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The Disciple-Making Minister

Biblical Principles for Fruitfulness and Multiplication

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Chapter Twenty-Six Fasting

Fasting is the voluntarily act of abstaining from eating food and/or liquid for a period of time.

The Bible records many examples of people who fasted. Some abstained from eating all foods, and others abstained from eating only certain kinds of foods for the duration of their fast. An example of the latter would be Daniel's three-week fast, when he ate no "tasty food...meat or wine" (Dan. 10:3).

There are also a few examples in Scripture of people who fasted both food and water, but this kind of total fast was rare and should be considered supernatural if it lasted longer than three days. When Moses, for example, went for forty days without eating or drinking anything, he was in the presence of God Himself, to the extent that his face shined (see Ex. 34:28-29). He repeated a second 40-day fast shortly after his first one (see Deut. 9:9, 18). His were two very supernatural fasts, and no one should attempt to imitate Moses in this regard. It is impossible, apart from the supernatural help of God, for a person to survive more than a few days without water. Dehydration leads to death. Most healthy people can survive with food, however, for quite a few weeks.

Why Fast?

The primary purpose of fasting is to gain the benefits provided through spending extra time praying and seeking the Lord. There is hardly a reference to fasting in the Bible that does not also contain a reference to prayer, leading us to believe that it is pointless to fast without praying.¹ Both references to fasting in the book of Acts, for example, mention praying. In the first case (see Acts 13:1-3), the prophets and teachers in Antioch were simply "ministering to the Lord and fasting." As they did, they received prophetic revelation, and consequently sent Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey. In the second case, Paul and Barnabas were appointing elders over new churches in Galatia. We read,

¹ I have fasted for as many as seven days without any spiritual benefit whatsoever, for the simple reason that I had no spiritual purpose and did not spend any extra time in prayer.

When they had appointed elders for them in every church, having prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed (Acts 14:23).

Perhaps in this second case, Paul and Barnabas were following Jesus' example, as He prayed all night long before choosing the twelve (see Luke 6:12). Important decisions, such as appointing spiritual leaders, need to be prayed about until one is certain he has the leading of the Lord, and fasting could give more time for prayer to that end. If the New Testament commends temporary abstinence from sexual relations between marriage partners in order to increase devotion to prayer (see 1 Cor. 7:5), then we could easily understand how temporary abstinence from eating could serve the same purpose.²

Thus when we need to pray for God's direction for important spiritual decisions, fasting lends itself to that end. Prayers for many other needs can be made in a relatively short time. We don't need to fast, for example, in order to pray the Lord's Prayer. Prayers for guidance take longer because of our difficulty in "discerning God's voice in our hearts," as God's voice often competes with any wrong desires or motivations, or lack of devotion that may be within us. Gaining assurance in guidance can require an extended period of prayer, and that is one instance where fasting is beneficial.

Of course, just spending any time in prayer for any good purpose could hardly be considered anything but spiritually beneficial. For that reason, we should consider fasting to be a wonderful means towards spiritual strength and effectiveness---as long as our fasting is coupled with prayer. We read in the book of Acts that the early apostles were devoted "to prayer and to the ministry of the word" (Acts 6:4). Surely that reveals to us at least part of the secret for their spiritual power and effectiveness.

Wrong Reasons to Fast

Now that we have established some scriptural reason for fasting under the New Covenant, we should also consider some *unscriptural* reasons for fasting.

Some people fast hoping that it will increase the chance of God answering their prayer requests. Jesus, however, told us that the primary means to answered prayer is faith, not fasting (see Matt. 21:22). Fasting is not a means to "twist God's arm," or a way of saying to Him, "You better answer my prayer or I will starve myself to death!" That is not a biblical fast—that is a hunger strike! Remember that David fasted and prayed for several days for his sick baby by Bathsheba to live, but the baby died because God was disciplining David. Fasting didn't change his situation. David was not praying in faith because he had no promise on which to stand. In fact, he was praying and fasting contrary to God's will, as evidenced by the outcome.

Fasting is not a prerequisite to having a revival. There is no example of anyone in the New Testament fasting for a revival. Rather, the apostles simply obeyed Jesus by preaching the gospel. If a city was unresponsive, they obeyed Jesus again, sweeping the dust off of their feet and journeying to the next city (see Luke 9:5; Acts 13:49-51). They didn't stay around and fast, trying to "break spiritual strongholds," waiting for a revival. This being said, however, I must add that fasting coupled with prayer can certainly benefit those who minister the gospel, making them more effective agents of revival. Many of the spiritual giants of whom we can read in church history were men and women who made a habit of prayer and fasting.

Fasting is not a means of "putting the flesh under," as the desire to eat is a legitimate and non-sinful desire, unlike the obvious "desires of the flesh" listed in Galatians 5:19-21. On the other hand, fasting *is* an exercise in self-control, and the same virtue is needed to walk after the Spirit and not after the flesh.

² The *King James Version* of 1 Corinthians 7:5 commends the mutual consent of husbands and wives to abstain from sexual relations in order that they might devote themselves to "fasting and prayer." Most modern English translations of this verse do not mention fasting, but only mention prayer.

Fasting for the purpose of proving one's spirituality or advertising one's devotion to God is a waste of time and an indication of hypocrisy. This was the reason why the Pharisees fasted, and Jesus condemned them for it (see Matt. 6:16; 23:5).

Some people fast to get victory over Satan. But that is unscriptural. Scripture promises that if we resist Satan by faith in God's Word, then he will flee from us (see Jas. 4:7; 1 Pet. 5:8-9). Fasting is not necessary.

But did not Jesus say that some demons can only be cast out by means of "prayer and fasting"?

That statement was made in reference to getting someone delivered from a certain kind of demon that possessed him, not in reference to a believer who needed to gain victory over Satan's personal attacks against him, something to which all believers are subject.

But does not Jesus' statement indicate that we can gain a greater authority over demons by fasting?

Remember that when Jesus' heard a report that His disciples had failed to deliver a certain boy from a demon, the first thing He did was lament their lack of faith (see Matt. 17:17). When His disciples asked Him why they had failed, He replied that it was because of the littleness of their faith (see Matt. 17:20). He may also have added as a footnote, "But this kind does not go out except by prayer and fasting" (Matt. 17:21). I say He *may* have added those words as a footnote because there is some evidence that particular statement may not have actually been included in Matthew's *original* Gospel. A note in the margin of my Bible (the *New American Standard Version*, a highly-respected English version) indicates that many of the original manuscripts of Matthew's Gospel do not contain this particular statement, which means it is possible that Jesus never said, "This kind does not go out except by prayer and fasting." English speakers have the benefit of having scores of different Bible translations in their language, whereas many Bible translations in other languages were translated, not from the original Hebrew and Greek manuscripts, but from the *King James Version* of the Bible, a translation that is now over four-hundred years old.

In Mark's account of the same incident, Jesus is recorded as saying, "This kind cannot come out by anything but prayer" (Mark 9:29), and it is noted in the margin of the *New American Standard Bible* that many manuscripts add "and fasting" to the end of the verse.

If Jesus actually did say those words, we would still be wrong to conclude that fasting is necessary for one to successfully cast out all demons. If Jesus gives someone authority over demons, as He did His twelve disciples (see Matt. 10:1), then he has it, and fasting can't increase one's authority. Fasting, of course, could give one more time to pray, thereby increasing spiritual sensitivity and perhaps his faith in his God-given authority.

Also keep in mind that if Jesus did actually make the statement under consideration, it was only in reference to *one* kind of demon. Although Jesus' disciples once failed to cast out one particular kind of demon, they successfully cast out many other demons (see Luke 10:17).

All of this is to say that we don't need to fast to gain personal victory over Satan's attacks against us.

Overemphasis Regarding Fasting

Some Christians have unfortunately made a religion out of fasting, giving it the dominant place in their Christian life. There is, however, not a single reference to fasting in the New Testament epistles.³ There are no instructions given to believers on how or when

³ The only exception would be Paul's mentioning of fasting by married couples in 1 Cor. 7:5, but among English translations of the Bible this is found only in the *King James Version*. *Involuntary* fasting is mentioned Acts 27:21, 33-34, 1 Cor. 4:11 and 2 Cor. 6:5; 11:27. These were fasts done not for spiritual purposes however, but only because of trying circumstances or because no food was available to eat.

to fast. There is no encouragement given to fast. This shows us that fasting is not a major aspect of following Jesus.

In the Old Testament, fasting is mentioned more often. It was most often associated with either times of mourning, such as in connection with someone's death or a time of repentance, or with fervent prayer during times of national or personal crises (see Judg. 20:24-28; 1 Sam. 1:7-8; 7:1-6; 31:11-13; 2 Sam. 1:12; 12:15-23; 1 Kin. 21:20-29; 2 Chron. 20:1-3; Ezra 8:21-23; 10:1-6; Neh. 1:1-4; 9:1-2; Est. 4:1-3, 15-17; Ps. 35:13-14; 69:10; Is. 58:1-7; Dan. 6:16-18; 9:1-3; Joel 1:13-14; 2:12-17; Jonah 3:4-10; Zech. 7:4-5). These, I believe, remain valid reasons for fasting today.

The Old Testament also teaches that devotion to fasting at the neglect of obedience to more important commandments, such as caring for the poor, is unbalanced (see Is. 58:1-12; Zech. 7:1-14).

Jesus certainly cannot be accused of overly promoting fasting. He was accused by the Pharisees of not practicing it (see Matt. 9:14-15). He chided them for placing it above more important spiritual matters (see Matt. 23:23; Luke 18:9-12).

On the other hand, Jesus did speak of fasting to His followers during His Sermon on the Mount. He instructed them to fast for the right reasons, indicating that He anticipated His followers would fast at times. He also promised them that God would reward them for their fasting. He Himself practiced fasting to some extent (see Matt. 17:21). And He said that the time would come when His disciples would fast, when He was taken from them (see Luke 5:34-35).

How Long Should One Fast?

As I have said previously, all of the forty-day fasts recorded in the Bible can be classed as supernatural. We've already considered Moses two forty-day fasts in God's presence. Elijah also fasted for forty days, but he was fed by an angel beforehand (see 1 Kin. 19:5-8). There were also some very supernatural elements to Jesus' forty-day fast. He was supernaturally led by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness. He experienced supernatural temptations from Satan near the end of His fast. He was also visited by angels at the end of His fast (see Matt. 4:1-11). Forty-day fasts are not the biblical norm.

If a person voluntarily abstains from eating one meal for the purpose of spending time seeking the Lord, he has fasted. The idea that fasts can only be measured in terms of days is erroneous.

The two fasts mentioned in the book of Acts that we have already considered (see Acts 13:1-3; 14:23) were apparently not very long fasts. They may have only been one-meal fasts.

Because fasting is primarily for the purpose of seeking the Lord, my recommendation is that you fast for as long as you need to, until you have gained what you are seeking from God.

Remember, fasting doesn't force God to talk to you. Fasting can only improve your sensitivity to the Holy Spirit. God is speaking to you whether you fast or not. Our difficulty is sorting out His leading from our own desires.

Some Practical Advice

Fasting normally affects the physical body in various ways. One may experience weakness, tiredness, headaches, nausea, light-headedness, stomach cramps, and so on. If one has a habit of drinking coffee, tea, or other caffeinated beverages, some of these symptoms can be attributed to withdrawal from caffeine. In such cases, it is wise for those individuals to eliminate those beverages from their diets several days before their fast begins. If a person fasts on a regular or semi-regular basis, he will discover that his fasts become progressively easier, although he will usually experience some weakness for at least the first week or two.

One should make sure he drinks plenty of pure water during his fast so as not to become dehydrated.

Fasts should be broken carefully and slowly, and the longer the fast, the more cautious one should be as he breaks his fast. If a person's stomach has digested no solid foods for three days, it would be unwise for him to break his fast by eating foods that are difficult to digest. He should start with foods that are easy to digest and fruit juices. Longer fasts require more time for the digestive system to adjust to eating again, but missing one or two meals needs no special breaking-in period.

Some are convinced that careful and moderate fasting is actually a means of promoting health within our bodies, and I am one of them, having heard a number of testimonies of sick people who were healed while fasting. It is thought that fasting is a means of resting and cleansing the body. This may be the reason that one's first fast is the usually the most difficult fast he will experience. Those who have never fasted are most likely to need the most internal physical cleansing.

One's physical hunger during a fast will usually cease anywhere from two to four days into his fast. When hunger does return (usually after some weeks), that is a sign to carefully end your fast, as that is the beginning of starvation, when the body has utilized its stored fat and is now utilizing essential cells. Scripture tells us that Jesus became hungry after forty days of fasting, and that is when He ended His fast (see Matt. 4:2).