

Can And Should Christians Fast?

- Last Sunday, I presented a lesson about “Lent”, a season of abstinence and fasting.
- While the season of Lent is not found in scripture, there is something to be said about abstinence and fasting in one’s life.
- In that lesson, I briefly addressed fasting.
- Today, I would like to dig a little deeper and notice how the Bible addresses this subject.

What is Fasting?

- To abstain from food (or something) for a specified period of time
- People fast for many reasons - troubling circumstances, lack of food, health reasons, or as a spiritual discipline.
- Spiritual discipline is our focus.

Fasting in scripture

- In the Old Testament
Leviticus 16:29-31 - the only annual observance that may have commanded fast
- the day of atonement
(**cf. Acts 27:9**)
- Clearly, the Jews associated fasting with that day.
- But the word used is *afflict* (**Numbers 29:7**)

Fasting in scripture

- In the Old Testament
Leviticus 16:29-31 - Yom Kippur
- The word *afflict* means to look down upon or abase (oneself). To torment (cf. **1 Cor. 9:27** - I *discipline* my body...)
- At times, humble yourself - **Ezra 8:21**, **Psalms 35:13**.
- Fasting is not specified in the texts, but it has been a part of Jewish observance for millennia. The text is about not working!

Fasting in scripture

- In the Old Testament
- Others fasted - Moses, David, Daniel, Nehemiah, Esther, etc.
During times of great mourning or repentance.
Such were either by personal choice or event driven

Fasting in scripture

- At some point, Jews (likely well intentioned) made it a part of their laws - a weekly ritual (twice a week -e.g., **Luke 18:11-12**)
- In time it would become binding by tradition or a judge of spiritual character.
- Such an environment can lead to superficial actions (**Zechariah 7:5-7**)

Fasting in scripture

- In the New Testament
- Jesus fasted - 40 days in the wilderness (**Matthew 4:1-2, Luke 4:1-2**)
- He was asked why his disciples did not fast (**Matthew 9:14-15**). He responded there would be a time when circumstances might warrant fasting.
“Then they will fast.”

Fasting in scripture

- In the New Testament
- Brethren praying for Paul and Barnabas (**Acts 13:3**)
- Appointing elders (**Acts 14:21-23**)
- Paul after blinded (**Acts 9:9ff**)

Matthew 6:16-18

When you fast...

- Jesus acknowledged a time of fasting, especially where the Jews were concerned.
His point was that IF and when you fast, this is how you are to that.
- His message focused on a proper attitude.

Matthew 6:16-18

Do not be like the hypocrites

- Pretenders. They made a show of their fasting. Having a sad look, torn clothes or sackcloth, possibly even powdering their face to look ashen.
- **Cf. Luke 18:12** - Mondays and Thursdays - the market days where they could gain attention
“They have their reward”

Matthew 6:16-18

But you, when you fast, anoint your head...

- Clean yourself up and wear what you normally would. If you are out and about, act NORMAL. Do NOT draw attention to yourself!
- - 1) It is a choice
 - 2) It is between you and God...

Matthew 6:16-18

So that you do not appear to be fasting...

- This phrase would include your facial expressions, attitudes and conversations (are you bragging about what you do?)

Matthew 6:16-18

Let it be in secret and God...will reward you openly

- Again, God knows your heart! He knows your attitude and intentions. This is NOT to say if one finds out it is wrong, but it IS about motives!

Should we fast today?

There is NO command to ritually fast!

- Nor is there an example of a congregation making such a public ceremony.
- Such was not even found in the LOM (except possibly the day of atonement)

Should we fast today?

There is NO command to ritually fast!

- It is something you CAN do! As a choice, not an obligation!
- Jesus did not condemn it and did fast
- And it can be beneficial with proper motives and reasons.

Should we fast today?

What are proper motives?

- It was done in times of distress -
- Israel fasted at threat of war.
Judges 20:26, 2 Chronicles 20:3, etc.
- Elijah fleeing Jezebel (**1 Kings 19:8**)

Should we fast today?

What are proper motives?

- It was done in times of distress -
- Nehemiah after hearing of Jerusalem's condition - **Nehemiah 1:4**
- Sometimes standing for truth brought unintended fasting -

2 Corinthians 6:5, 11:27

Should we fast today?

What are proper motives?

- Seeking God's protection - Ezra before traveling (**Ezra 8:21-23**)
- Times of repentance
 - Israel in days of Samuel - **1 Samuel 7:6**
 - Ahab (**1 Kings 21:27**)
 - David - **2 Samuel 12:16**
 - Daniel (**9:3-5**) with and for the people

Should we fast today?

What are proper motives?

- Dealing with temptations- Jesus in wilderness (**Matthew 4:1ff**)
- Before entering some important spiritual work - sending out Paul and Barnabas (**Acts 13:1-3**)

Should we fast today?

What are proper motives?

- As they were appointing elders (**Acts 14:23**)
- **Isaiah 58:1-8** - acceptable and unacceptable fasting to YHWH.
- The point - serious spiritual occasions - **where we need greater focus on God!**

How can fasting today make you better?

- It is about self-control (**Galatians 5:22-23, 2 Peter 1:6, Acts 24:25, etc.**). There is no better way to learn self-control than deprivation
- It is about sacrifice - giving up something of value for God's sake (**Romans 12:1-2, Hebrews 13:15**)

How can fasting today make you better?

- It is about awareness - such can make you more aware of your personal spiritual needs
- It is about drawing closer to God -
James 4:8
cf. Matthew 5:6 - hungering after righteousness

How can fasting today make you better?

- **NOTE:** The same principles apply to things other than food (not eating or diminishing your intake).
- Abstinence is the same principles.
- We may want to give up social media, television, certain foods, some activity, etc. for a time, and devote that time to God. **Colossians 3:1-2**

IF and when you fast:

- **Remember, it is a choice.** - And associated with a time of great need (don't make it a ritual, for ritual's sake)
- **Make it private!** Such reflects your true motives. It is about you and God (**cf. 1 Corinthians 7:5**)

IF and when you fast:

- **Make sure you have time** - let it be planned and something done with little distraction.
- **Do NOT harm yourself!** Drink water, etc.
- **What will you do with your time?**
Substitute your meal with prayer, Bible study, spiritual reflection
cf. 1 Corinthians 7:5, John 4:34)

What are you willing to
give up for Him?



Let us pray!