

LESSON NINE

Fasting, Silence, and Solitude ... For the Purpose of Godliness

CENTRAL IDEA

Many of us do not know much about the Discipline of fasting, so we tend to misunderstand and fear it. It's also hard for us to so radically go against the mainstream of culture by fasting. Yet purposeful fasting provides strong benefits in the disciplined pursuit of a Christlike life. It is a discipline that Jesus both taught and practiced. Likewise, the Disciplines of silence and solitude, which Jesus diligently practiced, are foreign to many who have learned to be comfortable only with noise and crowds. Yet these Disciplines contribute much to our spiritual growth and development.

WARM-UP

1. Describe what you think fasting means. Include what you consider to be positive and negative aspects of fasting.
2. Describe what you have learned about fasting from other Christians.
3. Have you ever chosen to temporarily seek privacy for spiritual purposes? If so, describe what it was like.

FASTING ... FOR THE PURPOSE OF GODLINESS

“Christians in a gluttonous, denial-less, self-indulgent society may struggle to accept and to begin the practice of fasting. Few Disciplines go so radically against the flesh and the mainstream of culture as this one. But we cannot overlook its biblical significance. Of course, some people, for medical reasons, cannot fast. But most of us dare not overlook fasting's benefits in the disciplined pursuit of a Christlike life.

Fasting Explained

A biblical definition of fasting is a Christian's voluntary abstinence from food for spiritual purposes. It is *Christian*, for fasting by a non-Christian obtains no eternal value because the Discipline's motives and purposes are to be God-centered. It is *voluntary* in that fasting is not to be coerced. Fasting is more than just the ultimate crash diet for the body; it is abstinence from food for *spiritual* purposes.

The Bible distinguishes between several kinds of fasts.

- A *normal fast* involves abstaining from all food, but not from water.
- A *partial fast* is a limitation of the diet but not abstention from all food.

- An *absolute fast* is the avoidance of all food and liquid, even water.
- The Bible also describes a *supernatural* fast that requires God's supernatural intervention into the bodily processes.
- A *private fast* is what Jesus was speaking of in Matthew 6:16–18 when He says we should fast in a way not to be noticed by others.
- *Congregational fasts* are the type found in Joel 2:15–16 and Acts 13:2.
- The Bible also speaks of *national fasts*. See 2 Chronicles 20:3, Nehemiah 9:1, Esther 4:16, and Jonah 3:5–8.
- There was one *regular fast* that God commanded under the Old Covenant. Every Jew was to fast on the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16:29–31).
- Finally, the Bible mentions *occasional fasts*. These occur on special occasions as the need arises.

Fasting Is Expected

Notice Jesus' words at the beginning of Matthew 6:16–17—"And *when* you fast.... But *when* you fast...." By giving us instructions on what to do and what not to do when we fast, Jesus assumes that we will fast. Plainer still are His words in Matthew 9:14–15—Jesus said that the time would come when His disciples "will fast," and that time is now.

Until Jesus, the Bridegroom of the Church, returns, He expects us to fast. Yet He gives us no command regarding how often or how long we should fast. Just like all other Spiritual Disciplines, fasting is not to be a legalistic routine. It is a privilege and an opportunity to seek God's grace.

Fasting Is to Be Done for a Purpose

Without a purpose, fasting can be a miserable, self-centered experience. Many purposes for fasting are given in Scripture. I've condensed them into ten major categories. Whenever you fast, you should do so for at least one of these purposes. (Notice that *none* of the purposes is to earn God's favor, to impress Him and earn His acceptance. We are made acceptable to God through the work of Christ Jesus, not our work.)

To strengthen prayer. There's something about fasting that sharpens the edge of our intercessions and gives passion to our supplications. So it has frequently been used by the people of God when there is a special urgency about the concerns they lift before the Father. The Bible does not teach that fasting is a kind of spiritual hunger strike that compels God to do our bidding. If we ask for something outside of God's will, fasting does not cause Him to reconsider. Fasting does not change God's hearing so much as it changes our praying.

To seek God's guidance. There is biblical precedent for fasting for the purpose of more clearly discerning the will of God. Fasting does not *ensure* the certainty of receiving clear guidance from God. Rightly practiced, however, it does make us more receptive to the One who loves to guide us.

To express grief. As mentioned in Judges 20:26, the Israelites wept and fasted to express grief for the forty thousand brothers they had lost in battle. Grief caused by events other than a death can also be expressed through fasting. Christians have fasted because of grief for their sins and as a means of expressing grief for sins of others.

To seek deliverance or protection. One of the most common fasts in biblical times was a fast to seek salvation from enemies or circumstances. Fasting, rather than fleshly efforts, should be one of our first defenses against persecution because of our faith.

To express repentance and the return to God. Fasting for this purpose is similar to fasting for the purpose of expressing grief for sin. But as repentance is a change of mind resulting in a change of action, fasting can represent more than just grief over sin. It can signal a commitment to obedience and a new direction.

To humble oneself before God. Fasting, when practiced with the right motives, is a physical expression of humility before God, just as kneeling or prostrating yourself in prayer can reflect humility before Him.

To express concern for the work of God. Just as a parent might fast and pray out of concern for the work of God in the life of a child, so Christians may fast and pray because they feel a burden for the work of God in a broader scope. A Christian might feel compelled to fast and pray for the work of God in a place that has experienced tragedy, disappointment, or apparent defeat.

To minister to the needs of others. Those who think the Spiritual Disciplines foster tendencies of introspection or independence should consider Isaiah 58:6–7. In the most extensive passage in Scripture dealing exclusively with fasting, God emphasizes fasting for the purpose of meeting the needs of others.

To overcome temptation and dedicate yourself to God. Ask Christians to name a fast by a biblical character and most will probably think first of the supernatural fast of Jesus prior to His temptation in Matthew 4:1–11. There are times we struggle with temptation, or we *anticipate* grappling with it, when we need extra spiritual strength to overcome it. Fasting for the purpose of overcoming the temptation and of renewing our dedication to God is a Christlike response.

To express love and worship to God. Fasting can be an expression of finding your greatest pleasure and enjoyment in life from God. That's the case when disciplining yourself to fast means that you love God more than food, that seeking Him is more important to you than eating. This honors God and is a means of worshipping Him as God.

There is no doubt that God has often crowned fasting with extraordinary blessings, but we should be careful not to have what Martyn Lloyd-Jones called a mechanical view of fasting. We cannot manipulate God to do our bidding by fasting any more than we can by any other means. As with prayer, we fast in hope that by His *grace* God *will* bless us as we desire. God will bless a rightly motivated, biblical fast by any of His children. Whether or not you receive the blessing you hope for, one thing is sure: If you knew what God knew, you would give yourself the identical blessing that He does. And none of His rewards is worthless. (*Taken from chapter 9 of Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life.*)

SILENCE AND SOLITUDE ... FOR THE PURPOSE OF GODLINESS

Explanation of Silence and Solitude

The Discipline of silence is the voluntary and temporary abstention from speaking so that certain spiritual goals might be sought. Sometimes silence is observed in order to read, write, pray, and so on. Though there is no outward speaking, there are internal

dialogues with self and with God. This can be called “outward silence.” At other times silence is maintained not only outwardly but also inwardly so that God’s voice might be heard more clearly.

Solitude is the Spiritual Discipline of voluntarily and temporarily withdrawing to privacy for spiritual purposes. The period of solitude may last only a few minutes or for days. As with silence, solitude may be sought in order to participate without interruption in other Spiritual Disciplines, or just to be alone with God.

First, think of silence and solitude as complementary Disciplines to fellowship. Without silence and solitude we’re shallow. Without fellowship we’re stagnant. Balance requires them all. Second, silence and solitude are usually found together. Third, recognize that Western culture conditions us to be comfortable with noise and crowds, not with silence and solitude.

There are many biblical reasons for making priorities of the Spiritual Disciplines of silence and solitude:

- To follow Jesus’ example. He regularly practiced silence and solitude. (See Matthew 4:1, 14:23; Mark 1:35; Luke 4:42.)
- To hear the voice of God better by getting away from distracting earthly noise and human voices. (See 1 Kings 19:11–13, Galatians 1:17.)
- To express worship to God in a way that does not require words, sounds, or actions. (See Habakkuk 2:20, Zephaniah 1:7.)
- To express faith in God. (See Psalm 62:1–2, 5–6; Isaiah 30:15.)
- To seek the salvation of the Lord. (See Lamentations 3:25–28.)
- To be physically and spiritually restored. (See Mark 6:31.)
- To regain a spiritual perspective. (See Luke 1:5–25, 57–64.)
- To seek the will of God, for at times He discloses it only in private. (See Luke 6:12–13.)
- To learn control of the tongue. (See Proverbs 17:27–28; Ecclesiastes 3:7; James 1:19, 26, 3:2.) *(Taken from chapter 10 of Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life.)*”

Fasting Explained

4. List the biblical purposes of fasting.

5. Review the various kinds of fasts mentioned in the Bible. Then determine which kind of fast each of the following passages describes:

Deuteronomy 9:9

Ezra 10:6

Esther 4:16

Daniel 1:12

Jonah 3:5–8

Matthew 3:4

Matthew 4:2

Luke 4:2

6. Consider these passages, noticing the word *when*: Matthew 6:2–3, 5–7, 16–17. What do they reveal about the importance of fasting?
7. What do we learn about fasting from Matthew 9:14–15?
8. What specific instructions about fasting are given in Matthew 6:16–18?

Fasting Is to Be Done for a Purpose

9. Read Ezra 7:11–20, 8:21–23. What was Ezra's situation, and what did he do?
10. God is always pleased to hear His people's prayers and is also pleased when we choose to strengthen our prayers through fasting. Why did the following people fast?
Nehemiah (Nehemiah 1:4)

The early Christians (Acts 13:3)
11. What does Judges 20:18–28 teach us about the purpose of fasting?
12. What is the relationship between repentance and fasting? (1 Samuel 7:6, Joel 2:12, Jonah 3:5–8)
13. What does Isaiah 58:6–7 reveal about the role of fasting in meeting the needs of others?

Explanation of Silence and Solitude

14. Look up these verses: Matthew 4:1, 14:23; Mark 1:35; Luke 4:42. What do they tell us about Jesus?
15. Why do you think many of us are uncomfortable when we are alone with our own thoughts and God's voice?
16. Read Mark 6:31. Do you receive enough physical and spiritual rest? What steps can you take to have time alone with God to restore your body and spirit?
17. In which area(s) do you need to discern God's will? What can you learn from Jesus' actions in Luke 6:12–13?

CLOSING PRAYER

Psalm 62:1–2, 5–6 contains some beautiful phrases that relate to our faith. Read these verses and write out your thoughts in the form of a prayer. If you, or others, are comfortable praying aloud, do so.

GOING DEEPER

(Extra questions for further study)

18. Are you willing to put aside your physical needs in order to seek God? Why, or why not?
19. Fasting can be little more than a “dead work” if we persistently harden our hearts to God’s call to deal with a specific sin in our lives. What sin in your life do you need to deal with today?
20. Consider the following ways you can make silence and solitude more of a reality and a habit. Which will you pursue this coming week?
 - Looking to Christ and listening to His Spirit during various “minute retreats” each day.
 - Developing a daily time of daily Bible intake and prayer when you’re alone with God.
 - Experiencing extended periods of silence and solitude—an afternoon, evening, or weekend.
 - Locating special places where you can apply the Disciplines of silence and solitude—a park, by a stream, in a special room at home, at church, or elsewhere.
 - Asking your spouse or friend to temporarily assume your responsibilities so you can be alone with God.