

Spiritual Disciplines For the Christian Life

By Donald Whitney

Summary of Chapter 10: Fasting...For The Purpose of Godliness

“Fasting must always have a spiritual purpose—a God-centered purpose, not a self-centered one—for the Lord to bless our fast.” pg. 176

Edward Farrell, *Almost everywhere at all times fasting has held a place of great importance since it is closely linked with the intimate sense of religion. Perhaps this is the explanation for the demise of fasting in our day. When the sense of God diminishes, fasting disappears.*

Fasting, at its root, is hunger or homesickness for God. Fasting is a two-part story that both have root in Psalm 73:25-26. Half of fasting is that our physical appetite is lost because our homesickness for God is so intense. The other half is that our homesickness for God is threatened because our physical appetites are so intense. In the first, appetite is lost. In the second, appetite is resisted. (Summarized from John Piper, *A Hunger for God*)

Questions to Ponder:

Why does Jesus often refer to himself as bread and water (John 6:33-35)?

Do you hunger for God as much as you do for food?

Does a day without time with God affect you the way a day without food does?

I. Fasting EXPLAINED

The Bible defines fasting as the abstinence from food for spiritual purposes.

Note: Fasting in Scripture always focuses on food. But fasting does not need to be limited to food. We can fast from anything that takes our attention away from God. What things in our lives do we feel it would be impossible to give up? What things seem to take away our attention from God? Fasting is an issue of sacrificing something for the purpose of focusing on something greater.

1. **Normal fast** – abstaining from all food, but not from water

Matthew 4:2 – *“Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil. After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry.”*

2. **Partial fast** – limitation of the diet, but not from all food

Daniel 1:12 – *“Please test your servants for ten days: Give us nothing but vegetables to eat and water to drink.”*

3. **Absolute fast** – avoidance of all food and liquid

Ezra 10:6 - *Then Ezra withdrew from before the house of God and went to the room of Jehohanan son of Eliashib. While he was there, he ate no food and drank no water, because he continued to mourn over the unfaithfulness of the exiles.”*

Acts 9:9 – *“For three days he [Saul] was blind, and did not eat or drink anything.”*

4. **Supernatural fast** – God’s supernatural intervention into the bodily processes

Deut. 9:9 – *“When I went up on the mountain to receive the tablets of stone, the tablets of the covenant that the LORD had made with you, I stayed on the mountain forty days and forty nights; I ate no bread and drank no water.”*

1 Kings 19:8 – *“So he got up and ate and drank. Strengthened by that food, he traveled forty days and forty nights until he reached Horeb, the mountain of God.”*

5. **Private fast** – fasting in a way not noticed by others

Matthew 6:16-18 – *“When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting. I tell you the truth, 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 men 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.”*

6. **Congregational fasts**

Joel 2:15-16 – *“Blow the trumpet in Zion, declare a holy fast, call a sacred assembly. Gather the people, consecrate the assembly; bring together the elders, gather the children, those nursing at the breast. Let the bridegroom leave his room and the bride her chamber.”*

7. **National fasts**

2 Chronicles 20:3 – *“Alarmed, Jehoshaphat resolved to inquire of the LORD, and he proclaimed a fast for all Judah.”*

Nehemiah 9:1 – *“On the twenty-fourth day of the same month, the Israelites gathered together, fasting and wearing sackcloth and having dust on their heads.”*

8. **Regular fast** – under the Old Covenant on the Day of Atonement

Lev. 16:29-31 – *“This is to be a lasting ordinance for you: On the tenth day of the seventh month you must deny yourselves and not do any work—whether native-born or an alien living among you— because on this day atonement will be made for you, to cleanse you. Then, before the LORD, you will be clean from all your sins. It is a Sabbath of rest, and you must deny yourselves; it is a lasting ordinance.”*

9. **Occasional fasts** – special occasions or when the need arises

Matthew 9:15 – *“How can the guests of the bridegroom mourn while he is with them? The time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them; then they will fast.”*

II. Fasting is EXPECTED

A. Matthew 6:16-17

1. Jesus assumes that we will fast
2. Compared with Matthew 6:1-7

“And when you give...And when you pray....And when you fast...”

3. Negative Command – Do not be like the hypocrites.

Two problems with the Pharisees:

- They are seeking the wrong reward in their fasting.
- They are acting like they have a love for God when they do not.

4. Positive Command – Present yourself in such a way that people do not know you are fasting. We are fasting for the reward of God – not the reward of others.

Question: What would be the greatest reward for true fasting?

B. Matthew 9:14-15

1. “then they will fast” – that time is now!
2. Matthew 6 – should be observed in secret by the Father
3. Length determined by the Spirit

III. Fasting done for a PURPOSE

Whitney, *“Without a purpose, fasting can be a miserable, self-centered experience.”*

Ten Reasons for Fasting Given in Scripture

A. To Strengthen Prayer

Calvin, *“Whenever men are to pray to God concerning any great matter, it would be expedient to appoint fasting along with prayer.”*

1. Fasting does not change God's hearing as much as it changes our praying (sense of urgency).
 2. Nehemiah 1:4, Acts 13:3
Daniel 9:3, "So I turned to the Lord God and pleaded with him in prayer and petition, in fasting, and in sackcloth and ashes."
- B. To Seek God's Guidance
1. Judges 20 – Israel lost two battles to the Benjamites and did not gain the victory until they had prayed and fasted.
 2. Acts 14:23 – Paul and Barnabas prayed and fasted in order to seek God's guidance before appointing elders to the churches they had started.
- C. To Express Grief
1. 1 Samuel 20:34 – Jonathan grieved over father's sin
 3. Samuel 31:13
- D. To Seek Deliverance or Protection
1. 2 Chronicles 20:3-4
 2. Ezra 8:21-23
 3. Esther 4:16 – Esther's plea for protection for the Jews from King Xerxes
- E. To Express Repentance and the Return to God
1. Joel 2:12
"Even now," declares the LORD, "return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning."
 2. Jonah 3:5-8
 3. Fasting can be vain without repentance
- F. To Humble Oneself Before God
1. 1 Kings 21:27-29
"When Ahab heard these words, he tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and fasted. He lay in sackcloth and went around meekly."
 2. An expression of humility unlike the Pharisee (Luke 18:12)
- G. To Express Concern for the Work of God
1. Nehemiah 1:3-4
 2. Concern for His work so that our normal concern for food would seem secondary.
- H. To Minister to the Needs of Others
1. Isaiah 58:6-7
 2. Not just the giving up of food, but time for others as well.
- I. To Overcome Temptation and Dedicate Yourself to God
1. Matthew 4:1-11
 2. In times where you know you will be struggling – stress, loneliness, sickness...

J. To Express Love and Worship to God

1. Anna in Luke 2:37

“...and then was a widow until she was eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying.”

2. Zechariah 7:5 – Before we fast we must have a purpose, a God-centered purpose. *“Ask all the people of the land and the priests, ‘When you fasted and mourned in the fifth and seventh months for the past seventy years, was it really for me that you fasted?’”*

Other Important Points

1. **God’s greatest enemies are often God’s gifts.**

Often times the good things God has given us take our attention away from God himself. Good things can replace our appetite for God. Mark 4:19

2. **Fasting must not be limited to food.**

Fasting can involve anything that can be a substitute for God.

3. **Fasting is about waging war on an inward and outward battle.**

Inwardly we are fighting for our own desires and affections. We are waging war on our own appetites. The outward battle is our desire for kingdom advancement around the world.

IV. APPLICATION

A. Will you confess and repent of any fear of fasting?

B. Will you fast as the Holy Spirit directs?

C. Will you plan a fast of dedication to express your willingness to fast from now on?

D. I have prayed about fasting and sense the Lord leading me to.