FASTING . . . “FOR THE PURPOSE OF GODLINESS”
Selected Texts

“Self-indulgence is the enemy of gratitude, and self-discipline usually its friend and generator. That is why gluttony is a deadly sin. The early desert fathers believed that a person’s appetites are linked: full stomachs and jaded palates take the edge from our hunger and thirst for righteousness. They spoil the appetite for God” (Cornelius Plantinga, Jr.). One of the Spiritual Disciplines which helps sharpen the edge of our hunger and thirst for righteousness and which intensifies our hunger for God is fasting. To practice it biblically would be one way to obey the command of 1 Timothy 4:7, “Discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness.”

I. FASTING EXPLAINED

In a broad sense, fasting may be defined as the abstinence of anything which is legitimate in and of itself for the sake of a special spiritual purpose. So then, fasting does not always deal with abstinence from food, though all specific references in Scripture do. Sometimes we may need to fast from involvement with other people, social media, television, the Internet, etc.

In the Bible, a normal fast involves abstaining from all food, but not from water (Mt. 4:2; Lk. 4:2). A partial fast is a limitation of the diet but not abstention from all food (Dan. 1:12; Mt. 3:4). An absolute fast is the avoidance of all food and liquid (Ezra 10:6; Esther 4:16; Acts 9:9). The Bible also describes the supernatural fasts of Moses (Deut. 9:9) and Elijah (1 Kin. 19:8), private fasts (Mt. 6:16-18), congregational fasts (Joel 2:15-16), national fasts (2 Chr. 20:3), regular fasts (Lev. 16:29-31; Lk. 18:12), and occasional fasts (Mt. 9:15).

II. FASTING IS EXPECTED

Jesus said in Mt. 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. Compare these words with His statements about giving in that same passage, Mt. 6:2-3: “Thus, when you give, . . . But when you give, . . .” Compare also His words in the same section about prayer, Mt. 6:5-7: “And when you pray, . . . But when you pray, . . . And when you pray, . . .” No one doubts that we are to give and to pray. It is quite common to use this passage to teach Jesus’ principles on giving and praying. Since there is nothing here or elsewhere in Scripture indicating that we no longer need to fast, we may conclude that Jesus still expects us to fast today. In fact, Jesus says of His followers in Mt. 9:15 that after He leaves and returns to Heaven “then they will fast.” The only instructions about fasting He left (in addition to those elsewhere in Scripture) are His words in Mt. 6:16-17. How long should we fast? There are fasts of various lengths in Scripture, so it’s up to you and the Spirit’s guidance.

III. FASTING IS TO BE DONE FOR A PURPOSE

A. To strengthen prayer (Ezra 8:23; Neh. 1:4; Dan. 9:3; Joel 2:12-17; Acts 13:3)
B. To seek God’s guidance (Judg. 20:26-28; Acts 14:23)
C. To express grief (Judg. 20:26; 1 Sam. 31:11-13; 2 Sam. 1:11-12)
D. To seek from God deliverance or protection (2 Chr. 20:3-4; Ezra 8:21-23; Esther 4:16; Ps. 109:21-26)
E. To express repentance and the return to God (1 Sam. 7:6; Joel 2:12; Jonah 3:5-8)
F. To humble oneself before God (1 Kin. 21:27-29; Ps. 35:13)
G. To express concern for the work of God (Neh. 1:3-11; Isa. 58:6-7; Dan. 9:3)
H. To minister to the needs of others (Isa. 58:6-7)
I. To overcome temptation and dedicate yourself to God (Mt. 4:1-11)
J. To express love and worship to God (Lk. 2:37)

MORE APPLICATION

1. Will you confess and repent of any fear of fasting?
2. Will you fast as the Holy Spirit directs?
3. Will you plan a fast of dedication now as an expression of your willingness to fast from now on?