

The
Radical Life
Of the Normal Christian

A Christian's Religion: FASTING

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Base Text

"And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

(Mat 6:16-18)

Fasting

First of all let us ask the question "What is Fasting". Strictly speaking it is the total abstention from food although it can be extended to be going without food partially or totally for shorter or longer periods. Our word BREAKFAST comes from the concept of fasting in that we are breaking the fast of the night where we have eaten nothing for 8 hrs or however long.

Fasting is something that we talk little about. It is something that as evangelicals and charismatic's that we have conveniently, in my opinion, over looked. Prayer we get, we understand, we embrace at least as a principle even if we fail to embrace it fully in practice. Fasting however we have at, best put down to being super spiritual. Something for the giants of the faith, those being persecuted or in very trying circumstances. We possibly assume that leaders "should be fasting", but have not taken it as something that a "Normal Christian" would do. At worst we think it is not something that we are called to do, certainly not regularly, as a regular run of the mill Christian.

Is fasting something we have overlooked as the western church? Is it something that has been thrown out with the charismatic bathwater?

Background

We know from the background of the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7, that the Pharisees tended to take some of the law and then expand it, add to it, remove from it, in order to elevate their own piety, their own status in order to be superior to the common people. Yep, you guessed it fasting was no different. The Mosaic Law only REQUIRED a fast once a year on the Day of Atonement¹. All the other fasts you read about were called by the people, not by God. The people called a fast for special reasons, to demonstrate repentance, as the people of Nineveh did, for example. We read also in the psalms that people fasted in order to humble themselves before God². Fasting is, in both cases, a humbling of ourselves before God for either grace received in forgiveness or for grace to come. I love the story of Ester in the bible. She was a Radical follower of God ... Esther was awesome. She called a corporate fast in order that she might approach the king to save the Jews from oppression, something she could herself be instantly killed for. But she fasted and asked for the people to God to fast with her and she said "If I die, then I die" – How gutsy was that!

¹ Lev 16:29, 31 & Num 29:7

² Ps 35:13, Isaiah 58:3, 5



So we see many examples of the people of God fasting individually and corporately for grace received or to grace to come. The Pharisees had turned it into a show! Disfiguring their faces, being gloomy so that everyone would know they were fasting and honour them as VERY holy and godly. Even today I think that we still have a view of fasting like that. Not that we make sure everyone knows, but that we think it is something for the very holy. But this is exactly what Jesus addresses when he speaks here in our base text. He speaks both to the hypocrites who were behaving in such an ungodly way, and also to his followers saying that fasting should be the norm for that radical Christian.

“When You”

Fasting is something that Jesus expected his followers to do. He expected them to fast as sure as he expected them to pray. If we were to look at Matthew chapter 6 verse 5 we read “When you pray”. I am sure that everyone, believer or non-believer, would agree that prayer is something that Jesus would expect every one of his followers to do. It is expressed here when he says “When You Pray”. If I said that prayer was something only for some Christians, or when you are in a really tight spot, or being persecuted you would say No! You would agree I hope that it was for those times too, but it was for all Christians at all times - After all Jesus said “When you pray”.

Here in verse 16 of chapter 6 or Matthew we see the same statement “When you fast”. Jesus expects his follower to fast! He expects it as just as he expects us to pray! He is here talking about **voluntary fasting**. He is not talking about religious fasts nor does he call us to religiously observe any. (Atonement, Lent, or any others)

Supporting Scripture

Now let me be clear here. We must never look to create a doctrine from a single passage in the bible. We must always look to the rest of scripture to support our position. We have looked to historic examples of the people of God fasting in the Old Testament and I think you will agree there is substantial evidence of that historically. Fasting was an important part of the people of God under the old covenant. But what of the new covenant? What examples do we have in the New Testament of fasting?

1. Jesus demonstrated fasting
2. The apostles fasted
3. The early church fasted
4. Jesus was questions specifically about fasting.

I will look at these in reverse order.

Jesus questioned about Fasting

Not surprisingly Jesus was asked about fasting as it was a common practice amongst the Pharisees. John the Baptists disciples fasted too but Jesus disciples did not. How was that fair was the cry – as it is today I think. So what did Jesus say ...



(Matthew 9:14-15 ESV)

Then the disciples of John came to him, saying, "Why do we and the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?" And Jesus said to them, "Can the wedding guests mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them? The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast."

This would, in my opinion, be an explicit call to us to fast. Whilst stopping short of calling this a command of Jesus I would suggest here that Jesus is making a strong statement of future fact.

Jesus is saying that once he has gone to be with the father, once I am glorified and the Holy Spirit has come my followers WILL fast, but right now they need not do so because I am with them. I think this passage is that clear and beyond any doubt. However, even if I take a very negative view we can conclude that Jesus certainly did not prohibit fasting, but I think that you need to work very hard at making the text say anything other than Fasting will be a practice of the follower of Jesus once he returns to the father.

This is demonstrated in how the Apostles functioned after Jesus ascended and the Holy Spirit was poured out at Pentecost!

The Apostles Fasted

The Apostles, those who were with Jesus every day for 3 years, the men who travelled with him, laughed with him, learnt from him, saw him everyday how did that experience coupled with the experience of receiving the Holy Spirit, how did that impact their prayer life? Was fasting something that remained? Was it in the armoury of the apostles?

Acts 14:23

And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed.

Here we see the apostles fasting in the context for prayer for big appointments of authority such as the appointment of elders as they looked for future grace.

Further evidence is in Paul letter to the Corinthian church where he, amongst other things, speaks of his fasting.

2 Corinthians 11:27

in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often in fasting, in cold and exposure.

Notice the difference here between just being hungry for involuntary lack of food and fasting a deliberate withdrawal from food.



The Early Church Fasted

(Acts 13:1-3 ESV)

Now there were in the **church** at Antioch prophets and teachers, Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen a member of the court of Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. **While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting**, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." **Then after fasting and praying** they laid their hands on them and sent them off.

Notice here that not only were they fasting as a general part of their general prayer (v2) but as the spirit spoke they then fasted and prayed again. Whilst there are 5 prophets mentioned here the "they" referred to throughout is the entire church. It is in the context of the entire church coming together to pray and fast that the Holy Spirit not only moved, was experienced but the prophets moved in the Holy Spirit's power and God spoke, a new ministry was birthed and the reaching of the entire world for Jesus began!

It is in this context that I want to look at Jesus' example and draw from it that same principle of not simply experiencing the Holy Spirit, but how that becomes operational power that changed everything!

What interests me here is that was fasting a factor in the prayer and was that combination complicit in the Holy Spirit moving in power, releasing the prophetic gift and receiving direction and vision for the church?

Jesus Example

Jesus, our example in everything fasted. Jesus fasted before his public ministry something that we saw echoed prior to Paul & Barney being sent out on their public ministry to the gentiles.

There is also a passage that is often quoted where Jesus, speaking of the disciples being unable to cast out a demon says "this kind never comes out except by prayer and fasting³". Indicating that the reason the disciples could not cast it out was that they were not practicing the discipline of regular prayer & fasting (which in their defence Jesus said they need not do while he was with them). I must conclude that the reason Jesus could, was not that he was God, but because he was prepared by regularly praying and fasting. We MUST be very careful in assuming that anything Jesus did was simply because he was God. Jesus was FULLY GOD and FULLY MAN and EVERYTHING he did he did as a man just like you and me. He did it not out of his divinity but through access to the Holy Spirit, the same access you and I now have as Christians.

It is because he was operating IN THE POWER of the Holy Spirit that we can be confident in his words that say "Greater things you will do⁴" because he did them as a man operating in the POWER of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you."

(John 20:21 ESV)

³ Matthew 17:20

⁴ John 14:12



As the father sent Jesus, who demonstrated his own need to fast to prepare for ministry, so he is sending us ... how much more should we prepare for the ministry he has for us.

I am sure we are all familiar with the story of Jesus spending 40 days and 40 nights in the desert praying and fasting. It was here that we read in each of the synoptic gospels (Matt 4:1-11, Mark 1:12-13, Luke 4:1-13) that Jesus was tempted by the devil. For those of you unfamiliar with the story Jesus was tempted by the devil, but overcame and did not sin.

However, I trust that I have demonstrated to you that fasting is a forgotten weapon in the armoury of the Radical Christian's and one clearly demonstrated by Jesus, that apostles and the early church. Fasting was instructed by Jesus for his followers and explained to his disciples as they ministered to the sick and cast out demons.

Conclusion

I want us to see that fasting should be part of the armoury in the life of the normal Christian. As far as I can see there is no getting away from the need to regularly fast as a Christian.

We need to understand that fasting is not "Getting serious with God", it is not a means of "Getting what we want". It does not mean that because we fast we will therefore get what we are praying for, but it is a means of humbling ourselves so that we might approach God ready to change ourselves as we appeal to Him.

"The moment we begin to say 'because I do this, I get that', it means that we are controlling the blessing. That is an insult to God and to violate the great doctrine of His final and ultimate sovereignty. No, we must never advocate fasting as a means of blessing" (Lloyd-Jones, 1976) Pg 316

So let me just summarise what we have looked at

Jesus expects us to Fast

Not out of obligation or because of a religious spirit as the Pharisees did, but because we are led by the spirit as Jesus was. The Spirit came upon him and he "was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. And after fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry⁵". We are primarily led by the Spirit, or the leadership in the case of corporate fasting, where we I think there is a willingness, a discipline and submission involved too.

The Early Church Fasted Corporately

The early church fasted as did the apostles. Maybe this is something you might want to consider for you cell prayer? If you have half nights of prayer?

Fasting is a lost weapon in our Prayer Advance

I believe that fasting is something we overlook as part of our prayer weapons. Jesus clearly modelled it and as our example in everything is something we must consider.

Maybe you could fast together as a cell if you are facing difficult situations either as a group, or if there are people in your cell in difficult or testing circumstances you could fast together for healing, restoration or direction.

Maybe there are those in your cell with unsaved family ... you could stand together with them.

⁵ Mat 4:1-2



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