

# Prayer & Fasting

## UNLOCKING SPIRITUAL AUTHORITY THROUGH FASTING AND PRAYER



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**People with medical complications, particularly people with dietary complications should seek the advice of a physician before undertaking a fast.**

## Introduction

Jesus, at the conclusion of his famous Sermon on the Mount, brandishes a stern warning: ***“Not everyone that saith unto me Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven”*** (***Matthew 7:21, King James Version***). He then explained that only those who do the will of the Father in heaven would have the privilege of entering the kingdom of heaven. With masterful clarity, the All-wise rabbi concretized his conclusion with the parable of the wise man who built his house on rock and the foolish man who built his house on the sand (***Matthew 7:24-27***). His audience could not miss the meaning: those who heard “these sayings of mine, and doeth them” (***Matthew 7:24a***), are like the man who builds on rock. The man who hears “these sayings of mine, and doeth them

not” are like the man who builds on the sand. Note well, it is the doer of “these sayings” that would enter, the Lord hears him, and allows him entrance to His kingdom. Hearers only, of “these sayings” stand crying “Lord, Lord... have I not done ... in your name”, but the Lord does not permit them to enter into His Kingdom.

The meaning of the parable however, is still locked unless we uncover what Jesus meant by “these sayings of mine”. “These sayings of mine” was everything Jesus spoke from Matthew 5:3 to Matthew 7:27. Even a cursory review of this extensive teaching brings to our realization the gravity of Jesus’ “these sayings of mine”. Jesus himself said that “these sayings” fulfill the law and the prophets (Matthew 5:17). One may ask, well what do these sayings have in common with fasting? Well, imbedded

in these sayings is a clear instruction on the Christian's responsibility to fast.

In fact, this seminal, sayings of Jesus/ "***Sermon on the Mount***" names three spiritual activities that carry their own independent reward. They are Giving (Matthew 6:1), Praying (Matthew 6:5) and Fasting (Matthew 6:16). Sermon on the Mount is a documentation of principles that are quintessential to successful Christian living. In other words if, as a professing Christian, one does not adhere to these principles, then growth and development in the faith of one's profession is actively illusive.

Regarding giving, Jesus announces: "[**when**] you give" (Matthew 6:2&3) regarding prayer, He says the same thing: "[**when**] you pray" (Matthew 6:5&6) ditto to the fast: "[**when**] you fast" (***Matthew 6:16&17***). This lets us

know that Jesus expects us, as part of the natural course of our Christian experience, to give, pray and fast. Some have postured that if you cannot give special time to praying then your fast is no more than a glorified diet or as others have suggested starvation. This argument does not meet with the consistency of Jesus' thought in Matthew six; for He speaks of these individual exercises receiving their individual recognition in heaven and thus they carry benefit without reliance on any other activity.

## **Fasting, what does it mean?**

The word fast (*nesteuo*) in its Greek context simply means, “Not eating”. The Hebrew counterpart (*sum*) means the very same thing – to deliberately abstain from eating food. To fast, therefore, is to abstain, for a limited period of time from food. In some circles it is popular to extend the meaning of a fast beyond its literary meaning. For example, some may speak of fasting *from* “television”, or fasting *from* some other activity that lends itself to sensual pleasure. This interpretation strays from the scriptural intention and does not capture the spiritual essence of a Biblical fast.

There is an implicit Biblical connection between spiritual maturity and one’s approach to food. Consider for example

the following statements Jesus made in reference to food: “... *it is written, Man shall not live by bread alone, but (also) by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God*” (Matthew 4:4b); “... *my food is to do the will of him that sent me and to finish his work*” (John 4:34b). In His profound caution about the Christian life in the last days, Jesus makes this statement: “*And take heed to yourselves, lest at any time your hearts be overcharged with surfeiting, and drunkenness, and the cares of this life, and so that day come upon you unawares*” (Luke 21:34). Some scholars have interpreted the word surfeiting to mean over-eating. So to them drunkenness, worrying and **overeating** are three things with the potential to make the Christian oblivious to the signs of the end time and consequently unprepared for the Lord’s return.



In his epistle to the church at Corinth the apostle Paul addresses the believer's propensity to moral sin. In the midst of his stirring rebuke he states: "***Meats (Food) for the belly and the belly for meats (food): but God shall destroy both it and them***" (1 Corinthians 6:13a). Apart from the obvious comparative language, the apostle insinuates that greed for food like sexual immorality leads to the destruction of the body.

Fasting therefore, is deliberately denying the body of the thing it naturally craves. It is bringing into check the body's first natural appetite, the appetite for food. By doing this the other most prevalent appetites, sex and greed, are vicariously checked. Speaking of the body's appetite for sex, Paul adjures with legal terminology that

married people should not deny their partner, the fulfillment of this craving, he writes: “... *defraud ye not one the other*” (1 Corinthians 7:5a). Then he goes on to explain the only legitimate reason for withholding and controlling this essential human appetite: “... *except it be with consent for a time that you may give yourselves to fasting and prayer ...*” (1 Corinthians 7:5b).

Greed, on the other hand is controlled because of the drastic change of focus the mind experiences during a fast, spiritual things take precedence over natural desires. When we fast Biblically, we order our priorities with a view to pleasing God, not gratifying our flesh.

Consequently, when we speak of the Biblical fast, various levels of abstaining from food, is the only consideration. This does not negate the benefit of abstaining, from viewing

television, playing cards or whatever may occupy time that should be given to the Lord. Notwithstanding, these denials, as noble as they are, cannot be construed as a Biblical fast.

### **The Scriptural Basis for fasting**

As we follow the experiences of the disciples in the Gospels, we see them in the experience of prayer (Matthew 25: 39 – 41), we see them giving with great sacrifice (Matthew 19:27-29; Mark 10:28-30). Jesus also observes others as they gave (Mark 12:41- 44). However, we never observe the disciples indulging in the spiritual activity of fasting.

We are not the only people who observed this seemingly strange behavior, that the ones who were closest

to Jesus neglected to observe the fast, one of the cardinal commands of the Christian faith. The disciples of John, who were devout observers of the fast, asked Jesus the very question. They could not come to grips with the fact that they, and the Pharisees, fasted often, but the disciples of Jesus did not fast (Matthew 9:14-17). Jesus answered on this wise: ***I am with them in a physical sense so they do not need to fast, but when I am gone, “then, shall they fast” (Matthew 9:15).*** In other words, when Jesus was not physically with them, the apostles, along with the rest of the church would indulge in the spiritual command to fast.

Jesus fasted, if we are followers of Jesus we ought to do what He did. Accounts of Jesus’ 40-day wilderness fast, can be found in Matthew chapter four, Mark chapter one, and Luke chapter four. If

Jesus, the incarnate Christ fasted, shouldn't we? In the New Testament, Christians fasted regularly. (Acts 10:30; 14:23; 1Corinthians 7:5). In addition to Jesus and the church, many of the Old Testament saints fasted. Moses fasted for forty days and forty nights on Mount Sinai as he received the Commandments (Exodus 34:28). King David, the notable Psalmist and worship leader, the greatest king of Israel's history fasted often as he confronted different issues of life (2 Samuel 12:16; Psalm 35:13; Psalm 69:10; Psalm: 109:24). Daniel also made a habit of fasting (Daniel 1:12; 9:3). Queen Esther and the Jews of that day humbled themselves before the Lord with fasting (Esther: 3:16). A heathen king fasted on behalf of his friend Daniel, because he was thrust into the lions' den (Daniel 6:13). Church, if the heathens could find value

in fasting, should we not take advantage of this great spiritual provision.

Fasting is a much-neglected spiritual exercise of the contemporary church. Because it has not lost its power or spiritual pertinence, it is my considered opinion that if more Christians realized the benefits they unlock through fasting, it would become an integral part of every church calendar.

### **Purpose and Benefits of the fast**

Jesus' command to fast is not valueless; there are benefits of the fast that will abound to our blessing right here and now. Matthew records an incident where a father brought his demonized son to the disciples of Jesus (Matthew

17-14-21). Apparently, they labored with the lad, but the demon refused to leave (Matthew 17:16). Jesus came to the multitude, and observing the plight of his followers, rebuked the demon and he left immediately. Jesus then made a critical statement of rebuke toward his disciples calling them: ***“faithless and perverse”*** (Matthew 17:17). However in the 21<sup>st</sup> verse he commented about the demon that they had been dealing with, he said: “howbeit, this kind goeth not out but by prayer and fasting”.

Jesus’ response the disciples’ inability to cast out the demon makes a link between faithlessness and perversion and prayerlessness and the failure to fast. Time and space would not allow us to delve deeply into all the implications of this statement. However, one salient thing can be established: failure to fast and pray adversely affect our ministry.

We can assume that the disciples had prayed because they asked Jesus to teach them how to pray, but we know that they had not fasted. In fact, Jesus was the only person who had fasted, this does not suggest that he needed to fast, and he easily put the demon to flight. The disciples however struggled with the demon, let's be practical, how could fasting have helped these benighted missionaries? Of a surety, fasting cannot do anything for God. God is immutable, He does not change, and He is not subject to persuasion. The benefit of fasting therefore is the internal change that takes place in the spirit of the believer.

Fasting is a spiritual exercise that develops the faith of the believer. As we fast, we deny what Paul describes as the flesh or carnal nature; this permits our spirit man to become our dominant



influence. We become sensitive to and dependent on God's provision and direction for every step we take. This heightened spiritual sensitivity is an enactment of faith. We truly begin to walk by faith and not by sight. Faith is the power of the believer's walk, by faith we say to the mountain be removed and be cast into the sea and the mountain obeys.

Just as the early disciples faced a stubborn demon, there are stubborn situations that we all face as children of God. Sometimes it takes the faith that is developed through fasting to break these strongholds that bring pain and discomfort to our lives. Therefore, as we fast, during this time when our faith is soaring, we are encouraged to carry before the Lord are most difficult issues. We should look for wisdom and

direction for future decisions, and the salvation of our kindred and loved-ones.

Our time of fasting is a great opportunity to seek the Lord for specific needs in our lives. When Daniel wanted to hear from God he fasted (Daniel 9:3); when Jehoshaphat was under attack and needed protection from the Lord he proclaimed a fast (2 Chronicles 20:3). When the people of Nineveh were under impending judgment for their numerous sins they repented and fasted for enablement to change their sinful ways (Jonah 3:5-10). In the same manner, Joel spoke to Israel that they should turn to the Lord with fasting and weeping that they may repent and so avert the judgment of the Lord, so that the Lord may restore the things that were already destroyed (Joel 2:1-27); and these are just a few examples.

The Biblical fast should always be one of purpose. We should determine the areas of our lives that are lacking, or the things that are preventing our breakthroughs and lift them before the Lord by faith, expecting that our needs would be met. We need to enter the fast determined that when the fast is accomplished, the mountains in our lives would be moved out of the way. In military terminology, the fast is the use of heavy artillery against stubborn enemy resistance.

### **The types of Biblical fasts**

There are three types of fasts recorded in Scripture. First there is the **absolute or total fast**. In this fast a person refrains from food and drink for a specific period of time. For example Queen Esther when confronted with a

life threatening situation proclaimed a fast among all the Jews for three days and three nights in which they would neither eat nor drink (Esther 4:16). This type of fast should not be attempted unadvisedly, and three days should be the maximum length of such a fast. It is hazardous for the human body to function without water for more than three days. Apart from Esther, we see Moses fasting for forty days and forty nights without eating food or drinking water (Exodus 34:28). This however is not the norm; Moses was supernaturally sustained in the concentrated presence of the Lord as he received the commandments.

Another kind of fast is what I call the **partial fast – the purposeful limitation of food intake either in type and or amount.** Daniel assumed the partial fast on more than one occasion

during his ministry. During his period of training for Babylonian leadership, Daniel and his friends refused meat and wine from the king's table but instead ate only vegetables and drank water (Daniel 1:12). On another occasion Daniel sought the Lord with fasting for an understanding of the times to come: ***“In those days I Daniel was mourning three full weeks. I ate no pleasant bread, neither came flesh nor wine in my mouth, neither did I anoint myself at all, till three whole weeks were fulfilled” (Daniel 10:2-3).***

In a partial fast one can limit food intake by skipping meals, for example, some saints would fast from 6am-6pm or from 12 noon to 12 midnight. Others would do fruit fasts, they would eat only fruit for a specific period of time, or liquid fasts, where juice would be their only source of nutrition for a period of time.

Still others would avoid meat and fish etc. there are many ways to regiment a partial fast

**The normal fast – the water only fast** however, is the fast that Jesus endured in the wilderness. Luke records that in the forty days of Jesus' wilderness experience He ate nothing: *“and in those days He ate nothing, and afterward, when they had ended He was hungry”*(Luke 4:2b). The language posits that though His body was not sustained by anything of food value, he drank water. This, water only fast, was frequently practiced by the apostles and early church. This kind of fast can be sustained for periods of up to forty days. This is the recommended fast, it is not without challenge but the benefits of these times of consecration can be realized by generations to come.

## **Practical Tips for the Normal Fasts**

Fasting is a spiritual exercise; expect to be met with spiritual opposition from a very formidable foe. For example from the time we proclaim the fast, even if we do it privately people who would not normally “spend a dime to see the world spin” offer to take you to dinner. You can expect to see food on every corner, expect offers to go to banquets, breakfasts and brunches. Folk will bring you donuts, hoagies, and your favorite dessert. Food that you don’t like, that you would not normally eat, take on an enticing attraction, but don’t fall for it, it is a trick of the enemy.

Additionally, people particularly family members and friends will find a

thousand and one reasons why you should not embark on or continue with the fast. They will present well intentioned, fine sounding but unsubstantiated arguments. They will present things they heard, some stuff they would have made up but this is only because they have neither understood, nor personally experienced the power of the fast. Be patient with them, neither be rude nor condescending but do not easily stray from the course that the Lord has prescribed.

Since the fast is a spiritual exercise the Lord must lead it. Consequently, notwithstanding the separate reward that the Lord promises for the fast, prayer is an essential complement to the fast. The fast should be entered into prayerfully, and prayerfully sustained. This is accomplished much easier when you're not fasting alone, for example, a church



group or Sunday school class may meet at specific times during the days of fasting to pray, share experiences and encourage each other.

A person should prepare themselves both spiritual and physically for a time of fasting. If at all possible one should ease themselves into the fast. Coffee drinkers for example should progressively reduce their caffeine intake as the fast draws closer. We should progressively reduce the size of our meal portions as the time for total abstinence approaches.

The first three days of the fast are normally the hardest. From the first day the body will begin to feel the effects of the fast. Expect headaches, stomach pains slight imbalances when you move too quickly and as the body loses toxins sometimes there can be odors. **Drink lots of water** this will help the body to

detoxify. After three days of fasting most people recognize that the fast becomes less intense and coping with the effects of the fasts actually becomes easier. Some have written that a little warm salt water the morning of the fast can hasten the initial effects of the fast and bring the body to the place where it can cope easier with the effects of the fast.

Luke explains that after the period of fasting was completed, Jesus was hungry. This is the return of natural hunger. It is the feeling that a great spiritual work has been accomplished; therefore we can be at spiritual ease. **Breaking the fast** is also a very critical function. If you have engaged in a normal fast that lasted for more than two days one should not shock the body into solid food. The longer the fast the more careful one should be in breaking

the fast. This kind of fast should be broken with fruit, or a broth of some kind. This light eating should be continued for a while until you are nursed back into a healthy diet. The temptation to eat without restraint would be present, it is unhealthy and unwise to do so. In fact, this is the very temptation that the enemy used on Jesus. Jesus' answer to the temptation is revealing, he said: ***“man shall not live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God”*** (***Matthew 4:4b***). At the end of the fast there is an excellent chance to control our diet. We can use this opportunity to begin what I call a fasted life – a life that puts God before food and pleasure.

## **A Final Word**

Jesus said when you fast you should not be as the hypocrites (Matthew 6: 16).

This speaks of the attitude of the believer during the fast. Remember, you want your fast to count; you need your fast to accomplish a life – altering betterment. Something significant should take place in the life of the believer at the end of the fast. Our attitude during the fast makes all the difference. Isaiah puts it this way:

***“Behold in the day of your fast you find pleasure, and exact your labors. Behold you fast for strife and debate, and to smite with the fist of wickedness, to make your voice be heard on high ”***  
**(Isaiah 58:3b-4).**

The time of fasting should not yield business as usual. The children of Israel continued to live carnally while indulging in this potent spiritual exercise. Yet they expected good results from the fast. As the fast progresses we should be making even greater efforts to please God in every area of our lives our time of fasting should be our time of greatest witness the time when Christ is allowed more than ever to shine through us. In our hour fast we should make full proof of our ambassadorship of Christ.

As you begin your fast you will soon realize that fasting takes effort. As you continue to fast you will understand that it demands resolve. However, if you endure to the end the feeling of satisfaction and accomplishment will outweigh any struggle you may have encountered. Additionally, real yokes would be broken, real lives would be

changed, real hope would be renewed,  
real spirit directed decisions would be  
made and the blessings of these would  
transcend generations.

God Bless, enjoy your time of fasting.