

**TITLE:** A “FAST” SERMON

**TEXT:** MATTHEW 6:16-18

**INTRO:** Fasting is a topic that gets very little attention in the church today. It can be a touchy subject among some. Some are 100% for it, taking it to ascetic extremes (unnecessarily depriving the body – which was *never* God’s intention for fasting). Some are 100% opposed to it (either because they just don’t want to do it, or because they see it as something practiced by liberal congregations or denominations). But it *is* biblical (OT & NT), and therefore needs to be addressed.

**I. FASTING IN THE OLD TESTAMENT (Hebrew “Tsum”–“to abstain from food”):**

- A.** Commanded only 1 day per year (Day of Atonement) - **Lev 16:29-31**– “*ye shall afflict your souls*” (a reference to fasting – **Ez 8:21; Isa 58:5; Ps 69:10**). The ‘affliction’ is of the soul, not the body. The Hebrew word (‘tsum’) means “to abstain from food,” but clearly the purpose is spiritual, not physical. (Different types of fasts: total abstinence, partial abstinence, etc.).
- B.** Examples of OT fasting done at times *other than* the Day of Atonement (almost always accompanied by prayer):
1. **Exod 34:28** – Moses -40 days/nights, neither ate bread nor drank water (total abstinence) (this was probably miraculous).
  2. **1 Kings 19:8** – Elijah went 40 days/nights (seems to be miraculous in nature, since an angel was providing the food).
  3. **Judges 20:26** – All Israel fasted (during war w/Benjamin). **2 Chron 20:3** –Before war, Jehoshaphat “proclaimed a fast.”
  4. **1 Sam 7:6** – All Israel fasted (because of sin/idolatry). They repented & Samuel prayed.
  5. **1 Sam 31:13** – When Saul was killed, the people of Jabesh-Gilead fasted 7 days (mourning).
  6. **2 Sam 1:12** – Upon hearing of the death of Saul & Jonathan, David & his followers “fasted until evening.”
  7. **2 Sam 12:16** – David fasted & prayed for the child of Bathsheba (**v.23** –“Why should I fast? Can I bring him back again?” David’s fasting was not in grief, but in expectation of healing for the child).
  8. **1 Kings 21:27** – Ahab fasted as part of his godly sorrow & repentance (and God forgave him).
- C. Duration:** Usually 1 day (e.g., Day of Atonement). Others: 3 days (Esther), 7 days (Jabesh-Gilead), 40 days (Moses, Elijah).
- D. Purpose:** To humbly give up your most basic need & want (food) & pray for God’s help. There were physical purposes (war, sickness, grief) and spiritual (sorrow/forgiveness). One of *God’s* expectations is seen in **Isa 58:6-7**- “*Is not this the fast I have chosen? To loose the bands of wickedness...to deal thy bread to the hungry...?*” It was about doing *God’s* will! So we see there were physical & spiritual purposes, but no purpose directly related to the food (cf. **Psa 35:13**–“*I humbled my soul with fasting*”).

**II. FASTING IN THE NEW TESTAMENT (Greek “nesteuo” – “to abstain from food”):**

**A. Examples of fasting in the NT:**

1. **Matt 4:2** – Jesus (like Moses & Elijah) fasted 40 days (this was in preparation for His being tempted by Satan).
2. **Matt 9:14-15** – The disciples of John the Baptist, and the Pharisees “fasted often” (**Lk 18:12** – the Pharisee said, “I fast twice in the week”). Jesus’ disciples didn’t fast because Jesus was with them (fasting was about getting closer to God, and He was right there with them)! But they would fast after He was gone.
3. **Matt 17:21** – “*This kind (demon) goeth not out but by prayer and fasting.*” This purpose is limited to the miraculous age.
4. **Acts 10:30** – Cornelius was fasting & praying, and God heard his prayer (and arranged for Peter to teach him the truth).
5. **Acts 13:1-3** –The leaders at Antioch fasted & prayed in sending Paul & Barnabas on the 1<sup>st</sup> missionary journey.
6. **Acts 14:23** – On the 1<sup>st</sup> missionary journey, Paul & Barnabas prayed & fasted before ordaining elders in each church.
7. **1 Cor 7:5** –Paul tells husbands & wives, “*Defraud ye not one the other except it be with consent for a time, that ye may give yourselves to fasting & prayer....*” This is a command to not deprive one another, with this one exception. The fasting is **not** commanded here, but it *is* part of the *only* exception to this marital responsibility. If you’re going to “deprive” one another, it **must** be for fasting & prayer. This shows the importance & value of fasting to the Christian couple.
8. **2 Cor 6:3-5; 11:27** – Paul said we should be “*approving ourselves as the ministers of God in much patience, in afflictions... in fastings; pureness, knowledge....*” The word “fastings” means “to abstain from food,” and can be done for religious purposes, or just for lack of food. The context seems clear that it’s the latter. So this is *not* a command to fast.

**B. Purpose & Practice of fasting:**

1. Purpose – Ignore the physical needs in order to focus on the spiritual needs.
2. Practice – no information on length of time (other than Jesus’ 40 days); no instructions given, other than **Matt 6:16-18**:
  - a. “*When ye fast...*” – Some say Jesus’ use of “when” (and not “if”) makes it a command. This is false.
    - It says that He knew they *were* fasting (as the Jews voluntarily did), so He told them the right way to do it.
    - “Fast” is **not** imperative mood (command), but subjunctive mood (which shows possibility, but not reality – Summers, p. 117). So Jesus is saying *how* fasting should be done, but not commanding that it be done.
  - b. “*Be not of a sad countenance...but anoint thine head, and wash thy face....*” When you’re *really* hungry, it’s easy to show it! Jesus says not to let people know. Don’t brag. This is between you & God, so keep it that way!

**III. FASTING TODAY:**

- A. Commands:** There are **no commands** for us to fast. Otherwise how do we know how long, how often, etc. (cf. **2 Tim 3:16-17**)?
- B. Examples:** But there *are* plenty of examples of it being done (Jesus, the apostles, church leaders). So there are obviously some benefits to doing it, if it’s done for the right reason (spiritual, not physical; not to lose weight, save money, or just because you’re curious what it’s like)! There must be a spiritual purpose that you need to address and focus your attention on.
- C.** Giving up meals, just for one day, shows the seriousness & importance of the spiritual issues you’re facing! It also allows you more time & ability to focus on these issues (think about how much time you spend on food – preparation, eating, cleaning, etc.)!
- D.** **1 Cor 7:5** makes it clear that it’s an optional way to help us focus on spiritual matters. So why *not* do it? Because we love food? Are we really so selfish that we wouldn’t give up our food for one day (or even one meal) in order to focus on godly things?

**CONCLUSION:** As important as fasting was (OT & NT), it’s surprising that Christians are not commanded to do it. The only negative thing ever said about fasting was when it was done for the wrong reason – for show (earthly reward). Yet the only *required* fast was on the Day of Atonement; otherwise, it was optional/voluntary, as it is today. But if we’re physically able to do so, why not consider something that will help us grow spiritually?