



# THE PRAYER CLOSET

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## FASTING

The subject of fasting creates a multitude of reactions. Some people react in unbelief. They do not believe that fasting is something for modern Christians. In their eyes, it is foolish for any believer to fast. Others react in indifference. It is something that a believer can do or not do; it really has no practical purpose or power. Theirs is a "take it or leave it" attitude. Some are shocked by the subject. The very thought of missing a meal or doing without food sends them into panic. This is unthinkable to them. And, there are those who believe it is only for "religious fanatics."

In recent years, the subject of fasting has been rediscovered. There had only been one major work wrote on this subject in over one hundred years until this rediscovery. Yet, this is a subject that is either ignored or dismissed by most Christians. In the modern church, fasting is looked at as a strange event. Why has fasting been ignored or dismissed by the modern church?

*First, there is widespread ignorance concerning the biblical teaching about fasting.* There has been very little preaching and teaching on this subject, if at all. The pulpits of this nation have been silent concerning fasting. *Second, the dominance of a "feel good" religion has been a hindrance to fasting.* Fasting calls for humility and self-denial. This cuts against the grain of the commitment of many church members. *Third, many church members have made convenience more important than commitment.* People desire to follow Christ and serve Him when it is convenient for them. They do not want to be bothered by the subject of fasting. It does not fit their desires nor their schedule. *Finally, there is a greater concern for the things of the world than the things of God.* Fasting causes a person to focus sharply on the things of God. Unfortunately, this is not the interest of many who profess the name of Jesus Christ.

This may sound harsh to you. It may sound as a grim evaluation of the modern church in America. Yet, the Word of God through the prophet Amos still ring true and clear, "**Woe to you who are at ease in Zion**" (Amos 6:1). A people who are proud and have a religion of convenience cannot expect the blessing of God. God does not bless pride; He blesses humility (1 Peter 5:5). Jesus Christ does not call His people to convenience but to self denial (Mark 8:34). Humility and self-denial are the heart of fasting.

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This issue of *The Prayer Closet* is devoted to the subject of fasting. Both the biblical and practical issues concerning fasting will be examined. I want to challenge you to prayerfully consider the subject of fasting. If you are already fasting, use this issue to strengthen and motivate you in your fasting. If you have fasted but have not for a long period of time, use this issue to rekindle the desire to fast and seek God. If you have never fasted, please consider practice. It will provide a pathway to a deeper experience of the presence and power of God in your life.

## What Is Fasting?

The most basic definition of fasting is that it is the act of abstaining from food for a spiritual purpose or for a spiritual goal. The word for “fasting” in the Old Testament means “to cover the mouth.” The word for fasting in the New Testament means literally “not to eat.” To fast is to abstain from feeding the body in order to focus on feeding the spirit by seeking God. It is turning away from the natural in order to receive the supernatural. Eating is the most natural thing that a person does. Fasting is interrupting this so that one can focus on God, His Word, and His will.

Fasting is pulling out of the rat-race of life in order to have a special time of focusing on God through prayer. The Bible connects prayer and fasting. Fasting is done in order to intensify prayer. In fasting, a person puts aside the desires of the flesh in order to wholeheartedly seek God in prayer. This provides a deeper experience of the presence and power of God. **During a fast, it is not that God hears better, but that you listen better.**

## Should A Christian Fast?

Through the years, I have encountered individuals who believed that fasting is not for modern Christians. The question is: Should a Christian fast? At this point, we must turn to the words of the Lord Jesus Christ. In **Matthew 6**, the Lord Jesus Christ refers to giving, fasting, and praying. Notice what Jesus says about each of these subjects:

v.2-*When you give*

v.5-*When you pray*

v.16-*When you fast*

The Lord Jesus Christ did not say “If you give,” or “If you pray,” or “If you fast.” He is not giving an option to His people. You cannot pick and choose what you want and leave off what you do not want. Our Lord Jesus Christ expects us to fast as much as He expects us to pray and to give. The church today emphasizes giving and praying. But, Jesus emphasizes giving, praying, and fasting.

Fasting is not just for a select few. It is not something just for “super-saints.” It is something that should be a part of every Christian’s life. Just as Christians need to pray and give, they also need to fast. Fasting is not obsolete, outdated, or something that “fanatics” do. It is a spiritual exercise that needs to characterize the lives of those who follow Christ.

In **Mark 2:18-20**, the Lord Jesus Christ is confronted by the disciples of John the Baptist and the Pharisees. They were fasting and wanted to know why Christ's disciples were not fasting. Jesus uses a common event in that day to explain why His disciples were not fasting like they were. He uses the illustration of a wedding. Before the wedding ceremony, there was great feasting and rejoicing. Jesus compares Himself to a "bridegroom" and His disciples as the "friends of the bridegroom." They were rejoicing, eating, and drinking. Yet, there would come a day when the bridegroom would be gone. This refers to the time when the wedding ceremony was finished and the bridegroom left. The feasting and the celebrating would then be over. Christ states that His disciples would fast when the "bridegroom" was gone. He is referring to His death, resurrection, and ascension to heaven. He is clearly stating that the time of fasting is when He returns to the Father. The time for fasting is after the resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ. This is the time in which we live. Fasting is not obsolete!

The words of Jesus Christ indicate that fasting was to be practiced by Christians after He returned to the Father. The early church practiced fasting. In fact, they fasted on a regular basis. In **Acts 13:1-3**, the church at Antioch fasted before the Lord. In **1 Corinthians 7:5**, the apostle Paul calls on husbands and wives to give themselves to a time of prayer and fasting. In **2 Corinthians 6:5**, Paul is discussing what he had done as an apostle. In this list, he mentions fasting. It was the common practice of Christians to fast two days a week, Wednesday and Friday. Epiphanius, bishop of Salamis (315 A.D.), wrote, "*Who does not know that the fast of the fourth and sixth days of the week are observed by Christians throughout the world?*"

In **Matthew 6**, the Lord Jesus Christ is dealing with the wrong way to fast. He is not teaching that fasting should be forsaken. He is declaring the right way to fast. By giving us instructions on what to do and what not to do when we fast, He simply assumes that we will fast. This is something that should be practiced by Christians. It is as important as prayer and giving.

## What Fasting Is Not

Whenever fasting is taught or preached, there are always going to be wrong ideas about its nature and practice. These wrong ideas are often used to declare that fasting is not for Christians. You should not allow false ideas about fasting keep you from this. It is important that you understand what fasting is not.

*First, fasting is not a way that you earn or merit favor from God.* Fasting does bring a person into a right relationship with God nor does it earn His favor or forgiveness. The only way to be made right with God and forgiven is through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. There is no religious ritual that a person can practice that will earn him or her a right standing with God. People receive the favor and forgiveness of God through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ (**Romans 3:24-28**).

*Second, fasting should not be used as a substitute for repentance and godly living.* Fasting is a powerful spiritual discipline. God honors and blesses true fasting. However, it is not a substitute for repenting of one's sins and striving to live a holy life. Fasting without the pursuit of holiness is an abomination to God. It does not substitute for the daily striving to live a godly holy life.

*Finally, fasting is not an attempt to manipulate God to do our will.* Fasting does not force God to do your will. It should not be used as a way to get God to do what you want. It is the opportunity to humble yourself before God in order to lay out your requests to Him and seek for His will in those matters. God is not a vending machine where if we put so much in, we will get so much back from Him. Fasting is not the manipulation of God.

# Why Is Fasting So Powerful?

Fasting is a powerful spiritual discipline because of its connection to three things. These are three things that God loves and wants to see produced in His people. Because of its intimate connection with these three things, God blesses and honors fasting. First, fasting and humility are intimately connected. Humility is at the heart of fasting. Fasting creates the humility or brokenness that God desires to see in His people (**2 Chronicles 20:3, 12**). God wants this type of broken, humble dependence on Him. Fasting will create this in a person (**Ezra 8:21**).

Second, fasting is intimately connected to self-denial. In **Psalm 35:13**, David declares that he had humbled himself through fasting. The word for “humbled” carries the idea of dying or putting to death. He declares that he was putting his flesh to death through fasting. Fasting enables the believer to die to self and put self to death. This is the life that pleases God. God does not want a people who are indulgent and self-seeking. God warned His people that giving in to the body’s every craving would make them sluggish and apathetic when it came to spiritual matters (**Deuteronomy 8:10-11**). The same is true today. God desires a people who will put the spirit over the body, the things of God over the desires of the flesh. Fasting enables a believer to do this. It is intimately connected to denying and dying to one’s self.

Finally, fasting is intimately connected with prayer. As you study the Scriptures concerning fasting, you will often find prayer and fasting joined together. There is something about fasting that sharpens the edge of our prayers and gives passion to our praying. When Ezra was about to lead a small group of exiles back to Jerusalem, he proclaimed a fast to help them in their praying for a safe journey. They were going to face many dangers on a nine hundred mile trip without any military protection. This was no ordinary matter to be brought before God in prayer. They fasted to strengthen their praying to God. God heard them and answered their prayer (**Ezra 8:23**).

Fasting does not change God’s hearing but it does strengthen and change our praying. It gives an urgency to our praying. It causes the one fasting to be bold in his or her pleading. As Arthur Wallis wrote in *God’s Chosen Fast*, “**The man who prays with fasting is giving heaven notice that he is truly earnest. . . . Not only so he is expressing his earnestness in a divinely appointed way. He is using a means that God has chosen to make his voice heard on high (p.42).**” God is always pleased to hear the prayers of His people. Yet, He is also pleased when we choose to strengthen our prayers in the way that He has appointed. That way that He has appointed is fasting. This is why fasting is so powerful.

## What Reasons Should Lead A Person To Fast?

There are numerous reasons why a believer should fast. Whenever you fast, you must have a spiritual purpose in mind. There has to be a spiritual purpose or goal fixed in your mind when you fast. If you do not have this, your fast will be of no value. It will also be a miserable, self-centered experience. The Bible reveals some purposes for fasting. These can be applied to your particular situation. Yet, these are the basic purposes revealed in the Scripture.

**To humble yourself before God:** This is a powerful way to humble yourself before God. It is a physical expression of how hopeless you are and how much you need God (**Ezra 8:21; 1 Kings 21:27-29; Psalm 35:13**);

**To strengthen prayer:** Fasting is one of the best friends that you can introduce to your prayer life. Fasting is God's appointed way of strengthening and intensifying your prayers. As Wesley Duewel writes, "Like every other God-ordained religious practice, fasting can be misused or abused . . . But fasting is still God's chosen way to deepen and strengthen prayer. You will be the poorer spiritually and your prayer life will never be what God wants it to be until you practice the privilege of fasting." (**Ezra 8:23**);

**To seek God's guidance:** Through fasting, a person can more clearly discern the will of God. The Bible presents two examples of this. The first example is in **Judges 20**. The eleven tribes of Israel were preparing for war against the tribe of Benjamin. The soldiers were gathered at Gibeah because of a shocking sin that had been committed by the men of that city (**Judges 19:22-30**). They sought the Lord before going into battle, and even though they outnumbered the Benjamites fifteen to one, they lost the battle. The next day they sought the Lord with prayers and tears and still lost the battle with thousands of casualties. On the third day, they not only sought guidance with prayers and tears but also with fasting until the evening (**20:26**). When they did this, the Lord made His will plain to them (**20:28**). It is only after they sought Him with fasting that the Lord gave the victory. Another example of this is **Acts 14:23**. Before Paul and Barnabas would appoint elders in the churches that they founded, they prayed with fasting in order to receive God's guidance. Fasting does not guarantee the certainty of ensuring guidance from God. However, when it is rightly practiced, it does make the person more receptive to God who loves to guide us;

**To express grief to God:** Fasting is a way to express the depth of our grief to God. Three of the first four references in the Bible to fasting connect it with an expression of grief. The grief experienced on these occasions was due to death: the reaction of the eleven tribes to the deaths of forty-thousand soldiers of Israel (**Judges 20:26**); the reaction of the men of Jabesh Gilead to the death of Saul (**1 Samuel 31:13**); and the reaction of David and his men to the death of Saul (**2 Samuel 1:11-12**). Fasting can show our grief over our sin. We are not required to pay for our sins because we cannot do this and because Christ had done this once for all (**1 Peter 3:18**). When a person confesses his or her sin to God, God is faithful and just to cleanse a person of sin and to forgive all unrighteousness (**1 John 1:9**). Fasting does not secure cleansing and forgiveness; this is done by confession and repentance. However, there are times when our grief over sin is so much that fasting should accompany our confession and repentance. At times like this, words do not seem to be enough. Fasting can be a voluntary, heartfelt part of confession. Fasting can also show our grief to God over the sins of others in your circle, your church, your community, or your country. When jealous King Saul attempted to murder the innocent David, the response of Saul's son, Jonathan, was to fast (**1 Samuel 20:34**). When you are grieved over the sin of someone you know and love, fasting is an appropriate response to show your grief to God. This will add power to your prayers for that person. Some may ask, "You can express your grief in prayer. And, God knows your heart. Why fast about it?" As stated earlier, sometimes words are not enough. There are times that the grief is so real and so deep that fasting is the only way to truly express its depth to God. God will be pleased to honor and bless this;

**To seek deliverance or protection:** One of the most common fasts in biblical times was a fast to seek God's deliverance from an enemy or a circumstance. Fasting, rather than fleshly, worldly attempts, should be our first line of defense against persecution. Our first response when persecuted is to strike