

The Acceptable Way to Fast

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By definition fasting is abstinence from food, drink or both for a certain period. The word, "fast," is derived from a root word whose primary meaning is to hold, keep or to restrain oneself.

FASTING: A DISCIPLINE

Fasting is unfortunately overlooked as a discipline for the modern Christian. G. Campbell Morgan states that,

"...fasting is a denial of everything that interferes with an intimate direct fellowship with the life in God... It is the life suffering the loss of rights in order that it may come into more strenuous relationship with God. That is the deepest means of grace; and in proportion as we learn what fasting really means, we approach the infinite sources of power."

Jesus was led to fast. Many of His miracles seem to have been preceded by fasting, yet neither by practice nor by precept did Jesus stress fasting. He spoke of fasting twice. The first occasion was in the Sermon on the Mount (Mat. 6:16-18). The second occasion was in Matthew 9:15 when He was approached by the disciples of John the Baptist. It was then that Jesus said that after the Bridegroom was gone His disciples would fast.

WHAT GOD WANTS WHEN WE FAST

In Isaiah 58 (MLV) God has left no doubt as to what He wants and does not want in the ritual of fasting. The Israelites had fasted, as many of us have done, for the wrong ends. God chided them severely:

"...on your fast days you seek your own pleasure, and oppress all your employees. You fast for strife and contention; you strike with your wicked fist. You are not fasting today so as to have your voice reach on high."

It is clear that this carnal, very ungodly approach to fasting will cause the worshipper's sacrifice to be in vain. One might just as well eat and not undergo the rigors of fasting. Nor does God want the faster to make a show of his denial of the pleasant things for a day. He asks:

"Can such a fast be the kind I choose - a man to bow down his head like a rush, to lie in sackcloth and ashes (a sign of mourning, which in this instance was a carnal show)? Is that what you call fasting, or an acceptable day to the Lord?"

You ask, "Then what does He want from me when I fast?" This is what God fervently wants from the fasting soul:

"Is not this the fast I have chosen: to loosen the bonds of wickedness; to undo the bands of the yoke; to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and to take the outcast poor into your home; to clothe those you see unclad, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh?"

To put it as succinctly as possible, a fast is to be entered into for worthy spiritual ends. All attitudes and practices upon which God frowns are to be avoided. This will be the result:

"Then shall thy light break forth as the morning, and thy health shall spring forth speedily...then shalt thou call, and the Lord shall answer; thou shalt cry, and he shall say, Here I am."

Fasting works when the person who is fasting approaches it in the right spirit. Some people think that certain powers can be received for healings, etc., by fasting and prayer. The two scriptures supporting that position are well known not to be in the best manuscripts. Mat. 17:21 and Mark 9:29. Discounting that, it still seems that fasting works. A man who fasts and prays follows the example of Christ.

Christians may make concerted efforts to DO more when DOING will never replace BEING. When one fasts with the aim of DOING, his fasting will be in vain. There is an emphasis on DOING, such as being concerned about erecting buildings, counting heads, noting physical accomplishments, updating our religious education procedures, our visitation program, our surveys, our conferences, our retreats and seminars. Would it not seem, as we look at the pitiful Church of today, that there is a need for the BEING to be developed to the point of quality Christian character? Proper fasting offers the opportunity for spiritual development.

The Church is in a crisis today. Historically the Church prayed and fasted and God answered. Would He not do the same today? There are those who agree with Milton Poole that regeneration would come upon those individuals entering into fasting and praying with faith and obedience. Fasting means that a person lets go of undue attachments to things that are earthly and reaches for the things that are above. Fasting and prayer change the person inside and out even when they do not constitute an act of penitence, when it is not a feeling of pain or inconvenience designed to appease an outraged God, when it is not an ostentatious display, but a sincere act of love and devotion. Fasting should be entered into as a relationship and not as a personal accomplishment.

The Lord is near to the brokenhearted, and He saves those who are crushed in spirit. Psa 34:18 (NASB). Proper fasting is the afflicting of the soul, the crushing of the spirit or the presentation to God of a broken heart. Jesus said that when the Bridegroom would be taken away from the disciples, then they would fast (Luke 5:33-35), and they did.

There is no directive or commandment given to the Church to fast — but Christ fasted. The apostles fasted. The Church fasted. Paul fasted. Are we fasting? Would we be witnessing, as we do, such a fleshly demonstration of "spiritual" worshipping if there were more fasting in the churches? Fasting, obviously, is not the only method of afflicting the soul, but is there any method superior to fasting?

