**Fasting: A Hunger for God**

I recently taught this material as a three-part Bible class. The lessons were well received with several people said it was the first time they recall studying the topic. This is simply a survey of the biblical examples of fasting and can easily be expanded for your needs. Clay

1. While we find fasting all over the Bible it doesn’t seem to get much attention today.
   1. Why do you think that is the case?
   2. What role has fasting played in your life?
   3. What role has it played in the life of our congregation?
2. We might start by asking, is fasting for Christians today?
   1. First, fasting was commanded of the Israelites one day a year on the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16:1ff; 23:26-32). Nevertheless, it was a common response to life’s circumstances.
   2. There is no similar command for Christians, however, New Testament teaching and practice assumes Christians will fast (Matthew 6:16; 9:14-17).
3. What is fasting?
   1. Dictionary Definition: It is the abstaining from certain or all food, (and drinks) for a specified period of time.
   2. Spiritual Definition: It is the humiliating response of a person to a grievous moment of life.
      1. Humiliating: Fasting afflicts the body with a view to humbling the soul before God (Leviticus 16:29-31; ) Fasting shatters the central focus of our lives - FOOD! so we can focus more on God (cf. Luke 12:22-31; Philippians 3:19; Romans 16:18).
      2. The motive for fasting should be our circumstances (not ritual per se) with a view to humbling ourselves while imploring God.
         1. Sin – Fasting – Forgiveness
         2. Danger – Fasting – Protection
         3. Needs – Fasting – Answers
   3. Biblical fasting is not…
      1. For health benefits
      2. A tool to manipulate God
      3. A ritual act of piety
      4. Punishment of the body for sin
      5. Not incidental
      6. An instant key to holiness
4. What does a bible fast look like?
   1. No set length or severity – the circumstances dictated the type of fast.
   2. The citizens of Jabesh fasted seven days for Saul (1 Samuel 31:13). Upon hearing of Saul’s death, David fasted till evening (2 Samuel 1:12). Perhaps the two accounts together tell us the seven day fast was only forsaking food till each evening.
   3. Esther, her maidens, and the Jews of Susa fasted from food and drink for three days, many did so with sackcloth and ashes (Ester 4:16; cf. Daniel 9:3).
   4. King Darius fasted through the night while Daniel was in the lion’s den. Additionally, he refrained from diversions and sleep (Daniel 6:18).
   5. Once Daniel fasted only from good foods and drinks for three weeks (think subsisting on bread and water only), additionally he also neglecting personal hygiene (Daniel 10:3).
   6. The whole of Nineveh, even the animals, fasted in sackcloth and the king adding sitting in ashes to his humiliation (Jonah 3:5-10).
5. Examples of David Fasting:
   1. At the death of Saul (2 Samuel 1:12)
   2. Over the murder of Abner (2 Samuel 3:35)
   3. During the sickness of the child born to him by Bathsheba (2 Samuel 12:16-22)
   4. While interceding in prayer for his advisories (Psalm 35:11-14)
   5. In his zeal for Zion (Psalm 69:9-12)
   6. In prayer for himself against his adversaries (Psalm 109:4, 21-25)
6. Selected Examples of Fasting from the Old Testament (In addition to those already noted):
   1. Fasting in response to sin
      1. In the conflict between Benjamin and the other tribes of Israel (Judges 20:26)
      2. Israel when the Philistines returned the Ark (1 Samuel 7:6)
      3. Ahab, when Elijah prophesied the king’s destruction (1 Kings 21:20-29)
      4. Ezra on account of the sins of the Jews who returned to the land (Ezra 10:6)
      5. Nehemiah over the desolation of Jerusalem (Nehemiah 1:4)
      6. Ezra and Nehemiah, along with the assembly, fasted while confessing their sins (Ezra 10:6; Nehemiah 9:1-2)
   2. Protection from Threats
      1. Jehoshaphat and Judah when the Moabites and Ammonites threatened to attack (2 Chronicles 20:3)
      2. Ezra before setting off to Jerusalem (Ezra 8:21-23)
   3. God called for the people to put on sackcloth and fast over their sins (Joel 1:13-14)
   4. As a result of Jeremiah’s prophecies against Judah and Jerusalem (Jeremiah 36:9)
   5. In remembrance of the fall of Jerusalem (Zechariah 7:1-7; 8:18-19)
      1. During the seventy years of captivity the people observed four fasts corresponding with different aspects of the destruction of Jerusalem.
         1. Fourth Month – Breaching of the Wall (2 Kings 25:3; Jeremiah 39:2-4)
         2. Fifth Month – Destruction of the Temple (2 Kings 25:8; Jeremiah 52:12). This was viewed as the most important of the four fast.
         3. Seventh Month – Mourning over the murder of Gedaliah (2 Kings 25:22-26)
         4. Tenth Month – Remembering the final siege against Jerusalem (2 Kings 25:1; Jeremiah 39:1)
7. Examples of Fasting in the New Testament:
   1. Anna worshipped God in the temple with fasting and prayers (Luke 2:37)
   2. Habitual practice of John’s disciples (Matthew 9:14; Mark 2:18; Luke 5:33)
   3. Hypocritically practiced by the Pharisees (Matthew 6:16-18; 9:14; Mark 2:18; Luke 5:33; 18:12)
   4. Jesus assumed followers would practice (Matthew 6:16-18; 9:15)
   5. Prayer and fasting needed when casting our certain demons (Matthew 17:21; Mark 9:29 NKJV)
   6. Paul fasted for three days after the Lord Jesus appeared to him (Acts 9:9)
   7. Practiced by Cornelius when praying (Acts 10:30 NKJV)
   8. The prophets and teachers in Antioch were worshipping the Lord with fasting (Acts 13:1-2)
   9. Barnabas and Paul commissioned with prayers, fasting, and the laying on hands (Acts 13:3)
   10. Elders appointed with prayer and fasting (Acts 14:23)
   11. “The Fast” referencing the Day of Atonement used as a marker for time (Acts 27:9)
   12. In times of intense personal prayer (1 Corinthians 7:5 NKJV)
   13. Paul referenced the “fastings” he endured for the sake of the gospel (2 Corinthians 6:5; 11:27 NKJV). Other translations say “hunger.”
8. What about the miraculous fast?
   1. Moses: When he received the law (Deuteronomy 9:9) and when he interceded for Israel’s sins (Exodus 32; Deuteronomy 9:18)
   2. Elijah when he ran from Jezebel (1 Kings 19:1-8)
   3. Jesus when He was tempted by Satan (Matthew 4:1-11; Luke 4:1-13)
   4. From these we learn that when we fast, no matter the length, we dedicate ourselves to the Lord and are sustained by Him (Matthew 4:1-4; cf. Deuteronomy 8:1-3
9. How does a believer go about fasting?
   1. Have a Purpose: Know why you’re fasting; maybe it’s a period of intense prayer, repentance over sin, of for someone needing prayers or a disaster.
   2. Set a Period: Know how long you’ll fast; it might be a half day, a whole day, three days, a week, etc.
   3. Establish your Practice: Know from what you’ll fast from be it satisfying foods, all foods, or all food and drink.
10. The spiritual dangers of fasting
    1. Empty Religious Ritual (Isa 58:1-14). Israel fasted but God didn’t recognize their affliction because it had become an empty ritual. Thus, it did not transform the people’s hearts toward God and others. God called Israel to practice the rite of justice and mercy (cf. Matthew23:23). Then God would listen to their prayers.
    2. For Prideful Show (Matthew 6:16-18). The hypocrites fasted to be seen by others (v. 16). Jesus said to let your fasting be done in secret and the God who can see in secret will reward you openly (vv. 17-18). Considering what we see in Acts, this was not a blanket prohibition against communal fasting.
    3. Spiritual Superiority (Colossians 2:18-23). Some in Colossae where teaching that the path to God was through asceticism. The belief was holiness was achieved through extreme self-denial (v. 22). While it seems good, fasting is powerless against the flesh and thus doesn’t make one holier.

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