
MOTIVES IN FASTING

George Battey | 3/4/14

Questions:

- 1) What is the Biblical outlook of food?
- 2) When the prophet came to town in Bible-days, what happened to people's appetites by the time he left?
- 3) What do Americans do after funerals?
- 4) What did David Lipscomb say about fasting in modern times?
- 5) What sort of activities should people be engaged in while fasting?
- 6) When were Israelites required to fast under the old law?
- 7) Why did the Ninevites fast?
- 8) On what day did Moses supposedly ascend Mt. Sinai to receive the law?

INTRODUCTION

Matthew 6:16-18

¹⁶ "Moreover, when you fast, do not be like the hypocrites, with a sad countenance. For they disfigure their faces that they may appear to men to be fasting. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward.

¹⁷ But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face,

¹⁸ so that you do not appear to men to be fasting, but to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly.

John Calvin:

(400 yrs. ago) "Let me say something on fasting: because many, for want of knowing its usefulness, undervalue its necessity, and ... reject it as altogether superfluous; while on the other hand, where the use of it is not well understood, it easily degenerates into superstition" (Institutes)

Things really haven't changed much since the days of Calvin.

GENERAL REMARKS

Fasting is a very prominent thing mentioned in the Bible.

- There are at least **123 references** to fasting.
- Some of these references are repetitions which leaves over **60 separate references**.
- About **20 of these** appear in the NT.

MEN WHO FASTED

Fasting was practiced by many faithful men of God. In OT people like:

OT	NT
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Moses (40 DAYS)• David• Nehemiah• Samuel• Elijah (40 DAYS)• Esther• Hannah• Ezra• Daniel	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Anna• Cornelius• John the Baptist• Paul• John's disciples• Barnabas• Jesus (40 DAYS)• Luke

PLACES

The Scriptures record that men with God's approval fasted in many different places:

- in public
- in the wilderness

- in private
- in a city
- on a mountain
- in a siege
- in a fish
- in a den of lions

TIMES

There were all sorts of times and occasions in which men fasted:

- at funerals
- when threatened
- when repenting
- when searching for a wife
- when asking for a baby
- in ordaining elders
- in temptations
- when receiving a revelation
- for 40 days
- 14 days
- 7 days
- 3 days
- 1 day

ACTIONS

When fasting, men of God did all sorts of things. Some of these things seem rather peculiar to us today:

- wore sackcloth
- sat in ashes
- put dirt on their heads
- tore their clothes
- wept
- washed their faces
- put oil on their heads
- wore a frown

- prayed
- read Scriptures
- worshiped God

MODERN TIMES

Today we have lost sight of fasting. We have even lost our perspectives about the purpose of food.

The Biblical outlook of food was **a means to an end**, not an end within itself.

- The glory of man was not in the food he consumed, but the work he accomplished – and by carrying out his work he was able to glorify God.
- Food simply provided the strength to fulfill this glorifying work of God.

But today we have made food an end within itself.

ILL: In High School, when lunch bell rang, kids ran like raging rhinos to get first in lunch line. You'd think they hadn't eaten for days.

ILL: At "church dinners" we rush to the head of the line. If one man eats only one plate of food we ask, "*What's wrong? Not feeling good?*" We stuff ourselves until we're uncomfortable.

Temperance is meaningless to us.

PREACHING

In Bible days, when a prophet came to town, if there was "*sin in the camp,*" by the time that prophet left, men had lost their appetites. They fasted and prayed.

Today when the preacher comes, no matter how sinful conditions may be we:

- sing
- play
- laugh
- stuff him like a hog
- and eat like pigs ourselves

Something's wrong. Either:

- The preacher is not preaching what needs to be heard.
- Or our consciences' are seared.

FUNERALS

In the Bible, when someone died men fasted ... **they refused to eat.**

Today, when someone dies, we carry car-loads of food to the grieving survivors and we insist they eat.

Can you not see the change that has taken place in our outlook?.

DEFINING TERMS

Biblically speaking, then, what is fasting?

fast (νηστεύω) – νη = "not"; στεύω = from ἐσθίω meaning "I eat"

It means "**not to eat.**"

Many people miss meals and don't eat because of sickness, a diet, or maybe a busy schedule. But: **Biblical fasting is not eating food for religious reasons.**

Genesis 24:33 (Eliezer searching for Isaac's wife)

³³ Food was set before [Eliezer] to eat, but he said, "**I will not eat** until I have told about my errand." ...

This is the first reference to fasting in the Bible – not eating for religious reasons.

KINDS OF FASTING

The Bible speaks of at least two kinds of fasting:

1) **An absolute fast** – no food or drink

Exodus 34:28

²⁸ ... [Moses] was there with the LORD forty days and forty nights; he **neither ate bread nor drank** water. ...

2) **A normal fast** – in which water was allowed

NOTE: Some Bible students believe there was a third kind of fasting which they call a "*partial fast*" where most food is rejected and only a certain kind is eaten. They cite Daniel and his three companions as participating in this kind of fasting.

But it appears these men were not fasting at all, for they still ate. They were merely refraining from food that would defile them which could mean one of two things:

- **Unclean food** (pork, etc.)
- **Meat sacrificed to idols**

THE LENGTH OF A FAST

The length of a fast varied, but on the average it was several days.

David Lipscomb:

"The fasting now, when observed at all, is to miss one meal and call it "fasting." They usually miss breakfast, attend church at eleven o'clock, and go home and eat a hearty dinner at one. Not much spiritual strength is gained by missing one meal. I am satisfied that the fasting of primitive times extended over several days, eating but little and abstaining from fleshly indulgence during the season. Missing but one meal requires little self-denial and makes us feel but little humility or excites no great feeling of dependence. To miss one meal and call it "fasting" is very much to make an empty form of it"

(Queries)

To this I say, "Amen."

ACTIVITIES WHILE FASTING

Fasting was not a time of idleness. Just because a man wasn't eating didn't mean he just laid around the house thinking about how hungry he was.

Fasting was a time for:

1) Praying

Men did not fast without prayer. In the Bible you will find men praying without fasting, but you will not find fasting without praying.

In Neh 9:1-13 fasting was a time for:

2) Confessing sins

3) Reading the law

4) Worshiping God

One time the nation of Judah complained to God that their fasting didn't seem to accomplish anything. God pointed out they weren't doing the right things while they fasted:

Isaiah 58:6-7

⁶ "Is this not the fast that I have chosen:

(5) To loose the bonds of wickedness,

(6) To undo the heavy burdens,

(7) To let the oppressed go free,

(8) And that you break every yoke?

⁷ (9) Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,

(10) And that you bring to your house the poor who are cast out;

(11) When you see the naked, that you cover him,

(12) And not hide yourself from your own flesh?

Fasting was not only a time to do all these things, but it was a time to refrain from pleasures:

1 Corinthians 7:3-5

³ Let the husband render to his wife the affection due her, and likewise also the wife to her husband.

⁴ The wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does. And likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does.

⁵ Do not deprive one another except with consent for a time, that you may **give yourselves to fasting and prayer**; and come together again so that Satan does not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.

Fasting was not a time for pleasure. It was a sober and serious occasion.

THE PURPOSE

Q: What did God design fasting for?

(Very rarely did God require something for no apparent reason.)

1) Fasting afflicts the soul

The only regular commanded fast in the entire Bible was the Day of Atonement:

Leviticus 23:27-29

²⁷ "Also the tenth day of this seventh month shall be the Day of Atonement. It shall be a holy convocation for you; **you shall afflict your souls**, and offer an offering made by fire to the LORD.

²⁸ And you shall do no work on that same day, for it is the Day of Atonement, to make atonement for you before the LORD your God.

²⁹ For **any person who is not afflicted in soul** on that same day shall be cut off from his people.

To "**afflict the soul**" meant to fast and Luke referred to this Day of Atonement as "**the fast**" (Acts 27:9).

Fasting, then, served to remind men of their unworthiness and their dependence upon God.

Psalms 69:10

¹⁰ ... I wept and chastened my soul with fasting, ...

2) Fasting expresses grief and sorrow

David fasted when:

- Saul died (2 Sam 1).
- Abner died (2 Sam 3).
- His own child lay sick (2 Sam 12).
- He even fasted when his enemies were sick.

Psalms 35:13-14

¹³ But as for me, when [my enemies] were sick,
My clothing was sackcloth;
I humbled myself with fasting;
And my prayer would return to my own heart.

¹⁴ I paced about as though he were my friend or brother;
I bowed down heavily, as one who mourns for his mother.

David said he would not have been more distressed if his own mother had been sick.

3) Fasting strengthens the spiritual man

It enables a man to gain mastery over his fleshly desires that war against the soul. It weakens the physical and strengthens the spiritual man:

2 Corinthians 12:10

¹⁰ Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ's sake. For **when I am weak, then I am strong.**

It teaches us the ability to say "No" to our physical desires.

1 Corinthians 9:27

²⁷ ... I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified.

Once the disciples of Jesus were unable to cast a demon out of a man:

Mark 9:28-29

²⁸ And when [Jesus] had come into the house, His disciples asked Him privately, "Why could we not cast it out?"

²⁹ So He said to them, "This kind can come out by nothing but **prayer and fasting.**"

Sometimes the assaults of evil are so strong that we need extra strength to overcome them. Fasting and prayer gives us that extra strength.

4) Fasting emphasizes the seriousness of an important occasion

- Moses fasted 40 days before receiving the Law.
- Elijah fasted 40 days before the conflict on Mt Carmel.
- Jesus fasted 40 days before beginning His ministry.

When elders were ordained in the early church, the entire congregation would fast:

Acts 14:23

²³ So when they had appointed elders in every church, and **prayed with fasting**, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed.

Fasting reminded these men that the events about to transpire were very serious. They were reminded that spiritual things were more important than even food.

5) Fasting gained the attention of God

When the Jews were about to be destroyed by wicked Haman, **Esther and Mordecai** fasted and prayed earnestly hoping to obtain God's help (Esther 4:16).

6) Fasting shows true repentance

- When Jonah preached to **the Ninevites** they repented and to prove their sincerity they fasted (Jonah 3:5-7).
- When **Saul of Tarsus** finally realized who Jesus was he fasted for 3 days to show his genuine sorrow (Acts 9:9).

Ecclesiastes 7:2-6

² Better to go to the house of mourning
Than to go to the house of feasting,
For that is the end of all men;
And the living will take it to heart.

³ Sorrow is better than laughter,
For by a sad countenance the heart is made better.

⁴ The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning,
But the heart of fools is in the house of mirth.

⁵ It is better to hear the rebuke of the wise
Than for a man to hear the song of fools.

⁶ For like the crackling of thorns under a pot,
So is the laughter of the fool.
This also is vanity.

7) Fasting shows sinful brethren when fellowship is broken

- When a prophet rebuked the idolatry of Jeroboam, God forbade the prophet to eat with those idolaters. When he disobeyed and ate anyway, God killed him (1 Kings 13).
- When a rebellious Christian refuses to repent God said, "With such an one know not to eat" (1 Cor 5:11).

It's not a time of feasting and joy when we are around these kind of people. We are to be mourning their condition.

How many of us would be dead if God killed us for eating with rebellious apostates like He killed the disobedient prophet?.

NOTE: Fasting was never done on an ordinary occasion. Always, without exception, it was because of some dire distress.

(Men of God did not fast just for the sake of fasting. Only hypocrites did that.)

When we see the Biblical basis for fasting and we consider how we have treated fasting in the past, perhaps we should fast and pray for the way in which we've been fasting and praying.

THE PHARISEES

Now what we've been studying is how fasting ought to be done. But by the time of Jesus the Jews had corrupted this service to God.

The Pharisees began to fast just for the sake of fasting. They viewed fasting as a meritorious work – that God owed them something because they had fasted.

They began to multiply the number of days in which men should fast. There were four annual fast days which the Pharisees imposed on the people:

(1) **The day of atonement** – this we have already mentioned as having been taught by the Law itself.

(2) **The fifth month** – to commemorate when Nebuchadnezzar burned the temple.

(3) **The seventh month** – to commemorate the assassination of governor Gedaliah (the last Jewish governor of the Jewish nation).

Zechariah 7:4-5

⁴ Then the word of the LORD of hosts came to me, saying,

⁵ "Say to all the people of the land, and to the priests: 'When you fasted and mourned in **the fifth and seventh months** during those seventy years, did you really fast for Me — for Me?

The Lord did not command these fast days and He did not accept them.

(4) New Year's Day

The really dedicated Pharisees also fasted twice a week (Lk 18:12).

(5) Thursdays – supposedly the day Moses ascended the mountain to receive the Law.

(6) Mondays – Supposedly the day Moses descended the mountain.

Altogether, the Pharisees observed **108 days of fasting each year**, not counting the times they may have fasted for funerals and other things.

By understanding these perversions of fasting, we can better appreciate what Jesus taught in Mt 6.

TEXT (1)

Matthew 6:16

¹⁶ "Moreover, **when you fast**, do not be like the hypocrites, with a sad countenance. For they disfigure their faces that they may appear to men to be fasting. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward.

The most often asked question about fasting that brethren ask me is: ***"Do you think fasting is something men should do today?"***

Notice carefully that Jesus did not abolish fasting. He did not say, ***"if you fast,"*** as though it were an option we could dispense with. He said, ***"when you fast."*** He expects His disciples to fast on certain occasions.

Matthew 9:14-15

¹⁴ Then the disciples of John came to Him, saying, "Why do we and the Pharisees fast often, but Your disciples do not fast?"

¹⁵ And Jesus said to them, "Can the friends of the bridegroom mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them? But the days will come when the bridegroom will be taken away from them, and **then they will fast.**

Fasting was incredibly common among the disciples of the early church:

2 Corinthians 6:4-5

⁴ But in all things **we commend ourselves as ministers of God**: in much patience, in tribulations, in needs, in distresses,

⁵ in stripes, in imprisonments, in tumults, in labors, in sleeplessness, **in fastings**;

When Paul described all the hardships he suffered as an apostle he said:

2 Corinthians 11:27

²⁷ [I was] in weariness and toil, in sleeplessness often, in hunger and thirst, **in fastings often**, in cold and nakedness —

When giving regulations to husbands and wives Paul said:

1 Corinthians 7:5

⁵ Do not deprive one another except with consent for a time, that you may **give yourselves to fasting and prayer**; and come together again so that Satan does not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.

So, yes, fasting was meant for today.

THREE SUBJECTS

In Mt 6 Jesus deals with three subjects:

- **almsgiving**
- **praying**
- **fasting**

But we sometimes act as though Jesus dealt with only one subject. Can you imagine:

- A Christian who never **prays**? NO.
- A Christian who never **gives**? Well ... sort of.
- A Christian who never **fasts**? Yes, pretty easy.

A lot of us act as though the present section on fasting was not even in our Bibles.

(I dare say there are many American Christians who have never fasted.)

Why do I say this? Because we have a hard enough time doing what is regularly preached. When something is not preached regularly, we sure enough don't do that.

DISFIGURING THE FACE

Now what were these hypocrites doing? They were "*disfiguring*" their faces in order to "*appear*" to be fasting.

You cannot see this in English, but in the Greek Jesus was making a play on words.

disfiguring (ἀφανίζω) – to render unrecognizable

to appear (φαίνω) – to shine, appear

Literally:

"They make their faces unsightly in order to make a sight" (cf. Lenski)

You'll remember that ordinarily the Pharisees made a big ceremony over washing – and they washed very often (Mk 7:2-3).

Now when they fasted they didn't wash their faces as usual and it was very obvious. They stuck out like Pinocchio's nose.

These Pharisees would go around:

- with dirty faces
- hair disheveled
- a sad countenance
- some even used light colored make-up to make them look a little pale and sickly

They appeared gloomy, downcast and sullen. To most men they appeared as if in great sorrow, or pain.

(This is what made them so despicable. They acted as though they were saddened by their sins, but in reality felt so proud of their righteousness.)

FASTING FED THEIR PRIDE

By being hypocrites about this fasting these Pharisees caused fasting to do the opposite of what it was suppose to.

You'll recall that fasting was to "*afflict the soul*" and bring about humility (Lev 23:27). But by abusing it the Pharisees fed their pride with it. The Pharisee bragged:

Luke 18:12

¹² I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess.'

WHAT ABOUT US?

What about us? Aren't we sort of like these hypocrites of Jesus' day? If we fast at all we:

- Long for an opportunity to tell someone.
- We secretly hope we will get "*caught*" doing it.

Pride is the besetting sin of man. We can take fasting, which is designed to prevent pride, and end up making it fertilize pride.

(We feel superior to others who don't fast when we ought to be humbled because of our sins.)

THE REWARD

Jesus said these men "**have their reward**" (Mt 6:16).

have (ἀπέχω) – "to receive payment in full"

They sought the admiration of men and they got it. Let them not expect an ounce of divine approval, for they have already received their reward in full.

TEXT (2)

Matthew 6:17-18

¹⁷ But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face,

¹⁸ so that you do not appear to men to be fasting, but to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly.

A problem arises here because men of God have:

- Disfigured their faces when fasting (with God's approval).
- They did not wash their faces.
- They did not anoint their heads.

ARGUMENT: "But that was in the OT."

A: Yes, but actions that are hypocritical in one dispensation are also hypocritical in another dispensation.

(In other words, hypocritical actions do not change in their character just because there was a change in covenants.)

So, these OT saints received God's approval even though they were of sad countenance and disfiguring their faces.

To give you some specific examples:

- **Nehemiah** was sad in the king's presence (Neh 2:2)
- **Ezra** plucked hair from his head and beard (Ezra 9:3)
- **Joshua** put dust on his head (Josh 7:6)
- **Job** sat in ashes (Job 2:8)

- **Mordecai** wore sackcloth in public (Esther 4:1)

Were these men hypocrites? NO. The difference between these men and the hypocrites of Jesus' day is that they were sincere in their mourning and sorrow. But the hypocrites just appeared to be in sorrow.

MOTIVATION

Jesus is discussing the motivation within a man's heart.

Remember in Mt 6:5 when Jesus forbade "*standing*" when praying, He was not condemning the bodily position of standing itself. He was condemning the motive within a man's heart that would cause him to pray "*to be seen of men.*"

Jesus is not condemning the OT saints who:

- Put dust on their heads
- Tore their clothes
- Wore sackcloth
- Sat in ashes

He is forbidding us to do such things for the purpose of receiving glory from men.

DON'T "BECOME" SAD

Notice in v16, "**Do not be like the hypocrites.**"

"Do not be" (μὴ γίνεσθε) – "*do not become as*"

In other words, Jesus is not forbidding a sad countenance if a man is truly sad. He is simply forbidding us from becoming or putting on a sad appearance when we are not really sad.

He's saying:

"Don't go out of your way to put on a sad look. If there is the slightest temptation to seek man's praise, then wash your face and groom your hair."

Jesus is not asking us to put on a false grin and laugh just so as not to appear fasting.

John Calvin:

"Christ does not withdraw us from one kind of hypocrisy to lead us into another [kind]."

Our fasting is to give God glory, not to receive glory to ourselves.

Rather than being hypocrites, we must go out of our way to avoid receiving praise to ourselves. When the heathen men of Lystra were going to sacrifice to Paul and Barnabas they:

Acts 14:14-15

¹⁴ ... tore their clothes and ran in among the multitude, crying out

¹⁵ and saying, "Men, why are you doing these things? We also are men with the same nature as you, and preach to you that you should turn from these useless things to the living God, ...

They went out of their way to avoid the praise of men. This is exactly what Jesus was teaching in Matthew 6.

A PERSPECTIVE

And so it was that Jesus ended His teachings on the motivations men have when serving God.

All around us today men are sacrificing and bowing to the gods of lust and indulgence. Among our own people we have little, or no sense of temperance.

1 Corinthians 9:25

²⁵ And everyone who competes for the prize is **temperate in all things**. ...

We eat and gorge ourselves until we become uncomfortable. We confess to everyone at the table we ought to quit eating as we reach for another bowl.

Our inability to say "no" to food has made us also unable to say "no" to other appetites. Slowly, but surely we are losing our:

- Spirituality
- Sense of priorities
- Humility
- Sense of depending on God

"*Gluttony*" is a word we laugh at and "*temperance*" a meaningless term. Have we forgotten that times of feasting and merriment were the occasions of downfall? Special mention was made that:

- Mt 24 – Before the flood men ate and drank.
- Lk 17 – The inhabitants of Sodom ate and feasted before their destruction.
- Judges 9 – Gaal feasted and then destruction came.
- 2 Sam 13 – Amnon was feasting before he died.
- Dan 5 – Belshazzar feasted and then God's hand wrote on his wall.
- Mt 14 – Herod feasted and then murdered John the Baptist.
- Lk 12 – The rich fool planned a feast to his own ruin.

Luke 21:34

³⁴ "But **take heed** to yourselves, **lest your hearts be weighed down with carousing, drunkenness, and cares of this life**, and that Day come on you unexpectedly.

Luke 12:45-46

⁴⁵ But if that servant says in his heart, 'My master is delaying his coming,' and begins to beat the male and female servants, and **to eat and drink and be drunk,**

⁴⁶ the master of that servant will come on a day when he is not looking for him, and at an hour when he is not aware, and will cut him in two and appoint him his portion with the unbelievers.

When we look around us and see the state we are in:

- Spread of immorality
- Hardened hearts

- Lack of devotion
- Spread of liberalism
- Departure from Biblical teachings
- Loss of our children to the world

It should drive us to fasting and prayer. It's time we humbled ourselves, afflicted our souls and repented in the sight of God.

Jonah 3:7-9

⁷ And [the king of Nineveh] caused it to be proclaimed and published throughout Nineveh by the decree of the king and his nobles, saying,

Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything; do not let them eat, or drink water.

⁸ But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and cry mightily to God; yes, let every one turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands.

⁹ Who can tell if God will turn and relent, and turn away from His fierce anger, so that we may not perish?

Once again we are driven back to the words Jesus began His sermon with:

Matthew 5:4

⁴ Blessed are those who mourn,
For they shall be comforted.

CONCLUSION

Is there one present who will respond to the call of God?

Is there one present whose heart is touched by the power of the Gospel?

If so, don't delay another day if you are not acceptable to God.