

SHORT COURSE ON FASTING

In more than 50 references to fasting in the Old and New Testaments, there is no specific command to fast, with the exception of the Day of Atonement for the Jews. In the New Testament it was assumed that fasting would be a part of the normal devotional life of the believer.

Matthew 6:16: *When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full.*

Matthew 9:15: *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."*

If these verses indicate that fasting should be a normal discipline in the church (and the numerous examples of fasting support the idea), then what does it mean to fast? What is the purpose of fasting? And how does one go about fasting?

1. Definition of "fasting" – going without food and sometimes water voluntarily, generally for religious purposes. There are four types of fasts referred to in the Bible.
 - a. Normal fast, going without food for up to 40 days. (e.g., Exodus 34:28, Ezra 8:21, 23; Daniel 6:18; Luke 2:37; Mark 2:18; Matthew 4:2; Acts 13:2-3, 14:23)
 - b. Partial fast, abstaining from certain foods. (Daniel 10:3)
 - c. Absolute fast, going without food or water no more than 3 days. (Esther 4:16, this is very rare in the Bible)
 - d. Voluntary group fast, called for a specific reason for a specific group of people (e.g., 1 Samuel 7:6; 2 Chronicles 20:3; Jonah 3:5)
2. Purpose of Fasting
 - a. Worship – it must be God-centered, God-initiated and God-ordained.
 - b. At times, fasting is an expression of distress, grief or repentance.
 - c. Fasting is a preparation for God to give guidance and renewal (Daniel 9; Exodus 24)
 - d. Fasting reveals the things that control us and hinder our intimacy with God.
 - e. Fasting reminds us that we are sustained "by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God." (Matt 4:4; Deut. 8:3)
 - f. Fasting helps us keep our balance in life. (1 Corinthians 9:27; Psalms 35:13)

3. Practice of Fasting

- a. For an occasional fast, eat a light meal (fruit, vegetables, yogurt, etc.) prior to beginning. Drink a lot of water. Skip 2-3 meals and break the fast with fruit juices followed by a light meal. Avoid oils, dressings and starch for a couple of meals.
- b. When starting a regular discipline of fasting, begin slowly with a partial 24-hour (2 meal) fast once a week for several weeks while drinking fruit juices.
- c. Monitor your inner attitudes and maintain a worshipful attitude.
- d. Break the fast with a light meal of fruit and vegetables.
- e. After a few weeks, try a normal fast, drinking lots of water only.
- f. Always be careful not to call attention to what you are doing.
- g. After succeeding with this for several weeks, move to a 36-hour (3-meal) fast.
- h. Seek the Lord regarding extended fasts. Get additional information on conducting extended fasts and clear the fast with your physician. (People with certain physical conditions should not fast.)
- i. Remember that the major work of scriptural fasting is in the realm of the spirit.
- j. If skipping meals is not possible, try fasting certain types of foods (like sweets or soft drinks), or you can fast activities (like TV or sports). It's important to convert that time to devotional activities, not just abstain from them.