



Core Seminar How to Grow Class 7: Fasting

I. Introduction

To begin, let's consider two broad definitions of fasting:

- An **inclusive** definition of "fasting" is "*abstinence from anything that is legitimate in and of itself, for some special spiritual purpose*" (Martin Lloyd Jones). So, we could be fasting from food, but it could also include sports, TV, telephone, etc.
- A **narrower** definition of fasting is *voluntary abstinence from physical nourishment—food and drink—for special spiritual purposes*. This study will deal only with this type of fasting, which is what the Bible refers to.

A. Fasting in the Old Testament

1. *Israel fasted on the Day of Atonement*

Leviticus 16:29

And it shall be a statute to you forever that in the seventh month, on the tenth day of the month, you shall afflict yourselves and shall do no work, either the native or the stranger who sojourns among you.

2. *After the Exile, four other annual fasts were observed on particular months*

Zechariah 8:19

Thus says the LORD of hosts: The fast of the fourth month and the fast of the fifth and the fast of the seventh and the fast of the tenth shall be to the house of Judah seasons of joy and gladness and cheerful feasts. Therefore love truth and peace.

3. *Sometimes, individuals or the nation would fast in relation to specific circumstances*

- *Individual:*

2 Samuel 12:22

He said, "While the child was still alive, I fasted and wept, for I said, 'Who knows whether the LORD will be gracious to me, that the child may live?'"

- *Corporate:*

Judges 20:26

Then all the people of Israel, the whole army, went up and came to Bethel and wept. They sat there before the LORD and fasted that day until evening, and offered burnt offerings and peace offerings before the LORD.

A narrower definition of fasting is *voluntary abstinence from physical nourishment—food and drink—for special spiritual purposes*. This study will deal only with this type of fasting, which is what the Bible

refers to.

4. *At times, fasting gave expression to various heart attitudes*

- *Grief*

2 Samuel 1:12

And they mourned and wept and fasted until evening for Saul and for Jonathan his son and for the people of the LORD and for the house of Israel, because they had fallen by the sword.

- *Penitence*

Daniel 9:3-5

3 Then I turned my face to the Lord God, seeking him by prayer and pleas for mercy with fasting and sackcloth and ashes. **4** I prayed to the LORD my God and made confession, saying, "O Lord, the great and awesome God, who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments, **5** we have sinned and done wrong and acted wickedly and rebelled, turning aside from your commandments and rules.

- *Humility*

Ezra 8:21

Then I proclaimed a fast there, at the river Ahava, that we might humble ourselves before our God, to seek from him a safe journey for ourselves, our children, and all our goods.

5. *Fasting was often directed towards securing the guidance and help of God*

Ezra 8:21

Then I proclaimed a fast there, at the river Ahava, that we might humble ourselves before our God, to seek from him a safe journey for ourselves, our children, and all our goods.

B. Fasting in the New Testament

1. *Even in the NT, we still see Jewish religious practice, which involved fasting, continued:*

- The annual fast of the Day of Atonement

Acts 27:9

Much time had been lost, and sailing had already become dangerous because by now it was after the Fast. So Paul warned them,

- The Pharisees fasted every Monday and Thursday

Luke 18:11-12

11 The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. **12** I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.'

- Anna the prophetess, who prophesied over the infant Jesus at the Temple

Luke 2:36-37

36 And there was a prophetess, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was advanced in years, having lived with her husband seven years from when she was a virgin, **37** and

then as a widow until she was eighty-four. She did not depart from the temple, worshiping with fasting and prayer night and day.

2. *Jesus fasted*

Matthew 4:1-4

1 Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. **2** And after fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. **3** And the tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." **4** But he answered, "It is written, 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

3. *Jesus assumed His disciples did and would fast*

Matthew 6:16-18

16 "And 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. **17** But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, **18** 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."

4. *Acts: leaders of the church fast when choosing missionaries (13:2-3) and elders (14:23)*

Acts 13:1-3

1 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. **2** 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." **3** Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off.

Acts 14:23

And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed.

5. *Paul twice refers to his "fastings," in 2 Corinthians 6 & 11*

II. **Components of Fasting**

There are at least four components of fasting. *Fasting is described in terms of what is given up, who participates, the duration of the fast, and how often the fast is conducted.*

A. Degree of Abstinence

We can abstain from food and drink to various degrees.

1. Normal Fast

The avoidance of all food and drink.¹

2. Partial Fast

A partial fast is a limitation of diet, but not abstention from all food.²

¹ Examples: *Esther 4:15-16, Ezekiel 10:6, Acts 9:8-9, Deuteronomy 9:9*

² Example: *Daniel 1:12.*

B. Number of Participants in the Fast

1. *Private Fast*

A private fast is what Jesus was speaking of in his Sermon on the Mount, when he said that we should fast in a way not to be noticed by others.

Matthew 6:17-18

17 But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, **18** 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.³

2. *Small Group Fast*

We can fast with other Christians as a shared commitment

Acts 13:1-3

1 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. **2** 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." **3** Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off.

3. *Congregational Fast*

A fast can be conducted by an entire congregation of God's people. Esther 4:16 describes a fast of all the Jews in Susa. Nehemiah 9:1 describes a fast by the entire nation of Israel. Joel 2:15-16 is a third example.

Joel 2:15-16

15 Blow the trumpet in Zion;
consecrate a fast;
call a solemn assembly;
16 gather the people.
Consecrate the congregation;
assemble the elders;
gather the children,
even nursing infants.
Let the bridegroom leave his room,
and the bride her chamber.

C. Length of Fast

The Bible doesn't give any commands about length. It includes fasts that cover part of a day (Judges 20:26-28), one day (Jeremiah 36:6), three days (Esther 4:1, Acts 9:8-9), seven days (1Samuel 31:13), 21 days (Daniel 10:2-3), and supernatural fasts of 40 days (Deuteronomy 9:9, 1Kings 19:8, Matthew 4:1-2). The Bible also records many fasts without mentioning their length (e.g., Matthew 9:14, Luke 2:37, Acts 13:3).

³ My emphasis.

D. Frequency of Fasts

How often, *i.e.*, on what schedule, is the fast occurring.

1. *Regular Fast*

On a repetitive schedule, e.g., Israel's fast annual fast on the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16:29-31). The Pharisee in Luke 8:12 congratulates himself for fasting twice a week.

2. *Occasional Fast*

These occur whenever a need is perceived. Most of the fasting examples in Scripture seem to fall into this category.

3. *Continuous Fast*

Example: John the Baptist. In Matthew 3:4, we read, "His food was locusts and wild honey."

These ways of describing fasts are largely independent of each other; you can specify one characteristic without constraining the others.

QUESTIONS OR COMMENTS ON THE BASICS OF FASTING

III. Should Christians Fast?

Before we answer this question, it might be helpful to consider what the New Testament has to say in general about food and eating. Food is spoken of as a good gift from God.

A good example is this passage from 1 Timothy 4:1-5:

1 Timothy 4:1-5

1 Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons, **2** through the insincerity of liars whose consciences are seared, **3** who forbid marriage and require abstinence from foods that God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth. **4** For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, **5** for it is made holy by the word of God and prayer.

Note here what Paul says about food. It is part of God's good creation, he says, and not meant to be abstained from *if* it is received with thanksgiving. Paul is eager to warn against a kind of asceticism that exalts fasting in such a way that God's goodness in the gift of food is overlooked or distorted.

Christian fasting, to be clear, is not asceticism. In Colossians 2:20-23, Paul warns against that kind of severe lifestyle. He says that it dishonors Christ by rejecting the sufficiency of His person and work.

Colossians 2:20-23

20 If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the world, why, as if you were still alive in the world, do you submit to regulations— **21** "Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch" **22** (referring to things that all perish as they are used)—according to human precepts and teachings? **23** These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh.

John Piper says about those words: “This is a strong warning against any simplistic view of fasting that thinks it will automatically do a person spiritual good. It is not that simple. ‘Severe treatment of the body’ may only feed a person’s flesh with more self-reliance.”

In these texts, eating or not eating is a matter that is non-essential in itself. Eating or not eating gains value, however, insofar as it expresses love and contentment to God, or lack of love and discontentment to Him (Rom 14:3-6; 1 Cor 8).

We’ve seen that the Old Testament commanded one annual fast during the Day of Atonement. ***But fasting is nowhere commanded in the New Testament.*** Yet it seems clear in Scripture that ***Jesus assumed that His followers would fast.***

We saw this a little while ago in Matthew 6:16-17, part of the Sermon on the Mount. If you have your Bibles, turn there for a moment. Jesus said:

Matthew 6:16-18

16 And 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. **17** But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, **18** 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.

There are a few more things to note in this passage. Christ gives us a negative command, a positive command, and a promise.

- **Negative command:** Don’t look somber, like you’re suffering.
- **Positive command:** No one should be able to tell you’re fasting by your appearance. The only observer of your fast should be God.
- **Promise:** “*And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.*”

Notice also that Jesus gives no specific command about when, how often, or how long we should fast. Fasting is not to be a legalistic routine. It is a privilege and an opportunity to seek God’s grace. We should not neglect it, but decisions regarding *the specific characteristics of our fasts are to be Spirit-led*. He is the one who helps us understand God’s Word and He applies those truths to our hearts in particular circumstances.

John Piper calls Matthew 9:14-17 the *most important passage* on fasting in the Bible. It says,

Matthew 9:14-17

14 Then the disciples of John came to him, saying, “Why do we and the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?” **15** 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. **16** 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. **17** 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.

Who is the bridegroom? When is He taken away from His disciples? Jesus means that He will return to his Father in heaven after his death and resurrection. During that time, the disciples will fast. John Piper says:

It is true that Jesus has given the Holy Spirit in his absence, and that the Holy Spirit is “the Spirit of Jesus”. So in a profound and wonderful sense Jesus is still with us... Nevertheless, there is a greater degree of intimacy that we will enjoy with Christ in heaven when this age is over. So in another sense Christ is *not* with us, but away from us (2 Corinthians 5:8; Philippians 1:23). In other words, in this age there is an ache inside every Christian that Jesus is not here as fully and intimately and as powerfully and as gloriously as we want Him to be. We hunger for so much more. That is why we fast.

New wine, in other words, calls for new fasting. What distinguishes Judaism from Christianity is that the longed-for kingdom of God is now present as well as future. The King, Jesus Christ, has come. What’s new about Christian fasting is that it rests on the finished work of the Bridegroom.

QUESTIONS OR COMMENTS ON WHETHER OR NOT CHRISTIANS SHOULD FAST?

IV. Reasons to Fast

Let’s be clear: Christian fasting has a spiritual purpose. It has a purpose that is closely aligned to our relationship with Christ. If fasting is done for worldly purposes, such as weight control, a pre-operation dictate, physical training, saving money, or political protest, then it isn’t a Christian fast!

The biblical accounts of fasting make it clear there are *at least ten reasons to fast*. And, *none of these purposes involve earning God’s favor*. We can’t use fasting as a way to impress God. We are made acceptable to God through the work of Jesus Christ alone. Fasting has no eternal benefit to us unless we first repent of our rebellion against God and surrender to Jesus Christ in faith.

Having said that, here are some good reasons to fast:

A. Fast to Strengthen Prayer

Ezra 8:21, 23

21 Then I proclaimed a fast there, at the river Ahava, that we might humble ourselves before our God, to seek from him a safe journey for ourselves, our children, and all our goods.

23 So we fasted and implored our God for this, and he listened to our entreaty.

Now, the Bible does not teach that fasting is a kind of spiritual hunger strike that compels God to do our bidding. *Fasting does not change God’s hearing; it changes our praying*. Christians who pray while fasting communicate that they are truly in earnest and are expressing that earnestness in a divinely appointed way.

B. Fast to Seek God's Guidance

Judges 20:26-27a

26 Then all the people of Israel, the whole army, went up and came to Bethel and wept. They sat there before the LORD and fasted that day until evening, and offered burnt offerings and peace offerings before the LORD. **27** And the people of Israel inquired of the LORD...

Fasting doesn't ensure clear guidance, but it does make us more sensitive to God. It helps us tune out the world and focus on the Lord, so that we might listen more attentively to His Word. Think of the leaders in Acts fasting before they sent out Paul and Barnabus. They wanted to be more sensitive to the Spirit's leading as they looked at God's word, so they fasted.

C. Fast to Seek Deliverance or Protection

2 Chronicles 20:2-4

2 Some men came and told Jehoshaphat, "A great multitude is coming against you from Edom, from beyond the sea; and, behold, they are in Hazazon-tamar" (that is, Engedi). **3** Then Jehoshaphat was afraid and set his face to seek the LORD, and proclaimed a fast throughout all Judah. **4** And Judah assembled to seek help from the LORD...

Fasting should be a line of defense against persecution from family, schoolmates, neighbors, co-workers, or other Christians.

D. Fast to Express Grief

The Bible contains many examples of fasting to express grief over sin or calamities that befall God's people.

2 Samuel 1:11-12

11 Then David took hold of his clothes and tore them, and so did all the men who were with him. **12** And they mourned and wept and fasted until evening for Saul and for Jonathan his son and for the people of the LORD and for the house of Israel, because they had fallen by the sword.

As we learned last week, confession of sin isn't a simple mouthing of words. Biblical confession involves grief for the sin committed, and inasmuch as fasting can be an expression of grief, it is never inappropriate. Don Whitney says in his book, "There have been a few occasions when I grieved so deeply over my sin that words alone seemed powerless to say to God what I wanted. And though it made me no more worthy of forgiveness, fasting communicated the grief and confession my words could not."

But we want to reject the temptation to think that our fasting somehow is paying for our sins. As 1 Peter 3:18 says, "For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit." Our fasting should include much praise to God for how he has promised that " If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

E. Fast to Express Repentance and a Return to Trust in God

Closely related to expressing grief for sin, fasting can also signal a commitment to obedience and a new direction.

Joel 2:12

“Yet even now,” declares the Lord,
“return to me with all your heart,
with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning”

F. Fast to Humble Yourself Before God

1 Kings 21:27-29

27 And when Ahab heard those words, he tore his clothes and put sackcloth on his flesh and fasted and lay in sackcloth and went about dejectedly. **28** And the word of the LORD came to Elijah the Tishbite, saying, **29** “Have you seen how Ahab has humbled himself before me? Because he has humbled himself before me, I will not bring the disaster in his days; but in his son’s days I will bring the disaster upon his house.”

John Calvin said about fasting, “Since this is a holy exercise both for the humbling of men and for their confession of humility, why should we use it less than the ancients did in similar need?”

G. Fast to Express Concern for the Work of God

Daniel 9:2-3

2 I, Daniel, perceived in the books the number of years that, according to the word of the LORD to Jeremiah the prophet, must pass before the end of the desolations of Jerusalem, namely, seventy years. **3** Then I turned my face to the Lord God, seeking him by prayer and pleas for mercy with fasting and sackcloth and ashes.

Now, we wouldn’t want anyone to leave thinking that we should fast all day every day as an expression of concern for all of God’s work. On occasion, however, God does give us so great a concern for His work that fasting may be an appropriate response.

H. Fast to Minister to the Needs of Others

Fasting cannot be compartmentalized from the rest of our lives. As we’ve said before, the spiritual disciplines are not only for our sake, but for the sake of others, too.

Isaiah 58:6-7

6 “Is not this the fast that I choose:
To loose the bonds of wickedness,
To undo the straps of the yoke,
To let the oppressed go free,
And to break every yoke?”

7 Is it not to share your bread with the hungry
And bring the homeless poor into your house;
When you see the naked, to cover him,
And not to hide yourself from your own flesh?”

If we give up some meals by fasting, we can use that time and money to minister to others.

I. Fast to Overcome Temptation and Dedicate Yourself to God

Fasting is a good exercise in self-discipline. Refraining from eating food can strengthen our ability to refrain from sin when we are tempted. If we train ourselves to accept the small “suffering” of fasting willingly, we will be better able to accept other suffering for the sake of righteousness.

J. Fast to Express Love and to Worship God

To fast means that you love God more than food. You deny your hunger for food to pursue your hunger for God. Seeking more of Him is more important than eating. When you feel a hunger pang, let it remind you that your stomach is not your God and that your fasting honors the true God.

So, to summarize this section on good reasons to fast, remember that fasting must always have a spiritual purpose – a God-centered, not self-centered, purpose.

QUESTIONS OR COMMENTS ON THE PURPOSES OF FASTING?

V. Conclusion

Fasting tests where our heart is. It helps us focus on God and feast on Him and His Word more fully. It communicates that our hearts are with God, and not with this world.

Take some time sometime soon to consider the reasons for fasting we just went through. Maybe you need God’s guidance on an important matter. Maybe your prayer life has been dulled by worldly concerns. Maybe you struggle with the sin of gluttony. Whatever the issue, fasting may well be a means of God’s grace in helping you with your need and in pointing you towards the sufficiency of God.

To close, consider John Piper’s words on the essence of Christian fasting: “We ache and yearn—and fast—to know more and more of all that God is for us in Jesus. But only because He has already laid hold of us and is drawing us ever forward and upward into “all the fullness of God.”