

Introduction:

1. In a country where the landscape is decorated with golden arches and dotted with pizza palaces, it seems somewhat out of place to talk about fasting.
 - a. We love to eat. We love to eat out. We love to order out and eat in. And, essentially, fasting is about not eating—at least not eating for a period of time. That's how it's presented in the Bible.
 - b. Even though it is a Bible topic, fasting is rarely discussed and its practice even more rare.
2. Fasting touches on something that is deeply personal with all of us—food.
 - a. Many people are very dependent upon food—not just for nourishment. Some turn to food to deal with anxiety, depression or boredom. And some people, rather than eating to live, live to eat. Food is their entertainment and what they enjoy most in life.
 - b. You can see, then, that food is indeed something very personal to all of us. That being the case, we might find our study to be a bit controversial. We will try to avoid that.

The Lesson:**I. What is fasting?**

- A. In addressing any topic, it is good to define terms. So, what is it?
 1. The Hebrew word used in the Old Testament (*tsoom*) means to cover the mouth.
 2. The Greek word used in the New Testament (*nesteuo*) means to abstain from food.
 3. In practice, fasting meant to eat sparingly or abstain altogether from food or drink for a period of time, usually a day. It could also mean not eating a particular kind of food (like meat) for a period of time. Our term “breakfast” means to break a fast. We fast at night.
- B. Nearly every great name in the Bible is associated with fasting at one time or another.
 1. In the Old Testament, Moses, David, Elijah, Esther and Daniel are portrayed as fasting.
 2. In the New Testament, Anna the prophetess, Paul, Cornelius and Jesus practiced fasting.
 3. Fasting is found in the Lord's teaching in the Sermon on the Mount; it is found numerous times in the book of Acts. Yet, strangely, it is found only three times in the epistles and is never found there as a command.
 4. In fact, we would be hard pressed to ever find fasting as a command to Christians anywhere in the New Testament. This, however, does not mean it is of no importance. To the contrary, people of God often fasted because it was so important to them.
- C. If it was so important, then why is there so little regard for it today?
 1. First, fasting picked up a bad reputation as a result of the excessive ascetic practices of the Middle Ages. In some monasteries it was practiced as a punishment of the body.
 2. Second, some conclude it was only a Jewish custom and has no value in the gospel age.
 3. Third, because of its abuse by *real* health nuts today, most people find it objectionable. Claims are made that people who fast regularly can live 150 years with no illnesses and with tremendous vitality and strength. That's what I mean by *real* health nuts when they speak of the “miracle of fasting.” Fasting is not miraculous and doesn't guarantee long life.
 4. Maybe it is not practiced much today because we don't do much teaching on it.

II. Fasting in the Old Testament.

- A. The Day of Atonement was observed by fasting, Leviticus 16:29-31.
 1. Though the term “fasting” is not found in this text, the phrase “You shall afflict your souls” was understood to be fasting (see Acts 27:9).
 2. This appears to be the only time fasting was actually commanded in the Law.
 3. This text also tells us something about the purpose of fasting on this day. It was to have an effect on the soul, not necessarily on the body. The goal of this affliction was a chastening of the soul, not necessarily on the body. The goal of this affliction was a chastening of the soul, Psalms 69:10. While the body abstains from food and other pleasures, the mind (the soul) was to be grieved because of the sins that had been committed.
- B. There are numerous other occasions of fasting. People often fasted (even though it was not commanded) in times of distress and difficulty.
 1. Israel fasted during the war with the Philistines, 1 Samuel 7:6; an appeal for God's favor.
 2. David fasted for his son when he was sick, 2 Samuel 12:16; an appeal for God's help.
 3. David fasted at Saul and Jonathan's death, 2 Samuel 1:11-12; an expression of grief.

4. Israel fasted in seeking God's forgiveness, [Nehemiah 9:1-2](#); an expression of repentance.
 5. Esther fasted before seeing the king, [Esther 4:16](#); an appeal for God's protection.
 6. There were numerous other occasions where God's people fasted. This is a sampling.
- C. In the examples given we can see something of the purpose of fasting.
1. Sometimes it was the natural expression of grief over the loss of a loved one. Even as we might do today; when someone has died, we often don't feel like eating. That is a fast.
 2. More significant, however, is that most fasting in the Old Testament was for the purpose of afflicting the soul. It was done as an expression of humility before God. It was not done for any health purposes related to the body. It was spiritual in nature.
 3. By humbling themselves, the people believed they would gain God's favor, [Ezra 8:21-23](#).
- D. The normal means of fasting in the Old Testament involved abstaining from all food (but did not include abstaining from water). Fasts may have been of different lengths.
1. Daniel abstained from certain foods for three weeks, [Daniel 10:2-3](#); a partial fast.
 2. The Israelites fasted until sundown in the conflict with the tribe of Benjamin, [Judges 20:26](#).
 3. Moses engaged in a total fast for 40 days, [Exodus 34:28](#); he was miraculously sustained.
- E. The prophet Isaiah attacked the fasting in Israel that had turned into an external show and had become nothing more than ceremonial ritualism, [Isaiah 58:3-4](#). Zechariah also spoke words of condemnation when fasting was done merely to feel sorry for self, [Zechariah 7:5-6](#).

III. Fasting in the New Testament.

- A. Jesus both taught on fasting and practiced fasting.
1. The best known incident is His fasting during forty days in the wilderness, [Luke 4:1-2](#).
 2. Jesus taught on fasting in the Sermon on the Mount, [Matthew 6:16-18](#). He said "When you fast..." While Christians are not commanded to fast, this assumes that Christians would, on some occasions, practice fasting. When it is done, it must not be for a show. It is an expression of humility toward God and—like prayers and alms—is a private matter.
 3. John's disciples wanted to know why Jesus' disciples did not fast, [Matthew 9:14-15](#). There would be a time when they would fast, but it is inappropriate to fast when the occasion does not call for it.
- B. Fasting among Christians in the New Testament.
1. The disciples at Antioch fasted when sending Paul and Barnabas out to preach, [Acts 13:1-3](#). Fasting was combined with their prayers, and hoped to gain God's favor.
 2. As elders were appointed in the churches that Paul established, prayer and fasting accompanied the ordination of those elders, [Acts 14:23](#). The solemnity of the occasion moved them to fast in association with these appointments. Though it is not commanded, it would not be inappropriate for us to do the same.
 3. Fasting was a mark of Paul's ministry, [2 Corinthians 6:4-5; 11:23-28](#). Note in verse 27 that fasting is mentioned separately from hunger. Paul might have been hungry because he had no food; but there were also times when he chose to abstain from food. He did this in order that God might bless his work.
- C. The question remains: Should Christians fast today?
1. While there is no express command to fast, there are times when it is proper and fitting.
 2. Sometimes we do it naturally without even thinking. We may grieve because someone has died, or we may worry about a sick child, and cannot eat. This is a natural fast and ought to be accompanied by prayer.
 3. We might find ourselves fasting because we recognize a special need for God's help. That is certainly consistent with cases we find in both Old and New Testaments. In times of temptation, crisis, or in making weighty decisions, we might fast and seek God.

Conclusion:

1. When and if we fast, do not do it to be seen of men, nor as a ritual. It must be done with a humble heart, not done to show that you are more spiritual than others. And it is not necessary to fast for forty days. A fast may simply involve missing one meal or even delaying a meal. If you choose to fast, don't do it just because you have never done it as a break in routine. Do it unto the Lord. You might begin your morning by delaying breakfast until after you have prayed and read the Bible.
2. All that we do must be done unto the Lord and for His glory, [1 Corinthians 10:31](#). Do all to His glory...even obedience to the gospel through faith, repentance and baptism.