

# A Guide To Fasting

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<http://newarkcoc.org/a-guide-to-fasting/>

At some periods of Christian history fasting has occupied a prominent place in the life of the church. At other times fasting has been, at best, a fringe practice.[1] Although fasting is making a comeback in our time,[2] many Christians are unaware of the meaning, purpose, and desired results of fasting.

## A. FASTING DEFINED

“Fasting is the act of total or partial abstinence from food for a limited period of time, usually undertaken for moral or religious reasons.”[3] Richard Foster notes that fasting is not a “hunger strike” (seeking power) or “health dieting” (vanity).[4] While both of these include the practice of fasting, they are not fasting in a religious sense.

Fasting is not an exclusive Christian practice. Many Christians have heard of Ramadan, the ninth month of the Islamic calendar (late June and early July in 2014). During this month Muslims fast from sunrise to sunset. The practice of fasting in other religions ranges from the Zoroastrian prohibition of fasting to the Jainist ideal of a life of passionless detachment resulting in death by starvation.[5](Fortunately Christian fasting avoids this extreme!)

## B. BACKGROUND OF CHRISTIAN FASTING

Christian fasting is rooted in the Jewish teachings and practice of fasting as presented in numerous Old Testament passages. In the Old Testament there is one prescribed fast day: the Day of Atonement (Lev 16:29-32, 23:26-32, Num 29:7-11).[6] There were also several public and private fasts, accompanied by prayer, for various purposes. These purposes included mourning (1 Sam 31:13, 2 Sam 1:12), to demonstrate repentance and remorse (2 Sam 12:15-23, 1 Kings 21:27-29, Joel 2:12-13), or to demonstrate serious concern before God (Ps 35:13).

Isaiah 58 demonstrates the religious and moral dimensions of fasting. Fasting was intended to focus an individual on his or her relationship to God. It is an inward act of devotion that results in outward change to the one who fasts. Elmer Towns writes, “The purpose of all worship, including fasting, is to change the worshipper in ways that have social and interpersonal impact. We worship not just to gratify ourselves, but also to become empowered to change the world!”[7] In Isaiah’s time the religious and moral elements of fasting were separated. The people ask God, “Why have we fasted, and you do not see? Why have we humbled ourselves and you do not notice?” God answers, “Yet on the day of fasting you do as you please and exploit all your workers. Your fasting ends in quarreling and strife, and in striking one another with wicked fists. You cannot fast as you do today and expect your voice to be heard on high” (Isa 58:3-4). When the religious and moral dimensions of fasting (or any religious practice) are separated from one another, the result is ritual as a substitute for real spirituality.

When considering Jesus and his teaching on fasting, it seems clear that ritual fasting was the primary practice. An outward show of piety took precedence over genuine, inward spirituality. “When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show men that they are fasting” (Matt 6:16). Jesus then offers a needed corrective to their practice. “But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to men that you are

fasting, but only to your Father who is unseen, and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you” (Matt 6:17-18). Jesus removes the outward ritual aspect of fasting, and restores it as a practice that is primarily God-ward in focus. Jesus does not eliminate fasting as a spiritual discipline. He fasted in preparation for ministry (Matt 4:2), and he taught that it would be appropriate for his followers to fast once he left them (Matt 9:14-15).

There are two references to fasting in Acts. One is Acts 13:2-3, where the leaders of the Antioch church are “worshiping the Lord and fasting.” The other is Acts 14:23, where Paul and Barnabas “appointed elders for them in each church and, with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord, in whom they had put their trust.” These passages point to the connection between worship, prayer, and fasting. They also demonstrate one purpose of fasting – to identify missionaries and congregational leaders and commit them to God.[8] It also should be noted that the Acts 13 fast is a “group” fast in which several leaders fasted together. I take this to mean that, while Jesus offered a needed corrective to the outward ritualistic practice of fasting by some first century Jews, he did not prohibit fasting by groups of believers.

The path of fasting in the history of the church has paralleled that of Judaism. When Christianity became the only recognized religion of the Roman Empire, the resultant institutionalization of the church led to a greater emphasis on religious ritual. Fasting became linked with legalistic theology and meritorious works. Fast days were added to the church calendar, particularly around the seasons of Lent and Advent.

The Protestant Reformation largely did away with fast days, along with many other rituals of the Roman Catholic Church. The Anabaptists (one group from whom we trace our religious heritage) relegated fasting to the private sphere, leaving it up to the individual to determine its appropriateness for self-discipline and prayer.[9]

The Roman Catholic Church has largely abandoned ritual fast days. Since Vatican II the only remaining fast days on the church calendar are Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. Among Catholics and Protestants alike there is a growing practice of group fasting with an accompanying donation of the cost of a normal meal to relieve world hunger.[10] Others fast to deepen their personal devotion to God or seek his will about important decisions in their lives.

## **C. SOME QUESTIONS ABOUT FASTING**

With the definition and background of fasting explained, I want to turn to some practical aspects of fasting. The following are questions I’ve been asked about fasting. The answers will help us understand the place of fasting in our personal and congregational life.

### **1. Are Christians required or commanded to fast?**

Strictly speaking, no – fasting is not commanded in the New Testament. However, there are four passages that imply that fasting is a spiritual discipline of the Christian life. In Matt 4:2, we read that the Lord fasted for forty days in preparation for ministry. We are not commanded to do likewise, but here we have his example as one who fasted. In Matt 6:16, Jesus says, “When you fast ...” He makes similar statements about giving to the needy (6:2) and prayer (6:5) – two undisputed Christian disciplines. Jesus does not say, “If you fast,” nor does he say “You must fast.” His word is, simply, “When you fast.”[11] The third passage is Matt 9:14-15. Jesus is asked by John’s disciples, “How is it that we and the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?” Listen to Jesus’ reply: “How can the guests of the bridegroom mourn while he is with them? The time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them; then they will fast.” There is speculation about the

“time when the bridegroom will be taken.” Is it the three days between the crucifixion and the resurrection? Or is it the time between the Ascension and Second Coming? I believe this is answered by the Acts passages (Acts 13:1-3 and Acts 14:23). These passages show that fasting was a practice of the early church; therefore fasting is a practice for we who live between the Ascension and Second Coming of Christ. About the Christian’s call to fasting Foster writes,

Perhaps it is best to avoid the term “command” since in the strictest sense Jesus did not command fasting. But it is obvious that he proceeded on the principle that the children of the kingdom of God would fast. For the person longing for a more intimate walk with God, these statements of Jesus are drawing words.<sup>[12]</sup>

## **2. Why should Christians fast?**

There are several reasons Christians should fast. One is that Jesus fasted, and by fasting we are imitating him. When we fast, we affirm the truth he spoke to the devil, who was tempting him. “Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God” (Matt 4:4). Foster writes, “In experiences of fasting we are not so much abstaining from food as we are feasting on the word of God. Fasting is feasting!”<sup>[13]</sup> Fasting affirms our dependence on the word of God (and the God of his word) for our true sustenance.

The example of the Antioch church leaders instructs us to fast when seeking God’s guidance and direction before major decisions, and to view fasting as an act of worship (Acts 13:1-3). The example of Paul and Barnabas connects prayer and fasting (Acts 14:23). When a Christian has something serious to pray about, the practice of fasting demonstrates to himself or herself and God the seriousness of the request.

The New Testament does not directly reference the teaching about fasting in Isaiah 58. However, the spirit of Isaiah’s teaching permeates the New Testament. In his ministry Jesus demonstrated the integration of the heart of spirituality and the outward practice of helping the poor. The current trend of fasting to free up resources for the poor is strongly supported by Scripture.

## **3. What should I do while I’m fasting?**

“Fasting must forever center on God. It must be God-initiated and God-ordained. Every other purpose must be subservient to God.”<sup>[14]</sup> Fasting should be about deepening my devotion to God. For this purpose fasting will be accompanied by prayer, singing, journaling, worship, or some other act of devotion. Fasting also involves inner and outer change, tying religious and moral practice together. If one fasts to help the poor and hungry of society, the fast may be accompanied by service at a food kitchen or a contribution to an organization dedicated to helping the poor.

When fasting, it is tempting to focus on the physical side – the body’s response to withdrawal of food, or in the case of a partial fast, withdrawal of certain types of food or drink, or stimuli like media. During the fast one should pay more attention to the spiritual side. Many who have fasted have reported a closeness to God that they did not experience before fasting. This should be the main thing we look for in our fast.

A secondary benefit to fasting may also be discovered. Foster writes,

More than any other Discipline, fasting reveals the things that control us. This is a wonderful benefit to the true disciple who longs to be transformed into the

image of Jesus Christ. We cover up what is inside us with food and other good things, but in fasting these things surface. If pride controls us, it will be revealed almost immediately ... anger, bitterness, jealousy, strife, fear – if they are within us, they will surface during fasting. At first we will rationalize that our anger is due to our hunger; then we will realize that we are angry because a spirit of anger is within us. We can rejoice in this knowledge because we know that healing is available through the power of Christ.[15]

#### **4. What results can I expect from fasting?**

Jesus promises that God will reward the one who fasts secretly before God alone. What is the reward God offers? Jesus makes several references to rewards in the Sermon on the Mount. “If you love those who love you, what reward will you get?” (5:47). “Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret (giving), will reward you” (6:4). “Then your Father, who see what is done in secret (prayer) will reward you” (6:6). Craig Keener takes an eternal view of the reward. “Those who give for others’ approval and pray and fast to people rather than to God already have what they wanted, others’ approval. They will not be rewarded for the deeds again on the Day of Judgment. Religious as they appear to be outwardly, they have lived for human approval rather than God’s.”[16]

A temporal reward may also be in view here. That which we are seeking through giving, or prayer, or fasting, God in his grace may bestow upon us in this life. I want to be careful to say that we should not fast in the hope that it will manipulate God. When you were a child, you probably had a technique that always worked to manipulate your dad or mom. If you wanted candy in the supermarket, you could scream until he or she gave in. Maybe you discovered that the opposite approach worked better. Be good and you knew you could get it. A wise parent sees through such ruses. God is the ultimate wise parent. He won’t give us what we don’t need, no matter how badly we want it. He won’t be manipulated by our good behavior or outward shows of piety. However, he is our Father, and he loves us and he delights to give us what we need. Sometimes that is in accord with what we ask for; sometimes it is not.

#### **5. Are there potential dangers in fasting?**

Yes, there are potential spiritual and physical dangers in fasting. One is to separate the practice of fasting from the desire for inner spiritual development. In other words, we can do the practice without any real desire for heart change. This is the problem Isaiah identified in Isaiah 58. God’s people have always been subject to the temptation to offer God our outward actions when what he really wants is our heart. We run the risk of developing the attitude of the Pharisee in Jesus’ parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector in Luke 18: “God, I thank you that I am not like other men – robbers, evildoers, adulterers – or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.” The point of Jesus parable was “For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.” Fasting is an expression of humility and devotion to God, not a badge of piety.

Another danger is to try to manipulate God for our own ends. Foster says:

It is sobering to realize that the very first statement Jesus made about fasting dealt with the question of motive (Matt 6:16-18). To use good things to our own ends is always the sign of false religion. How easy it is to take something like fasting and try to use it to get what we want. At times there is such stress on the blessings and benefits of fasting that we would be tempted to believe that with a little fast we could have the world, including God, eating out of our hands.[17]

Another danger is a physical one. Elmer Towns, in his book *Fasting for Spiritual Breakthrough*, offers this disclaimer:

The fasts suggested in this book are not for everyone. Consult your physician before beginning. Expectant mothers, diabetics, and others with a history of medical problems can enter into a spirit of fasting while remaining on essential diets. While fasting is helpful to many, the nature of God would not command a physical exercise that would harm people physically or emotionally.[18]

If you are not physically able to engage in a complete fast by giving up food for a period of time like a day or two, you should consider a partial fast. If you drink coffee or some other beverage regularly, give it up for a few days or a week. Consider a media fast. Turn off the television or computer, and use the time to worship or pray. There are other ways of participating without jeopardizing your health. Daniel participated in a partial fast, perhaps because his official duties precluded a complete fast (Dan 10:2-3).

## 6. How do I fast?

Foster has done much to restore the practice of fasting. He asserts that moderns do not fast because they do not know how to fast. He writes:

As with all the Disciplines, a progression should be observed; it is wise to learn to walk well before we try to run. Begin with a partial fast of twenty-four hours duration; many have found lunch to lunch to be the best time. This means that you would not eat two meals. Fresh fruit juices are excellent to drink during the fast. Attempt this once a week for several weeks. In the beginning you will be fascinated with the physical aspects of your experience, but the most important thing is to monitor the inner attitude of your heart. Outwardly you will be performing the regular duties of your day, but inwardly you will be in prayer and adoration, song and worship. In a new way, cause every task of the day to be a sacred ministry to the Lord. Break your fast with a light meal of fresh fruits and vegetable and a good deal of rejoicing.

It should go without saying that you should follow Jesus' counsel to refrain from calling attention to what you are doing. The only ones who should know you are fasting are those who have to know. If you call attention to your fasting, people will be impressed and, as Jesus said, that will be your reward. You, however, are fasting for greater and deeper rewards.[19]

**MAY GOD BLESS YOU WITH A MORE INTIMATE RELATIONSHIP WITH HIM. MAY HE HEAR AND ANSWER THE PRAYER OF YOUR HEART, AND BLESS THE FAST YOU UNDERTAKE FOR HIS GLORY.**

## Helpful Resources

Richard J. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*. In addition to an excellent chapter on fasting, Foster discusses twelve personal and corporate spiritual disciplines. This book belongs in every Christian's library.

Robert D. Linder, *Fasting*, in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*. Copy of article available from Steve.

Elmer Towns, *Fasting for Spiritual Breakthrough*. A copy is available in the church office. A comprehensive study of fasting, including a thorough list of Scriptures related to fasting.

[1] Richard Foster notes that from 1861 to 1954 no works were published on fasting. Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 47.

[2] A Google™ search on “Fasting” yielded over one million hits; “Religious Fasting” yielded 157,000 hits.

[3] Robert D. Linder, “Fasting” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 406-407.

[4] Foster, 48-49.

[5] Linder, 406. Jainism is an offshoot of Hinduism.

[6] The phrase “deny yourselves” (NIV) or “humble yourselves” (NAS) refer to a number of practices of humility, including fasting (see NIV footnote and Psalm 35:13). Gordon Wenham, *Leviticus*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament.

[7] Elmer Towns, *Fasting for Spiritual Breakthrough*, 18-19.

[8] The Newark church has engaged in “Forty Days of Prayer and Fasting” preceding the call of ministers or elders.

[9] Linder, 406-407.

[10] Some of our church members have participated in this type of fast, initiated by groups like World Vision and Manna International.

[11] Foster, 53.

[12] *Ibid.*, 54.

[13] *Ibid.*, 55.

[14] *Ibid.*, 54.

[15] *Ibid.*, 55.

[16] Craig Keener, *Gospel of Matthew*, 208.

[17] Foster, 54.

[18] Towns, 3.

[19] Foster, 57.