

Title: “Theology of Fasting” – What is Fasting? What Does it Mean for My Life?

Text: Matthew 6:16-18

Date: February 3, 2019 at FBCW

****Note, most everything I’ve learned/researched about fasting has come from: Tony Evans, Richard Foster, Jentezen Franklin, Dallas Willard, and Don Whitney.

Last Sunday Pastor Johnny asked those of you who were willing and able to consider fasting a meal or fasting for a day, and remembering FBCW in prayer.

The fact is this: God is doing wonderful things at FBCW.

And the devil knows this. The devil is and will do everything he can to discourage us, distract us, and destroy the momentum of our unity and mission.

The devil cannot stop God’s Kingdom...but he can push individual preachers, churches, and church members off course if they take their eyes off Christ.

God wants us to be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might (Eph 6:10).

The way we fight this battle is spiritual, not physical.

- We fight from our knees...from the prayer closet...by resisting fleshly impulses, denying ourselves...and crying out to heaven!

READ the TEXT.

INTRO. The story has been told of a young lumberjack who had become quite proud of his ability to quickly cut through the forest. He became so confident in his ability, he felt ready to challenge an older lumberjack to a chopping contest. The older lumberjack was also known for his fine tree chopping ability. So they began chopping. The young man went at it with all the vigor and strength he could muster. He chopped down one tree after another. He chopped so ferociously that he chopped all day without even stopping. He thought things looked pretty good for him because he noticed the older lumberjack took a ten- or fifteen-minute break every hour.

But at the end of the day, to the younger lumberjack’s dismay, the old lumberjack had chopped down about a third (33%) more than he had. The young man was dumfounded! How could this be? Miffed and puzzled, the young man went to the old master of forestry and asked, “How in the world did you do it? I chopped longer than you, I swung my ax harder than you, and I never took a break. Yet you have come away with far more trees than me, even though you took several breaks throughout the day. What gives?”

The wise old lumberjack looked at him and said, “Because whenever I stopped chopping, I was sharpening my ax.”

FACT. This is a good parable of the interior life (the spiritual life) of many Christians.

- Many of us are so busy chopping! We work and swing and fight! → *Yet why aren't more trees falling down?*
- A rare few of us don't seem near as stressed, busy, or overworked – and yet they appear fresh, relaxed, and more productive. What gives?
 - Maybe the difference is – they've been sharpening their ax.

LESSON. This is what the spiritual discipline of fasting is all about. Sharpening the “ax” of our inner person so we can achieve true spiritual victory.

When we fast, we are strategically saying, “no” to the physical needs of the flesh – and saying “yes/please” to the need of God's Spirit.

When we fast, we are saying no to certain things, so that we can say yes to the greater things.

First, what is fasting? Fasting is the deliberate refusal of physical gratification – usually food – in order to achieve a greater, spiritual goal.

- Denying the flesh, in order to gain the spiritual.
- Renouncing the natural in order to invoke the supernatural.
- It is a Christian's voluntary abstinence from food for spiritual purposes.
 - NOT the ultimate crash diet.
 - NOT about fitting into that dress...or getting your body ready for the beach.
 - If it's about you and your appearance...it's NOT a fast.
- Fasting is Christian – it is designed to focus your life God-ward, to be God-centered.
- Fasting is voluntary – it is not to be coerced.
- Fasting is about seeking self-control with your natural desires through the Spirit.
 - It means to acknowledge your strength comes from the Lord, not food.

Second, why does it seem most of us have heard so little about fasting? Well, for starters, fasting is hard. A culture of: “I want what I want and I want it now...” does not naturally gravitate toward the discipline of fasting.

I personally grew up in a conservative, Bible-believing, Jesus-loving Baptist church. It's a church and a childhood I'll always love and cherish.

- But I don't recall anyone ever teaching me about fasting.
- Can't remember a sermon on fasting.
- Can't remember a churchwide, called “fast.” Can't remember an occasion or season of fasting.
- It wasn't until I was in college that I recall being taught about the biblical discipline of fasting.

In college Dr. Doug Weaver turned me on to Richard Foster's *Celebration of Discipline*.

I would drive back from BPC to Warner Robins where we had just prepared to start our church – I literally wore out Pastor Tony Evans books, tapes and materials on fasting.

At Cross Point in 2004, I asked our church of 250-300 people to fast once a week for approximately four months as we searched for land for growth.

- Many of our people experienced fasting for the first time during that process.
- Many of our people skipped a meal, or a full day of eating, once a week for four months.
- God indeed moved in a significant way – during that window of time:
 - We sold our original location on Highway 41.
 - We leased a portion of the Northrop-Gruman facility.
 - We bought forty acres of land adjacent to the interstate (current location).

Indeed, God moved and blessed in direct response (I believe) to fasting and praying.

But in terms of the larger Christian audience – little seems to be mentioned about fasting.

- *What do people who fast look like?*
- *Are people who fast a little awkward?*
- *What if I'm fasting and a friend invites me to lunch?*
- *Isn't fasting for people who live in convents or monasteries?*

Maybe we don't fast because:

- We have never been taught.
- We struggle with gluttony; we're a bit self-serving.
- Discipline is something that we've never been good with.
- We're a people more driven by flesh (and not faith) than we'd like to admit...and fasting is about denying the cravings of the flesh more than any spiritual discipline there is.

Here's the irony. Though fasting is practiced very little today, there are numerous examples of fasting in the Bible.

- Fasting is even mentioned in the Bible more frequently than something we would consider very important, like baptism (fasting – 77 times; baptism – 25 times).
- Fasting may be the lost spiritual discipline of our generation!
- Today, let's consider what God would have us know about fasting.

Third, what did Jesus teach about fasting?

Matt 4:1-11, we're told that Jesus was tempted by Satan forty days/nights prior to his formal entrance into ministry. During those forty days, Jesus focused on fasting and prayer.

- Interesting → before Jesus gave himself to teaching, healing, ministering...he fasted!
- The “fast” gave Jesus the anointing and strength to withstand Satan.
- Consider the devil's first temptation: *Turn these stones into bread.*
 - Matt 4:4, “*Man doesn't live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.*”

Matt 6:16-19, In the middle of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus clearly assumes that believers will fast (a negative, a positive, and a promise).

Jesus begins Matthew 6 with – 1) When you give. 2) When you pray. 3) When you fast.

Negative: “When you fast, don’t look gloomy like the hypocrites.”

- They make their faces unattractive and their fasting is obvious.

Positive: “When you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face...”

- In other words: live normal, don’t draw attention to yourself, this is between you and God.

Promise: “Father who sees your secret life will reward you.”

- God sees your desire...
- God knows your hunger pains...
- God knows you want him more than food... (God will reward you!)

Matt 9:14-15, Jesus had just called Matthew the tax collector to be his disciple. The Pharisees were angered by Jesus’ friendship with sinners.

- John the Baptist’s disciples inquired, “Why do the Pharisees fast? And we also fast? But the disciples do not fast?”
 - We are over here fasting...and your disciples are over there feasting.
- Jesus answered, “I won’t always be here. I’ll be leaving soon, then they will fast.”
 - The time will come when the disciples will fast.
 - Until Jesus Christ returns for the church...he expects us to fast.
 - That time is now.

Mark 9:29, There was a demon possessed boy being tormented again and again by a demon. His father was brokenhearted. The disciples were unable to cast the demon out. Immediately when Jesus saw the boy...Jesus had authority to cast out the demon!

- Disciples asked, “Jesus, why couldn’t we drive out the demon?”
- Jesus answered, “This kind of evil can only come out by prayer” (some include fasting).

Fourth, let’s glance at fasting in several key Bible passages.

Judges 20. We fast when we are desperate and confused. The 11 tribes of Israel converged to make war against tribe of Benjamin (for his gross sin).

- Day 1 – they sought the Lord. They outnumbered Benjamin 15 to 1, but lost terribly (22,000 men).
- Day 2 – they prayed and mourned. They went to Benjamin, but lost terribly (18,000 men).
- Day 3 – they prayed, mourned, and fasted all day long. God said, “I’ll give them to you.”
 - Only after they sought God with fasting did the Lord give them the victory.

1 Samuel 20; 2 Samuel 1; 2 Samuel 12. Fasting to express our grief and disappointment.

- Saul was trying to insanely jealous of David and unjustly tried to kill David.

- *“On the second day of the month, Jonathan fasted, for he was grieved by his father’s shameful treatment of David.”*
- *“Then David and his men wept, tore their clothes, and fasted – for Saul and his son Jonathan and the army of the Lord, because they had fallen by the sword.”*
- When David/Bathsheba’s son was sick unto death...David wept, prayed, fasted.

Ezra 8:23. We can fast for safety, protection, and direction. Ezra was set to lead a group of exiles back to Jerusalem from their Babylonian prison camps. The trip was a long, rigorous 900-mile journey across dangerous territory, with no military protection.

- Ezra fasted and prayed for protection – and God heard his cry!

Esther 4:16, Before Esther went in and pleaded for the safety/exemption of her people the Jews, she begged the whole kingdom to fast/pray for three days! They did. God answered.

2 Chron 20:3-4. Jehoshaphat hears that three armies are converging on him and ready for war. To express his total humility and helplessness before the Lord, Jehoshaphat calls the nation to fast.

- God hears, he leads them to risk the unthinkable, worshiping into war! They win!

Nehemiah 1:4. Fasting before we undertake a major, significant project. Before Nehemiah started the process of rebuilding Jerusalem’s walls – he fasted.

- To get out of ruin, before restoration – he fasted!

Isaiah 58. This is the most comprehensive chapter on fasting in the entire Bible. It’s all about fasting for the purpose of meeting the needs of others. Fasting is a way for God to strengthen you to care for others.

- The people were fasting, but also quarreling – and they had not heard from God.
- God punished them, “Your fasting is about you...” (That’s not how God wants us to fast!)
- Isa 58:6-7 explains the kind of fasting (motive) that God likes:
 - To lose the bonds of wickedness, undo the straps of yoke, to let the oppressed go free.
 - To share your bread with the hungry.
 - To bring the homeless/poor into your house.
 - To clothe those who are naked!

Note, the kind of fasting that pleases God is the kind that results in care for others! Not self!

Joel/Jonah – fasting as a means of repentance and coming back to God.

- Joel 2:12, *Yet even now, declares the Lord, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, and weeping, and mourning.*
- Jonah 3:5-8, *After Jonah’s preaching, revival broke out in Nineveh – fasting!*

Acts 13:3. Fasting to determine the will of God, fasting for missions. Not until they prayed/fasted, did the Antioch Church lay hands on Barnabas and Saul for their first missionary journey.

Acts 14:23. Fasting for church leadership. Before Paul/Barnabas appointed elders in the churches they started, they fasted to receive God's guidance about proper leadership.

- Helping these leaders determine next steps in ministry: they fasted!

Fifthly, what types of fast are there?

- Normal – abstaining from all food, but not water (still drink water, possibly fruit juice).
- Partial (Daniel fast). Eat some food, but only veggies and fruits (no sugar, processed, etc.)
- Absolute fast – as in Esther – total avoidance of all food and liquid.
- Supernatural fast – total fast of forty days (Moses, Elijah, Jesus).
 - This requires a total intervention of God to sustain bodily energy and focus during forty days!
 - Not easy, not repeatable without the Lord.
- Congregational fast – as in Joel, the people of God fast together for a specific purpose.
- National fast – as in 2 Chronicles or Jonah, when the whole nation comes together for fasting.
 - Incidentally in the early days of the USA, Congress proclaimed three national fasts.
 - Presidents John Adams, James Madison, and Abe Lincoln, each called all Americans to fast.
 - Lincoln did it three times during the Civil War.

Sixthly, how long should we fast? Jesus gives no command regarding how often or how long. Numerous fasts are mentioned in the Bible of unspecified lengths. Bible fasts were: part of the day...or 1 day...3 days...7 days...14 days...21 days...40 days.

These are fundamental, important truths when it comes to fasting:

1. Fasting is generally a private matter. Do not broadcast yourself and draw attention to it.
2. When you fast, you must have a purpose...and it should be God-centered.
 - a. Zech 7:5 – 70 years, Israel fasted in 5th and 7th months in exile.
 - b. They came back to their homeland and asked, “Should we keep up the fasting?”
 - c. God said, “Sadly, your fasts have become empty rituals.”
3. Note, when you eat – you eat for you. Food goes into your body for your own health.
 - a. But fasting is for God.
 - b. Fasting is for spiritual breakthrough.
 - c. What food is for you...fasting is for your soul's connection with God!
 - d. Sadly, many of us pack the body with food while our spirit is starving!

4. When should we fast? When the cry of our soul is greater than the cry of our belly!
 - a. Am I willing to give up steak and potatoes for spiritual riches?
5. Note, fasting is a concentrated time we cut-back on our intake in order to give more of ourselves to God or to others.
 - a. When you're not eating...you should be praying or serving!
6. God's pattern in the Bible is to always bless a fast.
 - a. May not get exactly what I think I should.
 - b. But through fasting, my will becomes fully aligned with God's will.
 - c. If I knew what God knew, I'd give myself the identical blessing that he does.
 - d. None of God's rewards are worthless.
7. Finally, commit yourself to regularly enjoy the spiritual discipline of fasting.
 - a. Confess and repent of any fear of fasting (never met someone that fasting killed).
 - i. Don't look for loopholes to avoid it.
 - ii. Look for ways to experience it.
 - b. Get medical advice when necessary (pregnant, diabetic, working, etc.)

Don Whitney – start with a fast of dedication (dedicating yourself to learning to fast).

- One meal, or two meals.

Richard Foster – fast from other things (people...news...internet...consumerism, etc.)

- Go poor and hungry to God...walk away rich and filled by his grace.

CONCL – always remember, it is the Gospel of Jesus that saves us!

The ultimate fast? When Christ left heaven (left his Father's presence), and came to earth.
Philippians 2:4-11.

Would you stop everything today (fast from the world right now) → and invite Christ into your life?

When will Christians begin to incorporate fasting into their lives?

- We need God!
- The world needs our message!
- Oh Jesus, we come to you in fasting/prayer; please anoint us for the task!
 - The food we need isn't found on the earth.
 - The food we need is served to us from heaven!