

The Pursuit

Fasting and Solitude

1. Fasting in the life of Jesus

Matt 3:13-4:4 -- Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John. But John tried to deter him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" Jesus replied, "Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness." Then John consented. As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and lighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased." Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil. After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. The tempter came to him and said, "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread." Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'

Jesus goes from miraculous affirmation to desert isolation. Why?

Deut. 8:2-3 -- Remember how the LORD your God led you all the way in the desert these forty years, to humble you and to test you in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commands. He humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your fathers had known, to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD.

John Piper says of Jesus' time in the desert:

"It was a voluntary act of identification with the people of God in their wilderness deprivation and trial. Jesus was saying in effect, "I have been sent to lead the people of God out of the bondage of sin into the Promised Land of salvation. To do this I must be one of them. That is why I was born. That is why I was baptized. Therefore I will take on the testing that they experienced. I will represent them in the wilderness and allow my heart to be probed with fasting to see where my allegiance is, and who is my God. And, with the Spirit's help, I will triumph through this fasting. I will overcome the devil and lead all who trust me into the Promised land of eternal glory."

Can believers like you and I really face the hazards of life and ministry without walking with Jesus through the wilderness of fasting?

2. What is fasting?

- Fasting is a Christian's voluntary abstinence from food for spiritual purposes.
- Turning food-centered time into God-centered time.
- Fasting is a clear expression to God and to yourself of your zeal for him.

John Piper:

"Fasting is a periodic -- and sometimes decisive -- declaration that we would rather feast at God's table in the kingdom of heaven than feed on the finest delicacies of this world."

3. A pervasive biblical practice

- Old Testament -- Moses, Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah, David, the nation of Israel.
- New Testament -- Paul, Barnabas, the prophets and teachers of the church in Antioch.
- Church History -- Ignatius, Augustine, Martin Luther, John Calvin, Jonathan Edwards, Charles Spurgeon, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, C.S. Lewis

4. How's your hunger?

John Piper:

Many small acts of preferring fellowship with God above food can form a habit of communication and contentment that makes one ready for the ultimate sacrifice. This is one way that fasting serves all our acts of love to God. It keeps the preferring faculty on alert and sharp. It does not let the issue rest. It forces us to ask repeatedly: do I really hunger for God? Do I miss him? Do I long for him? Or have I begun to be content with his gifts?

Fasting is an intensifier of spiritual desire.

Fasting focuses our attention on the giver, not the gifts.

5. Fasting is not a command

- A biblical practice.
- A privilege of those who follow Christ.
- Not the source of our acceptance before God.

6. Jesus expected that his followers would fast

Matt. 6:16-17 -- When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face,

Matt. 9:14-15 -- Then John's disciples came and asked him, "How is it that we and the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?" Jesus answered, "How can the guests of the bridegroom mourn while he is with them? The time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them; then they will fast."

7. Reasons for fasting

- Fasting strengthens prayer:

Jer. 29:12-13 -- "Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me *with all your heart*."

Fasting is an expression of wholehearted zeal, as we find in the book of Joel:

Joel 2:12 -- "Even now, declares the Lord, return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning."

God's looking for fervent searching ... a searching greatly aided by fasting.

Dan. 9:3 --So I turned to the Lord God and pleaded with him in prayer and petition, in fasting, and in sackcloth and ashes.

- Fasting humbles our souls:

Psalms 35:13 -- Yet when they were ill, I put on sackcloth and humbled myself with fasting.

Deut. 8:2-3 -- Remember how the LORD your God led you all the way in the desert these forty years, to humble you and to test you in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commands.

- Fasting aids us in seeking guidance and being prepared for challenging tasks:

Before the church sent out Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey, they fasted and prayed: Acts 13:1-3 -- In the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen (who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch) and Saul. While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off.

Paul and Barnabas must have benefited from the approach, because they soon repeated it.

Acts 14:23 -- Paul and Barnabas appointed elders for them in each church and, with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord, in whom they had put their trust.

Jesus was strengthened by fasting. In Luke's gospel, it tells us that Jesus went into the desert LED by the Spirit, and came out of the desert IN THE POWER OF the Spirit.

Do you need God's guidance? Need his empowering grace? Considering fasting and prayer.

- Fasting sensitizes us to poverty and injustice:

Isaiah 58:6-10 -- "Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter— when you see the naked, to clothe him, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?"

8. What fasting is NOT:

- Doesn't give you any merit before God.
- Is not a hunger strike.
- Not an opportunity for you to "show off" spiritually.

Matt. 6:16-18

When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to men that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

There is a reward for fasting. But only when done in secret. Be discrete.

9. Types of fasting

- The Normal Fast -- excludes food, but includes water ... maybe fruit juices.
- The Partial Fast -- also called the Daniel Fast. It's a limitation of the normal food you eat.
Daniel 10:3 At that time I, Daniel, mourned for three weeks. I ate no choice food; no meat or wine touched my lips; and I used no lotions at all until the three weeks were over.
- The Absolute Fast -- no food or drink of any kind.
- The Corporate Fast -- group of individuals fasting together.

10. Practical Guidelines

- Start small.
- Make prayer a priority.
- Plan to fast.

SOLITUDE

1. Definition

Solitude is the spiritual discipline of voluntarily and temporarily withdrawing to privacy for spiritual purposes.

Western culture conditions us to be comfortable with noise and crowds, not with silence and solitude.

2. Reasons for silence and solitude

- Following in the footsteps of Jesus:

Matthew 14:23 -- After he had dismissed them, he went up on a mountainside by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone.

He sent both the seeking multitudes and his disciples away so he could be alone with the Father.

Mark 1:35 -- Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed.

Luke 4:42 -- At daybreak Jesus went out to a solitary place. The people were looking for him and when they came to where he was, they tried to keep him from leaving them.

- To seek the will of God:

Luke 6:12-13 -- One of those days Jesus went out to a mountainside to pray, and spent the night praying to God. When morning came, he called his disciples to him and chose twelve of them, whom he also designated apostles:

Solitude isn't always necessary or possible, but there are times to eliminate the voices of the world in order to hear undistracted the voice of God.

3. Practical suggestions

- Chose a time
- Chose a place
- Start small
- Dedicate the time to the Lord
- Be creative

SUMMARY

"Christ is my righteousness. Christ is my holiness. Therefore, becoming holy is not primarily a matter of pursuing holiness but primarily a matter of pursuing Christ. Rather, becoming holy is a matter of receiving his pursuit of me. And any righteousness I pursue that doesn't have Jesus in the crosshairs of my effort -- or, again rather, having myself in the crosshairs of *his* effort -- is self-righteousness." -- Jared Wilson

Pursue Christ. Receive his pursuit of you. Let's receive fasting and solitude for what they are. Not burdens, but gifts of equipping grace from a loving Father to his children.