

**Introduction:** In this prayer series we have looked at prayer and discovered that it involves listening, responding, making commitments, petitioning and this week we want to address the issue of prayer and fasting. What is fasting and why should we be concerned to practice it?

**Definition:** The act of total or partial abstinence from food for a limited time, usually for religious purposes. Fasting in a spiritual context is to abstain from any natural appetite for spiritual advancement.

**Nearly all religions practice some form of fasting** for a variety of reasons.

- Jainism prescribes regular fasting as a way of life—in order to achieve increasing levels of detachment from material things—culminating ultimately in death by voluntary fasting. Sounds like a super fun religion.
- In primal religions, fasting is a way to appease or manipulate the gods into answering prayer.
- Ancient Greeks practiced fasting in order to divine messages from the gods in consultation with the oracles.
- Some native American tribes practice fasting in association with acquiring their special spirit guide in the Totem.
- Islam practices fasting during Ramadan from sunrise to sunset.

Judaism practiced fasting in association with Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement (Lev. 16:29-31; Num. 29:7-11). Additionally, the Jews practiced occasions of public and private fasting and prayer for a variety of reasons and contexts.

Two facts about fasting:

***The Bible doesn't give us a lot of direction about fasting.*** At best, we have some **parameters** and some **examples** from which we can draw general principles. But, the NT does not speak that much about it.

***Fasting is nearly always mentioned with prayer.***

**So why is it important?**

**Thesis/Main Idea:** Fasting and prayer is a mode of spiritual conditioning which can greatly enrich our communion with God. So, I want to show you three things today.

**Transition: We're going to answer three questions today:** (1) How should I not fast? (2) What does fasting and prayer do? (3) Practical ways to fast in order to maximize your spiritual conditioning in the faith.

## 1. How not to fast.

### a. We are not to fast as a public display of our devoutness.

Matt. 6:16-18 “When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces **to show others** they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. <sup>17</sup> But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, <sup>18</sup> so that it will not be obvious to others 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.”

**The Jews practiced ceremonial fasting**, usually associated with the major holiday, Yom Kippur. Jesus denounces the Pharisees’ practice which extended that ceremonial function into everyday life for the sake of appearing religious and devoted.

**The ceremonial use of fasting passed out of Christianity. The NT church did not reinstitute fasting as a ceremony until** about the 4<sup>th</sup> century when the Monastic movement replaced martyrdom in the church. **The monks morbid fascination with martyrdom led them to practice extreme forms of ceremonial fasting** that made its way into the church again.

But Jesus seems to expressly forbid this type of fasting.

Fasting is not to show others that we’re mourning, or praying, or being devout. It’s an intense and personal mode of prayer which is to be directed towards God and no other.

**Let’s look at a passage where Jesus shows us the way when it comes to fasting and prayer.**

**Matthew 4:1-11** Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. <sup>2</sup> And after fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. <sup>3</sup> And the tempter came and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.” <sup>4</sup> But he answered, “It is written, “‘Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’” <sup>5</sup> Then the devil took him to the holy city and set him on the pinnacle of the temple <sup>6</sup> and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down, for it is written, “‘He will command his angels concerning you,’ And “‘On their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone.’” <sup>7</sup> Jesus said to him, “Again it is written, ‘You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.’” <sup>8</sup> Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. <sup>9</sup> And he said to him, “All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.” <sup>10</sup> Then Jesus said to him, “Be gone, Satan! For it is written, “‘You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve.’” <sup>11</sup> Then the devil left him, and behold, angels came and were ministering to him.

## 2. What does fasting do?

### a. Fasting focuses the spirit on the God who provides instead of God's provision.

Jesus modeled prayer as a time of total dependence on the Heavenly Father even for the most basic needs of the human life. This is where the discipline of fasting comes in. **Temporarily abstaining from food focusses the mind on God and his commands; it resets our desires and priorities to Him.** Jesus, when tempted to turn stones to bread simply responds "man does not live on bread alone..." he needs something beyond the provision and he needs the God who supplies and sustains us.

**Jesus is led to this desert by the Spirit, for the purpose of being tempted by the devil.** The purpose of that trial is prove his sonship through obedience, and Satan's purpose is to get him (like he did with Adam in the Garden and Israel in the wilderness) to disobey a direct command from the Heavenly Father.

**But Jesus passes the test. And because of this Christ is our focus.**

**Heb. 12:1-2** "Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, <sup>2</sup>fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith."

**The man, the image-bearer, cannot make it if all he does is subsist on this world. He needs more. The man needs communion with God—to fix the gaze his heart on Jesus Messiah.**

**2 Corinthians 4:18** "So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal."

**Fasting and prayer has a way of** recalibrating us, refocusing the eyes of our inner man to God as the ultimate source and provider of all things.

**When we fix our eyes on Christ, we widen our vision of God, and we enlarge our appetite for Him. Ps 34:8 "taste and see the Lord is good"**

**b. Fasting and prayer helps to bring our natural appetites and desires under control.**

*Everything that Satan tempts Jesus with in the wilderness is a legitimate appetite or desire.*

**He is hungry and his body needs sustenance**—so why not “bling” magically turn some inedible rocks into delicious, sumptuous hot bread? You see, fasting has given Jesus a vulnerability that he would not normally have.

**Jesus is destined to be vindicated as the true Son of God by having the Father Rescue him.**

So why wait for Him to rescue you in resurrection from the dead. Just show everyone now, before the appointed time—and base jump from the temple into the canyon allowing the Heavenly Father to catch you and prove you are the true Son?

**Jesus was born to be king, that’s what the title “Christ” or “Messiah” means.** Anointed king! So why not take a shortcut, bow down and worship the devil and receive all the kingdoms of the world? **It is a temptation of expedience—a shortcut to God’s purpose for him. But Jesus knows his crown is woven from thickets and thorns, and there will be no kingdom without the Cross. The Kingdom comes through the cross not without it.**

**You see, the nature of the temptation is that Satan always pulls on legitimate desires and needs.** But he tempts us to meet those needs or fulfill those purposes that would contradict God’s direct command or the Spirit’s leading.

**Illus.** **The piles of bagels and boxes of Pizza at Planet Fitness.** Every time I walk by that table and refuse to eat 600 calories of pizza between machines—I am strengthening my resolve of self-control. I am not there to eat. I am there to not eat. I am in that gym to focus my attention and to strengthen my resolve to live in mastery of my appetites.

Satan’s specialty is to tempt you, to buffet you while you’re trying to do the right thing. Led by the Spirit to God’s will for your life—and it turns out that you’re suffering and lack and Satan is right there to set the table, to tempt you to disobey God’s Word.

***Be forewarned and be forearmed.***

**c. Fasting and prayer can prepare us for the work God has for us.**

Notice that his time of fasting and suffering happens right before he is launched into 3 ½ years of undeniably powerful ministry.

**Illus. Now, every time I've reached a monumental change in life. A direction in life that I felt the Spirit wanting me to go—I have always come at that through a period of fasting and prayer.**

**Before I became the senior pastor here** I was experiencing what I can only call an existential crisis. I had a friend at Moody Northwest who wanted me and encouraged me to seek a potential full time professor gig there—in Theology. And I had recently enrolled in a PhD program in order to head in that *more academic direction in life*.

**I also felt my spirit thrashing around seeking God's will**—I knew he wanted me to move on from the church where I was serving—I absolutely did not want to venture out. But I felt so strongly that God was calling me to leap that I began to fast and seek him in earnest.

God spoke to me as clear as a bell. “You are not going to be a professor. I have called you to my beloved church.” **The clarity was glorious and heartbreaking and exhilarating. But the process leading up to that calling was turbulent.**

***The intensity of our testing is commensurate with the consequence of our calling.*** Great works for God do not come to unprepared vessels. We voluntarily submit ourselves to the intensity of seasons of prayer and fasting in order to better prayer for a greater work the Lord would have us do, or a greater usefulness and capacity.

**The next principle we learn about fasting in Scripture is that...**

**d. Fasting and prayer can help us to express a repentant heart more fully.**

**Neh. 9:1-2** On the twenty-fourth day of the same month, the Israelites gathered together, fasting and wearing sackcloth and putting dust on their heads. <sup>2</sup>Those of Israelite descent had separated themselves from all foreigners. They stood in their places and confessed their sins and the sins of their ancestors.

Repentance is an about face. It means to sincerely turn from sin to righteousness.

The people in Nehemiah's day weren't just fasting for God to help them. They were fasting as an act of repentance. Fasting can help us to express our deepest regret over choices made.

And notice they were also fasting and repenting for the sins of their predecessors. Acknowledging generational sin and rebellion against the Lord.

**e. Fasting and prayer can help us to mourn deeply the losses of life.**

**Matt. 9:14-15** Then John's disciples came and asked him, "How is it that we and the Pharisees fast often, but your disciples do not fast?" <sup>15</sup> Jesus answered, "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.

Notice Jesus' answer to the question. They are asking about the disciples' fasting habits, while they wait for the Messiah to come. Jesus' response is that the Bridegroom has arrived—and there is no need to mourn will he is here.

His second answer speaks to our situation. Today we fast and pray as we await him.

**Titus 2: The grace of God has appeared to teach us to say "no" to ungodly passions 13. While we await the blessed hope—the glorious appearing of our Great God and Savior—Jesus Christ.**

We see a world spinning into moral madness.

We see a political climate that is getting more divided by the day. And everyone is at fault. We see all of this and as believers, as citizens of an unseen realm, we pine for the Master's return. Our hearts ache for his rule, and we mourn his absence until the blessed hope gloriously appears.

Fasting is, in a sense a state of mourning. We may mourn and weep and forsake basic needs for losses in this life as well.

**Neh. 1:4** "When I heard these things, I sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven."

**2 Sam. 12:16** "David pleaded with God for the child. He fasted and spent the nights lying in sackcloth on the ground. <sup>17</sup> The elders of his household stood beside him to get him up from the ground, but he refused, and he would not eat any food with them."

**Fasting** was associated with mourning in Jewish culture, and this is why Jesus answered John's disciples the way he did.

**Illus. My mom, after my sister's passing—she died in a car accident in front of our home when she was only about 22 months old.**

**For weeks, mom couldn't eat, she could hardly breathe.** It hurt to be alive. And the pressure of carrying it was too much.

**She went into** the hallway bathroom to end her life. And just about the moment when she was going to go through with it, she told me that I knocked on the door and asked if she was ok. And she snapped out of her despair—and resolved to take care of me and my brother.

Recap: Fasting **refocuses the spirit** on the God who provides.

It can give us an opportunity to **bring our natural desires** under Christ's Lordship.

**It can prepare us**, along with seasons of intense testing—for a greater work that God wants us to do.

And it can help us to express both our **repentance of sin**, and our **deepest grief**.

### 3. How to fast?

**a. Partial fasting**—Fasting something that is a natural appetite, praying and devoting ourselves more fully to Jesus. **Daniel and his friends practiced this—they refused to partake of the food sacrificed to Babylonian gods.** **This could be anything that is in danger of becoming an idol in our lives. Internet, social media, the cult of leisure, and even certain types of food like sugar and junky carbs.** You ask “well how do I identify this?” Sure, you should pray and seek the Spirit's leading. But, also use wisdom. Anything you can't give up, you just won't give up.

**b. Intermittent daily fasting**—This is my preferred way to fast. Intermittent fasting is abstaining from food daily for a window of time. For me it's between about 7pm to about noon the next day. I've found that the window of time between 6am-1:30pm is when my mind is most active and my spirit more attuned to God's Spirit.

**c. Full day fasting**—Occasional full day fasting is 24 hours—nothing.

**d. Limited extended fasting**—this often happens through prolonged seasons of suffering and is very natural when there is an ongoing anguish of the heart.