

Why Fasting Is Relevant for Today

By Dave and Kim Butts

Perhaps no spiritual discipline today is as much misunderstood as fasting. Why to fast, how to fast, when to fast, how long to fast, what type of fast, SHOULD I fast, etc.

In simplest terms, fasting means to abstain from food for a period of time for a spiritual purpose or goal.

As a Christian, obviously the first question we need to ask is, "What does Jesus say about this?" It is obvious in Scripture that Jesus fasted, but because He did, does that mean that we ought to as well?

In Matthew 6, Jesus discusses three specific spiritual activities and gives instructions as to how the disciples should perform these activities in a way that is pleasing to God. His language indicates that He assumes the disciples would already be doing these three things: "When you give...when you pray...when you fast..." This is an interesting combination. There is not a believer who would argue that God does not expect us to pray or to give, but when we talk about fasting, all sorts of arguments begin to be put forth as to why fasting isn't for today.

For many in this busy, self-centered world, fasting is just not an option, or even a consideration, even though we see numerous references to fasting throughout the Scriptures: (Joel 1:14-15, Nehemiah 1:4, Daniel 9:3, Luke 2:37, Acts 13:3 to name only a few).

Because Jesus modeled the practice of fasting (Matthew 4:1-2), and took the time to instruct His disciples in the discipline,

it should be a pretty strong indication that He still desires us to fast today.

Although not everyone is called to the same levels of fasting, we believe Scripture indicates that all Christians who seek to grow and mature should remain sensitive to the leading of the Holy Spirit in this area. **(Note: Fasting is never intended to be done out of guilt, or in cases where it is medically unsafe. If you are unable to fast from food because of medical reasons, please consider fasting from something that would be a sacrifice for you – TV watching, for example. Set aside that time to seek the Lord instead).**

Ronnie Floyd, in his excellent book, *The Power of Prayer and Fasting*, has, perhaps one of the most concise and understandable exhortations to fast: “God’s gateway to supernatural power can become ours when we come to our heavenly Father with contrite hearts and obedient spirits in fasting and prayer.” He goes on to say, “One purpose of prayer and fasting is to bring our hearts to a place of being filled with a sacrificial love that results in godly attitudes in our lives. True fasting will draw us closer to God and His purposes.”

We see three main purposes in Scripture for fasting.

- It allows us to come before God in humility and repentance.
- It helps us to focus on God, and to become sensitive to the leading of the Holy Spirit.
- It empowers us through God for service.

God’s Word tells us that God “opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble” (James 4:6). How can we walk in humility before our God? By recognizing that humility puts us in a position to be able to receive from Him. As individuals, families, churches, communities and nations, we are in desperate need of a fresh touch from God...of hearing His voice instead of the clamor around us! We live in a society of “I’ll

do it myself" mentality. However, there always comes a time when "self" just can't do it anymore. Eventually, we realize that we are not God, but we do NEED Him.

That was the situation in Judah during Jehoshaphat's day. An army from several nations was on the march against them. Outnumbered and in despair, they turned to God and fasted and prayed. Their fasting put them in a place of humility where they could pray the right prayer. Jehoshaphat's prayer, after they had fasted, was not a prayer asking God to bless their efforts or to do what they wanted Him to do. Instead, it was an astonishing prayer of humility in which he said, "O Lord, we do not know what to do, but our eyes are upon you" (2 Chronicles 20:2-12). Fasting brings us to a proper place of humility before God where we are able to pray such a prayer of faith and dependence.

Fasting also helps us to focus ourselves upon God and the leading of His Holy Spirit. Doing without food for a period of prayer helps us to put away distractions and to turn to Jesus. We are living in a day in which Jesus is calling His Church back into an intimate relationship with Himself – a time when we come directly to Him and get to know Him deeply.

Christian author, Steve Hawthorne, recently described a seven day fast he experienced as he was seeking direction for his ministry. At the end of the fast, a friend asked him if he had received the guidance he was seeking. Steve replied, "Probably not...but I do know the Guide better now." Where is your focus?

Fasting is also a way for us to be empowered by God for service. There seems to be a release of spiritual power when fasting and prayer are combined. The great men and women of God down through the ages have come to God in prayer and fasting to receive power for greater ministry. Jesus Himself launched His ministry after a forty day fast. Esther went to the king for mercy and salvation for Israel. It was her day of greatness and ministry to God's people, but it happened after

a three day fast undertaken by herself and many others.

Our ability to be empowered by God for service, relates back to the first two points. When we humble ourselves and draw near to the Lord through fasting and prayer, then we are ready to receive power to be used in God's service in an even greater way than ever before. Having learned humility and intimacy, we can be entrusted with greater power because we realize that it is not our doing, but God working in and through us.

God desires to raise up a people who will surrender their lives to be used by Him in these critical days. Without God's people being set ablaze in prayer and fasting, the revival He longs to send cannot happen. Evil will continue to pervade the earth, and Christians will continue to watch weakly, wishing there was something they could do.

We believe that fasting is part of God's plan for His children. Ronnie Floyd says, "Unless we surrender completely to God's plan, we are destined to drift in a sea of disappointment, disillusionment, and depression. We are in constant need of supernatural power." Elmer Towns has said, "If every Christian fasted, the results could shake our society like a windstorm bending a sapling. Christians would demonstrate that they live differently, that their faith is imperative, that the Almighty works in their daily lives."

Reading about fasting is not enough. Seek God to know what He is saying to you personally about this vital spiritual discipline. How will you respond?

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