

WEDNESDAY BIBLE FELLOWSHIP

Christ Church, Crouch End Hill

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No: 58a & 58b

FASTING IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

Introduction

We shall now examine "Fasting In The New Testament", as taught and exemplified by: a. Jesus, b. His church c. The apostle Paul ...in an effort to determine whether Christians can or should fast today!

We begin by considering...

I. Fasting in the Life of Jesus

A. Jesus fasted forty days in the wilderness -

Matthew 4:1-9; Luke 4:1-2

- What can you say about Jesus' fasting; (Why, for how long, nature, etc.
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B. Jesus taught on fasting in his "Sermon on the Mount"

Read- **Matthew 6:16-18**

- What do you understand by the use of "when", not "if"; in **Matthew 6;16?**
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- When done properly what does God do to the person fasting?

- Prayer and giving of alms are acts of righteousness done to please the Father. In what way is prayer similar to these acts?

- C. When questioned by John's disciples in Matthew 9:14-17 (**Mark 2:18-20; Luke 5:33-39**), what response did Jesus give with respect to fasting?

The Combined Power of Prayer and Fasting

- In Matthew 17:14-21 (**Mark 9:14-29**) what is Jesus' teaching concerning fasting and prayer?

[Now let's take a look at...]

II. Fasting in the Lord's Church

The church at Antioch - Acts 13:1-3

They were fasting as a group while ministering to the Lord and they fasted and prayed in preparation to sending out Barnabas and Saul.

- What can we learn from this passage which could be a commendable practice in 21st century Church?
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Fasting in Paul's ministry

Fasting was part of the ministry of the apostle Paul. Besides the fact that he fasted with many churches (**Acts 14:21-23**) for the task of appointing elders, he went on fasting as an individual as a mark of his ministry and of his good standing as a minister of Christ! (**2 Corinthians 11:27**).

Fasting by couples in marital relationship

Paul also taught that the only time husbands and wives may deprive one another sexually is when by consent they devote themselves to fasting and prayer for a specific period of time (**1 Corinthians 7:5**).

Other Examples of Fasting

Though not actually Christians at the time, we also have other examples of those who fasted and were blessed by God...

- a. Anna - **Lk 2:36-38**
- b. Saul - **Ac 9:9**
- c. Cornelius - **Ac 10:30-31**

Conclusion

As a summary, then, here is what we have seen in this study:

- a. That our Lord fasted in time of temptation.
- b. That He taught His disciples about fasting on several occasions.
- c. That He foretold of a time in which His disciples would fast.
- d. That there are times when the combination of fasting and prayer might be more efficacious than prayer alone.
- e. That the early church fasted in their service to the Lord.
- f. That Paul regarded fasting as a mark of his ministry.
- g. That prayer and fasting often go hand in hand, utilized whenever there was a strong desire for God's blessing and guidance.

FASTING BY CHRISTIANS TODAY

INTRODUCTION

1. Our two previous lessons sought to educate us on the subject of fasting as found in the Old and New Testaments.
2. In this final lesson, we shall directly address the questions that brought up this subject:

"Should Christians fast today, and if so, why? When should they do it, and how?"

[Starting with the first of these questions...]

I. SHOULD CHRISTIANS FAST TODAY?

A. YES! BECAUSE OF THE TEACHINGS OF JESUS...

1. He assumed his disciples would fast ("when," not "if") -
Mt 6:16-17
2. He said they would fast when He was gone - **Mt 9:14-15**
3. He taught His disciples:
 - a. How to fast so as to incur God's favour - **Mt 6:16-18**
 - b. That when done properly, fasting WOULD incur God's good favour - **Mt 6:18b**
 - c. That fasting should be done only when the occasion properly calls for it - **Mt 9:14-17**
 - d. That there would be occasions when prayer joined with fasting might be needed - **Mt 17:20-21**

B. YES! BECAUSE WE HAVE EXAMPLES OF THE CHURCH FASTING...

1. The brethren at Antioch - **Acts 13:1-3**
 - a. Fasting in their service to Lord.
 - b. Fasting and praying when they send out Paul and Barnabas on their missionary journey.
2. The churches in Galatia - **Acts 14:21-23**
 - a. There was fasting in every church.
 - b. When appointing elders to watch over the flock.

C. YES! BECAUSE PAUL FASTED AS A MINISTER OF CHRIST...

1. He listed fasting among those things which proved him as a minister of Jesus Christ - **2Co 11:23-28**
2. Are we not commanded to imitate him, even as he imitated Christ? - **1Co 11:1** (and they both fasted in their service to God!)

[At the very least, we can say that it would be appropriate for Christians to fast today. Unless there are medical reasons not to fast, we have very good examples to motivate us to utilize fasting in our service to the Lord!

But to ensure that we fast for the right reason, consider our next question...]

II. WHY SHOULD CHRISTIANS FAST?

A. PEOPLE FAST TODAY FOR VARIOUS REASONS

1. Some purposefully, for health reasons.
 2. Some without thinking, in times of grief and sorrow.
 3. Others, in an effort to gain some kind of self-control.
- But these are not the reasons Christian should fast in their service to God - (cf. **Col 2:20-23**).

B. CHRISTIANS SHOULD FAST, FOR THERE ARE TIMES WHEN WE ARE IN NEED OF DIVINE HELP.

1. This is consistent with the majority of fasting in the O.T.; they fasted...
 - a. In times of war or at the threat of it (Israel).
 - b. When loved ones were sick (David).
 - c. When seeking God's forgiveness (Ahab, Daniel).
 - d. When seeking God's protection (Ezra).
2. This is consistent with the examples of fasting in the N.T.; they fasted...
 - a. When dealing with temptations (Jesus).
 - b. When serving the Lord (Antioch).
 - c. When beginning a work for the Lord (Antioch).
 - d. When selecting and appointing elders (Galatia).

3. Such fasting should be done in conjunction with prayer
 - a. For fasting, when done properly...
 - 1) Humbles the soul - **Ps 35:13**
 - 2) Chastens the soul - **Ps 69:10**
 - b. And the prayers of a humble person are more likely to be heard! - (cf. **Ezra 8:21-23**)

If fasting does have a part in the Christian life, then let's look more closely at...

III. WHEN SHOULD CHRISTIANS FAST?

A. WHENEVER OCCASIONS REQUIRING DIVINE HELP SHOULD ARISE...

1. These may be occasions on an individual level
 - a. When faced with difficult temptations
 - b. When faced with the serious illness of a loved one
2. These occasions might be on a congregational level
 - a. As when appointing elders
 - b. As when sending out missionaries

B. WHATEVER OCCASIONS CALL FOR PERSISTENT PRAYERS MIGHT CALL FOR FASTING JOINED WITH PRAYER...

1. Are we not taught that God is more likely to answer our prayers if we are persistent? - cf. **Lk 18:1-8**
2. And also if we fast in the proper manner? - **Mt 6:17-18**

[So whenever there is a matter requiring much prayer, fasting in conjunction with prayer would seem appropriate.]

Finally, let's take a look at...]

IV. HOW SHOULD CHRISTIANS FAST?

A. NOT TO BE SEEN OF MEN...

1. Cf. **Mt 6:16-18**
2. Whether fasting as individuals or with others, it is⁷ important that we not do it for "show".

B. NOT AS SOME REGULAR RITUAL...

1. Cf. **Mt 9:14-17**
2. It should be done only when the occasion calls for it
3. Such as situations where you would be spending much time in Prayer.

C. NOT WITHOUT TRUE REPENTANCE...

1. Cf. **Isa 58:3-9**
2. All the praying, all the fasting, is of no avail if not accompanied with penitent obedience.

D. SOME PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS...

1. Don't go out and fast just because it sounds like a neat thing to do.
 - a. Take the subject seriously.
 - b. Fast only when the occasion is a serious one.
 - c. One in which you desperately desire God's help
2. If you have never fasted before...
 - a. Start slow, fasting only for brief periods of time.
 - b. End slow, gradually breaking your fast with fresh fruits and vegetables in small amounts.
3. Fast when you have time to spend in prayerful meditation
 - a. Remember the purpose for fasting.
 - b. To humble oneself in God's sight.
 - c. To seek favourable answer to prayer for some important plea.

CONCLUSION

1. There is probably much more that could be said on the subject of fasting.
2. But I hope that this is enough to stimulate our thinking on a subject which has often been neglected in both study and practice.
3. As with any subject, the Word of God is the last word, and I hope that this study has shed some light on what His Word says on the subject of fasting.