

Lesson 10—Fasting with Prayer

Were you ever frustrated as a child with the things that you had to do but didn't want to? I remember well the nights that I didn't want to go to bed, the days when I had no desire to go to school, the times when I would have gladly gone without a bath, haircut, nap time, or any one of the myriad of other childhood "problems" that were cast upon me by my parents. So it is with the mind of a child, with one too young to understand his or her own needs.

Paul mentions this way of thinking in 1 Corinthians 13:11. He explains that we once thought as children, but there is to be a different mind-set as we move toward maturity. As we mature, we begin to understand God's thinking compared with or in contrast to our own. By reason of our finiteness, next to the wisdom of God, our minds will always be as those of children, even as we mature. So it should come as no surprise to us that some of the things the Lord calls us to do not "compute" in our mode of thinking.

Fasting is one of these things. Some even question the place or validity of fasting. What did Jesus say? While Jesus may not have made a direct commandment, "Thou shalt fast!" He did make strong statements about fasting—words that cannot be circumvented and we dare not overlook as spiritual warriors.

To understand Jesus' call to fast, use the cited verses to answer these questions.

What does Jesus say in Mark 2:18–20 about His disciples fasting? What time does He say His disciples will fast?

What words of Jesus open His discourse on fasting in Matthew 6:16–18? What does this assume about His disciples?

Read the episode in Mark 9:14–29. From Jesus' concluding words, what can we learn about the power of fasting in certain cases?

FOR THOUGHTFUL CONSIDERATION

Some translations omit the words "and fasting" from Mark 9:29 and Matthew 17:21, even though as much manuscript evidence argues for their inclusion as for their omission as a later addition to the text. What reasons do you think might have motivated scholars to choose the option of omission, when inclusion is equally viable on all academic terms?

WORD WEALTH

Fast, *tsom*. A fast; a day of fasting; a time set aside to mourn or pray with no provision for one's normal food needs. This noun comes from the verb *tsum*, "to fast." The verb occurs twenty-two times and the noun twenty-six times in the Old Testament. Fasting is a voluntary denial of food. The verb "fast" is sometimes coupled with the words "weep," "mourn," or "lay in sackcloth," all expressing intensity. Fasting is an action contrary to the first act of sin in the human race, which was eating what was forbidden. Fasting is refusing to eat what is allowed.

Disciples, *mathetes*. From the verb *manthano*, "to learn," whose root *math* suggests thought with effort put forth. A disciple is a learner, one who follows both the teaching and the teacher. The word is used first of the Twelve and later of Christians generally, as in [Acts 6:1](#). Because of this we understand that Jesus' directives to His disciples include all believers.

FAITH ALIVE

As you begin to look at fasting as it relates to spiritual warfare, take a few moments to prepare your thoughts. Review your past experiences with fasting and your inner feelings about it. Think through these questions and record your current views.

Do you ever fast? If so, when and why do you fast?

What is the hardest part for you when you fast? How do you, how have you, or how might you overcome this?

What has been your view of fasting in the past? What is it for? Present a biblical case for its importance and relevance today.

What do you think is the reason that Jesus suggests His disciples will fast in such times as ours?

FASTING IN THE EARLY CHURCH

It is clear from the statements of Jesus that His disciples are to be fasting now that He is not present on the earth in the physical form of His Incarnation. It is also obvious that the practice of fasting cannot be a 100%-of-the-time activity. The needs of our physical bodies are not unregarded by our Creator—ever! So, in order to see fasting in a balanced perspective, look through these scriptures to see how fasting was implemented and taught by Jesus' disciples in the early church.

Use these questions to guide you as you read these passages: What was the daily norm for the partaking of food in the early church? How was the practice of fasting seen? What was taught about fasting? How does this provide a balanced view of fasting?

Acts 2:42–46

Acts 6:1–7

Acts 10:2–4, 30, 31

Acts 14:23

Acts 27:21–26

2 Cor. 6:5; 11:27

BEHIND THE SCENES

While it was only required of the Jewish people to fast one day each year, on the Day of Atonement ([Lev. 16:29](#)), it had become the practice of the Pharisees to fast twice each week, Monday and Thursday. These were the market days in Jerusalem when those who put on the haggard face of fasting would be most noticed.

It was this appearance “to men to be fasting” that Jesus condemns in [Matthew 6:16–18](#). On the contrary, Jesus’ disciples are called to fast without putting on the affectations of the Pharisees.

In the early church the pattern of fasting twice each week, generally Wednesday and Friday, was common among believers. This was the beginning of the traditional church practice of fasting on Wednesday and Friday, a tradition mandated in parts of the church until more recent years.

God’s mandatory fast for Israel, in [Leviticus 16:29–34](#), introduces some patterns for understanding fasting in our personal life. (“Afflict your souls” is another expression for fasting.) What kinds of things does this Leviticus passage associate with fasting?

From Jesus’ references to fasting in [Mark 9:17–29](#) and [Matthew 17:14–21](#), it is assumed that He practiced some regular pattern of fasting that exceeded His disciples’ practice of keeping the annual fasts. What might this fact, along with the practice of patterned fasting in the early church, recommend to believers today?

WHEN FASTING BECOMES OUR RESPONSE

Most New Testament believers will acknowledge that fasting has some place in the church today, but few understand it. Just as with “spiritual warfare,” which many neglect for want of teaching, so fasting—a powerful weapon in warfare—is overlooked. Still, even when fasting is believed and received as a potential periodic discipline, when some are asked, “When do you fast?” a common answer is, “Whenever the Holy Spirit prompts me to.” That is not entirely unworthy as an answer, but there might be a need for addressing a deeper

issue: *pattern* fasting. That is, might we look at more regular seasons of “planned” fasts? First, because Jesus already has told us to fast; and second, because it is inconsistent with the biblical examples of fasting to wait for a direct command from God to fast. Perhaps it should be noted that the Holy Spirit may issue such a directive if He desires to call an individual to a special fast for a specific purpose. But might we also agree that these should not be the sole times of fasting for the believer?

By using the scriptures below, see what you discover about why and when believers of Bible times fasted. Try to identify in each example: 1) the *purpose* of the fast; 2) the *decision* regarding the fast (who decided to fast and how did they make that decision); and 3) the *result* of the fast.

2 Sam. 12:15–24

Purpose

Decision

Result

2 Chr. 20:1–24

Purpose

Decision

Result

Ezra 8:21–23, 31

Purpose

Decision

Result

Neh. 9:1–3; 10:28, 29
Purpose

Decision

Result

Dan. 6:6–28
Purpose

Decision

Result

Jon. 3:4–10
Purpose

Decision

Result

Luke 2:36–38
Purpose

Decision

Result

FAITH ALIVE

How do you feel about fasting after reading these passages? Have you seen anything so far in this lesson that gives you a greater desire to fast?

Time and time again believers in the Bible responded to needs by seeking God with fasting and prayer. How do you respond to such needs in your own life?

Do some situations require fasting and not others? Why do you think this is so? In what situations do you think fasting should be the response of every believer?

GOD'S WORD ON FASTING

Fasting is one discipline about which most Christians seem to understand the least. God has spoken a good deal about fasting in His Word, but few people take the time to search the Scriptures and learn about this powerful part of our spiritual life.

Use the following scriptures to learn more about fasting and the role that it takes in our spiritual walk. As you read through these passages, write down what points you are learning about fasting.

The fast God chooses: Is. 58:6–12

Record here what is said about the time, purpose, and power of fasting from God's perspective:
Time (v. 6a)

Purpose (vv. 6b, 7—note 8 things)

Power (vv. 8–12—note promises of results)

The opening five verses of Isaiah 58 were an attack on dead traditionalists who ritualized “fasts” but did not put their heart into it—only forms were observed. What lessons might be listed from that text?

How do Jesus’ words on fasting in Matthew 6:16–18 coincide with what you have just read?

Different types of fasting:

Note from these texts different methods and lengths of fasting. List how long the fast was, what was consumed, and what their physical actions were.

Judg. 20:26

1 Chr. 10:11, 12

Esth. 4:15–17

Dan. 10:2, 3

Matt. 4:1, 2

FASTING: KEY TO BREAKTHROUGH

Although there is no one key to every solution except to do God’s will, there are definite benefits in fasting. Power is released and breakthrough comes when God’s people dedicate themselves to fasting and prayer. Many have come to love fasting, not because of the physical discipline, but because of the results seen in the spiritual realm when they fast.

In the scriptures listed below there are references to fasting and the results that came when God’s people fasted. Read through these texts and answer the questions in order to learn more about this mighty tool of spiritual warfare.

Esth. 4:3, 16: What caused the Jewish people to fast?

Esther 9:1, 2 records the results of the Jews' fast. How does this contrast with the original decree placed against them in Esther 3:13?

Mark 9:17–29: What does Jesus say here about the unique power of fasting?

How is this also related to faith in the story?

FAITH ALIVE

Now that you have completed this lesson on fasting, use this section to help you reflect on the things you have learned.

What stands out to you as the most notable thing about fasting? Do you see this being practiced in your own life? How?

Describe whatever pattern of fasting you have kept in the past. Do you feel that this is a healthy or unhealthy pattern? Explain.

What changes or truths will affect your pattern of fasting as a result of this lesson?

Why do you think Jesus so strongly encouraged faith in a situation that required fasting and prayer? Could it be that the faith needed here was developed through fasting?

As you conclude, take a few minutes to pray over your answers here. Ask the Lord to give you the strength you need as you grow in this discipline of warfare in your life.

Hayford, Jack W. ; Hayford, Mark: *Kingdom Warfare : Prayer, Spiritual Warfare, and the Ministry of Angels*. Nashville : Thomas Nelson, 1997, c1993 (Spirit-Filled Life Kingdom Dynamics Study Guides)