

A Primer on Fasting

Various

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I. When you fast... (Joel 2:12-17; Mt 6:16-18; 9:14-15)

II. What is Fasting?

A. Definition of Fasting

Charles Hodge writes, “Fasting, in a religious sense, is a voluntary abstinence from food for a religious purpose.”

B. Foundational Fast (Lev 16:29-34; 23:26-32 cf. Jer 36:6; Lk 18:12; Acts 27:9)

In the OT cycle of feasts, the *foundational fast* was the Day of _____.

¹And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, ²“Speak to the children of Israel, and say to them: ‘The feasts of the LORD, which you shall proclaim to be holy convocations, these are My feasts... ²⁷“Also the tenth day of this seventh month shall be the Day of Atonement. It shall be a holy convocation for you; you shall afflict your souls, and offer an offering made by fire to the LORD. ²⁸And you shall do no work on that same day, for it is the Day of Atonement, to make atonement for you before the LORD your God. ²⁹For any person who is not afflicted in soul on that same day shall be cut off from his people.”

The Day of Atonement, therefore, reveals that *the foundation of all true fasting is God’s promise of forgiveness in Christ*. Fasting is not some means by which we merit God’s favor. Fasting is a means of humbling ourselves before God and of throwing ourselves on His mercy in Christ.

C. Occasional Fasts

1. Civil Fasts (cf. Est 4:16; Jonah 3:5-10)
2. Ecclesiastical Fasts (cf. Ezra 8:21-23; Joel 1:13-14; Acts 14:23)
3. Personal Fasts (cf. Jer 35:6-11; Dan 9:3; Mt 4:2)

II. Why Fast?

So why fast? When we fast, we deprive ourselves of food to proclaim that knowing and serving God is even more important than food. Matthew Henry writes that fasting “*puts an edge upon devout affections.*” Our hunger pains remind us that there are things more important than our bellies: to know God and to serve Him are far more important. Better to be separated from _____ than to be separated from _____ and His word.

- A. Confess our sin (cf. Ezra 9:3-5; 10:6; Neh 9:1-2; Jer 36:1-9)
- B. Seek God's Mercy (e.g., Dt 9:18; Joel 1:13f; 2:12-19)
- C. Seek God's Favor or Help (1 Sam 7:5-6; Ezra 8:21-23; Ps 35:13-14; Dan 6:18; Acts 14:23; 2 Cor 11:27)
- D. Seek God's Wisdom (Dt 8:3; Judg 20:26-28; Ps 69:9-11; Dan 9:3; Lk 2:36f; Acts 9:9; 13:3)
- E. Express sorrow or grief (1 Chr 10:12; Ps 109:24; Dan 10:2-3)
- F. Develop self-discipline (1 Cor 9:24-27)

III. What Distinguishes True from False Fasting? (cf. 1 Kgs 21:9)

- A. True fasting comes from the heart (Joel 2:12ff; Is 58:1-9)

First, true fasting is to come *from the heart*. It is an extension of reverence for God. It is a turning away from sin and a turning to God. So the prophet Joel commands, “*Rend your _____ and not your garments*” (2:13). To fast is to *afflict our souls* not just our bodies. So Isaiah rebuked those Israelites who were engaging in ritualistic fasting:

Is it a fast that I have chosen, A day for a man to afflict his soul? Is it to bow down his head like a bulrush, And to spread out sackcloth and ashes? Would you call this a fast, And an acceptable day to the LORD? Is this not the fast that I have chosen: To loose the bonds of wickedness, To undo the heavy burdens, To let the oppressed go free, And that you break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, And that you bring to your house the poor who are cast out; When you see the naked, that you cover him, And not hide yourself from your own flesh?”

- B. True fasting has God as its object (Mt 6:16-18)

Second, true fasting *has God as its object*. In other words, the one who is truly fasting wants God to _____ him, not other people. Remember Jesus' words in Matthew 6:

“Moreover, when you fast, do not be like the hypocrites, with a sad countenance. For they disfigure their faces that they may appear to men to be fasting. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward. But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, so that you do not appear to men to be fasting, but to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly.” (Mt 6:16–18)

IV. Conclusion (cf. Mt 5:6; Jn 6:53-58)

When we fast, each time we experience hunger pains, the rumbling in our stomachs is a reminder to seek the Lord and remember His promise: “*Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled*” (Mt 5:6).