

“Fasting in the New Testament”

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The word “fasting” is used predominantly by Matthew, Mark, and Luke (including Acts). It is not found in John’s writings. Paul uses the word three times (1 Cor. 7:5; 2 Cor. 6:5; 11:27). And it is not used in any of the non-Paul writings (i.e. James, Hebrews, 1 & 2 Peter, etc.). This alone makes the thought intriguing. Is fasting something New Testament believers should be engaged in as a spiritual discipline? Let us consider the following seven ideas together.

First, Jesus fasted for forty days and forty nights (Matt. 4:2). His fast provided a platform for His temptation by the devil. Fasting can leave you physically weak and thus open to spiritual attack (Mark 8:3). Just because Jesus did, does not mean we should. However, this does lend itself toward a serious consideration of its practice. When we do fast, we must be aware of the real potential of being under spiritual attack by the evil one. And although a fast can leave you physically weak, it is also a time of great spiritual renewal.

Second, there appears to be a proper approach to fasting. Fasting would seem to be a private matter that others are not necessarily to be made aware of (Matt. 6:16-18). Fasting is not about you, but about Him. Fasting was not designed to make much of you, but to place you before Him. When a fast draws attention to the fast, then to the degree that it does the fast is fleshly.

Third, there is a positive spiritual consequence to fasting (Matt. 6:16-18). Every divinely established fast has an intrinsic merit. Fasting is for our benefit. Although we give up the good, we gain the best.

Fourth, there is a time and place for fasting and a time and place for non-fasting (Matt. 9:14, 15; Mark 2:18-20; Luke 5:33-35). A fast is to be seasonal and occasional. It is neither mundane nor routine (Luke 18:12). Accounts like Anna in Luke 2:37 appear to be exceptions and not the rule. Although we might set aside specific times to pray, there is a prayer that is divinely sourced that transcends our ability to pray. This is equally true with a fast. You might plan to fast, but those that are sourced in God are ethereal in their expression.

Fifth, sometimes fasting occurs because one’s spiritual interest distracts away from the consumption of food (Matt. 15:32; Mark 8:3). It is on these occasions that the divine aspect of the fast becomes prominent.

Sixth, a fast is a part of the spiritual disciplines (Acts 10:30). It is often accompanied by prayer (Acts 13:2, 3; 1 Cor. 7:5). One’s sensitivity to the Lord’s leading can be heightened by fasting (Acts 14:23) and it appears to be a means of accomplishing spiritual warfare and fulfilling the outworking of God’s

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purpose (Matt. 17:21; Mark 9:29). This is the beauty of a fast. Fasting should be a part of every believer's life. It is normal, can be spontaneous, and is to be expected.

Seventh, believers historically have fasted: Anna (Luke 2:37), Cornelius (Acts 10:30), the early church (Acts 13:2, 3; 14:23), and Paul (2 Cor. 6:5; 11:27 [whether or not this was intentional is not known from the text]). It would appear to be something that is normal (1 Cor. 7:5). Just because they did, does not mean we should, but there is an historical pattern for us to fast.

So how are we to answer the question, "Is fasting something New Testament believers should be engaged in as a spiritual discipline?" Let me offer two concluding considerations.

First, we should fast, not because it is specifically mandated, but because it has the power of heightening our sensitivity to the Holy Spirit's voice.

Second, we should fast because it is a means (when coupled with prayer) of God revealing Himself to us for the outworking of His purpose.

My hope is that we would be a people who embrace the biblical idea of fasting and that we would be a fasting church.