

Fasting: a discipline to cultivate

Introduction

In 1980 Richard Foster produced a book called 'Celebration of Discipline'. It was described as 'as a stimulating guide for personal devotional life, and a source book for group study, for prayer and worship.' One of the disciplines Foster included was fasting.

He wrote, 'In my research I could not find one single book published on the subject of fasting from 1861 to 1954, a period of nearly 100 years. More recently there has developed a renewed interest in fasting, although it is often more dogmatic and lacking in biblical balance.' We shall try to correct that by this study.

So first a question, 'How often do you think that fasting is mentioned in the Bible? Well Arthur Wallis in his 1968 work on fasting, 'God's Chosen Fast', lists at least 77 biblical references to fasting. Now does that surprise you? Well it did me as I began to write these notes.

The 18th century Church leader John Wesley wrote, 'Some have exalted religious fasting beyond Scripture and reason, and others have utterly disregarded it. It was not by the light of reason that the people of God have been, in all ages, directed to use fasting as a means, but they have been taught it of God himself, by clear and open revelations of his will.. now whatever reasons there were to quicken those of old, in the zealous and constant discharge of this duty, they are of equal force still to quicken us today.'

Fasting is a discipline of abstinence. When we abstain from anything we miss and feel its absence. But we also hear our hearts better, and we face our real self. So to fast means that we don't get to eat what we want or don't get to engage in some activity that we prefer. This is about training us in self-denial. The idea is to help us empty ourselves so we become hungry for the things that matter. The discipline of abstinence teaches us a way to be in the world but not of the world. We learn to love the world God loves without running on the fuel it runs on, unlimited amounts of foods, media and words. We take a break from the sickness of our culture, information anxiety, obsessing over just the right foods, and endless competition with whomever we are standing next to. We learn to be immersed in the concerns of our world, but completely different from it. Our responses are different, enabling us to be salt and light for God. So let's begin the study on the simplicity of fasting.

Study 1

Fasting: a simple discipline

Introduction

When the priest Jean- Nicholas Grout was forced to flee to England to escape the 18th century French revolution, his friends were horrified to discover that he was spending his final years of life in a cell the size of a large cupboard, but he didn't mind. He put it, 'There is no reason for me to be rich, no reason why I should not suffer a loss of temporal goods, while reducing my luxuries, and being deprived of certain comforts, while I still have a decent livelihood.' The idea that less is more is what lies behind simplicity. Simplicity is an expression of frugality, which means that we refrain from using resources to add to our status, glamour or sense of luxury. The discipline of fasting pulls us away from the 'gotta have, gotta do, gotta be, until we are exhausted.

Bible Study

1. Which of these actions would be most difficult for you if you had to do it for a week?

*eating food that is bland and poorly prepared

*drinking only water

*going without coffee or.....

*other [related to choices of eating, drinking]

Read Matthew 6:24-30

2. What reason did Jesus for not worrying about food and drink?

- 3 What choices of clothing or ways of dressing are least likely to distract you from seeking God and following God in the building of the kingdom [primarily through loving others]?

Read Matthew 6:31-34

4. What does Jesus say that worry is an issue for 'pagans' and not for Christians?

5. How are worry and anxiety natural results of lack of simplicity or singleness of purpose?

6. Jesus used the example of food and water to talk about being preoccupied with certain things. If Jesus was speaking to our culture today, what other examples might he give do you think?

7. If you were to let go of the things that you're preoccupied with, especially food and drink, what worthwhile activities might you have more time for?

8. The Christian writer Dallas Willard prophesies vs. 33 as 'direct your actions towards making a difference in the realm of spiritual substance sustained and governed by God. Invest your life in what God is doing, which cannot be lost.' What spiritual practices or down-to-earth influences have helped you to invest in 'what God is doing'?

9. What sort of relationship with God does a person need to have in order to do what this passage says [vs. 33-34] and let go of worry and preoccupation with simple earthly matters?

10. Which of these signs of simplicity do you most desire?

*to stop craving things that you neither need nor desire

*to have a joyful unconcern for possessions

*to develop a deeper appreciation for creation

*to be no longer fascinated with the latest gadget

*to stop fearing what others think of you

*to be unconcerned about what you eat and drink

10 How might the practice of the simplicity of fasting help someone move gradually?

a :from pride to humility

b:fromtalking about practicing simplicity to be a self-starter

c: from worry to trust

d:from self- centeredness to God - centeredness

e: from turmoil to peace.

Study 2 Fasting and Feasting

Introduction

Jesus not only feasted, but he also fasted from food, not even missing it, or so it seems. Jesus himself said in the Sermon on the Mount, [Matthew 6:16] 'when you fast, not if you fast.' He was assuming that the children of the kingdom of God would be doing this, and was giving instruction in how it could be done with spiritual success. Jesus stated that our fasting shouldn't be evident to others [Matthew 6:16]

Jesus also spoke of having access to a mysterious source of non food nourishment [John 4:32]. Later he presented himself as that nourishment [John 6:48-51]. While feasting on Christ may well be intriguing, fasting may put you off.

However to fast one does not have to be Olympic-skilled. You might begin by fasting from people [it is called solitude] or conversation [silence], spending [frugality], social media, or the telephone. Perhaps you might like to abstain from over packaged, highly processed foods, from lack of exercise [think about how much time people today spend going to the gym]. Or you may like to practice a partial fast of eating no rich food, meat or wine [Daniel 10:3]

Such things are not cheating when it comes to fasting. If you think they are cheating, then you have not understood what it really means to fast. The purpose of spiritual disciplines is not to get high scores on a kind of spiritual SATS test, or to get you suggested for sainthood. The purpose of spiritual disciplines is a simple way to connect with God, to feast on the One who loves you, God himself.

Bible Study

1 Can you think of a time when you have seen God provide for you in a surprising way?

Read Matthew 4:1-4

2. Describe Jesus predicament?

3. How did Jesus refusal to turn the stones into bread demonstrate his complete trust in God?

4. When Jesus answered the devil [vs4] he quoted a Scripture passage that described how God provided for the Israelites while they wandered in the wilderness [Deuteronomy 8:3]. What good things did God do to provide for the Israel [Deuteronomy 8:2-6], which Jesus described as 'word[s] that come from the mouth of God'?

5. Read John 6:48-51 and identify all the words that have to do with life and living. Identify all the food related words. What is Jesus saying about himself as food?

6. What is Jesus saying about himself as life?

7. How then does fasting create a situation in which your faith is likely to grow?

8. If you were to fast from food or another item or activity, what character qualities would be most likely to grow in you?

*humility

*courage

*purity

*charity

*other

Read Matthew 4:5-11.

9. Imagine you have been without food for many days. Which of these temptations would have presented to you most boldly and why?

Turn stones into bread vs. 3-4

*doubts- will God provide?

*weaknesses- hunger; impatience; need to prove self

*desires- desire to be relevant

Jump from temple vs. 5-7

*doubts- will God protect?

*weaknesses- pride; insecurity; need to test God

*desires- desire to be spectacular

Worship Satan vs. 8-10

*doubts- will God 'win'?

*weaknesses- craving quick power and easy solutions

*desires- desire to be powerful.

10. How does refusing temptation invite you to feast on God?

11. How do you respond to the idea of fasting from something other than food: conversation, television, radio, social media, eating chocolate?

12. Fasting is a discipline people sometimes tenaciously force themselves to do because it seems important or because their entire church is fasting. How are our attitudes different when we force ourselves to try hard versus when we rely on Jesus minute by minute?

13. If you were to fast from something this week, how would you keep yourself focused on feasting on God?

A transforming exercise [make a choice]

1. Pick a word from John 6:48-51, maybe 'living bread', or 'came down from heaven'.

For several minutes, sit or stand in that phrase. If you wish, focus on the grandeur of God who loves you. Respond with a gesture, movement, or facial expression.

2. Sit in your backyard/ garden with a pile of stones in front of you. Consider all the reasons why you don't fast. For each reason pile one stone on your left. Consider the reasons in this study why you should fast, for each reason pile a stone on your right. Pray quietly, asking God what you need to know about these reasons. Wait for answers through this following week.

Study 3

Fasting: a way to be open to God

Introduction

Fasting is an encouragement for us to feast on God, it also carries an edge to it. Just as our worst sins are revealed when we get hungry, tired of lonely, fasting reveals the things that control us. The parts of ourselves we'd hoped would go away. It is during fasting that our fears and faults stare us in the face. This is why there is a strong Christian tradition that reveals that fasting leads to repentance and confession of sin. John Piper in his book *A Hunger for God* picks this out. You can see it in Psalm 69:10 also in Isa Ch 58:3, Ezra ch 8 1 Samuel Ch 7; Nehemiah Ch 9:1-2. It appears that without our normal comforts, we turn to God with more honesty and intensity. There we connect with the richness of God, who truly meets our needs. As a result, we experience new levels of humility, simplicity and peace.

When we practice fasting regularly, then we find we have more patience, we repent and confess more easily, our character grows, and we become the kind of people God can easily use as his servants in his kingdom. We become more kingdom orientated.

Bible Study

Read 1 Samuel Ch 7:3-6

In this passage Israel had been mourning after failing for 20 years to bring home the Ark of the Covenant, a symbol of God's presence. They had fallen into idol worship and needed to repent.

1. What did the Israelites need deliverance from?
2. What did Samuel tell them was the way forward?
3. What are some of the sins that many of us need deliverance from today?
4. What did the Israelites do after putting away their idols?

Read 1 Samuel 7:7-9

5. Someone might say that the Israelites' trouble with the Philistines began after Israel gathered, fasted, confessed and repented. How do you think Israel's fasting and repentance prepared them for trouble?

Read 1 Samuel 7: 10-13

6. Put yourself in the place of the Israelites in this scene of fasting, confessing and offering a sacrifice. What aspects of your whole person would have been affected by these acts of devotion to God? Start by listing some of the senses which are involved.

7. How did God respond to their prayers for rescue from the Philistines?

8. Think of a situation in which you need to trust God more and relinquish your focus on self [maybe a challenge to tithe towards the TVC]. How might regular times of fasting and repenting help you to rely on God alone to meet your needs, and build your inner character to meet these situations?

9. How would your life be different if you were more patient and humble because you've practiced not getting what you want when you want it [perhaps by fasting regularly]?

10. How does the humility, patience and peace that results from fasting make it easier to practice simplicity [by that I mean staying focused on God and God's kingdom]?

11. How might those who fast regularly make better servants?

12. If for one day you fasted from people or conversation, or social media, telephone, mobile phone, e-mail, media [pick one], how would you need to arrange your life differently that day to help it happen?

Study 4

Fasting; what it says about us

Introduction

Motives in fasting are crucial, and that is why the first mention of fasting in the New Testament is a warning about motivation. So while fasting can be done corporately [Acts 13:2] there is still the question of motive [Matthew 6:16-18]. It is easy to fast for the wrong reasons. Fasting can become, if we are not careful something of a spiritual trophy in our eyes, and make us feel better than other believers. It can be seen as an instant ticket to supposed spiritual superiority, so others look up to us. Even if we keep our fasting secret as Jesus told us to do [Matthew 16:16-18] it can become a source of self-congratulation as we compete with ourselves to 'improve' our fasting record. The question of how long should we fast is relevant to us. The Bible offers examples of fasts lasting from part of a day to 40 days, although it would appear that the latter were likely supernaturally enabled. Today such a lengthy fast should properly be practiced with caution depending on your level of fitness or existing medical conditions. If you have any questions or health issues, then seek medical advice before you fast.

Today fasting is part of the Jewish tradition in Yom Kippur, and Muslims fast during Ramadan, and Hindu high caste of Brahmins practice fasting.

So when come to biblical fasting what is the proper motive? Richard Foster offers the following 'the only reason to fast is an urging or call to it, a prompting; a sense of rightness'. When we hear that call of God because we have been connecting with God, and we long to connect even more, then we are moving in the right direction of a motive for fasting today.

Arthur Wallis puts it, 'God is not merely concerned with what we do but why we do it. A right act might be robbed of all its value in the sight of God if it is done with a wrong motive'. [God's Chosen Fast].

Bible Study

Read Matthew 6:16-18

1. What do Jesus words 'when you fast 'tell us about fasting?
2. What reward did the hypocrites receive when they looked sombre and disfigured their faces?

3. If we fast how can we ensure that our fasting does not as Arthur Wallis puts it 'become devoid of spirit and life'?

4. Let's say that you feel miserable [sombre vs. 16] during a fast. Should you make yourself look happy to obey Jesus' directive here? Why or why not?

5. Why isn't it deceitful to keep a spiritual discipline a secret?

Read Isaiah 58:1-4

6. What were the results of Judah's fasting?

7. What do these people's selfish behaviours reveal about what went on inwardly when they fasted?

Read Isaiah 58:5-11

8. How is God's description of a true fast different from Judah's fasts?

9. In what ways could a person's fast involve acts of charity, justice, liberation or generosity [vs. 6-7]?

10. Which if any of the following questions about spiritual disciplines speak to you about your motives? [Based on A. Wallis God's Chosen Fast]

Am I confident that this desire to fast is God-given?

Are my motives right? Is there any hidden desire to impress others?

What are my spiritual objectives in this fast? What special burdens?

Do my objectives tend to be self-centred? Is my desire for personal blessing balanced by genuine concern for others?

Am I determined above all else to minister to the Lord?

11. Both the hypocrites and the people of Judah used fasting as a spiritual trophy [Matthew 6 Isaiah 58]. How do we tend to see others spiritual disciplines as trophies [meditation, prayer, study, simplicity, solitude, submission, service, tithing, confession, worship, guidance] - proving to ourselves, to God and to others that we're spiritually better off or getting better?

12. If you were to fast, what sort of fast would you be ready to try:

Duration of fast:

*fasting for a week

*fasting one day a week

Items fasting from:

*abstaining from.....[an activity]

*absolute fast form food; no food; minimal water

*partial fasting; eating no rich food, no meat of wine [Daniel 10;3]

*partial fasting from food you normally crave [bread, sugared foods, cakes].

Reading list

If you want to read further on fasting, then I suggest following books, all available on Amazon.

John Piper: *A Hunger for God*

Arthur Wallis: *God's Chosen Fast*

Ronnie R Floyd: *the Power of Prayer and Fasting*

Derek Prince: *Shaping History through Prayer and Fasting*

Richard Foster: *Celebration of Discipline*