



Part 39: Jesus and Fasting

Matthew 6:16-18

The Way of Jesus is both feasting and fasting.

I. Context

“Be careful not to do your acts of righteousness before men, to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven.” Matthew 6:1

Jesus speaks of “acts of righteousness” meaning the specific ways we embody our faithfulness to the Lord (Matthew 6:2, 5, 16). Here we see he assumes we will embody our faith through giving (especially to the poor), prayer, and fasting.

Here we are entering a strange land for most of us. How many of you have ever heard a sermon on fasting? More on our historical context in a minute.

If you are reading through Matthew, you might be confused by Jesus on the topic of fasting. How do we understand this Scripture, which assumes fasting, with Matthew 9:14-15?

Jesus is referring to the period between his resurrection/ascension and his second coming as the period when fasting is appropriate and expected. This is observed in the early Church (Acts 13:2-3; 14:23).

What is fasting? Fasting is not eating food. It is going without food for some period of time.

It’s not abstinence, which is going without something (social media, TV etc), and it’s not a restricted diet (intermittent fasting is popular now).

A little history lesson on fasting:

In the first Century, fasting was a common practice in Judaism. The Pharisees fasted on Mondays and Thursdays (sunup to sundown). John the Baptist disciples likely followed this rhythm (Matthew 9:14).

After Jesus was resurrected, Christians changed the days of fasting to Wednesday (day Jesus was betrayed) and Friday (day Jesus was crucified). Between Good Friday and Easter Sunday, the entire Church would fast to identify with Jesus' sufferings. During Lent, the 6 weeks prior to Easter, Christians would fast from sunup to sundown every day except Sundays (Resurrection/Lord's Day).

"Fasting gives birth to prophets, she strengthens the powerful; fasting makes lawgivers wise. She is a safeguard for the soul, a steadfast companion for the body, a weapon for the brave, and a discipline for champions. Fasting repels temptations, anoints for godliness. She is a companion for sobriety, the crafter of a sound mind. In wars she fights bravely, in peace she teaches tranquility." – St. Basil the Great (A.D. 330-379)

This practice of fasting was consistent up to the period of the Enlightenment when we put all the emphasis on our minds to the neglect of our bodies.

"I fear there are now thousands of Methodists, so called, both in England and Ireland, who, following the same bad example, have entirely left off fasting, who are so far from fasting twice a week ... that they do not fast twice a month!" – John Wesley

II. Why Fast?

- A. To offer ourselves to Jesus (Romans 12:1; 1 Corinthians 6:19-20).
Our ultimate goal = to awaken our body and soul to get in touch with our hunger and need for God.

"Fasting is whole body hungering for God." – John Piper

"Fasting is a way of praying with our body." – Scott McKnight

- B. To grow in holiness – a way to starve your sin nature and feed the Spirit (Matthew 16:24; Romans 7:14-24; 8:13; Galatians 5:24; Colossians 3:5).

Paul describes the internal war between our sin nature ("flesh") and the Holy Spirit.

"For if you live according to the sinful nature, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live."

Romans 8:13

"Fasting gives strength against sin, represses evil desires, repels temptation, humbles pride, cools anger, and fosters all the inclinations of a good will even unto the practice of every virtue." – St. Leo the Great (fifth century Bishop of Rome)

"Fasting reveals the things that control us." – Richard Foster

- C. To amplify our prayers (Joel 2:12-15; Isaiah 58:4; Jeremiah 29:12-14; Mark 9:29; Acts 13:1-3)

“When we choose to sacrifice a need of a body to place more importance on a need of the Spirit, God Himself sits up and takes notice. The heavens are opened to us in a way that might not have otherwise been.” – Priscilla Shire

- D. To stand with the poor (Isaiah 58:3-12; 1 John 3:16-18).

“Break your bread for those who are hungry, said Isaiah, do not believe that fasting suffices. Fasting chastises you, but it does not refresh the other...Do you wish your prayer to reach God? Give it two wings, fasting and almsgiving.” – Augustine

“Give to the hungry what you deny your own appetite.” – St. Gregory of Nyssa (fourth-century Church Father)

III. The Way of Radical Dependence

Fasting is a practice needed in our culture of excess.

“The Spirit of God is always zigging where the culture is zagging. He is always moving in the opposite direction than the gods of our age.” – John Mark Comer

Forming disciples who love Jesus and follow his Way.

Jesus began his public ministry with a 40-day fast in the wilderness (Matthew 4:1-11). Jesus models for us the way of learning radical dependence on God.

“Jesus himself knew that when we have learned how to fast in secret, our bodies and our souls will be directly sustained by the invisible Kingdom.” – Dallas Willard

Recommended Resources:

1. The Rule of Life podcast by Practicing the Way (John Mark Comer) A 4-part series on fasting.
2. Practicingtheway.org (practice of fasting): <https://www.practicingtheway.org/fasting>

Discussion Questions:

1. What has been your experience with a teaching on the practice of fasting?
2. What has been your experience, if any, with fasting unto the Lord?
3. Does it surprise you to learn that the Western Church practiced fasting regularly up to the period of the Enlightenment? What do you think is lost when we put all our emphasis on the mind to the neglect of our body in our discipleship to Jesus?
4. Which of the four reasons for fasting are most intrigued by? Why?
5. How do you feel about experimenting with the practice of fasting? Remember to start small.