

**“Fasting”**  
*Trinity Baptist Church Discipleship Training*  
(May, 2003)

**Introduction:**

This study is provided as an addendum to our study on prayer. As prayer is one of the glorious privileges of the child of God, so is fasting, and as prayer is often neglected and misunderstood, so is fasting. In our generation fasting has been neglected to the point of near extinction. We can link its decline to several causes:

1. The decline of Biblical teaching in the church. This has led to widespread Bible ignorance - most Christians would rather depend upon experience and tradition than upon the truth of God's Word. Few today know anything about fasting.
2. A decline in the spirituality of God's people. There is a decline in all of the spiritual disciplines.
3. Fasting radically irksome to the flesh.

The purpose of this study is to reaffirm fasting as a Biblical principle designed by God for the spiritual good of His people.

**Bibliography:**

- Hendriksen, William. *New Testament Commentary, Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1973.
- Pink, Arthur W. *An Exposition of the Sermon on the Mount*, Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1950.
- Wallis, Arthur. *God's Chosen Fast*, Fort Washington: Christian Literature Crusade, 1968.
- Whitney, Donald S. *Spiritual Disciplines For the Christian Life*, Colorado Springs: Navpress, 1991.

**Definition –**

From *Spiritual Disciplines For the Christian Life*:

“A biblical definition of fasting is a Christian's voluntary abstinence from food for spiritual purposes. It is *Christian*, for fasting by a non-Christian obtains no eternal value because the Discipline's motives and purposes are to be God-centered. It is *voluntary* in that fasting is not to be coerced. Fasting is more than just the ultimate crash diet for the body; it is abstinence from food for *spiritual* purposes.

There is a broader view of fasting that is often overlooked. This is the approach Richard Foster takes when he defines fasting as ‘the voluntary denial of a normal function for the sake of intense spiritual activity.’ So then, fasting does not always deal with abstinence from food. Sometimes we may need to fast from involvement with other people, or from the media, from the telephone, from talking, from sleep, etc., in order to become more absorbed in a time of spiritual activity.” (Whitney, Donald S. *Spiritual Disciplines For the Christian Life*, P. 160)

- I. Fasting is clearly taught in Scripture – over 50 times
  - A. There is little doubt from a study of the Old Testament that Israel fasted
    1. Every year on the day of atonement the entire nation spent a day of fasting which was synonymous with seeking the LORD in humility
    2. In **Exodus 34** Moses in a time of supreme national and spiritual need fasted 40 days
    3. In **1 Kings 19:8** Elijah under exceptional circumstances fasted 40 days
    4. In **Daniel 10:2** Daniel when deeply exercised in his soul fasted 21 days.

- B. The New Testament also presents the subject of fasting
1. As we move into the NT we immediately find Jesus fasting for 40 days - In spiritual preparation for His ministry which would involve the warfare against Satan (we must not diminish His humanity)
  2. Jesus made it clear that fasting would be a part of the life of a Christian  
**Matthew 9:14-15** – “Then came to him the disciples of John, saying, Why do we and the Pharisees fast oft, but thy disciples fast not? <sup>15</sup> And Jesus said unto them, Can the children of the bridechamber mourn, as long as the bridegroom is with them? but the days will come, when the bridegroom shall be taken from them, and then shall they fast.”
  3. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus taught not “if you fast” but “when you fast”  
**Matthew 6:16** – “Moreover when ye fast, be not, as the hypocrites, of a sad countenance: for they disfigure their faces, that they may appear unto men to fast. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward.”
  4. The early church often fasted, particularly before making major decisions such as the ordination of elders.  
**Acts 14:23** – “And when they had ordained them elders in every church, and had prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord, on whom they believed.”
  5. Paul taught that fasting might include areas other than food  
**1 Corinthians 7:5** – “Defraud ye not one the other, except *it be* with consent for a time, that ye may give yourselves to fasting and prayer; and come together again, that Satan tempt you not for your incontinency.”
- C. Following the teachings of the Bible, we can see the practice of fasting throughout church history, particularly after the reformation – Luther, Calvin, Knox, Jonathan Edwards, David Brainerd all fasted

II. The PURPOSE of fasting - Why should we fast?

There must be a purpose - we must never fast in a mechanical way for instance: it is Tuesday, therefore I must fast - God must be the focus - not self

- A. To Strengthen Prayer
1. Jesus was entering the most important time of His life – He began by earnest prayer that included fasting
  2. Erroll Hulse - "Fasting reinforces our earnestness in seeking God"
  3. Calvin - "Whenever men are to pray to God concerning any great matter it would be expedient to appoint fasting along with prayer."
- B. To Seek God's Guidance especially during major decisions  
We can see this in the major decisions of the early church
1. During the commissioning of missionaries –  
**Acts 13:2-3** – “As they ministered to the Lord, and fasted, the Holy Ghost said, Separate me Barnabas and Saul for the work whereunto I have called them. <sup>3</sup> And when they had fasted and prayed, and laid *their* hands on them, they sent *them* away.”

2. During the appointment of elders –
 

**Acts 14:23** – “And when they had ordained them elders in every church, and had prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord, on whom they believed.”
- C. To Express Grief
 

Fasting is an expression of sorrow in confession of sin  
**Joel 2:12** – “Therefore also now, saith the LORD, turn ye *even* to me with all your heart, and with fasting, and with weeping, and with mourning:”
- D. To Seek Deliverance or Protection
 

Fasting can be used in periods of distress as we pray unto God

  1. National danger –
 

**Jonah 3:5** – “So the people of Nineveh believed God, and proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them even to the least of them.”

    - a. Upon hearing of the devastation of Jerusalem Nehemiah fasted  
**Nehemiah 1:4** – “And it came to pass, when I heard these words, that I sat down and wept, and mourned *certain* days, and fasted, and prayed before the God of heaven,”
    - b. When Esther was about to go to plead for the life of the Jewish nation  
**Esther 4:16** – “Go, gather together all the Jews that are present in Shushan, and fast ye for me, and neither eat nor drink three days, night or day: I also and my maidens will fast likewise; and so will I go in unto the king, which *is* not according to the law: and if I perish, I perish.”
  2. Fasting can be used during Church trials and difficulties  
 (Trinity’s fast in 1999 - I believe God honored that fast)
- E. To Humble Oneself Before God
  - 1 Calvin - "Since fasting is a holy exercise both for the humbling of men and for their confession of humility, why should we use it less than the ancients did in similar need."
  2. Fasting is an expression of humiliation as we keep our flesh under subjection and concentrate upon the work of the Father
- F. To Express Concern for the Work of God
 

David Brainerd - "I set apart this day for secret fasting and prayer, to entreat God to direct and bless me with regard to the great work I have in view, the preaching of the Gospel"
- G. To Overcome Temptation and Dedicate Yourself to God
 

Christ’s example in this passage
- H. To Express Love and Worship to God - Anna: Luke 2:36-37
 

It means that you love God more than your stomach - Phil. 3:19  
**Philippians 3:19** – “Whose end *is* destruction, whose God *is* their belly, and whose glory *is* in their shame, who mind earthly things.”)
- I. To maintain our control over the flesh
  1. The human flesh is the ruler of mankind
  2. The Christian is to maintain supremacy over his flesh  
**Romans 8:5** – “For they that are after the flesh do mind the things of the flesh; but they that are after the Spirit the things of the Spirit.”  
**Romans 8:13** – “For if ye live after the flesh, ye shall die: but if ye through the Spirit do mortify the deeds of the body, ye shall live.”

3. This demands great wisdom and discernment – fasting can even be a means of satisfying the flesh
  - a. When the flesh rises up to exclude us from fasting – Discomfort is normal - We should exercise wisdom
    - We shouldn't fast when we are ill
    - Children shouldn't fast at all and teenagers shouldn't attempt extended fasts
    - The elderly shouldn't go on extended fasts
    - There are modified fasts – For example juice only for a day.
  - b. When the flesh distracts us with thoughts of the flesh - weight loss
  - c. When we use it to bargain with God
  - d. When it becomes just a religious practice – Lent in Catholicism a good thing turned useless
  - e. When we use it to attract attention to ourselves
 

**Matthew 6:16** – “Moreover when ye fast, be not, as the hypocrites, of a sad countenance: for they disfigure their faces, that they may appear unto men to fast. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward.”

### III. How should we fast?

- A. Individually – We must be careful not to make it a show
- B. As a group
  1. Husband and wife
  2. Whole church as in Acts
 

**Acts 13:2-3** – “As they ministered to the Lord, and fasted, the Holy Ghost said, Separate me Barnabas and Saul for the work whereunto I have called them. <sup>3</sup> And when they had fasted and prayed, and laid *their* hands on them, they sent *them* away.”
  3. The nation of Israel was called to fasting
 

**Joel 2:15-16** - "Blow the trumpet in Zion, sanctify a fast, call a solemn assembly"
- C. How long
  1. An individual determination based upon spiritual need - physical limitations
  2. One to forty days
- D. Types of fast
  1. Normal Fast - abstaining from all foods but not from water
  2. Partial Fast - a limitation of the diet but not the abstention from all foods - good for those whose health prohibits a normal fast
  3. Absolute Fast - abstaining from all foods and liquids
  4. The Bible gives two examples of supernatural fasts - Moses was on Mt Sinai for 40 days without food or water (Deut. 9:9). Elijah fasted without food nor water for 40 days (1 Kings 19:8) These required God's supernatural intervention
- E. God must be the focus - not self
  1. Fasting must never be from the motive of manipulating God. Our actions must never be tools used to entice God to bless us.
  2. God must be the focus - thoughts of food must drive us to thoughts of God and prayer. The desire for God to be glorified should be our chief motive.
- F. We may also fast from other physical activities

- IV. Isn't fasting harmful to the body  
(Observations from Arthur Wallis: *God's Chosen Fast*)
- A. Misconceptions from well meaning friends
    - 1. We must continue to eat to live
    - 2. Fasting is starving
    - 3. You're going to get sick
  - B. The body needs air, water, sleep - food
    - 1. We can go several weeks without food without starvation
    - 2. During a prolonged fast the body lives on fat reserves
      - a. low grade fuel - low energy
      - b. refining process occurs - beneficial
      - c. weight loss - 2 lbs per day falling to 1 lb per day.
    - 3. Common experiences during fast
      - a. 1-3 days - feeling of hunger, headaches
      - b. 3-5 days - general weakness
      - c. followed by increasing strength as the body eliminates waste, finally a return of hunger  
Jesus - after 40 days he hungered
  - C. While there may be physical benefits we must focus upon the spiritual purposes of fasting

**Conclusion:**

- 1. We live in a day of over indulgence where men pamper the flesh when they should buffet it. Most professing Christians will not allow themselves to be inconvenienced. Most know nothing of self-denial.
  - a. This is inconsistent with Biblical Christianity  
**Matthew 16:24** – “Then said Jesus unto his disciples, If any *man* will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me.”
  - b. Paul taught the importance of self-discipline in his own life.  
**1 Corinthians 9:27** – “But I keep under my body, and bring *it* into subjection: lest that by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be a castaway.”
- 2. God's people need to spend much time today in prayer and fasting. The times demand it. Duty demands it.