

Wellspring – Life & Teaching of Jesus (43) Sermon on the Mount – When you fast (Matt 6:16-18)

When you fast, do not look sombre as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to men that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. (Matt 6:16-18)

The power of fasting

Fasting is the third practical spiritual discipline that Jesus refers to in Matthew 6. He again stresses that this is something that we do to God and not to be seen by men. Fasting is one very powerful discipline that God has given us to use that enables us to position ourselves to receive all the blessings that he wants to pour out into our lives.

God is determined to have a glorious Church without spot or wrinkle, a bride fit for His beloved Son... in the travail that will bring this to birth, we shall rediscover one of the lost secrets of the early Church, the power that is let loose through the truly biblical practice of fasting unto God. (Arthur Wallis, God's Chosen Fast)

Jesus Christ showed us the way and personally modelled it for us. Being filled with the Spirit does not make you ready to move into the fullness of your calling in power. We need to submit to the discipline of the Holy Spirit, and during that time frame God will discipline us in the crucial works of prayer, fasting, and the skilful use of His Word as a weapon. Then we will go forth in the power of the Spirit. (Mahesh Chavda, The Hidden Power of Prayer & Fasting)

Fasting is one of the tools that God wants to give us in these last days as we prepare for the return of our Lord. If we want to move to a higher level of fruitfulness in our individual lives and in our life together as a church, I believe this is a discipline we need to embrace wholeheartedly and passionately.

On a practical level, the body can survive for quite a long period (normally about 40 days) without 40 without any detrimental effect, whereas after 3 days without water the body begins to dehydrate in a detrimental way.

There are three type of fast spoken of in the Bible:

- An **Absolute Fast** – abstaining from all food and liquids. The most extreme examples of this involved Moses on Mount Sinah where for two consecutive 40 days periods we read he neither ate nor drank. This was a supernatural fast – naturally he would have died without water for that period. There are other examples in the Bible but this type of fast is relatively rare. After Paul was converted and blinded on the Damascus rode we read that for three days he neither ate nor drank.
- A **Normal Fast** – abstaining from all food, but drinking water. Jesus' 40 day fast in the wilderness fell into this category, we are only told that he did not eat, not that he did not drink. Many people have followed our Lord's example and done 40 day fasts and have suffered no adverse physical consequences – in fact it is generally considered that a period of fasting is a good cleansing for the system.
- A **Partial Fast** – whereby we abstain from some, but not all food and drink, for example simply eating vegetables and drinking water. This was the fast undertaken by Daniel and his three friends when he was taken into captivity in Babylon (see Daniel 1). After an initial 10 day test period Daniel and his friends maintained this fast throughout their 3 years of training. It is clear that they did not continue this lifestyle indefinitely, because Daniel chose to go again on such a fast some years later (See Dan 10:2-3).

So why is it important to fast?

1. *We fast in obedience to God's Word and the leading of the Holy Spirit*

Jesus didn't say *if* you fast, he said *when* you fast. In Matt 9:15 he said that when he was taken back into heaven then his disciples would fast. Paul confirmed that in 2 Cor 6:5 where he talks about "fastings" as omne of the things which commends him as a minister of the Gospel.

It was commanded in the Old Testament as one of the ways in which people would humble themselves and come before God in order to receive his blessing and favour.

“Even now,” declares the Lord, “return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning. Rend your heart and not your garments.” (Joel 2:12-13)

For us perhaps the most important principle is that we need to fast under the leading of the Holy Spirit. It is not a legalistic thing, but as we declare our willingness to discipline ourselves before God in this way, the Holy Spirit will clearly lead and guide us, as he did Jesus.

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the desert, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing during those days, and at the end of them he was hungry. (Luke 4:1-2)

We may be led by the Holy Spirit to fast regularly, or for a specific season – or like Daniel to do a partial fast.

2. We fast to humble (weaken) ourselves before God and to obtain His grace, power and strength.

Fasting is a practical tool to humble ourselves before God – James says that if we humble ourselves before God he will lift us up (*James 4:10*) and Bible repeatedly says that God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble. God grace is what releases the power of God into our lives.

Paul says that God’s strength is made perfect in our weakness (*2 Cor 12:9-10*). Fasting is a choice FOR God and AGAINST the flesh. It is an inward choice, demonstrated in an outward act that I am not going to rely on my own strength, but I want God’s power to flow through my life. As I become weak, He becomes strong!

3. We fast to overcome temptations in areas that keep us from moving in God’s power.

Jesus took away my sins at the cross and I am now dead to sin and alive to God, but many of us still struggle with besetting or entangling sins in our lives. God wants us to walk in complete victory and there is great power in prayer and fasting to reinforce the victory of the cross in our own lives and to pray not only for our sins but for the sins of other – see *Daniel 9:3-5*.

4. We fast to release the anointing to accomplish His will and overcome demonic powers

In *Acts 13:3* we read that the leaders in Antioch fasted and prayed before commissioning Paul and Barnabas for the work of ministry that God has called them to. In *Matthew 17* we read of an demon possessed epileptic boy who the disciples could not help – Jesus casts out the evil spirit, pointing to their lack of faith and then says *“However, this kind does not go out except by prayer and fasting.” (Matt 17:21)*

There is a level of faith and anointing in dealing with the enemy that is only released in our lives through prayer and fasting. If we are called to come against principalities and powers in the New Forest area, then fasting and prayer will be one of the keys to release the anointing we need to accomplish what God is calling us to do.

5. We fast for direction, understanding and divine revelation.

In *Ezra 8:21-23* we read that Ezra and the people fasted and prayer in order to receive direction and guidance from God as to what they should do. During times of fasting our spirits become more alert and sensitive to the Holy Spirit and we often receive fresh revelation from the Word of God.

6. We fast in times of crisis.

When Esther faced the crisis of the threat to the Jewish people, she called a three day absolute fast among the Jews before she took her life in her hands by coming before the King on behalf of her people (*Esther 4:15-16*). The serious nature of the crisis called for an aggressive response of a fast from both food and water.

Prayer with fasting is a major weapon in our spiritual armoury. God is calling us to be a people who learn how to use it.