

Helpful Hints When Fasting

What is fasting?

nesteia (Grk. *fasting, a fast*): Fasting was a regular practice of first century Judaism and was originated on a deeper level to the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur, Lev 23: 26-32). This is why the Day of Atonement is referred to as "the Fast" in Acts 27:9. This day was part of the culture and community. Jesus says in Matthew 6:16, "when you fast," not "if you fast," indicating that Jews practiced fasting as a way of life. It was not uncommon in Jesus' day for a Rabbi to direct his disciples to fast (Matt 9:14), but Jesus also emphasized the need for purity and simplicity of motive for fasting (which is covered below). Here are a few examples of fasting in the Bible: *in times of war: Judges 20:26; for repentance: Jonah 3:5, Daniel 6:18; for courage and wisdom: Esther 4:3, 16 and 9:31; in times of grief: 1 Samuel 31:13, 1 Chronicles 10:12; in times of distress: 2 Samuel 1:11-12; 3:35*

Establish your motive for fasting

So much of our thinking is ruled by the self-centered principle, "What do I get out of it?" that it is easy to place emphasis on fasting for personal benefit – for power, for physical healing, or for specific answers to prayer. Seeking these benefits is not wrong, but when fasting we must first ensure that our underlying motives are right. God is not merely concerned with *what* we do, but *why* we do it. A right act may be robbed of its value in the sight of God if done with a wrong motive (Is 58:3-5). It is deeply significant that in His first statement on the subject of fasting, Jesus dealt primarily with the question of motive (Matt 6:16-18). The fasts undertaken in the above passages, as well as those undertaken by the Pharisees in the New Testament, were motivated by self-interest. It was against this that Jesus lifted up His voice in the Sermon on the Mount, telling His followers that they were not to be like the hypocrites in their fasting. The Pharisees paraded their piety for the applause of men, making sure that people knew they were fasting. They were not ministering to God, but to the pride of their own hearts. Fasting must be done unto the Father who sees in secret, avoiding the desire for the praise of man or for the gratification of personal ambitions (Matt 6:18). Our basic motive in fasting should always be the glory of God.

Who has called you?

In Isaiah 58, the classic Scripture on the subject of fasting, God reminds His people that the acceptable fast is the one that He has chosen. Fasting, like prayer, must be God-initiated and God-ordained if it is to be effective. Prevailing prayer begins with God; He places upon us a burden by the Spirit and we respond to that burden. When God chooses our fast He will not have to ask us as He asked His people long ago, "When you fasted...was it really for me that you fasted?" (Zech 7:5) All this does not, of course, relieve us of our

responsibility. On our part, there must be the recognition of the rightness and need of fasting, the willingness for the self-discipline involved, and the exercise of heart before God; but in the final analysis, the initiative is His. He will give you all the power you need to complete the fast.

During a fast, focus is critical. You will become painfully aware of how noisy, chaotic and cluttered your world is. This is because fasting will force you to slow down. The following practical principles will assist and encourage you to fast with the least number of distractions:

1. Tell the least number of people possible that you are fasting.

Fasting is an exciting event and it is easy to tell everyone that you are on a fast, especially when you begin to experience the incredible benefits. Keeping your fast between you and God will help you stay focused in times of temptation.

2. Feast on the Word and meditate.

Just think of all those lost hours of time spent on radio, television and newspapers. During your fast, make a diet adjustment: saturate yourself in His Word. Use every available means possible – tapes, books, videos, Christian television, but most of all, the Bible. We are not ignorant of the power of media to change peoples' thinking. Can you imagine the power the creative Words of God will have on your thinking if you begin to fill yourself with His spiritual food? "But his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night" (Ps 1:2). Through meditation, we wrestle down the negative thoughts and emotions that plague us in our daily lives. Take a Scripture or a single nugget of truth and meditate on it all day. This will transform your thinking, which will transform your attitudes and actions. Once you've cut off the flesh, you fill the void with things to feed your spirit: prayer, the Word of God and worship. These things need to replace whatever it is you are fasting. Fasting is the one discipline Jesus promised would bring about supernatural results.

3. Get alone with God.

Fasting and solitude have always gone hand in hand. Jesus was led by the Holy Spirit, away from the crowds and into the desert. (Luke 5:15)

4. Sleep.

Getting enough sleep is essential during a fast. The last thing you need during the difficult part of your fast is to be tired and overworked. Fasting is worth the investment of time and energy, and that requires a balance of rest.

Helpful resources:

Bill Bright, *The Transforming Power of Fasting and Prayer*

John Piper, *A Hunger for God: Desiring God through Fasting and Prayer*

Ronni W. Floyd, *The Power of Prayer and Fasting*