

#184 “Biblical Principles Concerning Fasting”

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Fasting is a theme that runs throughout the Scriptures. Done rightly, it can have great benefit in our walks with Christ. Too often, however, it is done improperly for the wrong reasons and motives. Fasting is not a rote tradition that is done to earn God’s favor. It is not as if choosing not to eat a meal in and of itself draws us closer to God. We are not more holy if we abstain from food. Enjoying our food and drink is a great blessing and mercy of God in this life (Ecclesiastes 5:18). We can be close to God as we enjoy the fruits of our labor and the wonders of God’s creation. But there is a time that is proper for fasting, and as we understand the reasons behind fasting, we will be better able to let it be a part of our spiritual lives just as prayer and Bible reading have their places.

Fasting is not an everyday sort of practice, but it is reserved for times of great need, mourning, or sorrow (Psalm 35:13, Nehemiah 9:1). Fasting is always understood to be combined with praying and seeking God’s will and favor. There will be times of such desperation that we will not even have an appetite or find it fitting to eat. David fasted when he prayed for his son to be healed, but after his son died, he went back to eating (2 Samuel 12:21-22). Jesus fasted before His earthly ministry began (Matthew 4:1-2). Nehemiah fasted when he heard bad news concerning the Jews and when he wanted to see God’s mercy poured out upon his people (Nehemiah 1:1-4). He was also seeking out God’s will for how he could be part of the change. Daniel was reading the writings of Jeremiah when he was moved to pray and fast concerning its meaning (Daniel 9:3). He was so moved and bothered in his spirit concerning the prophecies that he sought God out with such a fervency that it involved fasting for a time. There is also a time for fasting when we seek for God to search out our hearts and help us change (Isaiah 58:5-6).

Sometimes the reality is that a full stomach makes us overly content and complacent to the extent that it removes us from feeling desperate. It therefore alienates us from being able to be keenly in tune to the Spirit’s leading in our hearts. That is not to say that God cannot lead us with a full stomach, for He certainly does. Fasting is the exception, not the rule, and there will be times when circumstances will be so intense, dire, and extreme that we will be moved to fast and to focus on what God wants us to do. In such cases, we won’t want to stop praying to eat because we are in such deep communion with God.

Fasting is not some rote spiritual discipline, but it is for times of great need and sorrow (Matthew 9:14-15). We may go long periods of times between fasting. Then again, we might find that we need to fast quite often due to certain circumstances. Fasting is not forced or contrived but necessitated for the purpose of prayer, soul-searching, seeking God’s wisdom and direction, and calling out for change.

Fasting is not about dieting or earning God’s favor (Luke 18:9-14), and never should we fast to be noticed by others (Matthew 6:16-18). Fasting can be short or long, depending

on the severity of the situation, an individual's health needs, and the time it takes to receive direction and peace from God concerning a situation (Nehemiah 1:4-11). We need to be mindful that there are no gold medals for those who can go the longest without food or the most often without food. Fasting is not an Olympic event. Just not eating doesn't move God to work. Fasting is the outgrowth of an inner heart burden for change such that it is necessarily the result of our desire to pray and call out to God. If we fast to the point that it is a danger to our health, we are not doing God's will. There is nothing in Scripture about fasting to the point of harm. We should take every precaution when it comes to taking care of our health, from staying hydrated, not starving our bodies, etc. A failing body is not going to be able to concentrate on God and endure in prayer. Fasting is for increased focus, not for famine.

Sometimes we will be doing ministry as we fast (Acts 13:2). Sometimes we will fast alone, while at other times we will fast with others who feel the same burden that we do. The Bible speaks of instances of individual fasting (Nehemiah 1:4, Daniel 9:3) and corporate fasting (Ezra 8:23, Acts 13:3).

In times of great need or duress or when we need direction from God (Esther 4:3, Ezra 8:23), fasting is a Biblical thing to do. It is not a fad, a diet program, or a rote spiritual exercise. It flows forth from the burdened soul that needs increased focus and help, and it ends when the need has been met, our prayer has been heard, our hearts have been changed, our burdens have been lifted, and/or when our bodies need to eat. There is no magic formula to fasting just as there is not a magic formula for praying. Remember, we don't pray in order to fast, we fast in order to better pray.