

Theme: Biblical fasting is a call to not only abstain from food, but to feast upon the Word and will of God.

I. Look at the Size of the Portions!

- A. Philomena movie
- B. She is concerned her son will be obese - because of how much Americans eat
- C. Europe had Gothic cathedrals - we have Golden Arches
- D. Is the ancient practicing of fasting relevant?
- E. How do we apply fasting in our lives today?

II. What Do We Mean By Fasting?

A. Definition

Fasting is the voluntary act of abstaining from food for a period of time for a spiritual purpose.

- 1. There are many types of fasts, but all include abstaining from some or all foods for a period of time
- 2. Sometimes only certain foods - as in Daniel 10
- 3. Sometimes just solid food - allowing all liquids
- 4. Sometimes only water is allowed
- 5. Sometimes for very short period - not even water

B. What we do not mean by fasting

- 1. Fasting prior to medical procedures
- 2. Fasting for political purposes, to try and protest or assert pressure on higher authorities to attain certain desired ends

- 3. Fasting as a form of dieting to control weight
- 4. These are not what Scripture means by fasting

III. Fasting In the History of God's People

A. Fasting among God's people in Scripture

- 1. Moses, David, Elijah, Esther, Daniel, Anna
- 2. A regular prescribed practice for God's people
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 — ³⁰ 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. ³¹ It is a sabbath of rest, and **you must yourselves; it is a lasting ordinance.** Lev. 16:29–31
- 3. Fasting was called for on special occasion as well
Declare a holy **fast**; call a sacred assembly. Summon the elders and all who live in the land to the house of the Lord your God, and cry out to the Lord. Joel 1:14

B. Jesus began His public ministry with an extended fast

- Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil. ² After **fasting** forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. Matthew 4:1–2
- 1. He has just come out of the waters of baptism
 - 2. Immediately after this we see Jesus begin to preach (Matthew 4:17)
 - 3. Jesus is not fasting for political purposes - he is by Himself in the wilderness

4. This is a spiritual practice for Jesus
5. Jesus had grown up doing this as an Israelite
6. He obviously fasted regularly - He could not have done a 40 day fast otherwise!

C. Fasting continued in the NT church - and beyond

1. Fasting continued in the NT church

In the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen (who had been brought up with 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." Acts 13:1–2

- a. They were seeking God - and fasting was part of this
 - b. This is the birth of the mission to the Gentiles!!!
2. Fasting continued down through church history
 3. President Lincoln declared a public day of fasting!
 4. But fasting fell on hard times in last 150 years

D. Why did fasting cease to be a regular practice?

1. There were many abuses in the middle ages - asceticism
 - a. Asceticism said to punish our evil flesh
 - b. Many abuses in the church that had to be cleared away
 - c. But there were abuses with Scripture, prayer, giving - and we still do those!

2. It is simply out of step with our culture of 'more'

"In a culture where the landscape is dotted with shrines to the Golden Arches and an assortment of Pizza Temples, fasting seems out of place, out of step with the times." - Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*
3. What seems more unnatural to our culture of satisfying every craving with overabundance than to refuse our physical hunger pangs?
4. But Scripture and history testify that fasting is part of a vibrant walk with Christ

IV. Recovering the Feast of Fasting

A. Fasting is about much more than abstaining from food

1. Less is more - not just abstaining, but abstaining from one thing so we can give ourselves to another
 - a. Martha is called to stop other things to hear Jesus
 - b. We cut out good things so we can give more focus to the best
2. Fasting is abstaining from food to feast on God

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?' ⁶ And when you were eating and drinking, were you not just feasting for yourselves? Zechariah 7:5–6

 - a. Their fasting was for themselves and their ends rather than for God
 - b. Whatever we do - eating or fasting - must be done for God and His glory - It is really all about Him!!!
3. If we do this - fasting becomes a feast!

B. Fasting to feast on the Word of God

Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil. ² After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. ³ The tempter came to him and said, "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread." ⁴ Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'" Matthew 4:1-4

1. Jesus has fasted for 40 days - and is hungry!
2. So Satan tempts Him with food - an old ploy!
3. But Jesus replies about the feast of God's Word
4. Jesus has not just been skipping food - He has been feasting on the Word of God
5. When we fast, we do not take more time to work or clean - we spend more time in the Word
6. Hunger pains remind us that we need God's Word more than food
I have not departed from the commands of his lips; I have treasured the words of his mouth more than my daily bread. Job 23:12
7. A fast without more of the Word is just less food, but when we fast from food to feast on the Word LESS IS MORE!!

C. Fasting to feast on the will of God

Meanwhile his disciples urged him, "Rabbi, eat something." ³² But he said to them, "I have food to eat that you know nothing about." ³³ Then his disciples said to each other, "Could someone have brought him food?" ³⁴ "My food," said Jesus, "is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work. John 4:31-34

1. Jesus had been very tired and hungry (verse 6)
2. But telling the Good News to the woman at the well had energized Him!
3. We can feast on the will of God rather than food!
4. This has deep resonance in Isaiah 58
'Why have we fasted,' they say, 'and you have not seen it? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you have not noticed?' "Yet on the day of your fasting, you do as you please and exploit all your workers. ⁴ Your fasting ends in quarreling and strife, and in striking each other with wicked fists. You cannot fast as you do today and expect your voice to be heard on high. ⁵ Is this the kind of fast I have chosen, only a day for a man to humble himself? Is it only for bowing one's head like a reed and for lying on sackcloth and ashes? Is that what you call a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord? ⁶ "Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Isaiah 58:3-6
 - a. The people had skipped food - but not fasted
 - b. Less eating - but not more of the will of God
 - c. Fasting should be tied with prayer for God's will to be done - in us & how we treat others
 - d. Fasting should be tied with prayer for God's will to be done for others
5. When we fast we pray & work for God's will
6. Helps us to learn to resist & center on God in every area
7. Hunger pains remind us that God's will is not done - in us and around the world

8. Hunger pains remind us that the poor are oppressed and hungry
9. Hunger reminds us that we are anointed to set the oppressed free!
10. A fast without more of the will of God is just less food, but when we fast from food to feast on the will of God LESS IS MORE!!

V. Applying the Word - This Week and Beyond

A. Applying the Word - this week

1. We are hosting winter relief - echoes of Isaiah 58!
2. I want to encourage everyone who can to fast at least part of a day
 - a. Spend extra time in the Word reading Isaiah 58
 - b. Spend time in prayer - God reach these precious folks
 - c. When hunger arises - pray, reflect on Isaiah 58
 - d. Less food, more God, more service to neighbor

B. Applying the Word - this spring - and beyond!

1. In many ways fasting is a metaphor for Less Is More
2. We will be observing Lent this spring
3. Not about asceticism, less M&M's
4. Lent - Less of the good, for more of the best
5. We will encourage everyone to fast each week
 - a. Less time eating = more time in Word & prayer

- b. We will be reading the Gospels together
- c. We will practice Less Is More leading to Easter

C. Applying the Word - practical tips for fasting

1. Start small if you have never fasted
 - a. Just do a fast from food, and drink juice
 - b. Do this for two full meals and then break the fast
2. Practice this regularly as we head into Lent
3. Slowly build by removing all juice & increasing time
4. Specifically set aside meal time for reading & prayer
5. Fast from food to feast on God's Word & will!

The Feast of Fasting

Matthew 4:1-4

January 11, 2015

Prayer & fasting for Winter Relief

2 Thessalonians 2:16-17

Teaching keywords: fasting; God's will & guidance; word of God; mercy ministry; self-control; confession & repentance; legalism; means of grace

16 May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope, 17 encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and word. 2 Thessalonians 2:16-17

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