

## THE DISCIPLINE OF FASTING

(Taken from the book, *Celebration of Discipline* by Richard Foster)

### WHAT IS FASTING?

In all scriptures, fasting refers to abstaining from food for spiritual purposes. It is like a hunger strike; fasting can be done for health purposes such as a diet. However, the biblical fasting will always be centered on a spiritual purpose.

### The Scriptures Describe Different Types of Fasts

**The normal fast:** This involves abstaining from solid foods and liquids, but not water. During the forty days Jesus fasted, it is said that He did not eat anything, and before finishing his fast, “he was hungry” thus, Satan tempted him to eat, which means he abstained from food, but not water (Luke 4:2).

**The partial fast:** The Bible describes the partial fast, which is to have a limited diet, but not total abstinence from food. Though the normal fast seems to be one of Prophet Daniel’s habitual practices, there was a time when he prayed for three weeks, while not eating anything; he had no meat, no wine, and he did not anoint himself (Daniel 10:3).

**The total fast:** There are several examples in the scriptures where we read about total fasts, in other words abstinence from food and water. Sometimes, these fasts seem to happen during spontaneous emergencies in search of desperate help. When Esther realized that an execution awaited her and her people. She told Mordecai, “Go and gather together all the Jews of Susa and fast for me. Do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. My maids and I will do the same” (Esther 4:16). Paul fasted for three days after his encounter with the living Christ (Acts 9:9). In addition, I’d like to clarify that a total fast shouldn’t be done unless God commands you to do so.

### IS FASTING A COMMANDMENT?

Nowhere in the Bible do we find laws that require us to fast on a regular basis, neither do we find a commandment to fast. However, we do find examples of individuals who regularly fasted such as: Moses, David, Elijah, Esther, Daniel, Hannah, Paul, and Jesus.

Several great Christians in the history of the Church fasted and witnessed their values such as: Martin Luther, John Calvin, John Wesley, Jonathan Edwards, and others.

Christ gives instructions on how to fast in the Sermon of the Mountain. He said, “And when you fast, don’t make it obvious, as the hypocrites do” (Matthew 6:16). Christ did not say, “If you fast” neither did he say, “you have to fast”. He seems to assume that people would do it, thus, instructions would be needed in order to fast correctly.

### THE PURPOSE OF FASTING

**Fasting must forever be centered on God.** We need to be close to God and experience a deep relationship with Him like Hannah did in 1 Samuel 1-2. We must worship and fast at the same time.

**Fasting reveals the things that control us.** We try to cover what is inside of us with food and other things, but once we fast those things stand out. If pride controls us, it will be revealed

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immediately, David said, “I wept *and chastened* my soul with fasting” (Psalm 69:10). If there is anger, bitterness, jealousy, strife, and fear inside of us, these things will stand out during the fast. First, we will reason that our anger, for example, is due to the hunger we are experiencing, then we will discover that we are not angry because we are hungry, but because the spirit of anger is oppressing us. Thankfully, we can rejoice in the fact that healing is found in the power of Christ.

**Fasting helps us keep a balance in our life:** It is easy to allow what is unimportant to take over our lives. We are quick to desire things that we do not need and then we become slaves to those things. Paul wrote the following, “All things are lawful for me, but all things are not helpful. All things are lawful for me, but I will not be brought under the power of any” (1 Corinthians 6:12). “But I discipline my body and bring *it* into subjection” (1 Corinthians 9:27). David wrote, “I humbled myself with fasting” (Psalm 35:13). This is not ascetism, it is discipline and discipline brings freedom.

## HOW TO PRACTICE A SPIRITUAL FAST

**Purify your motivations.** The purpose of a spiritual fast is to worship Christ and focus on Him. The purpose is not to lose weight, nor to go on a hunger strike, nor to save money food.

*<sup>16</sup> “Moreover, when you fast, do not be like the hypocrites, with a sad countenance. For they disfigure their faces that they may appear to men to be fasting. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward. <sup>17</sup> But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, <sup>18</sup> so that you do not appear to men to be fasting, but to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly” (Matthew 6:16-18 NKJV).*

**Start with a partial fast.** It is preferable to learn to walk before learning to run. Many people start to fast for 24 hours and they only have one meal, which means they abstain from two meals. Another excellent way to fast is by having drinks made of fresh fruits. You might be fascinated with the physical aspects this fast produces, but the most important thing during fasting is to take care of your internal attitude of worship. On the outside it is noticeable you are performing your daily tasks, but in the inside, you are in prayer, singing and ministering to the Lord. Finalize your fasting with a light meal of fresh fruits and vegetables, while rejoicing in the inside.

**Then, fast for 24 hours.** Only drink water, but use good quantities of it. You might feel some hunger pain or uncomfot before ending your fasting. Nevertheless, this is not real hunger in your stomach; for years you have been conditioned to feel hunger during certain times of the day. Many people have stomachs that are like spoiled children, and spoiled children need indulgence. Tell your “spoiled” child to “be quiet” and the hunger pain will then leave shortly. You are the master of your stomach, not its slave.

**Fasting has a powerful impact in your life.** Consider having a discipline of fasting one day out of the week for six months. Fasting regularly or weekly had a profound affect in the lives of the first leaders of the Church. An example is John Wesley, who did not want to ordain anyone who did not fast every Wednesday and Friday.