Fasting – a spiritual discipline for today?

Text: Matthew 6:16-18

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**Scriptures:** Ezra 8:21-23; Matthew 6:1-18

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 145, 69b, 490, 471, 525

Series: Occasional (Sunday before Easter)

Theme: Fasting as a means of self-denial

Proposition: Fasting is beneficial as a voluntary spiritual exercise of humble, private self-denial

**Introduction**

The [Roman Catholic Church](https://www.thoughtco.com/roman-catholic-church-denomination-700532) has a long tradition of fasting for Lent. Not only do devout Catholics fast on [Ash Wednesday](https://www.thoughtco.com/what-is-ash-wednesday-700771) and [Good Friday](https://www.thoughtco.com/what-is-good-friday-p2-700773), but they also abstain from meat on those days and all the Fridays during Lent. On fast days, Catholics are allowed to eat one full meal and two smaller meals which, together, do not constitute a full meal. Young children, the elderly, and persons whose health would be affected are exempt from fasting regulations.

The [Eastern Orthodox Church](https://www.thoughtco.com/eastern-orthodox-church-denomination-700624) imposes the strictest rules for the Lenten fast. Meat and other animal products are prohibited the week before Lent. The second week of Lent, only two full meals are eaten, on Wednesday and Friday, although many lay people do not keep the full rules. Weekdays during Lent, members are asked to avoid meat, meat products, fish, eggs, dairy, wine, and oil. On Good Friday, members are urged not to eat at all.

Most Protestant churches do not have regulations on fasting and Lent. During the [Reformation](https://www.thoughtco.com/beginners-guide-to-protestant-reformation-1221777), many practices that might have been considered "works" were eliminated by reformers [Martin Luther](https://www.thoughtco.com/martin-luther-biography-700828) and [John Calvin](https://www.thoughtco.com/john-calvin-biography-701364).

The Westminster Confession of faith (21:5), one of our confessional standards as the Reformed Churches of New Zealand, notes that on ‘special occasions and at appropriate times’ there are elements of worship which are not part of our corporate worship together and lists ‘religious oaths, vows, **solemn fasts**, and thanksgivings’.

As we consider this topic of fasting, we’ll do so under three headings:

1. The History of Fasting
2. The Dangers of Fasting
3. The Benefits of Fasting
4. **The History of Fasting**

Fasting is mentioned in many Old Testament books of the Bible as an integral part of the religious practice of Israel.

Fasting gave expression to grief for the OT people of God e.g. 1 Sam 7:6 *They gathered to Mizpah, and drew water and poured it out before the LORD, and fasted on that day and said there, "We have sinned against the LORD."* (e.g. for Saul and his sons, slain in battle by the Philistines 1 Sam 31:13: *“And they took their bones and buried them under the tamarisk tree at Jabesh, and fasted seven days”.*

On occasion, the Lord commanded the people to fast e.g. Joel 2:12 "Yet even now," declares the LORD, "Return to Me with all your heart, and with fasting, weeping and mourning”.

Penitential intercessory prayer was sometimes accompanied by fasting e.g. *“So I gave my attention to the Lord God to seek Him by prayer and supplications, with fasting, sackcloth, and ashes” (*Daniel 9:3); 2 Chron 20:3 *Jehoshaphat was afraid and turned his attention to seek the LORD, and proclaimed a fast throughout all Judah;* Esther 4:16 *"Go, assemble all the Jews who are found in Susa, and fast for me; do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my maidens also will fast in the same way. And thus I will go in to the king, which is not according to the law; and if I perish, I perish."*

Zechariah records a public fast in the 4th,7th and 10th months (8:19). Ezra 8:21-23 *Then I proclaimed a fast there at the river of Ahava, that we might humble ourselves before our God to seek from Him a safe journey for us, our little ones, and all our possessions. 22 For I was ashamed to request from the king troops and horsemen to protect us from the enemy on the way, because we had said to the king, "The hand of our God is favourably disposed to all those who seek Him, but His power and His anger are against all those who forsake Him." 23 So we* ***fasted*** *and sought our God concerning this matter, and He listened to our entreaty.*

Fasting then became a part of the Jewish oral tradition which was given the force of God’s law by the Pharisees even though their rules were merely the commandments of men. The people were therefore confused when Jesus’ disciples did not fast, whereas the disciples of John the Baptist did. (Matt 9:14; Mark 2:18)

Jesus refers to the regular practices of charitable giving in Matt 6:2, then to prayer in v5 and then in our text v16 “**When** you fast”. Christ **assumed** that those He taught in the sermon on the Mount would give to the poor, pray and fast. These were normative spiritual disciples in 1st century Judaism.

In v16 He condemns the hypocrisy of self-denial in fasting for the purpose of public show: Matt 6:6 *“They neglect their appearance so that they will be noticed by men when they are fasting. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full”.* Some Pharisees would even colour their faces pale to mimic effects of pro-longed abstinence from food.

We also see that the early Christian church practiced fasting for example when Barnabas and Saul were commissioned for mission work. *“Then, when they had fasted and prayed and laid their hands on them, they sent them away” (Acts 13:3).*

Later in history, fasting was integral to the monastic movement. In the rule of St Benedict there is a call to ‘love fasting’. References to fasting were included in some later (Byzantine) NT manuscripts as we see in the King James Version translations of: Matt 17:21 “*Howbeit this kind goeth not out but by prayer and* ***fasting***”; 1 Cor 7:5 **“***Defraud ye not one the other, except it be with consent for a time, that ye may give yourselves to* ***fasting*** *and prayer; and come together again, that Satan tempt you not for your incontinency*”; Acts 10:30 **“***And Cornelius said, Four days ago I was* ***fasting*** *until this hour”*”.

As we’ve already seen, fasting was a spiritual discipline recognized by the Reformed writers of the Westminster Confession in 17th Century. In summary, fasting has a long history both in the Scriptures and in the development of the New Testament church. However, there are dangers, pitfalls to be very aware of with this form of self-denial.

1. **The Dangers of Fasting**

There are many Christian who seldom, if ever, fast. Some people avoid the practice of fasting because they don’t see any purpose in doing so, others because they are aware that there are risks. Let’s look at some of the dangers of fasting.

* **Working to gain favour with God** – the idea that fasting gets God’s attention and demonstrates our love for Him. Thinking that fasting automatically gains an audience with God.
* **Trying to manipulate God** in Isaiah 58 the people were ignoring the clear commands of God but fasting instead. The people question God “Why have we fasted, and you see it not? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you take no knowledge of it?' He answers “Behold*, in the day of your fast you seek your own pleasure, and oppress all your workers. Behold, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to hit with a wicked fist. Fasting like yours this day will not make your voice to be heard on high*” (Isaiah 58:3-4). Fasting is of absolutely no value apart from a humble heart desiring to serve the Lord in righteousness, truth and justice.
* **Asceticism – punishing the body** – the Scriptures warn against man-made religious asceticism. "Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch!" (which all *refer to* things destined to perish with use) -- in accordance with the commandments and teachings of men? These are matters which have, to be sure, the appearance of wisdom in self-made religion and self-abasement and severe treatment of the body, *but are* of no value against fleshly indulgence” { Col 2:21-23}
* Beware of fasting to **exercise unhealthy control over the body** which can lead to bulimia, anorexia.
* Even when done in secret, there is the risk of **focus on self which can subvert a Christ-focus**. The fasting self can feel pious, holy, proud. e.g. Zech 7:6 *'When you eat and drink, do you not eat for yourselves and do you not drink for yourselves?’* This is contrary to the teaching of Scripture is humility–e.g. James 4:6; quoting Prov 3:36 *"God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble."*

There are dangers, but these should not put us off from practicing private fasting- a voluntary, solemn, subduing of the flesh. Let’s look at some of the benefits of fasting:

1. **The Benefits of Fasting**

We’ve all had days when things go wrong – that is not according to our own plans and expectations. We can then become irritable, angry, miserable, withdrawn, and forget the Lord’s goodness, losing trust in Him. A day when we might say “I am just not myself”, whereas in fact, that is a day when what I am really like is most clear. When many of the props of this physically comfortable life are removed. **Fasting can help us gain confidence that we are not mastered by the flesh**. It can show us what we are really like...if we are being supported by the good things of this life, rather than by the Lord.

**Fasting can help us to subdue the flesh** – “*Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry*” (Col 3:5). Self-denial was the passion of our Lord whose soul was afflicted. Think of His humble, willing self-affliction of the soul, His self-denial of the privileges of His divinity: Philippians 2:6 *“who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men”.* He did not value His flesh and blood but gave all over for us. We cannot add to His sacrifice for us…. but we can look to his example of his self-denial. The Lord Jesus Christ in the wilderness for 40 days (Matt 4:2) – going without food, but not necessarily from choice.

**May increase self-discipline** **–** fasting may help us toprove to ourselves that we are not a slave to the stomach. Here are a few practical issues: drink plenty of water; have a healthy diet when not fasting. Eat plenty of fruit and vegetables, otherwise you are likely to have headaches as toxins leave body. Advise close family members that you intend to fast.

Fasting is a private matter, however it **can assist in personal worship**. It can be an outward demonstration to the Lord and to ourselves of a humble posture of the heart.

Here are some purposes of fasting:

* **To strengthen prayer** – ref. Neh 1:4, Daniel 9:3. John Calvin “Whenever men are to pray to God concerning any great matter, it would be expedient to appoint fasting along with prayer”. Fasting can assist us in focusing upon the Lord in our private and corporate prayers.
* **To express grief** –2 Sam 12:16 – David, when Bathsheba’s child to him died. Nehemiah. *When I heard these words, I sat down and wept and mourned for days; and I was fasting and praying before the God of heaven. (Neh 1:4).*
* **To seek deliverance or protection** (Ezra 8:21, Esther 4:16).
* **To express repentance and return to God** e.g. Ninevites (Jonah).
* **To overcome temptation and dedicate yourself to God** – example of Christ in fasting forty days and forty nights in the desert (Matt 4:1).
* **Can assist us in focusing upon the Lord in our private prayers**, particularly in times of great need or distress.

**Should we then fast? The Scripture does not teach that we must, but that we may.** Discuss this sermon at home, and as a congregation, but what you do, is to be a private matter between you and the Lord.

There are certainly dangers, pitfalls, to be carefully avoided. However, fasting is a spiritually beneficial discipline when a person follows the Word of Christ from the heart motivation of love for Him and the gospel.

Here again are the words of Christ on the practice of fasting. *"But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face so that your fasting will not be noticed by men, but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you” {Matt 6:17-18}.*

AMEN