

# Fasting

John Piper

## Fasting Defined

First of all, let's define fasting. Here is a generally accepted definition of fasting among Christians over the centuries. Fasting is a temporary renunciation of something that is in itself good, like food, in order to intensify our expression of need for something greater — namely, God and his work in our lives.

Now, defined like that, fasting is not explicitly commanded in the Bible for Christians. Fasting doesn't have the same place in Christianity that it does, for example, in Islam. The fasting that Muslims do during the month of Ramadan in Islam is a requirement of every real Muslim. You can't really claim to be a Muslim if you say, "I am just not going to do Ramadan."

Fasting doesn't have that kind of place in Christianity. Even though there is no command to fast in the New Testament, nevertheless there are indications that it was normal and that Jesus expected it would happen among his followers.

## Secret to Fasting

For example, in Matthew 6:16–18, Jesus says, "When you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you."

So, several things stand out in that passage. One is that Jesus says, "When you fast" — not "If you fast." That is what I mean when I say it seems that he expects that his followers will be fasting.

Even more clear in this passage is that Jesus insisted that our fasting not be for the sake of impressing other people. In fact, we should go out of our way, he says, as much as possible — washing our face, combing our hair — to keep other people from knowing that we are fasting. That gives fasting for Christians a radically Godward focus, and in that sense fasting is a great test and confirmation that God is real to us, since in many situations God is the only person who knows you're fasting. The discipline can't impress anybody, and all it can do is test whether you and God are really having a transaction here.

## Effects of the New Covenant

Another important passage for the meaning of Christian fasting is Matthew 9:14–17. Jesus compares the old, pre-Christian fasting to old wineskins and the fasting that his disciples will be doing as new wine that won't fit into the old wineskins. It blows them up. In other words, there is something new about Christian fasting that sets it apart from Old Testament fasting.

They are not the same thing. Here is what he says:

*“Then the disciples of John came to him [Jesus], saying, “Why do we and the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?” And Jesus said to them, “Can the wedding guests mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them? The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast. No one puts a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old garment, for the patch tears away from the garment, and a worse tear is made. Neither is new wine put into old wineskins. If it is, the skins burst and the wine is spilled and the skins are destroyed. But new wine is put into fresh wineskins, and so both are preserved.”*

Jesus says that his disciples are not fasting while he is with them. He is the Bridegroom present. We don't fast when the Bridegroom is present. When he is gone away, he says (which he has, because he has gone back into heaven), then the disciples will fast.

## **Hungering for Christ**

What that seems to indicate is that Christian fasting is a way of expressing our longing for the Bridegroom, Jesus Christ our King, to return. That is the connection between the fasting and the second coming of Christ.

One of the meanings of Christian fasting is that we are expressing our hunger for the Lord Jesus to come back and to take up his kingship in this world. What sets Christian fasting apart as unique — new wine that can't fit into the old wineskins — is that Christ has already come. The Bridegroom, the King, has already been here. We have seen him and known him. We love him, because we have tasted of his presence. We have already tasted the presence of the kingship of Jesus.

So, Christian fasting is not merely hoping and longing and hungering and aching for something future. It is based on an already — not just a not yet. The King has come. He has died for our sins. He is risen from the dead. He is gone away into heaven.

We already have the down payment in our hearts of his presence and his Spirit, but we long and we hunger for the consummation of the day of his return, his coming and reigning.

So, Christian fasting is unique among all the fasting of the world. It is unique in that it expresses more than longing for Christ or hunger for Christ's presence. It is a hunger that is rooted in — based on — an already present, experienced reality of Christ in history and in our hearts.

## **Expressing Our Neediness**

Let me give one more passage that gets at the meaning of what fasting is for Christians. In Acts 13:1–3, there is this beautiful illustration of how fasting became instrumental in the laying hold of God for the shaping of world-changing ministry. Here is what it says:

Now there were in the church at Antioch prophets and teachers, Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen a lifelong friend of 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." Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off.

So, the leaders of the church were fasting, it seems, in order to express to God their own need and longing and desire with their bodies for God's guidance in missionary breakthroughs. And God responded with an answer that totally transformed the world, because the mission of Barnabas and Saul (or Paul) was one of the most important missionary endeavors in the history of the world. The advancement of the gospel broke into the western Roman Empire, and nothing in the world has ever been the same since that breakthrough.

## **Means to Worship**

Let me summarize the heart of Christian fasting and why we Christians do it. One way to say it is that fasting is the hungry Christian-handmaid of faith. Fasting is not a replacement for faith in Jesus. It is a servant of faith in Jesus.

Fasting is a way of saying with our stomach and our whole body how much we need and want and trust Jesus. It is a way of saying that we are not going to be enslaved by food as the source of our satisfaction. We will use the renunciation of food from time to time to express that Jesus is better than food. Jesus is more needful than food.

Food is good. Let there be no mistake about this. We are not ascetics, in that we deny the goodness of God's creation. Food is good. It is a gift of God, and we glorify God with it in two ways, not just one way. We feast on it with gratitude for God's goodness, and we forfeit food out of hunger for God himself.

When we feast, we gladly taste the emblem of our heavenly food: the Bread of Life, Jesus himself. And when we fast, we say, "I love the reality more than I love the emblem." Both

feasting and fasting are worship for the Christian. Both magnify Christ. Of course, both have their peculiar dangers. The danger of feasting is that we fall in love with the gift, and the danger of fasting is that we belittle the gift and boast in our willpower, our discipline.

At its best, Christian fasting is not a belittling of the good gift of food. It is simply a heartfelt, body-felt exclamation point at the end of the sentence “I love you, God. I need you more than I need food — more than I need life.”