

A photograph of a white ceramic plate with a silver fork and knife resting on a rustic wooden table. The text is overlaid on the right side of the image.

fasting  
— to —  
**feast**

**Biblical Principles for Fasting**

## A Theology of Fasting: “When You Fast…”

The best place to begin in understanding what fasting is and how it connects us to God is with the words of Jesus:

*When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to men that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.*

*(Matthew 6:16-18)*

Notice first that Jesus assumes His disciples *will* fast. Jesus does not say, “*If* you fast,” but, “*When* you fast.” It is true that nowhere in the New Testament is fasting commanded. This, however, does not diminish the value of fasting. Indeed, fasting was common among early Christians. The apostle Paul fasted after encountering Christ for this first time (cf. Acts 9:9). Members of the early church fasted (cf. Acts 14:23). Even our Lord fasted for a full forty days (cf. Matthew 4:2). A first century manual of Christian practice called the *Didache* prescribed that Christians fast two days a week on Wednesdays and Fridays.<sup>2</sup> Clearly, the early Christians fasted. Today, we are invited to follow their example.

Jesus continues by cautioning us against some sinful motives for fasting. The hypocrites, Jesus says, fast so others will tell them how wonderfully spiritual they are. We read an example of this kind of hypocritical fasting in Luke 18:9-14 when Jesus tells a parable about a Pharisee and a tax collector. The Pharisee boastfully proclaims, “*I fast twice a week*” (Luke 18:12)! Richard Foster writes that the Pharisees would normally fast on Mondays and Thursdays because those were market days. This way, there would be large audiences buying and selling goods who could admire their piety.<sup>3</sup> Jesus flatly condemns such practices. He says, “*They have received their reward in full*” (Matthew 6:16).

Interestingly, the Greek word for “reward” is *misthos*, a word meaning “wage,” or even “paycheck.” Thus, those who fast just to be congratulated by others are trying to *earn* the approval of others. But they do not and cannot earn the approval of God.

Fasting to try to earn something, whether from people or from God, is very dangerous and actually turns fasting into a harmful rather than a helpful activity. Martin Luther explains:

*Fasting has become a means of seeking great merit before God, of atoning for sin, and of reconciling God. . . That is what I call fasting in the name of all the devils, hitting Christ in the mouth and trampling Him underfoot. . . I would rather see a gorged pig than a saint like this, even if he fasts most strictly on bread and water.*<sup>4</sup>

In his trademark colorful style, Luther explains that fasting to curry favor is not fasting at all. It is only arrogance. Arrogance is a sin against God.

Now that Jesus has explained how not to fast, He continues by explaining how to fast: “*But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to men that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen*” (Matthew 6:17-18). Fasting is an activity between you and your heavenly Father, who lovingly watches you and cares for you through the experience. According to the Bible, there are three primary purposes in fasting.

First, **fasting helps you focus on Christ.** In Luke 2:36-38, we read of a woman named Anna, who “*worshipped night and day, fasting and praying*” (Luke 2:37). Anna’s fasting was not an end in itself. Rather, it pointed her toward God and prepared her to praise God when she finally saw the baby Jesus. The same can happen with us.

When you fast, use the time you would normally spend eating to focus on Christ. Read your “Word for Today” Bible reading during breakfast. Spend some time listening to Christian music, or, perhaps, even singing a favorite Christian hymn as you feel comfortable, during lunch. At supper, gather your family and spend some time in prayer together.

In fact, it is interesting that right before Jesus teaches on fasting, He teaches on prayer (cf. Matthew 6:7-15). Fasting and prayer go together! Whenever your stomach growls, thank God that you *“do not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God”* (Matthew 4:4). As Richard Foster notes, “In experiences of fasting we are not so much abstaining from food as we are feasting on the Word of God. Fasting is feasting!”<sup>5</sup>

Second, **fasting can be used to repent of sins.** In the Old Testament, fasting often accompanied a time of repentance (cf. 1 Samuel 14:24; Nehemiah 1:4, 9:1-2; Jonah 3:8). Take time each day as you fast to go to a private place and consider your sins, be they occasional or habitual, and confess them before Christ. As you reflect on these sins, be sure to reflect all the more on God’s grace which is more than enough to cover every transgression.

Third, **fasting helps mortify your flesh.** We live in a world where food is an obsession and addiction for many people. Paul writes that, for some people, *“their god is their stomach”* (Philippians 3:19). And yet, our stomachs are not supposed to master us, we are supposed to master our stomachs! Fasting helps us do this. Philip Melancthon, a colleague of Martin Luther’s, writes:

*These exercises [of fasting] are to be accepted not because they are services that justify, but because they are assumed to control the flesh, should overindulgence overpower us, and make us secure and unconcerned. This results in people indulging and obeying the tendencies of the flesh. This effort [at mortification] should be constant because it has God’s permanent command.*<sup>6</sup>

The principle of mortification through fasting is this: when we control our stomach and its cravings, we can consider how we may also control other cravings in our lives, especially those which are sinful, so that we may live sanctified lives to God’s glory. As Paul writes, *“I discipline my body and keep it under control”* (1 Corinthians 9:27 ESV). As you fast, then, consider what sins, addictions, and cravings master you. What do you have trouble resisting? What do you have trouble letting go of? Ask God to help you lay those things down even as you have laid down food in fasting.

Jesus concludes His teaching on fasting with a wonderful promise: *"Your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you"* (Matthew 6:18). When the hypocrites receive their "reward" for fasting, they receive a *misthos*, or an earned compensation, as they garner accolades from others (cf. Matthew 16:16). But, when Jesus talks about the reward our heavenly Father offers for true fasting, He does not use the word *misthos*, but the word *apodidomi*, the Greek word for "gift." In other words, the "rewards" from our heavenly Father are not earned by our fasting, but are freely given out of His love. Thus, the value of fasting is that it helps you focus on these gifts and give thanks for them. So as you fast, make sure you praise and thank God! Thank God for all the material blessings He has poured into your life, food included. Thank God for your friends and family. And thank God for the most precious gift of His forgiveness, given through His Son, Jesus Christ.

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## Tips for Fasting: “Eat This! Not That!”

In 2007, *Men's Health* magazine writer and editor David Zinczecko penned a guide titled, *Eat This! Not That!* I doubt he could have imagined how well it would be received. It topped the *New York Times'* bestseller list. The secret to this book's success seems to lie in its simplicity. It surveys America's most popular restaurants and lists the best and worst choices on their menus. Thus, wherever you go to eat, you can be informed enough to make at least relatively healthy choices.

Although this booklet is much more modest, this section is meant to be an *Eat This! Not That!* styled guide to help you in your fast. Here are some simple tips to help you along as you fast.

**1. Consult your physician if you have a health concern or existing health condition.** No less than the father of modern medicine, Hippocrates, suggested fasting as an aid to health.<sup>7</sup> However, certain diseases such as diabetes can make fasting dangerous for some. If you have a health concern, consult your physician before joining in our fast. If you can't fast from food, however, consider fasting from something else. Take a break from watching television. Rather than surfing the Internet, pick up your Bible. Rather than playing video games, spend time in prayer. Just because you cannot fast from food doesn't mean you cannot fast to the glory of God!

**2. Before beginning your fast, eat several small meals.** It is tempting, before beginning a fast, to “load up,” as it were, on your favorite greasy, fatty, cholesterol laden foods. Such an action is inadvisable. Instead of “loading up,” eat several small meals as you prepare to fast. Sliding into a fast with smaller meals rather than jumping into one after a huge meal will decrease hunger pangs and help you feel better throughout the course of your fast. Eating fruits and vegetables before your fast will help you stay healthy.

### **3. During your fast, drink plenty of water and fruit juice.**

Staying hydrated is key to any fast. Although the body can go for days without food, it cannot go for very long without water. Indeed, some scholars believe that when Jesus fasted for forty days in the desert, He fasted from food and not water, for Matthew notes only that *“He was hungry”* (Matthew 4:2), not thirsty. Juices will provide you with the calories you need to keep your energy level up. Keeping your stomach full of fluids will also help reduce hunger pangs.

**4. When breaking your fast, take it slow.** Just like it is tempting to “load up” before beginning a fast, it can also be tempting to “splurge” when you break a fast. After a few days of fasting, your stomach will have shrunk. Eating a large meal will only make you sick. Instead, consider eating something small, most preferably fruits and vegetables. Then move onto dairy products like milk and yogurt. Finally, you may return to normal eating.

**5. Invite your whole family to participate in age appropriate ways.** This fast with only water and juice is meant for those of high school age and up. We do not suggest children younger than fourteen engage in a fast from all solid foods. However, younger children can participate in other ways. For example, for supper one night, make a simple meal of only rice and beans and explain to your children that 79.9 percent of the world’s population lives on less than \$2 a day.<sup>8</sup> For them, rice and beans is a common meal. Lead your family in a prayer of thanksgiving for God’s blessings and pray for those in poverty. Explain that you are fasting so you can better appreciate God’s blessings. Then ask your children how this simple meal helped them better appreciate God’s blessings.

Martin Luther once said, very simply, “It is good to fast.”<sup>9</sup> Indeed it is. It is good to fast not because it makes us more acceptable in God’s sight or earns us brownie points in heaven, but because, as a discipline given by God, it can bring us closer to Him. The goal of fasting, then,

is to “*come near to God*” (James 4:8), remembering that He has already come near to us in His Son, Jesus Christ.

God bless you as you fast in His name!

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## References Cited:

<sup>1</sup> John Wesley, Sermon 27

<sup>2</sup> Didache, Chapter 8

<sup>3</sup> Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1998) 51.

<sup>4</sup> AE 21:158

<sup>5</sup> Foster, 55.

<sup>6</sup> Apology XV:47

<sup>7</sup> Foster, 48.

<sup>8</sup> Source: <http://www.riceandbeansfoundation.org/>

<sup>9</sup> AE 30:28

Unless otherwise noted, all Bible quotations are taken from *The New International Version of the Holy Bible*, © 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society.



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