

A BRIEF GUIDE TO THE DISCIPLINE OF FASTING

This basic tract, introducing the discipline of fasting, is intended to be augmented by pastor-guided discussion and instruction within a spiritual formation setting

WHAT IS A FAST?

We are herein discussing the topic of fasting within a religious/spiritual context. There are two general aspects of what this type of fast entails. One is *spiritual*, which will be discussed within the below section, *Why Fast*. The other is the *physical* aspect, which consists of avoiding all food and/or drink during a period set aside for that purpose.

How long you choose to fast or precisely what hour you initiate it is between you and God. You may wish to do a Bible study on fasting to gain some insights. More commonly, fasts are conducted for a day (or 24-hour period). Some spiritual formation exercises suggest building up to about a 36-hour fast period (i.e. skipping one additional meal). The fast start time is calculated from the hour the first meal is skipped, rather than from the hour the last meal is eaten (cf. Lev. 16:29 with 23:32; also Ezra. 8:21 & Is. 58:5). Some prefer to initiate the fast upon skipping the evening meal (in line with some biblical examples; Lev. 23:32), while others prefer to begin with skipping breakfast (as more naturally falling within modern activity cycles). If you need to drink fluids during the fast, restricting drinks to straight water is common.

You may decide to do a *diminished* fast if you are not yet ready to commit to a complete fast. You might conduct a full fast, abstaining from both food and liquids for the first 24-hours, allowing water-only for the remainder of the fast. You may prefer to fast for a shorter period or to only fast from food, while drinking water. You may even diminish it so much as to skip only a meal or two, or at least not eat between meals and/or restrict your consumption to a limited selection of food and/or drink. This is not an exhaustive list of options, but be cautious of diminishing the fast so dramatically that it is hardly a meaningful effort or sacrifice (i.e. when it becomes nearly as much an indulgence as it is a discipline.)

There are many other types of fasts, such as a juice fast, which entails consuming exclusively juice during the dedicated period. These other types will not be considered herein.

A Special note for coffee drinkers:

It is common for coffee drinkers to experience withdrawal symptoms from a sudden cessation of caffeine when fasting. Moderate to severe headaches may result, which may distract the faster from the focus of the fast. Many coffee drinkers begin slowly weaning off coffee several days prior to starting the fast. In some severe cases, they will choose to conduct a diminished fast, where coffee is not entirely refrained from during their fast.

WHO CAN FAST?

Basically, any healthy adult may fast. It is not uncommon for young teenagers to choose to fast.

If you have particular health problems, you may need to seek the advice of a qualified physician, preferably one that recognizes the healthful benefits of fasting. If your condition prevents you from conducting a full fast, you might be able to modify it depending on your physician's advice (ref to the *diminished* fast in the above section). Certain persons are generally advised to avoid fasting such as those who are diabetic or pregnant. Seek your physician's advice if you have any concerns.

WHY FAST?

Speaking generally, we are to fast for the primary purpose of God's will being done, whether within an internal-personal or external-intercessory focus. We are promoting the Kingdom of God, the gospel, conversion, protection or perfecting of the saints and holy intercession on behalf of others, etc. If the fast is conducted for personal holiness, we are seeking his will to be done in our lives by humbling ourselves, particularly the flesh. Fasting in this context is reaching towards total personal surrender and being a living sacrifice to God (Rom. 12:1, Ja. 4:7). We are actively rejecting any claims of supremacy over our lives by our carnal natures and establishing God's legitimate claim over us, so that "the way of the Spirit" is supreme within us. Fasting helps us to become more open to receiving and following God's revelation as it lowers the carnal *noise* and impediments that all too often distract us and interfere with our hearing and submitting to God's Spirit.

The list of things to fast for is unlimited; however, it is to be always for a godly purpose. Fasting is not for getting God to grant us some vain or selfish desire. However, it is fine to fast for personal health purposes or protection. The Bible supports such a concept (2 Sa. 12:16, 22, Ps. 35:13; Ezra 8:21-23; Est. 4:3, 16) and such may be within the will of God. Healings can strengthen us, encourage and better enable us to serve God's purpose better.

The "target" of your fast may be just about anyone.

- The target may be ourselves, intercession on behalf of other individuals or groups, various institutions, churches, church leaders, ministries, society, government leaders, Christians, or those lost, etc.
- It may be for resolving a wide range of circumstances existing in our personal lives or those of others, circumstances within our families, churches, society, friends, enemies; circumstances that may be local, national, or international.

The specific purposes one might fast are countless, but below is a short list of considerations.

- It may be for specific spiritual giftings or fruit, such as developing more faith, love, wisdom, courage, clearer vision, self-control or understanding, etc.
- We may fast for the purpose of processing grief and sharing our heartbreak with God.
- It may be for protection or for healing others or us.
- Remember, it is loving and spiritual to fast on behalf of others' needs. If it is spiritual to fast for others' needs, it is therefore, not carnal nor against God's will to fast for such when they apply to our own personal needs. Just be on guard against the spirit of selfishness when praying for personal needs. When Jesus prayed that if it were possible to remove a burden, it was not selfish because he more greatly desired his Father's will to be done (Mk. 14:36). Thus, it was proper *self-compassion*, not selfishness. If we lack proper self-compassion, it is unlikely that we will be able to have proper compassion for others.
- The Bible is filled with instances where confession, repentance, mercy and forgiveness were the main themes of the fast (Neh. 1:4-11; 9:1-2f)
- The key is that we are doing so to fulfill the will of God.

Do NOT fast for the below reasons:

- We should never have a wrong spirit of *entitlement*, as if God was supposed to morph into our 'go-far'. It is not for "twisting God's arm" to satisfy some selfish carnal desire. - In all things, "God's will be done" –

- Spiritual fasting is not for the purpose of losing weight. Many health experts warn that fasting for this purpose may backfire.
- We must avoid legalistic tendencies when fasting. It is not to break our old fasting record; not to match the number of days Jesus or Moses fasted; not to gain bragging rights or impress others or the self with how disciplined we are. It is not a *competition* with anyone. We must be on guard against legalism and self-righteousness. It is not for vainglory (Mt. 6:16).

If we are part of a *group-fast*, there should be a clear consensus and precise understanding for what purpose the fast is being held. – Exactly what are we asking of God?

WHERE TO FAST (i.e. the environment):

The ideal environment is one that is conducive to meditation, prayer and Bible study. For an effective fast, minimizing interruptions is important. Some are able to go to a secluded camp or retreat. Most fasts however are conducted at home. Although it may not always be possible to find the ideal environment in which to fast, there may be many things we can do to make the most of our situations. We may strategically plan to fast when the home is least active. We may be able to anticipate and prepare for the needs of the household in such a way that there is less need for interruptions during the fast. If we have a spouse, solicit his/her aid in minimizing interruptions. Children that are at the toddler age and older, with a spouse's aid ought to be able to substantially accommodate meaningful periods of privacy. Perhaps a *prayer-walk* will help. This does not mean we have to neglect our duties, but try to accommodate the purpose of the fast as much as reasonable within our circumstances. Do the best with what we have and ask God to influence the results.

WHEN TO FAST:

We might consider which periods may be best for minimizing interruptions. There is no hard and fast rule for this. In the Old Testament, there was one required annual fast during the Feast of Atonement (Lev. 23:27; cf. with Ezra. 8:21 & Is. 58:5). During the Exilic period, the Jews habitually fasted during certain other months (Zec. 7:5; 8:19). The NT Christians fasted during certain crises or when the church (and its leadership) had important decisions to make (Acts 13:2), preceding consecrations and for God's blessings preceding various missionary ministries (Acts 13:3, 14:23). John the Baptist and his disciples fasted regularly and Jesus stated that after he departed, his disciples later would also likewise fast (Lk. 5:30 – 35). Jesus fasted before a major trial (Mt. 4:2). The NT shows that fasting was anticipated and expected of its membership (I Co. 7:5). The NT shows that fasting is needful in order to develop mature faith and that we should be seeking such full Christian maturity (cf. Mt. 17:20-21; Mk. 9:28-29; with Heb. 3:21; Ja. 1:4). Some times the church or civil government may call a fast for a particular purpose for us to participate in (Jer. 36:7-9).

Seek God's guidance on fasting and particularly on when and how frequently to fast. Study the subject within our bibles. He will help us recognize when we should make plans to fast, but we also must be open to hear his call. Again, it is impossible to cover this adequately within this short tract, which will thus be augmented by further instruction and training.

HOW TO FAST:

Communion with God is the focus of spiritual fasting. If all we did was to go without food, than all we have accomplished was experiencing hunger for physical sustenance. Spiritual fasting should *always* be accompanied by prayer and meditation and very often by Bible study or some other inspirational messages (sermons, music or messages on tapes, CDs, DVD, printed, etc.). Since the topic of this tract is fasting, rather than its accompanying elements of prayer, meditation, and study, etc., and also since *how to* have a successful spiritual fast is the more profound aspect of fasting, we will cover this aspect more extensively through pastoral guided discussion and instruction.

We should have a bold confidence in the access we gain to God through Christ. His death and resurrection are powerful markers that we are so important to God and that we will be heard. Approach God in a humble Spirit, acknowledging our own sinfulness and smallness, yet in confidence in the power of Jesus' redemption and advocacy (Eph. 2:18; 2 Cor. 3:4-5; 1 Jn. 2:1). Jesus' is real, his power is real, thus, our access to the Father through Jesus is real.

THINGS TO EXPECT:

If you are not very experienced with fasting, it can be challenging for the first time. You may find your thoughts a bit obsessed with food for a while. This often dissipates after the first 12 hours, but your experience may vary. Don't worry. No normal healthy adult is going to perish simply because of a day or two without food or water (unless in some very life-threatening, extreme environment).

Each fast should be a learning and growing experience, both spiritually as well as on how to conduct the physical aspects of the fast better. You will not necessarily always receive all that you have asked for before the fast had ended. You might not even recognize God's answer to your requests when he grants it. Do not become confused. A fast does not remove the sovereignty of God, reducing him into your personal genie. This is for God's will to be done, not your will. If you have done an honest spiritual fast, something has changed. There is a meaningful difference even if it is currently imperceptible to you. God did hear and did respond according to his perfect, holy, omniscient, all wise and patient will. You must not be the brat at the candy counter demanding God to indulge your requests as if he should relinquish parental authority to the child. You remain the child. You should become a more matured child of God upon completing the fast and better able to recognize his Lordship and will as being worthy of receiving your full acceptance and complete submission.

HOW TO BREAK THE FAST:

You should conduct the fast-breaking meal with a special dignity. One in which you express thankfulness for all of God's blessings, his accessibility and for his having heard you. You should also have an increased appreciation for his daily sustenance. The opposite example was provided by ancient Israel and many were punished for it (Nu. 11:33-34).

To end your fast in a healthful manner, you may wish to avoid *shocking* your digestive system and blood sugar level. Be cautious of consuming things that are overly greasy, difficult to digest, (such as onions, hot/spicy sauces, pork, sausages, sugary soda, caffeine, and highly carbonated substances) and the amounts of certain foods, such as certain carbohydrates (such as pasta and non-whole grain breads, or too much fruit) that may so quickly convert to glucose in your blood system. However, moderate amounts, particular of fruit, may be quite beneficial. This is a greater concern for those with sensitive health or digestion conditions. Often a small amount of fruit, followed by a light nourishing soup is a nice way to break your fast. Eating smaller portions more frequently may also be advisable for the first six hours or so. Also, be more attentive to not overeat or eat too hurriedly upon the breaking of your fast to avoid cramps. These are only guidelines. Every person is different. This is especially so when considering you may have been brought up on different dietary practices, which your "body-intelligence"

has adapted to and responds differently than others. Your own experience will better help you determine your fast-breaking preferences. You do not want the fast-breaking practice to become a legalistic regimen of restrictions. It should usually be done in a thoughtful spirit of rejoicing and celebration, although there may be special situations such as grieving, where a different temperament is appropriate.

CLOSING:

“There is power in a properly conducted fast. Conversely, there is spiritual anemic deficiencies where prayer is lacking or where such is not augmented by some regimen of fasting. The more hostile your thoughts are to the idea of fasting may provide a barometer to just how averse you are to humbling the flesh to the rule of Christ and how much you need to begin a regimen of fasting” (Refer to my article: *Fasting – It’s Not Just For Others*, in the *Call to Prayer* series, 9/3/06). Let us therefore, seek God with our whole heart, mind, soul and strength without holding back (Mk. 12:30).