

Is Fasting Emphasized in the Scripture?

I often am asked about the precedent of fasting in the Bible. It seems as though fasting has become the step-child of the Church. Many know that there is some kind of responsibility towards it, but they really just don't want to live up to it. So, fasting is often neglected. We try very hard around here to promote a healthy lifestyle view of fasting. As good as I believe that view or discipline is, it doesn't matter what I think. What matters is what Scripture says. After all, the first of our foundational statements of beliefs says, "The Scriptures, both the Old and New Testaments, are verbally inspired of God and are the revelation of God to man, the infallible, authoritative rule of faith and conduct." The question which we should ask in relation to fasting is this: Is fasting emphasized in Scripture and does it need to be a part of our (your) spiritual discipline?

Scripture has been given to us as a guide for how to live a fulfilled life in relationship with our God. In that it sets the example of how to succeed or how to fail in that life. Therefore, we should ask the most basic question: Is fasting seen in Scripture?

In the Old Testament, Isaiah 58:3-12 gives one of the clearest teachings on fasting. About 3 years ago Rich Cramer taught with eloquence and power from that passage.

I can hear some already questioning: But that's the Old Testament? Funny, we love to claim the promises of the Old Testament, but we often shy away from the responsibilities that go along with them. If you go through both Testaments and count up the references to fasting, you will find 78 times that fasting is mentioned in Bible. That's significant. If God our Heavenly Father thought it important enough to include in His revelation of Himself to man, should we not stop and pay attention to it?

In the New Testament, Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, teaches the Disciples about prayer. The passage is found in Matthew chapter 6. The Sermon on the Mount is often referred to as the Constitution of the Kingdom. A constitution is "a body of fundamental principles or established precedents according to which a state or other organization is acknowledged to be governed."

What Jesus is doing in this Sermon is establishing the foundational principles and setting precedents that members of the Kingdom of God are to practice and abide by in order to live in His Kingdom.

In establishing these fundamentals, Jesus includes prayer. I am sure that we have all heard many teachings and sermons from verse 5 through 15, of this chapter. It contains the “Our Father” model of prayer. Just on a side note, Jesus wasn’t teaching us to repeat a nicely crafted prayer. He was establishing a model approach to the Father in prayer, but that is a different lesson. Without looking ahead, do you know what foundational principle of the Kingdom that Jesus addresses immediately after prayer? Fasting.

I have been around the church world for a long time now (since 1981) and I can tell you that in the last 20 or so years I have heard plenty of messages about prayer and fewer and fewer about fasting. Yet, Jesus’ teaching about fasting immediately follows His teaching about prayer in the Constitution of the Kingdom!

Why is it that so much of the Church denies the discipline of fasting? We are going to let that question hang out there for just a little while, ok? I will say here that Jesus completely expects that you will fast.

Don’t believe me? Answer this question: Do you believe that the Bible was written to you and that it applies to your life? If you answered yes, then without a doubt I can say that Jesus expects you to fast! In the three verses of Matthew 6:15-18 Jesus twice says, and I quote, “when you fast”. Not if, you fast but “when you fast” be aware of fasting for the wrong reasons or with the wrong motives.

Often, we get caught up in how to fast. Eat this, don’t eat that and so on. In the 21 Days of Hunger handout there are several different methods suggested. However, I am not looking to go into that today. The reason being that most of the Scriptures’ teachings on fasting are by precept; that is teaching the principle of why we fast.

I mentioned that there are 78 references to fasting in the Bible. Of those 78 references we see at least thirty-five people in the who fasted. Of these, three fasted forty days: Jesus, when tempted in the wilderness (Matthew 4), Elijah (1 Kings 19:8), and apparently Joshua (Exodus 24:13-18). Moses fasted for forty days without food or water and then immediately repeated the fast, bringing his total fast to eighty days (Deuteronomy 9:9-25 with Exodus 32:30).

Fasting is clearly written into the pages of Scripture, which is our “authoritative rule for faith and conduct.” If this is true, why then does so much of the Church avoid fasting? Okay, here’s the major reason: Fasting involves self-denial. It is in the satisfaction of natural desires or appetites that the Church weakness its self and diminishes its effectiveness against the world, the flesh and the devil.

One of the greatest benefits of fasting is that through denying the natural appetite or the lust of the flesh that the spirit man gains dominance. This makes fasting a powerful life discipline for spiritual growth and maturity. As such it is a weapon to be used in the battle that rages between the Spirit and the natural appetites of man.

In Scripture, fasting rightly is always used as a means of seeking God to the exclusion of all else. The principle of fasting, is that in self-denial we decrease, and He increases.

This flies contrary to what many people have thought and taught. Some believe that they can make God preform, if only they fasted long enough and hard enough. Newsflash: God does not perform on demand nor will He be coerced to action because I skipped a snack between lunch and dinner.

Many have been told that fasting casts out demons, heals the sick and pays the rent. Nope. Fasting does not cast out demons or heal people or get your rent paid. Such things may come as an added benefit or a byproduct of the fast, but they are not the reasons to fast.

When we fast rightly, we decrease, and He increases. When He increases in and through the life of a decreased believer His sozo power; His saving, delivering, healing and providing power manifests for His glory. His power manifests not because someone went hungry but because someone got humble and useable.

Some of us still aren't too sure about that. So, let's turn over to Matthew 17. This is right after the Transfiguration of Jesus, a man had brought his son, who he says is suffering with epilepsy which we learn later is caused by a demonic spirit, to the disciples to be healed. In verse 16 the man states to Jesus about His disciples, "but they could not cure him."

In verse 17 and 18 we read, "¹⁷ Jesus answered and said, 'O faithless and perverse generation, how long shall I be with you? How long shall I bear with you? Bring him here to Me.' ¹⁸ And Jesus rebuked the demon, and it came out of him; and the child was cured from that very hour."

This prompts the disciples to go and speak to Jesus. Verses 19 through 21 capture the private conversation:

¹⁹ Then the disciples came to Jesus privately and said, "Why could we not cast it out?"

²⁰ So Jesus said to them, "Because of your unbelief; for assuredly, I say to you, if you have faith as a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you. ²¹ However, this kind does not go out except by prayer and fasting."

From this passage many have supposed that the demoniac could not be freed because the disciples did not go to prayer and fasting for a time and a season. I have heard some church leaders say that when they were confronted by a person with a demonic issue that they gathered the church to prayer and fasting. Now, if you haven't been in prayer and fasting that is probably a good course of action. But in general, if you wait until you are face to face with a demoniac before you go to prayer and fasting, you've waited too long.

I am telling you that if you are confronted with a demoniac and you think skipping your twinkie after dinner is gonna get the job done, you will face a very sad and possibly dangerous reality. The devil is not moved by how long you have gone without eating.

Do you know what the devil responds to? You should because I have taught about this. The devil responds to power and authority. When unbelief is operating in your life power and authority are diminished. It is unbelief and its effects on the Christian's life that Jesus is here referring to when He says, "²⁰ this kind does not go out except by prayer and fasting."

In verse 17, during the confrontation, Jesus says, "bring him here to Me." In the next verse Jesus rebukes the demon and the boy is cured. There was no time between verse 17 and verse 18 for Jesus to go to the mountain top and pray and fast for 40 days in order to speak to the demonic mountain.

Jesus didn't construct a fast to convince the demon that it had to go. Jesus operated in a life of power and authority, which was fostered by the discipline of fasting. This kept His natural appetites in check and allowed His spirit man to function with dominance.

It is through fasting and prayer that we deny our fleshly impulses and grow in spiritual power and authority. As we humble ourselves and draw close to the Lord, subjecting our natural appetites to the working of the Spirit, we gain intimacy with God and grow in belief and the power and the authority that comes with it.

Therefore, we will cast out demons, heal the sick and see signs and wonders manifest because we are humbly submitted to and usable for the glory of the King of kings and the Lord of lords.

The real benefit of a fast is in humbling oneself through self-denial and learning to draw upon God's strength and provision rather than our own to accomplish the work of the Kingdom.

But why, oh why does God ask me to deny my spaghetti and meatballs? Our appetite for food is one of our most basic natural needs, fourth actually, after air, water and sleep. Yet, it represents perhaps our most self-satisfying lusts. Fasting reigns in that lust and opens the door to breaking other-self satisfying habits.

So, to my earlier questions: Is fasting really emphasized in Scripture and does it need to be a part of spiritual discipline? Yes! If you think differently or if you believe someone who teaches differently you stand against the expectation of Jesus because He said, “when you fast”.

My final question to you is this: Are you meeting the expectation of Jesus concerning fasting?