

THE RIGHT AND WRONG WAYS TO FAST

¹⁶ “When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show others they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full.

¹⁷ But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, ¹⁸ so that it will not be obvious to others 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.

QUESTIONS FOR THOUGHT AND DISCUSSION

1. While God only required fasting in preparation for the day of atonement, it soon became an institution in Judaism. Why do you think people were drawn to the idea of fasting as opposed to other more substantial acts of repentance and obedience?
2. While fasting, in and of itself, does not make God more predisposed to hear your prayer, according to Zechariah and Isaiah, what in fact does?
3. What are all the wrong reasons for fasting?
4. What are some really good reasons for fasting?
5. According to Jesus, what should you avoid when fasting?
6. What is the right way to fast?
7. What can we expect when we fast (or practice other acts of devotion) from a pure heart?
8. How do you strike a balance between private devotion to God and participating in genuine biblical community?

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If you were to judge my devotion to God on how frequently and effectively I abstain from eating or drinking in order to spend quality time with God, I would not come out looking very good.

When I fast, it is more a test of physical endurance than a deeply rewarding spiritual experience. The moment I make up my mind to fast, I immediately feel five or six times more hungry than I would otherwise. When I open my Bible or try to spend time in prayer, all I can think about is how hungry I am. Every time I try to quiet my spirit, my stomach makes really weird gurgling noises. While Jesus says, “Don’t let anyone know you are fasting,” my stomach always gives me away. If fasting is a major spiritual discipline, then I am a major spiritual failure.

On top of that, I have some serious theological questions. Does fasting make God more predisposed to hear my prayers? Does it make me more predisposed to hear his voice? Are New Testament believers even required to fast? If so, why? If not, why not? What are we to make of Jesus’ teaching on fasting?

Before we take a stab at answering these or any other questions we have about fasting, it might be helpful to survey what the Bible has to say about fasting.

FASTING IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

- The nation of Israel was only required to fast once a year, in preparation for the day of atonement.

LEVITICUS 16:29–30 “This is to be a lasting ordinance for you: On the tenth day of the seventh month you must deny yourselves and not do any work—whether native-born or a foreigner residing among you—because on this day atonement will be made for you, to cleanse you. Then, before the Lord, you will be clean from all your sins.

- While there is only one required fast, fasting occurs in several other instances—usually in response to dire circumstances or extreme sorrow. Fasting can be practiced by individuals (2 Samuel 12:16–23; 1 Kings 21:27; Nehemiah 1:4; Psalm 35:13; Daniel 9:3) or the community at large (Judges 20:26; 2 Chronicles 20:3; Ezra 8:21–23; Nehemiah 9:1; Jonah 3:5–9).
- During the exile, additional fasts were added to mourn the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple. The prophet Zechariah seems to indicate God never called for these fasts, and was looking for far more substantial acts of obedience and repentance.

ZECHARIAH 7:1–6;9-10: In the fourth year of King Darius, the word of the Lord came to Zechariah on the fourth day of the ninth month, the month of Kislev. ² The people of Bethel had sent Sharezer and Regem-Melek, together with their men, to entreat the Lord ³ by asking the priests of the house of the Lord Almighty and the prophets, “Should I mourn and fast in the fifth month, as I have done for so many years?”

⁴ Then the word of the Lord Almighty came to me: ⁵ “Ask all the people of the land and the priests, ‘When you fasted and mourned in the fifth and seventh months for the past seventy years, was it really for me that you fasted? ⁶ And when you were eating and drinking, were you not just feasting for yourselves?’

⁹ “This is what the Lord Almighty said: ‘Administer true justice; show mercy and compassion to one another. ¹⁰ Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the foreigner or the poor. Do not plot evil against each other.’

ZECHARIAH 8:19 “The fasts of the fourth, fifth, seventh and tenth months will become joyful and glad occasions and happy festivals for Judah. Therefore love truth and peace.”

- While Isaiah wrote long before the exile or the fall of Jerusalem, he offers a similar critique.

ISAIAH 58:3; 5-9 Why have we fasted,’ they say, ‘and you have not seen it? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you have not noticed?’

Is this the kind of fast I have chosen, only a day for people to humble themselves? Is it only for bowing one’s head like a reed and for lying in sackcloth and ashes? Is that what you call a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord?

“Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter— when you see the naked, to clothe them, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?

Then your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear; then your righteousness will go before you, and the glory

of the Lord will be your rear guard. Then you will call, and the Lord will answer; you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I.

FASTING IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

- In Jesus’ day, fasting had taken on a life of its own. In addition to the five annual fasts, the Pharisees were fasting two times a week on Monday and Thursday. It was evidently considered a badge of extraordinary spiritual devotion.

LUKE 18:10–12: “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. ¹¹ The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. ¹² I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.’

- While Jesus did go forty days without eating or drinking in the wilderness at the onset of his ministry, he attracted more attention by not participating in regular fasts.

MARK 2:18-20 Now John’s disciples and the Pharisees were fasting. Some people came and asked Jesus, “How is it that John’s disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees are fasting, but yours are not?”

¹⁹ Jesus answered, “How can the guests of the bridegroom fast while he is with them? They cannot, so long as they have him with them. ²⁰ But the time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them, and on that day they will fast.

- Jesus never requires or instructs his followers to fast, but he does predict there will be a time when they do fast. He may be referring to the time between the cross and the resurrection, or the time between the ascension and the sending of the Spirit. He may have had occasional fasts in mind. There are at least two occasions in the book of Acts where we find New Testament believers fasting.

ACTS 13:2-3 While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.” ³ So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off.

ACTS 14:23 Paul and Barnabas appointed elders ^a for them in each church and, with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord, in whom they had put their trust.