

# What about Fasting?

## A Sermon by Dr. Calvin Warpula

Fasting is the doing without food, and sometimes water or other drinks, for a period of time in order to focus on spiritual concerns.

Fasting is certainly a biblical subject. It is mentioned several times in the OT and a few times in the NT. It is not a Christian duty that is commanded but a privilege, an optional, voluntary practice according to each person's individual situation and needs.

Fasting is something that we in the Church of Christ do not know much about. I have been preaching for 45 years and have only preached one full sermon on the subject in all those years. I have some 2200 sermons in my files and only one devoted to fasting.

There is only one letter difference between "fasting" and "feasting," the single letter "e." I sure know much more about feasting than fasting. Two weeks ago I was on a five-day cruise out of Galveston on the Carnival Ecstasy. Food is available 24 hours a day every day. A person could literally eat all day long in the dining rooms and the lido deck. After four days of enjoying all the amenities of the cruise, I noticed that the salt air in the Gulf was shrinking my clothes (smile). I tend to be like the Houston Fat Stock and Rodeo—I get bigger every year. But I'm not alone—I read that one of three Americans has a weight problem. Statistics show that 79% of male preachers are overweight. We heard the call of God and the call of Shipley Donuts. I noticed that according to my height/weight chart, I should be ten feet tall. In fact, I went to the doctor the other day and he told me that I needed a triple bypass—I was stunned, I said, "A triple bypass?—really?" "Yes, he said, "you need to by pass the pizza parlor, the refrigerator and the Blue Bell ice cream."

Seriously, feasting more describes the Christian life than fasting, and in this lesson I'll be explaining why.

Let's begin there. God created us with physical bodies with physical appetites and needs. We need water, food, sleep and air to survive and live as humans. There is nothing wrong with anything God has made. God created the world and us and said, "It is good." Throughout the OT, God's people were feasting and enjoying the bounty of the land. Hospitality and entertaining strangers with feasts were a part of spirituality. God's people offered sacrifices in worship but they were privileged to eat most of these sacrifices after they were offered to God. Nothing was wasted. In OT times under the law, God's people had many feast days. There was only one day of the year that was a mandatory fast day, and that was the Day of Atonement, a day to mourn over one's sins and to seek forgiveness from God. That leaves 364 days for feasting.

The Sabbath was a family feast day to recall God's blessings and to praise him for all his gifts. The Passover was a feast day to celebrate their independence from Egypt, just like we celebrate our national independence on the 4<sup>th</sup> of July. The feast of the tabernacles was a seven-day feast where everybody camped out under temporary shelters, like we might go on a seven day camping trip to the state or national parks. The book of Ecclesiastes emphasizes that we should enjoy life and all that God has given (Eccl. 5:18-19).

In the NT, the apostle Paul warned against those who were forbid marriage (which is the enjoyment of an intimate conjugal relationship) and those that forbid the eating of meats. In fact,

Paul condemned enforced asceticism that forbade the legitimate, God-created pleasures of living. God is not an ascetic and Jesus was not a vegetarian. Jesus often enjoyed table fellowship with his disciples. His miracles and teachings were often in the context of eating with sinners and his disciples. The Lord's Supper was instituted during the Passover meal and in the first century it appears that the Lord's Supper was celebrated in the midst of a common meal, much like we have church fellowship dinners today. In the glory world yet to come, the Bible says there will be no fasting, but there will be feasting as we eat at the marriage supper of the lamb. Jesus spoke, "Blessed are those who will eat bread in the kingdom of God."

I'm saying all this to enforce the idea that the kingdom of God is a party and spiritual fun and delight of immeasurable joy. The word "joy" and its various forms of "rejoice and rejoicing" appear 125 times in the NT. The fruit of the Spirit is love, peace, joy. Jesus said, "My joy I give to you." The apostle Paul wrote that the kingdom of God is righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. So it is important that when we talk about fasting that we understand that it is not a normal, everyday emphasis of the Christian life. It is an exception that may be observed at special times. It is never commanded but is entirely optional and voluntary.

Now, let's look into this subject of fasting and see what the Bible says.

In the OT, there was only one mandatory fast and that was one day a year on the Day of Atonement (Lev. 16:31). From sunrise to sunset, God's people were to concentrate on seeking him and turning their lives more fully to him. On that day, the high priest offered sacrifices for his own sins and for the sins of the people. Fasting here, and in other OT references, was always connected with mourning for sin and repentance of it. The word for "fast" in the Hebrew suggests the penitent humbling of the soul before God. The word is translated in the Revised Standard Version as "to afflict the soul." At other times, the people were free to fast if they chose to. Moses, and later, and later, Elijah, both fasted forty days on special occasions. David fasted during the seven-day sickness of his newborn son born to Bathsheba and him (2 Samuel 12:16-22). David fasted when he heard about the deaths of King Saul and Jonathan (2 Samuel 1:12). Israel fasted when they were losing battles (Judges 20:26). They also fasted when they were faced with their sins and God's punishments (I Samuel 7:6). King Ahab fasted when he heard the Lord's punishment that was to come upon him (I Kings 21:27). The people of God in Babylon fasted as they sought God's will in returning to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem (Ezra 10:6; Nehemiah 1:4). Esther fasted when she heard the terrible news that Haman had ordered the deaths of all the Israelites throughout the kingdom of Artaxerxes (Esther 4:1-3, 15-17). The Ninevites fasted because of impending doom (Jonah 3:5-10). After the return from the Babylonian exile, Zechariah spoke of four additional fasts that the people began to observe (Zech. 8:16-19).

Zechariah addressed the ills of Judah that centered on trusting in external righteousness instead of genuine piety (Zech. 7:3, 4-6, 8-10). Sometimes people in OT times, like people today, tended to trust in ceremony and ritual to save them, instead of genuine repentance and righteous deeds. Some two hundred years before Zechariah's time, Isaiah the prophet spoke about these false hopes in chapter 58:3-7 of his book. Hear what he said: [read].

Fasting never was a replacement for integrity of heart and soul. To religiously abstain from food while coveting evil in the heart makes one a super hypocrite. [Compare Joel 2:12-13 and Jeremiah 14:10-12].

Now let's come to the NT.

Anna, a saintly old woman, fasted regularly (Luke 2:37). The Pharisees were the religious elite, a strict sect or denominational of the Jews during the first century. Jesus told about one Pharisee that boasted that he fasted two times a week, which are 100 more times than the law demanded (Luke 18:12). History tells us that these fast days were Monday and

Thursday, because it was believed that on Thursday Moses went up to the top of Mt. Sinai to receive the law and he came down 40 days later on a Monday.

There is no record of Jesus ever fasting as such. He did go without food for forty days in the temptation account in Matthew chapter 4 but that seems to be because no food was available in the wilderness where he was, not because he was under a deliberate fast. There are some twenty separate times in the gospels where Jesus prayed and he taught his disciples to pray and how to pray. But there are no commands to fast. In fact, this raised a problem for some. The Pharisees fasted and the disciples of John the Baptist fasted but Jesus never taught his disciples to fast. Fasting seems to have been an expected part of spiritual religion. Some of Jesus' disciples asked him about fasting. Notice in Mk. 2:18-22: [read]

Jesus says it is entirely inappropriate to fast while the bridegroom is with the disciples. Jesus is the bridegroom; the church is his bride. We have all been to wedding feasts where plenty of rich, delicious gourmet food is freely available because of the wedding celebration. It would be totally out of place to fast during a wedding in Jesus' time and in ours today. If one did so, it would be a big insult and a slap in the face to the host and the wedding party. But Jesus says a time is coming when the bridegroom is taken away and then the disciples will fast.

That time came when Jesus was arrested, tried, convicted, crucified, and buried for three days. During that time the disciples mourned his death and what they thought was a permanent going away. They were weeping, unbelieving, disjointed, discombobulated, confused, and skeptical. They thought everything they had hope for three years now was totally and irrevocably lost. It was Friday, but Sunday was coming. Following his resurrection on Sunday morning, Jesus appeared to his disciples for forty days. He gave them any infallible proofs of his resurrection and then went away after promising them the abiding, permanent, and energizing power of the Holy Spirit. That power came on them on Pentecost, ten days after the ascension, and they boldly and powerfully preached the gospel of Jesus' as the spiritual son of God who was now raised to glory at God's right hand and was coronated Lord and Christ. Jesus was with his disciples through the medium of the Holy Spirit whom he sent to be with them forever. He said, "I will never leave you or forsake you. I will be with you always, even unto the end of the world." Thus the entire age since that time is one of joy, celebration, feasting, empowerment, encouragement, and anticipation of his coming again to take us to be with him forever and ever. Fasting then is not a mark of the NT church.

So, if fasting is not a permanent mark of the church, and if fasting as a lifestyle is inappropriate for Christians, since Jesus is with us and we are to enjoy all that God has given, then should we fast at all, and if so, when and under what circumstances?

There are three acts of piety that are common to most religions, and in Judaism and Christianity. Those three things Jesus spoke of in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew chapter 6. They are giving alms to help the poor, prayer and fasting. Jesus taught the same basic truths about each of these practices: do them voluntarily, privately, and for the glory of God, not for selfish reasons. About fasting, he said, [read Matt. 6:16-18].

Notice that Jesus did not command or forbid fasting. He said, "When you fast," not "if" you fast. This indicates that there would be times when the disciples would fast. When they did so, they were to be sure that it was an act of genuine piety and not a hypocritical show or pretense. The teaching for fasting is the same as for praying and giving alms. Jesus cautions that "when we fast" we should make sure that the motive is God, the aim is God, and the object is God.

There are only two authentic references to fasting in the early church. They are Acts 13:2, 3 and 14:23. In the KJV, there are some other references to fasting, particularly tied to praying, but these texts are in the Textus Receptus, which seem to be manuscripts that had

additions inserted by the church in later years. They are not found in the oldest, best and most reliable manuscripts of the NT and thus not in any version made since 1880 [The verses in questions are Matt. 17:21; Mk. 9:29; Acts 10:30; I Cor. 7:5].

In the authentic references to fasting, here what the Bible says. First, Acts 13:1 [read]. Then Acts 14:23 [read]. This shows that fasting as a congregation is certainly acceptable at times of spiritual change, new directions, and momentous, challenging undertakings. We might notice that when Saul became convinced of the reality of Jesus that he did not eat or drink for three days as he prepared for the new direction of his life (Acts 9:9). Fasting can shrink the body but fatten the soul.

According to these verses, it is right at times to encourage voluntary fasts as a congregation. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus spoke of private praying, private giving and private fasting. However, public praying was not excluded (Matt. 18:17-20). The early church prayed publicly (Acts 2:42; 12:5, 12). Public giving was not excluded (I Cor. 16:1-2). The church collected funds for the poor (Acts 4:36-37; 11:29-30). Public worship was not excluded (as in the Lord's Supper, I Cor. 11:23-25). Likewise, public fasting is not excluded either.

This coming Wednesday is termed by some "Ash Wednesday." This is the beginning of forty days of Lent which is a period unknown to the Bible but developed in church history as a time for fasting before the celebration of Easter. Of course, the strange thing is that the forty days of fasting is preceded by "Mardi Gras" (which literally means, "Fat Tuesday") which is generally a time of gorging and reveling. Some churches have a series of regularly scheduled fasts during the year as they honor various men and women in the history of the church. These fasts are a matter of denominational practice, not biblical teaching. There are no fasts for sins in the NT because Christ has totally forgiven our sins.

So should you, if you want to please God and grow in the Christian life, fast at times? Yes, if you choose to. There is certainly nothing wrong with it and it can be very helpful. William Barclay in his Daily Study Bible on Matthew chapter 6 gives these values in fasting for Christians today

1. Fasting is good for health.
2. Fasting is good for self-discipline
3. Fasting preserves us from becoming the slaves of a habit.
3. Fasting preserves the ability to without things.
5. Fasting makes us appreciate things all the more.

Barclay concludes by saying,

Fasting has gone almost completely out of the life of the ordinary person. Jesus condemned the wrong kind of fasting, but he never meant that fasting should be completely eliminated from life and living. We would do well to practice it in our own way and according to our own need.

Of course, we all fast for several hours between meals today. Our morning meal is called "breakfast" which is two words put together, "break" and fast." When we "break the fast" that we have had during sleep and arise after not eating for eight hours, we have "breakfast."

Fasting can be good and wholesome, but it is not recommended for everyone. Women who are pregnant, those with diabetes, and other problems should not fast due to medical conditions. But for the rest of us, fasting can be beneficial.

I know that in my life during times when my mind has been preoccupied with spiritual decisions, with mounting problems, with church concerns, that I have not felt like eating and have turned my heart to the Lord to the extent that I forget about my hunger. In times like that, we draw closer to God. We pray more. We are more dependent on God. I know that I am closer to God when I am suffering or hurting or struggling than when I am prospering and enjoying the fat of the land. We grow more in adversity than we do in prosperity.

Fasting then can be and is a useful recommended spiritual discipline to help us focus on God. It is not mandatory. It is not for show. It is for a closer walk with God. It is an inward, spiritual retreat from the hectic business of life to give our hearts and minds more fully to the will of God.

What the Lord really wants from us is our hearts, souls and minds surrendered to him. He wants us to be real—to be authentic Christians. He wants us to be people of integrity—people that are transparent—who are what we are on the inside what we are on the outside. That is what he really wants from us.

Remember that Isaiah, Zechariah and Jesus taught us that no religious act like going to church, praying, giving, singing, communing, preaching, or fasting is worth anything before God if it is not sincere, for the glory of God, and from our hearts. Today you can give your heart and life to Jesus Christ, the spiritual son of God by believing in him as your Lord and Savior, by trusting him as the great Physician of your soul, by turning away from your sins, and by committing your life to him in water baptism,. We have everything prepared now for you to obey the Lord. We have towels and garments for baptism, the baptistery is filled with warm water, and this is a perfect time for you to begin your walk with Christ. Whosoever will may come while we stand and sing...

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