

Articles and Sermons :: The Discipline Of Fasting -duewel

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The Discipline Of Fasting

by Wesley L. Duewel

Fasting is a God-ordained form of self-denial. The very nature of intercession calls for as much or more self-denial than any other form of spiritual activity. The major work of prayer and fasting from food is normally in secret. We think of fasting as abstaining primarily from food. However, fasting may include abstaining from such normal activities as sleep, recreation, and other special enjoyments. As far as possible, it should include abstaining from social relations with others while you fast. You may need to fast while still discharging family responsibilities or your regular work, or you may be able to get completely alone for the fast period (1 Cor. 7:5).

Andrew Bonar defined fasting as abstaining from anything that hindered prayer. Though himself an avid reader, he had to fast at times from his excessive love for reading to find time to commune with God. Phillips Brooks described fasting as abstaining from anything innocent in itself in order to grow more spiritually or serve God more effectively. Perhaps for our generation fasting should often be from radio and TV in order to give ourselves more totally and intensely to prayer.

The purpose of fasting is (1) to subject the physical to the spiritual and to give priority to spiritual goals; (2) to disentangle oneself for a time from one's environment, material things, daily responsibilities, and cares; and (3) to devote one's whole spiritual attention to God and prayer. We do not imply that daily duties and life's necessities are unholy or unspiritual; rather, we subject permissible things, even profitable things, to greater spiritual priorities.

Andrew Murray taught, "Prayer is the one hand with which we grasp the Invisible; fasting the other, with which we let loose and cast away the visible." Fasting added to prayer makes our communion more precious to the Lord and our intercession more powerful in its ministry to the Lord (Acts 13:2), as He royally intercedes from heaven's throne (Rom. 8:34). What, then, is the role of fasting?

Fasting is integral to a life of deep devotion and intercession. Anna the prophetess is a beautiful example of such a lifestyle (Luke 2:37). Fasting is essential to a life of personal spiritual discipline, and such discipline greatly enhances and empowers prevailing prayer.

When you long to strengthen and discipline your prayer habits and to add a new dimension to your prevailing in prayer, add fasting. When you seek to humble yourself before God in total submission to His will and in total dependence on His almighty power, add fasting. When you face an overwhelming need, a human impossibility, and your soul hungers to see God intervene by supernatural power, add fasting.

In such situations you may well find such a powerful drawing to fasting that you are sure you will fail the Lord unless you set apart time for fasting prayer. Scripture is clear in this point: God does call His people to fasting (Isa. 22:12-13). Tragically, so many are not walking closely enough with the Lord to feel His holy drawing and to hear His gentle voice. How shocked many Christians will be in heaven to see what blessings they missed and how often they failed all that God intended to do through them just because they did not add fasting to their prayer.

But you are more likely to hear God's voice calling you to fast if you already have been making fasting a regular part of the spiritual discipline of your life. Jesus said of us today, "Then they will fast" (Matt. 9:15). You and I have no more right to omit fasting because we feel no special emotional prompting than we have a right to omit prayer, Bible reading, or assembling with God's children for lack of some special emotional prompting. Fasting is just as biblical and normal a part of a spiritual walk of obedience with God as are these others.

Why don't we fast more? For the same reason we hesitate to deny ourselves and take up our cross in other ways! Yet Jesus said so emphatically, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me" (Matt. 16:24). You are an incomplete disciple unless you do. But denial of self is seldom preached and all too seldom practiced. What more biblical and Christlike way is there to deny self than to fast as we pray?

How do you take up your cross? To take up a cross is not to have someone place the cross upon you. Sickness, persecution, and the antagonism of other people are not your real cross. To take up a cross is a deliberate choice. We must purposely humble ourselves, stoop down, and pick up the cross for Jesus. Fasting is one of the most biblical ways to do so.

You can indeed deny yourself some expenditure and give the money saved to missions or to some other aspect of God's work. Such an action could be taking up your cross. You could identify with an unpopular cause for Jesus' sake and thus take up your cross. But no way is more God-approved and more constantly available than to add fasting to your prayer. In what form of self-denial have you found most blessing? Or don't you practice self-denial?

There may be times when physically you cannot fast more than one or two meals, rather than a full day or more. Perhaps your responsibilities demand that you eat, alone or with others. But you can still fast. Do like Daniel. He fasted partially for three weeks, and God wonderfully honored his fast. As a prime minister he had to attend some functions. He had to preserve his strength and could not hibernate for three weeks. So Daniel fasted from choice food (i.e., he ate only the bare essentials) and from the use of lotions (Dan. 10:3).

God is not a slave driver. He understands your health and your situation. He wants to keep you well and effective. Ask the Spirit's guidance, and He will show you how and when to fast. But as far as possible, spend the fast mealtimes in prayer. Set apart a period of hours for prayer, especially if you are in a prayer battle.

Satan does not want you to fast. He did not want Jesus to fast. He will try to tempt you with the thought of food. He will try to get you to forget your commitment to fast, just as he tries to keep you from prayer. Satan tries to make you hesitate to fast, to procrastinate about fasting. Why be surprised? He fears tremendously lest your prayer be empowered by fasting. He may even temporarily try to battle you all the more if you fast. He may become desperate. You are greatly endangering his work when you fast and pray.

Watch Your Motive

Remember, the motive in your fasting is all-important. Remember what fasting is not:

1. It is not a way to earn God's blessing and God's answer to your prayer. You are never worthy of His help and blessing. You implore His love and mercy. You do not earn any aspect of His grace.
 2. It is not a way to bypass obedience. Prayer and fasting do not change your need to be obedient to God and His clearly revealed will. God will not hear your prayer, even if you add fasting, if you are out of His will in some regard. Take the steps of obedience, and then begin to fast and pray.
 3. It is not an automatic way to miracle. Fasting is not some spiritualized form of magic. It does not work by itself. Fasting may do you physical good quite apart from your spiritual condition, but fasting is not some secret of power available to just anyone. Fasting has power only as it is added to your humbly seeking God's face. The more closely you are walking with God, the greater can be the spiritual values from your fasting.
- You may not be able to stop all of your other activities while you fast for twelve hours or for a day. But if your soul is constantly crying to God as you go about your work, if every moment you are reaching out to Him as you fulfill your responsibilities, then whatever fasting you can do adds tremendous power to your seeking God's answer.
4. It does not accumulate power to your credit, so that you can display it at will. You do not use the Holy Spirit--He uses you. The moment you parade your power, it is gone. The moment you flaunt your fasting, it does you no good, a warning that Jesus made very clear. If you want God's reward for your prayer, fasting, and good works, keep them as hidden as possible.

Jesus took it for granted that you would do all three, so He does not say, "Pray," but "when you pray." He does not say, "Fast," but "when you fast" (Matt. 6:2,5,16). Jesus tells you to let your fasting, as far as possible, be known only to God and He will reward you (v. 18).