

# FASTING FOR THE PURPOSE OF GODLINESS

*“Self-indulgence is the enemy of gratitude, and self-discipline usually its friend and generator. That is why gluttony is a deadly sin. The early desert fathers believed that a person’s appetites are linked: full stomachs and jaded palates take the edge from our hunger and thirst for righteousness. They spoil the appetite for God.”*

~Cornelius Plantigna, Jr., president of Calvin Theological Seminary

One of the Spiritual Disciplines which helps sharpen the edge of our hunger and thirst for righteousness and which intensifies our hunger for God is fasting. To practice it biblically would be one way to obey the command of 1 Timothy 4:7, “Discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness.”

## I. FASTING EXPLAINED

In a broad sense fasting may be defined as “the voluntary denial of a normal function for the sake of intense spiritual activity” (Richard Foster). So then, fasting does not always deal with abstinence from food, though all specific references in Scripture do. Sometimes we may need to fast from involvement with other people, the media, the telephone, the internet, sleep, etc.

In the Bible, a *normal fast* involves abstaining from all food, but not from water (Mt. 4:2, Lk 4:2). A *partial fast* is a limitation of the diet by not abstention from all food (Dan. 1:12; Mt 3:4). An *absolute fast* is the avoidance of all food and liquid (Ezra 10:6; Esther 4:16, Acts 9:9). The Bible also describes the *supernatural fast* of Moses (Deut. 9:9) and Elijah (1 Kings 19:8), *private fasts* (Mt 6:16-18), *congregational fasts* (Joel 2:15-16), *church leadership fasts* (Acts 13), *national fasts* (2 Chr. 20:3), *regular fasts* (Lev. 16-29-31; Lk 18:12), and *occasional fasts* (Mt. 9:15).

## II. FASTING IS EXPECTED

Jesus said in Matthew 6:16-17, “And **whenever** you **fast**, ... But you, **when** you **fast**,...” By giving us instruction on what to do and what not to do when we fast, Jesus assumes that we will fast. Compare these words with his statement about giving in the same passage, Matthew 6:2-3: “**When** therefore you **give** alms,... But **when** you **give** alms,...” Compare also His words in the same section about prayer, Matthew 6:5-7: “And **when** you **pray**,... But you, **when** you **pray**,... And **when** you are **praying**,...” No one doubts that we are to give and to pray. It is quite common to use this passage to teach Jesus’ principles on giving and praying. Since there is nothing here or elsewhere in Scripture indicating that we no longer need to fast, we may conclude that Jesus still expects us to fast today. In fact, Jesus says of His followers in Matthew 9:15 after He leaves and returns to Heaven “then they will fast.” The only instructions about fasting He left in addition to those already in Scripture are His words in Matthew 6:16-17.

## III. FASTING IS TO BE DONE FOR A PURPOSE

- A. To strengthen prayer (Ezra 8:23; Neh. 1:4; Dan. 9:3; Joel 2:12-17; Acts 13:3)
- B. To seek God’s guidance (Judges 20:26-28; Acts 14:23)
- C. To express grief (Judges 20:26; 1 Sam. 31:11-13; 2 Sam. 1:11-12)
- D. To seek from God deliverance or protection (2 Chr. 20:34; Ezra 8:21-23; Esther 4:6; Ps. 109:21-26)
- E. To express repentance and the return to God (1 Sam. 7:6; Joel 2:12; Jonah 3:5-8)
- F. To humble oneself before God (1 Kings 21:27-29; Ps, 35:13)
- G. To express concern for the work of God (Neh. 1:3-11; Isa, 58:6-7; Dan, 9:3) Historically Christians have fasted as they have sought the revival of the Church.
- H. To minister to the needs of others (Isa. 58:6-7)
- I. To overcome temptation and dedicate yourself to God (Mt. 4:1-11)
- J. To express love and worship to God (Lk. 2:37)

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## IV. What should we expect to see happen through fasting?

Fasting is not a 'cure all' for all our spiritual struggles or a short cut to a happy, problem-free life. It is a weapon in our walk and warfare as Christians. Fasting is also not a competition and we do not fast to earn answers or twist God's arm. We fast to intensify our connection with God and improve our communication so prayer is more effective. It humbles us and brings us to an awareness of our need of God. It renews the sense of balance and priority in our walk with God. It heightens our spiritual sensitivity and clears the channels of communication with God. It hits at our deep-seated selfishness and strengthens our self control. It clears the ground for greater spiritual breakthrough in our lives and the lives of those we come into contact with. In fasting we are reminded in a very tangible way what the Bible says: "Man does not live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God" (Deut. 8:3 & Mt. 4:4).

Adapted from Chapter 9 in *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life* (NavPress) by Donald S. Whitney, 1991 and from the 24/7 Prayer website (<http://24-7prayer.us/>)