins. That was my first ever experience with fasting. As you might imagine, I have practiced it many times since then. Though I did not fully understand what fasting was, I had experienced the power of God working through simple prayers and a simple fast.

I do not know if you have practiced this spiritual discipline because you may not have ever been around it much. Fasting is a mysterious topic. This mystery has led to much confusion. It is one of the most misunderstood spiritual practices of all of Christianity. But while there might be confusion, there is also the chance to lose a spiritual practice with benefits. One missionary friend of mine says it like this: *“Fasting is a powerful weapon. What person in a war refuses a powerful weapon?”* We are all in a battle. We are battling for our souls and our children. We are battling to carry the name of Jesus into the darkness. We are battling to see the hungry feed and the home restored. If God has given us a weapon that can help us, then I want to use it. But there is also a great danger in fasting the wrong way. Today I want to teach two main things. I want you to know what fasting is and what it is not. For the sake of clarity, we will begin by saying what it is not.

❖ What fasting is not

I recognize that in our modern day culture when we speak of a spiritual “fast”, we may not all be talking about the same things. So I want to begin by saying that the fasting I speak of is biblical fasting. It might be helpful to briefly say five things biblical fasting is not.

1. It is not a way to earn God’s love or manipulate him.

Sometimes we think that we have to do dramatic things to get access to God. If we fast for ten days, God will see our suffering, and we will earn his love. That is fasting outside of Jesus. That is fasting outside of grace. That is ignoring his promises. Hebrews 4:14-16 says:

“Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. ¹⁵ For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. ¹⁶ Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.”

It does not say that when we are holy or have done enough good works, we can have confidence. It does not say a throne of judgment. We fast wrong because we do not understand all that Jesus is and has done for us.

There is a prevalent idea that fasting is a way to manipulate God. It is a spiritual hunger strike. When I was young, my older brothers would hold me down and force me to say they were the best brothers in the world. I would fight and wrestle, but eventually, it would be no good. They would get their way. When some people fast they try and hold God down. Two weeks ago I spoke of the dangerous idea that we can have a business relationship with God. Some people see fasting as a business bargaining tool. I will not eat, and you owe me a miracle. That is not Gospel-centered prayer and fasting. That is a negotiation. Fasting that knows what Jesus did on the cross does not try and twist God’s arm, it delights in the throne of grace. Jesus paid it all so we could have free access to God. Lets fast because we have access, not to earn it.

2. Fasting is not a special diet.

Today, we live in a nutritional culture. Some people say, “I’m on the Daniel fast,” or “I am on the Eden fast”. It has also become popular in our time to talk about the health value of fasting. We are told that when we fast, we can purge the toxins from your body. We are told that we can restore the clarity of our mind. I am not speaking of fasting in this way. There may be health benefits from fasting, but they are secondary side effects, not the primary goal.

3. Fasting is not a religious activity to make me feel more spiritual than others.

The religious people during the time of Jesus would fast and do everything possible to let everybody know they were fasting. They would put on a sad face. They would look weak and when someone would say, “are you ok?” they would say, “oh yes, I am just fasting.” They purposely drew attention to themselves so that others would ask and they could tell them about their spirituality. In this way, they felt righteous. They felt like they were examples. It was a kind of twisted religious high. Jesus condemned this kind of fasting because it was not focused on God. It was fake. It was for men and not for God the father.

4. Fasting is not something that is only for ancient Jewish people.

This mistake can come from two errors. First, many modern day people tend to think that everything practiced before the scientific era was ignorant or at the least useless. So when they see fasting, they believe it is no different from dancing in a circle to bring rain or leaving offerings for dead relatives. They think, “Fasting is an ancient practice; therefore fasting is useless today.” One Christian scholar calls this kind of thinking chronological snobbery. People who say that we should make no distinction based on race, gender, color, age or creed, while at the same time considering themselves better than all those who went before them, are a new kind of snob.

5. Fasting is not the punishing of the body to pay for my sin.

Still another group makes the mistake of thinking they can punish themselves and somehow pay for their sins. This is a universal belief. Whether it is people crucifying themselves or crawling on their knees to a temple in Asia, people want to pay for their sins. They invest massive amounts of energy to do this. In the gospel, Jesus dies to pay once for all for our sins. He puts forth the effort to pay for sins so we can invest our energy in having a relationship with our Father.

❖ What fasting is

So I have taken the time to show you a few errors in regards to fasting. But what is fasting? I want to begin with a basic definition of fasting: **Fasting is abstaining from food (or something I repeatedly and strongly desire) for spiritual purposes or goals.** In the eyewitness account of the first Christians, the

book of Acts, we see several examples of this kind of fasting and prayer. We know the believers were constantly in prayer. One passage particularly sticks out: Acts 13:1-4. Let's take a look at it.

“Now there were in the church at Antioch prophets and teachers, Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen a lifelong friend of Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. ² 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.’ ³ Then after fasting and praying, they laid their hands on them and sent them off. ⁴ So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia, and from there they sailed to Cyprus.”

In this account, we see that they were fasting and worshiping. Then after hearing the guidance of the Holy Spirit, through fasting and worship, they send the first recorded missionaries off with fasting and prayer. What were they doing and why were they doing it? To answer that we have to back up from the story and see fasting as part of the bigger picture of scripture. Throughout the Bible, fasting has many purposes. But when the fasting was directed toward God, it was to seek God for something specific or with intensity. Sometimes it was for forgiveness. Sometimes it was to ask for guidance. Sometimes it was to end social evils in the nation. Sometimes it was to dedicate themselves to a time of worship. Whatever the reason for seeking God, fasting always had a particular purpose, reason and goal.

1. The first step to biblically fasting is to know what you are fasting and seeking God for.

It might be your family. It might be to be closer to God. It might be for healing or salvation of a loved one. It might be to seek God for wisdom and his plan for your life. It could be that you are struggling to overcome sin or temptation. Maybe you do not hunger for God and want to ask him to give you that hunger and love again. Whatever the reason, fasting is a great way to empower your prayer life. So what does not eating have to do with prayer? Why did ancient Israelites fast? Let me tell you a story to explain. When my family lived on the Amazon River, we were in a small town. We had electricity 12 hours a day, most days. We could not count on a refrigerator, so cooking three meals a day was very time-consuming. We had to get the essential ingredients and then prepare them. We had to get them and eat them on the same day. In much of the ancient world, it was like that. Preparing and eating took up much of the day. Earning enough to buy food and then preparing it was what life was all about. Most men would work in the fields and women would do all the chores and cook. So fasting meant a break from the usual way of life. When they fasted, they stopped and focused on God. They had time to pray and meditate on his word.

2. Fasting is one of the most useful ways to make us focus.

Sometimes people think of fasting as only for a giant need. In Acts 13:1-4 they focused on worship; they focused on prayer for the missionaries leaving from their church. Following their example, we get a prayer request or goal and then we can focus on praying for that by fasting. Do you have trouble concentrating spiritually? Try fasting and see if it does not help you. So often we get distracted and cannot pray, or we forget to pray. Fasting can help us because it has an effect much like an alarm clock. Try this when you fast next. Let the hunger pains remind you of the purpose of prayer. Every time the

desire for food comes, use it as a reminder to pray. So even if you are distracted, the alarm clock of your own hunger will remind you and focus you in prayer.

3. In fasting, we set aside time to seek God.

The third thing in the story is that the church at Antioch set aside time to do this. It was not like they just accidentally fasted. They planned it. We must be intentional. We can fast many different ways. In the Bible, fasting was done in a group, and it was done individually. It was done in public and also in private. It was total or partial. It was every week or occasionally. It was for a short time, or it was for as long as 40 days. But what all those examples share in common is that they were intentional. In other words, whether in a group or done individually, it was planned.

4. We can fast from things other than food.

Today, one way to fast might be through turning off the mobile phone for a while. Much like we hunger for food, we crave our cell phone. When we don't have it, some of us feel that something is wrong. We crave it. So I can fast from my cell phone for a day or a week. I do this. I give my phone to my wife, and I ask her to filter the calls or texts. It is a great thing to do. In fasting, we use our desires to fight our desires. When I want to eat, I pray. When I want to pick up the phone, I pick up the Bible. When I want to check my Facebook, I check on those around me to see how they are. Fast from these types of distractions. Turn off the TV for a set time. Take a break from Facebook and Instagram for a set amount of time. I used to struggle convincing people to give up habits that did not help them grow. They would always argue that it was not sin and so God did not care. Then I heard someone preach Hebrews 12:1:

“Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us² looking to Jesus, the founder, and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.”

Here is the key. Not everything that slows you down is a bad thing. Many things are not in and of themselves evil, but they can slow us down. A TV is a box with electronic pieces. It is not evil, but so many people are weighed down by it because they spend so much time in front of it. Some things are weights, not sins. They keep us from looking to Jesus. Here is where fasting can help. When we fast and pray, there is the chance to grow by shedding weights, not only sins.

Many of you are spiritually stuck. You grew but have now slowed down. Maybe you do not even have a spiritual hunger. We all, at times, do not hunger for God. We are, often, our own greatest enemy. When we are not hungry for God, we can fast with the purpose of getting spiritually hungry. One Pastor says it this way: *“If we don't feel strong desires for the manifestation of the glory of God, it is not because you have drunk deeply and are satisfied. It is because we have nibbled so long at the table of the world. Our soul is stuffed with small things, and there is no room for the great.”* Our souls are so filled with so many things that there is no room for God. All around us are things trying to satisfy our souls. If you snack constantly, you have no room for dinner. The truth is many of us need to fast from all of the many things

that are sucking away our time and hearts. If we learn to deny these pangs of hunger for a time so that we can seek God, we will find him. When we find him, we will find the person that our hearts were truly created to be satisfied in.

Here is the secret of fasting. Fasting is not at all about getting God to do our will. Fasting is an intentional way to meet with God. It is a way to shed the weights of this world and run the race we are called to run. Your soul is hungry. Jesus said that he is the bread of life. I pray that through fasting you may experience God in a different way.

Discussion questions:

1. Have you ever fasted and prayed for something? Share your experience.
2. What things make it difficult for you to fast and pray? How could you overcome that obstacle?
3. What sticks out to you in Acts 13:1-4? Why?
4. How does Hebrews 4:14-16 encourage us to seek God?
5. Hebrews 12:1 speaks of laying aside every weight to run more effectively for Jesus. What things weigh us down that we could fast from?