

Core Class 201 – Up Toward God – Discovering How to Grow Spiritually
Lesson 4: Following Jesus in Fasting

Opening Questions:

- What is the longest amount of time you've gone without food?
- What was the reason?
- What was your experience like?
- What are some of the general perceptions about fasting?
- How many times is fasting mentioned in the Bible? 107 times in 33 books (33 times in the N.T.)

**Part I:
What is Fasting?
(Definition)**

Fasting is practiced in many religions and cultures for a multitude of reasons. To begin to understand what it means to follow Jesus in fasting, read the following passage which is the first mention of Jesus and fasting in the Gospels:

1 Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.
2 And after He had fasted forty days and forty nights, He then became hungry.

Matthew 4:1-2 (NASB95)

Observations:

1. The word "fasted" (v.2) is the Greek word *nesteou*. (*ne – a negative prefix, and esthio – "to eat"*), which literally means not to eat.
2. Considering the context and historical usage of the word, we can also add that fasting is a voluntary spiritual or religious exercise.
3. Jesus' experience in the wilderness, including His fast was, at the leading of the Holy Spirit (v.1).

As a Jew, Jesus would have been familiar with the practice of fasting throughout the history of His people. Read the following accounts of 2 other 40 day fasts recorded in the Old Testament. What was the purpose or circumstances behind each of these fasts?

Exodus 34:27-28 – Moses was "with the Lord" (v.28) receiving His word, covenant, or prescribed way of life. Fasting is to be in God's presence, receiving His Word.

1 Kings 19:8-15 – Elijah, encountered God. Listened to His still voice receiving instruction and direction. ("Go... Return... You shall...")

Read Matthew 6:16-17 and 9:15. Do you think fasting is something Jesus expects His followers to do? Why or Why not?

- Yes! See Jesus use of the phrase, “When you fast...” vs. “If you fast...”
- See also His emphatic statement “Then they will fast.” When?
- In Jesus’ absence. Longing for His presence!

Summary:

Summarize what we’ve learned so far into a brief definition of what it means to follow Jesus in fasting (include elements of each of our observations):

Other Considerations:

Abstaining from food seems like a pretty drastic course of action, especially in our culture today. What does fasting accomplish that other measures do not?

1. Frees... Time and other resources. Think of the time devoted to eating! Shopping, preparing, clean-up. Not to mention our recreational eating!
2. Eliminates... Distractions
3. Denies... Self. We are a culture driven by self-gratification. Fasting becomes a means of beginning to die to self in the very basic needs.
4. Creates... Awareness of needs and dependence as well as the things which control us.
5. Enhances... All the other disciplines by increased time and focus.
6. Benefits... Our bodies

What Fasting is NOT!

Fasting is NOT a way to manipulate God, or earn anything from Him!

Fasting is NOT a way to impress others with our spirituality !

Part 2:
What Does Fasting Look Like?
(Forms)

Read the following examples of fasts in the Bible to see the different forms of expression fasting can take. With each passage, list who fasted, for what purpose, the result of the fast, and their personal response.

1. **2 Samuel 12:15-20** – “David *inquired of God*” (*baqash* – to seek)
 - a. David (Example of a personal fast)
 - b. God’s mercy on innocent victims of sin.
 - c. Result (vs. 19-23) – The child died.
 - d. David worshipped and acknowledged God’s sovereignty.

2. **2 Chronicles 20:1-4, 12** – “turned his attention to seek the Lord.” (“Set his face” – Determination/resolve)
 - a. Jehoshaphat and all of Judah (Example of a corporate fast)
 - b. Strength and confidence in the face of opposition
 - c. Prophetic response through Jahazael (vs. 15-17); The enemy defeated (vs. 23-24);
 - d. People worshipped (v.18), praised (v.19), gave thanks (v.21), sang praises (v.22)

3. **Daniel 9:3-6, 19** – “Gave my attention to the Lord God to seek Him...” (*nathan* – *naw-than*; *paniym* – *paw-neem*. Set my face, i.e. determined with all that I am!)
 - a. Daniel
 - b. Worship, confession and intercession
 - c. Angelic messenger with instruction (vs. 20-23)
 - d. Blessing, waiting, going his way until the end (Daniel 12:12-13)

4. **Ezra 8:21-23** – “...to seek from Him”
 - a. Ezra
 - b. Humility, protection on journey (for themselves, children and possessions)
 - c. God listened (v.23)
 - d. Acknowledged God’s deliverance (v.31) – Praise!

5. **Acts 13:1-3** – “ministering to the Lord and fasting”
 - a. Church leaders in Antioch
 - b. Worship –
 - c. Result was being set apart (“for the work to which I’ve called them” and sent)
 - d. Being sent by the Holy Spirit, they went (v.4) - Fruitful ministry (See 16:5)

Summary:

Fasting is always abstaining from food for a specified time, primarily for the purpose of seeking God's presence. However, this may find its expression in any or all of the following forms:

1. Time in God's Word (Moses & Elijah)
2. Time in Prayer (All)
3. Worship (Jehoshaphat, Daniel, Church Leaders in Acts)
4. Confession (Daniel)
5. Supplication & Intercession (David, Jehoshaphat, Ezra, Daniel)
6. Discerning God's Will & Direction (All)

Two necessary attitudes find their greatest expression in fasting and capture what must be at the heart of every fast – **Humility & Hunger (for God)**

- **Humility** recognizes our desperation and dependence while acknowledging God's sovereignty and supremacy. (2 Chronicles 20:12)
- **Hunger** recognizes our need and desire while acknowledging God as the source of our provision and fulfillment. (See Job 23:12; Psalm 63:1ff.; cf. John 4:34)

Fasting, at its very essence, is the expression of and embracing of a hunger for God above everything else!

SO...

Part 3: Where Do We Begin? (Practice)

Having determined what fasting is and what it looks like from a biblical point of view, it's time to ask "How do we do it and where do we begin?" The following are some suggestions:

1. **Examine your motives** – Is this something I believe the Holy Spirit is leading me to do? Am I motivated by genuine humility and hunger for God Himself?
2. **Determine a purpose** – What is my focus? Time in the word? (Pick one extended passage to focus on). Intercession? (Write out your concerns and requests). Seeking direction? (Begin with prayer to genuinely desire what God wants).
3. **Start small!** – Set a stretching but attainable goal. This is a learning process! Perhaps a single mealtime devoted to time in the word and prayer.

Practical Guidelines for a 24 Hour Fast
(Lunch to Lunch)

- **Lunch** - Have a lighter lunch to “condition” yourself (*avoid “stocking up.”*)
- Go about your usual afternoon activities maintaining a conscious awareness of God’s presence and focusing on “things above.” (See Colossians 3:2 and Philippians 4:8)
- **“Dinner”** - Spend your typical dinner time in Scripture reading and prayer (*review your notes and daily devotional guides from “Following Jesus in the Word and Prayer”*). Treat yourself to a small glass of fruit juice.
- Go about your usual evening activities, but end your day with continued time in the word and prayer. Pray that God would even speak to you through the night (See Psalm 127:2). Listen to a favorite worship song.
- **“Breakfast”** – Continue your Scripture reading and prayer over a glass of fruit juice. Perhaps journal any thoughts or reflections on your experience so far.
- Go about your usual morning routine, again maintaining a heightened spiritual awareness/focus and attitude of listening for God’s voice.
- **Lunch** – Have a lighter lunch (*avoid gorging yourself to make up for lost time*). Reflect on your time of fast and chronicle any insights. Trust God to use the time for His purpose

Other Suggestions:

When and where possible include some extended times for the following:

1. **Worship.** Listen to a favorite worship cd and allow some freedom of expression! (It’s perfectly biblical and simple obedience!)
2. **Soul Searching and Confession** (See Psalm 139:23-24 .
3. **Solitary walk in God’s creation.** Focus on all the ways God reveals Himself! Listen! Listen! Listen!