

Pursuing God - Fasting and Prayer

Luke 5:33-35

Our campus prayer time that started back in August has been rich, in my perspective. Numbers have fluctuated since we began between 12 and 1 at times. That's ok with me. It's an ongoing effort to stay focused on praying together for the needs of our church, our community and the world. Sometimes there is not enough time to pray for those needs that have arisen, at other times, we have ended quickly.

Something that has added to the richness is reading a little book called "Victorious Praying: Finding Discipline and Delight in Your Prayer Life" by Bill Thrasher. The book is full of practical ways to call upon the Lord in any number of circumstances and situations that we are confronted with every single day. One section of the book that was particularly challenging was the section of fasting and prayer. Which has motivated this sermon on fasting and praying along with a challenge to do it for 21 days in connection with pursuing God in prayer as a campus.

Now I understand that this is not a popular subject and one that there is a lot of misunderstanding about. My goal is to simply present to you what the Bible says about fasting and prayer and invite you to participate in a 21 day experience - more on that in a minute. So let's find out first what the Bible has to say about fasting and prayer...what it is and what it is not.

First, let me say that fasting is a huge subject in the Bible, so we will only scratch the surface today concerning it. Let's look at a passage that tells us what Jesus had to say about fasting and prayer.

Luke 5:33-35 33 And they said to him, "The disciples of John fast often and offer prayers, and so do the disciples of the Pharisees, but yours eat and drink." 34 And Jesus said to them, "Can you make wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them? 35 The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast in those days."

The Pharisees were challenging Jesus about why His disciples didn't fast like they did or like John the Baptist's disciples did. His answer was that while He (the bridegroom) was there they didn't need to fast but to rejoice. But one day He would be gone and then His disciples would fast. We are living in the time that Jesus spoke about so there is scriptural support for us to fast today.

So what is fasting? Fasting by its pure definition according to W.E. Vine's Expository Dictionary is:

Fasting—To abstain (to eat; fast) from food for a period of time is a discipline practiced by believers, not as an end in itself, but as a sign of repentance or of seeking God.

So fasting is a scriptural way of seeking God's presence. But in this definition there is a broad range of application. So let's take a look at the kinds of fasts we see in the Bible. There are 7 different types of fasts in the scriptures:

1. Normal fast—abstaining from all food, but not from water

Matt 4:2 “And after fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry.”

It does not say anything about Jesus being thirsty only hungry. According to science we know that the body can normally function 3 days without water, so He must have had something to drink during that 40 days. This is the most common type of fast we see in the Bible.

2. Partial fast—limiting the diet but not totally abstaining from food.

Dan 1:12-17 **12** “Test your servants for ten days; let us be given vegetables to eat and water to drink. **13** Then let our appearance and the appearance of the youths who eat the king's food be observed by you, and deal with your servants according to what you see.” **14** So he listened to them in this matter, and tested them for ten days. **15** At the end of ten days it was seen that they were better in appearance and fatter in flesh than all the youths who ate the king's food. **16** So the steward took away their food and the wine they were to drink, and gave them vegetables. **17** As for these four youths, God gave them learning and skill in all literature and wisdom, and Daniel had understanding in all visions and dreams.

Dan 10:3 3 I ate no delicacies, no meat or wine entered my mouth, nor did I anoint myself at all, for the full three weeks.

Daniel obviously was a man who believed in fasting. In fact he believed in it so much that he was willing to challenge the king of Babylon and the king of Persia!

3. Absolute fast—avoiding all food and water for a short period of time.

Ezra 10:6 Then Ezra withdrew from before the house of God and went to the chamber of Jehohanan the son of Eliashib, where he spent the night, neither eating bread nor drinking water, for he was mourning over the faithlessness of the exiles.

Esther 4:16 “Go, gather all the Jews to be found in Susa, and hold a fast on my behalf, and do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my young women will also fast as you do. Then I will go to the king, though it is against the law, and if I perish, I perish.”

Acts 9:9 And for three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

Notice in each of these scriptures the fast was only for a short period of time (i.e. 3 days). Never assume an absolute fast for a long period of time. Then it becomes the next kind of fast.

4. Supernatural fast—God supernaturally sustains the body in a manner that is not normal.

Deut 9:9 When I went up the mountain to receive the tablets of stone, the tablets of the covenant that the Lord made with you, I remained on the mountain forty days and forty nights. I neither ate bread nor drank water.

5. Private fast—fasting in a way that others don't know about it.

Matt 6:16-18 “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. **17** But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, **18** 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.

6. Congregational fast—a call to a sacred assembly to meet with God

Joel 2:12-17 “Yet even now,” declares the Lord, “return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; **13** and rend your hearts and not your garments.” Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love; and he relents over disaster. **14** Who knows whether he will not turn and relent, and leave a blessing behind him, a grain offering and a drink offering for the Lord your God? **15** Blow the trumpet in Zion; consecrate a fast; call a solemn assembly; **16** gather the people. Consecrate the

congregation; assemble the elders; gather the children, even nursing infants. Let the bridegroom leave his room, and the bride her chamber. 17 Between the vestibule and the altar let the priests, the ministers of the Lord, weep and say, "Spare your people, O Lord, and make not your heritage a reproach, a byword among the nations. Why should they say among the peoples, 'Where is their God?'"

Acts 13:2-3 While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." 3 Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off.

Notice that the church in Antioch worshipped and fasted. This led to the direction of the Holy Spirit setting apart Saul and Barnabas to serve on their missionary journeys.

7. National fast—a nation seeking God in a time of crisis

2 Chron 20:3-4 Then Jehoshaphat was afraid and set his face to seek the Lord, and proclaimed a fast throughout all Judah. 4 And Judah assembled to seek help from the Lord; from all the cities of Judah they came to seek the Lord.

Another example of a national fast is when Jonah preached to the city of Nineveh (Jonah 3:5-9) and the king declared a fast so that they could see if God would spare them from the destruction that He had told them through Jonah was coming because of their wickedness.

It is clear that fasting was a part of the lives of the people of the Bible. The only question that can be asked is when, not if, they fasted. The early church and other church leaders like John Wesley practiced fasting as a regular lifestyle. Today, fasting is hardly thought about, let alone preached or practiced by the church as a whole. In that we have lost this spiritual discipline we have also lost a great source of power in our lives and a valuable weapon to fight the flesh and the enemy.

Don Whitney in his book *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life* says "In giving us the privilege of fasting as well as praying, God has added a powerful weapon to our spiritual armory. In her folly and ignorance the Church has largely looked upon it as obsolete. She has thrown it down some dark corner to rust, and there it has lain forgotten for centuries. An hour of impending crisis for the Church and the world demands its recovery."

Now let's talk about what fasting is not. For one thing fasting is not a weight loss program. You can lose weight by fasting, but that is not the kind of fasting that is talked about in the Scriptures. Secondly, fasting is not a way to twist God's arm to do what we want Him to do. Nor is fasting a way to score "brownie points" with God by proving how religious we are.

So why fast? The reason we fast is to humble ourselves before God so we can better hear His voice. Notice in the verses above that when they fasted, they were worshipping God (Acts 13:2), seeking help from God (2 Chron 20:3-4; Joel 2:12-17), or seeking God's will (Matt 4:2). So the primary purpose of fasting is to seek God's guidance.

There are many benefits to fasting:

1. We are humbling ourselves.
2. We will see life's priorities more clearly.
3. We will see balance return to areas of our life where there is imbalance.
4. Our selfish ambition and pride will begin to be washed away (we will appreciate more what we have.
5. We will be more sensitive to God's Spirit.
6. Our hidden areas of weakness or susceptibility will rise to the surface so that God can deal with them.
7. God will make you more unselfish.

But the key to fasting being effective is combining it with prayer. When this is done the power of prayer is increased because we are more in tune with God's Spirit. Now hear me on this, in no way does this imply that by fasting and praying we are making God answer our prayers any more than He already has promised He will do. We are not going on a "spiritual hunger strike" to force God to act. We must be careful not to think that because we fast and pray that we will have instant results. We are fasting and praying to put ourselves in a position to hear God's voice not to twist His arm. He is a Sovereign God and hears our prayers when we speak them. But He also answers our prayers in His time and in His way. "Fasting does not change God's hearing so much as it changes our praying."

When the church needed direction they fasted and prayed.

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.

Ezra 8:21-23 Then I proclaimed a fast there, at the river Ahava, that we might humble ourselves before our God, to seek from him a safe journey for ourselves, our children, and all our goods. **22** For I was ashamed to ask the king for a band of soldiers and horsemen to protect us against the enemy on our way, since we had told the king, “The hand of our God is for good on all who seek him, and the power of his wrath is against all who forsake him.” **23** So we fasted and implored our God for this, and he listened to our entreaty.

So what does this have to do with us? All the above. I want us together to pursue humility...to gain God’s perspective on our priorities...to wash away pride and selfish ambition..to reveal hidden dependence on anything other than God...in short, to pursue God in 2018 and beyond. A new year gives us an opportunity to refocus, to get our direction for life and ministry...together.

I want to encourage you this morning to join me in a 21 day experience of pursuing God in fasting and prayer. (Pass out booklets and explain the plan) So it is not so important what or when you fast, but that you do fast. Then take that time that you would have used eating, watching TV, playing video games, whatever, and pray.

There are also some precautions that I must make in regards to fasting. If you have medical problems that require you to eat a certain diet, then please do so. Do not fast without a doctor’s supervision if you have medical problems that could cause serious damage to your body if you do not eat. Drink water or some fruit juice while you are fasting. Also do not gorge yourself before you start the fast to try to make up for the food that you won’t eat. It does not make you any less hungry and causes other problems that are associated with overeating. No one should fast to harm their body!

What do I expect from this 21 days of prayer and fasting? That all of us will become more aware of what God wants to do in our lives and what He wants to do through us in 2018. If God reveals specific areas in your life that need to be cleansed or sins that need to be repented for, then surrender them to Him and allow Him to cleanse and forgive. I believe that together as we seek His Presence to hear His voice we will be moved by His heart to do His will in our community.

The aim of fasting is that we come to rely less on food (and other things we tend to rely on) and more on God himself.

That's the meaning of the words in

Matthew 4:4, But he answered, “It is written, “‘Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’”

Every time we fast, we are saying with Jesus, "Not bread alone. But you, Lord. Not bread alone, but you, Lord."

Let me show you quickly in closing why I think Jesus is saying that we should trust in God not bread. It comes from the context of Deuteronomy 8:3 where Jesus gets this word in Matthew 4:4,

“And he humbled you and let you hunger and fed you with manna, which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that he might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.”

He gave them manna—an utterly unheard-of food falling from heaven—Why? "So that" they would learn to live on everything that comes from the mouth of God. How does manna teach that? Because manna is one of the incredible ways God can, with a mere word, reveal himself and meet your needs when all else looks hopeless.

Our deepest satisfaction does not come from food, or anything that this world provides for that matter, but from God. Every word that comes out of the mouth of God reveals God. And it is this self-revelation that we feed on. This will last forever. This is eternal life.

I invite you to let God prove your heart with fasting over this next 21 days. See if he does not reveal some deep things to you, and give himself to you for food.