

Practicing Righteousness: Giving, Prayer and Fasting

By Doug Hamilton

C) Fasting

We have been studying the concept of doing the right things for the wrong reasons. We saw that it is possible to give generously, yet fall short of the expectations of God if we give for the wrong reason. The unacceptable offering in God's eyes is that which gives man the glory and not God. We saw the same concerning the second form of righteousness, which is prayer. A man can pray with all the right words, the right needs, and the right regularity, but with the wrong motive. God is not obligated to the prayer life that seeks the glory of man instead of glory to Him. Now we enter the third and final phase of practicing righteousness. It has to do with fasting.

The Wrong Way to Fast

Matthew 6:16, “And whenever you fast, do not put on a gloomy face as the hypocrites {do,} for they neglect their appearance in order to be seen fasting by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full.”

Notice Jesus does not say “*if you fast*”, but “*when you fast*”. It appears that Jesus not only expects us to give (*when you give*), expects us to pray (*when you pray*), but also expects us to fast (*when you fast*). This is an area of the modern Christian which has been neglected.

I saw a poll a few years ago that less than 40% of professed Christians have never fasted. In fact throughout the brotherhood most churches do not teach fasting as part of a well-balanced spiritual diet. Why is it that we neglect these words of Jesus? Is it something we should consider in our own Christian lives? In order to appreciate what Jesus is said concerning fasting, we must go back to the history. There were three types of fasting common to the people of Isreal.

1) Fasting to draw the attention of God to the individual.

- David fasted in 2Samuel 12:16 to show God the seriousness of his repentance.
- King Ahab fasted to show his pain over the death of the Baal prophets in 1Kings 21:27.
- Daniel fasted for an answer from God in Daniel 9:3.

2) Fasting to draw the attention of God to the nation or a group of people.

- The nation fasted in Judges 20:26 over the devastation of Benjamin.
- In 1Samuel 7:6, we saw the prophet call for a national fast in the face of Baal worship.

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- There was national fasting over the death of Saul and Jonathan in 2Samuel 1:12.
- God called for the nation to fast in sackcloth and ashes in Joel 2:12.
- The entire people of Israel fasted in the face of annihilation in Esther 4:3.
- In Acts 14, we find the congregation fasting and praying at the appointment of elders.

3) Fasting to draw the attention of men

The third type of fasting is for the vicarious reason, to turn the attention of man toward man. This is the type a fasting that Jesus condemned in Matthew 6. Under the Law there was only one mandatory fast, the Day of Atonement (Lev 16:31). Though there were many that would fast for the righteous reasons, there were others who sought the glory of men.

During Jesus' ministry, there were two designated days of fasting carried out by the Pharisees, Monday and Thursday. This also happened to be the two main market days as well. Certain self-righteous individuals would use those large crowds to parade their giving and prayer for the purpose of demonstration of piety. They also deliberately soiled their garments and lightened their faces with makeup to present themselves as extremely humble during fasting times. When the country folks would come to town for shopping, they perceived these pompous, self-righteous fools were very close to God. "Surely they are focused on God if they carry out these serious fasts". Jesus weighed in on this and proclaimed they were fasting for wrong reasons and voiding any blessing from God.

Fast in Secret

Matthew 6:17-18 "But you, when you fast, anoint your head, and wash your face ¹⁸ so that you may not be seen fasting by men, but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will repay you."

In the same way the Pharisees were to give in secret and pray in secret, they were also to fast in secret. If you decide to begin fasting as a boost in your spiritual life, but are struggling with drawing attention to yourself and away from God, Jesus offers sound advice. Do it in secret. God will see you in secret and reward you openly.

Though there are many reasons to fast, the key thing to understand is to not present yourself in a way that draws attention to yourself. If we fasted for the rest of our life and it were for the reason of drawing attention to ourselves, it profits nothing

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in the eyes of the Father. If however, we fast for spiritual reasons, presenting ourselves to God, the rewards will come from God.

Rewards from God

Just like there are natural curses to not following God, there are natural rewards for following him. Here are some of the natural rewards in fasting.

1) Health

This may sound like an oxymoron, but did you know that fasting is part of a well-balanced diet? When fasting, we give our body a break. Half of the world we live in does not have enough to eat and the other half eats too much. It is scientifically proven that the body strengthens through fasting. Weight is better maintained, food is better digested, the immune system strengthens, senses are awakened and the overall well-being of an individual is increased when one fasts. Of course this is referring to short-term fasting, which is a day or two. Over longer periods like a week, it begins to have the opposite results. God did not design our bodies to be constantly digesting food. If this were the only benefit from fasting, it would be worth it, but there is more.

2) Discipline

Why would this be? It is because food is a natural daily desire of the human body. When engaging in a battle over a natural desire of the body we can master the body. Just like lifting weights and working out strengthen the body, fasting sets the foundation to strengthen the will. Look at all the situations and struggles of life that would be better off only if one would fast. What if the drug addict and the alcoholic engaged this powerful weapon for the soul? What if the person who struggles with poor language were to use strength drawn from fasting? What might change in the life of brothers or sisters struggle with self-control were to practice fasting? We would receive the reward of better self-control.

3) Appreciation

Paul commands the Christian in *1 Timothy 6:8 And if we have food and covering, with these we shall be content.* He drew the line of Christian contentment at the bare necessities of life, food and clothing. He mentioned nothing about money, homes, cars, television, retirement accounts, etc. Paul said our line of contentment is the clothing on your back and food in your stomach. Can a person live without the television? A vehicle? An iPad? All we humbly need is food and clothing. This is why materialism is so bad,

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making wants into needs. This is exactly where we are today in America.

Imagine stepping across that line of contentment and going without food. We learn and earn a deeper appreciation for all those people in the world who go to bed hungry. We value the “daily bread” God has blessed us with. If you want to add a boost to your prayer life, then fast. If you want to have great appreciation for the blessing of food, then fast. To better understand what Paul said in *2 Corinthians 6:10* “*as having nothing yet possessing all things*”, then fast. You will have the reward of a deep seeded appreciation that was never there before.

This is the point that Paul is making in *Phil 4:12-13*, “*I know how to get along with humble means, and I also know how to live in prosperity; in any and every circumstance I have learned the secret of being filled and going hungry, both of having abundance and suffering need.* ¹³ *I can do all things through Him who strengthens me.*” It was through the withholding of food that Paul learned that he could do all things through God. It is also through the same that we can as well. We can do all things through Him who strengthens us, if we want to fast like the Bible teaches.

The Challenge

These are just a few of the rewards that God gives through fasting. In order to learn more, you will just have to buckle down and just do it? Whatever you do, don’t do it for the wrong reason. Do not seek the glory of man, but of God. Take one day in the coming week and fast a twenty-four hour period, saturating it in prayer and focusing on God. Experience the many rewards which God would like you to have.