

Fasting and Prayer Matthew 6:16-18

Jesus' words on fasting, reveal how God _____ this practice to be, and how we, like the Pharisees, can mess it up in our flesh. Jesus looks at _____ in the conduct of spiritual disciplines, using the example of fasting.

16 "Now whenever you fast, do not make a gloomy face as the hypocrites do, for they distort their faces so that they will be noticed by people when they are fasting. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. Jesus' words aren't so much about instructions on how to fast, as how to _____ hypocrisy when you fast by desiring _____ doing good.

Should We Fast?

16 "Now whenever you fast,

Well, the first question that should be asked is: should Christians fast? Jesus _____ with saying, "whenever you fast", not "if ever you fast". See also Matthew 9:14-16.

Some reasons for fasting

1. To strengthen prayer

In the New Testament, when the disciples failed to cast a demon out of a boy, Jesus explained in Matthew 17:21, "**However, this kind does not go out except by prayer and fasting.**" So, we see a _____ of prayer through fasting. Fasting focuses our _____ to seek God, letting ourselves know that we mean business. It helps remove _____ from our mind, as we remember that we have basic needs that God makes sure are fulfilled every day and acts as a demonstration to us that God can do what we're asking Him to. Ezra 8:23 **So we fasted and sought our God concerning this matter, and He listened to our pleading.**

2. To seek God's guidance and to draw close

When there was civil war in Israel, and the people desperately needed God's guidance, we read in Judges 20:26 **26 Then all the sons of Israel and all the people went up and came to Bethel, and they wept and remained there before the Lord, and fasted that day until evening. And they offered burnt offerings and peace offerings before the Lord.** As with prayer, fasting to seek God's guidance isn't done to change God but to make us more _____ to his guidance.

3. To express grief

Expressing grief is one of the primary reasons for fasting--when you're moved to tears by grief you lose the _____ to eat.

4. To seek deliverance or protection (e.g., see 2 Chronicles 20:3 – 4)

In the book of Joel, when all the land had been devastated by locusts, God told Israel through the prophet **14 Consecrate a fast, Proclaim a solemn assembly; Gather the elders And all the inhabitants of the land To the house of the Lord your God, And cry out to the Lord.**

In 2nd Chronicles 20, when a great army from the nations of Moab and Ammon came against Israel, we read in verses 3-4 that **3 Jehoshaphat was afraid and turned his attention to seek the Lord; and he proclaimed a period of fasting throughout Judah. 4 So Judah gathered together to seek help from the Lord; they even came from all the cities of Judah to seek the Lord.**

So, the model for us in seeking deliverance from disaster or calamity, whether natural or man-made is to turn our _____ to seek the Lord, and especially to do this by fasting. When Solomon dedicated the temple, God spelled out the role of His people during calamity (see 2 Chron 7:13-14).

5. To express repentance and a return to God

To express grief over our sins shows our seriousness about returning to God's will for our lives in obedience. Joel 2:12-13, **12 "Yet even now," declares the Lord, "Return to Me with all your heart, And with fasting, weeping, and mourning; 13 And tear your heart and not merely your garments." Now return to the Lord your God, For He is gracious and compassionate, Slow to anger, abounding in mercy And relenting of catastrophe.**

6. To humble oneself before God

Fasting is a way to humble yourself in the sight of God. It's one of the _____ ways to get your heart in the right place to approach God correctly. When Elijah confronted King Ahab, the most wicked King of Israel, and pronounced God's judgement against him, Ahab had a change of heart (see 1 Kings 21:27-29). True humility before God in repentance of sins _____ gets God's attention, no matter how awful the sinner.

7. To express concern for the work of God

As with Nehemiah, fasting can be a way to express our _____ over a work that God is doing.

8. To minister to the needs of others (e.g., see Isaiah 58:3 – 7)

We can use time we'd normally spend eating to fast and _____ to others. When we seek God during a fast, we are to bring up the needs of others, and consider how we're treating others. In Isaiah 58:3-7, God calls out Israel for their _____ in fasting. And one of the quickest ways to let God change our behavior toward others, and especially those who are being evil toward us is to pray and fast for them (see Psalm 35 13-14). It's pretty hard to hold a _____ against someone when you've spent time in prayer and fasting for their good.

9. To overcome temptation and dedicate yourself to God (e.g., see Matthew 4:1 – 11)

Fasting can help us _____ when we are struggling with particular temptations. Fasting is a powerful tool for placing anything that entangles us and puts the longings of this world in _____ perspective. See Matthew 4:1-11

10. To express love and worship for God (e.g., see Luke 2:37)

In Luke 2:36-38 when Jesus was presented at the temple, God revealed that baby Jesus was the promised Messiah.

Jesus continues in Matthew 16 vs. 17-18 **17 But as for you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, 18 so that your fasting will not be noticed by people but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you.** We are to turn to God in fasting, not inwardly to seek ourselves, and not toward other people, regarding what they think about it. And to avoid the distraction and interruption of this process of humbling ourselves before God, we are to _____ just like we do on any other day, not seeking to draw attention to our fasting, but conducting ourselves so that others won't notice. And the closeness with God that should be the overall goal of fasting is its own reward! And also, we have a reward in Heaven to look forward to.

So, in preparing to fast, we should _____ of our sins. Then we should _____ and confess our sins, as we humble ourselves before God. Repentance came first, then prayer. Prayer should be our sustenance throughout the fast, but it is imperative we begin the fast with a contrite heart. Then we should spend our time in prayer and in seeking God by meditating on God's Word, before and during the fast.