

Fasting

Written by K B Napier
Friday, 11 March 2016 10:26

Many Christians talk about it, so what, really, is fasting? Is it simply not eating and drinking, or is there more to it? And, should we all fast?

Jesus, you might remember, refused to send a large crowd away for fear of their fainting through lack of food:

“Then Jesus called his disciples unto him, and said, I have compassion on the multitude, because they continue with me now three days, and have nothing to eat: and I will not send them away fasting, lest they faint in the way.” (Matthew 15:32)

In this text ‘fasting’ simply means ‘not having eaten’, but, Jesus did not want them to not eat. Yet, on one occasion (there may have been more we do not know of), Jesus counselled disciples that the reason they could not cast out a demon was that it was a particularly stubborn type, so they had to fast and pray.

“Howbeit this kind goeth not out but by prayer and fasting.”

(Matthew 17:21 et al)

The word used in 15:32 is the feminine noun, *nēstis*, which simply means not eating. The word used in 17:21, also a feminine noun, is *nēst eia*, which has several possible meanings. In this context it is obviously fasting as a religious exercise, coupled to prayer, but also voluntary. Yet, though voluntary it was also necessary because of the type of demon being cast out.

Why fast? It seems that the fasting was an act of spiritual determination on the part of the disciples that was greater in effect than the evil stubbornness of the demon. As one who has (rarely) fasted for serious matters, I know that to fast is not just voluntary – it shows a decision to go beyond what is usual to bring something about. As for the prayer: prayer should

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accompany fasting. The prayer itself is not something plucked out of thin air, but is a response to the command of the Holy Spirit to pray. All genuine prayers are of this kind. So, in spiritual terms, the demonic refusal to leave was countered by the stronger determination of God to remove the demon, using human agency to bring it about.

We have yet another Greek word for ‘fasting’ in the case of Cornelius (Acts 10:30), the verb, *nē steuō*.

It is similar in meaning to the ‘religious’ meaning above and is rooted in the feminine noun, *nēstis*

(which itself is rooted in

nēsteuō

). As Vine states, the counsel by Jesus is to direct disciples to what is pure and simple, probably as an antidote to the complexities of Pharisaism.

Cornelius was observing the Jewish practice of religious fasting. Many early Christians fasted for the same reason – as a copy of the Judaistic observance. So, his fasting was more of a perceived obligation than a voluntary activity, though from his character we may assume it was intended to be voluntary.

Prayer and fasting appears to have been normal when the apostles called men to the pastorate (but something we do not see today):

“And when they had ordained them elders in every church, and had prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord, on whom they believed.” (Acts 14:23).

Thus, prayer and fasting seems to be the crux of choosing an elder/pastor (both names are synonymous), indicating the seriousness of such a choice. This is contradicted by modern practices of choosing pastors from a short list, as if it were normal employment, and when various attributes are collated and compared. Even in the matter of temporary separation of husband and wife, prayer and fasting is part of the process (1 Corinthians 7:5)... or should be (modern separations or divorces rarely consider God’s will or law).

Note that an adjective, *asitos*, is used to describe the simple act of not eating in Acts 27:33. In this text the word is used as a negative to ‘eating’ (similar to *nēstis*

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In the Old Testament fasting, *tsowm*, was often associated with wearing sack-cloth and ashes/earth, but 'fasting' does not contain any qualifying statement or word, e.g. as in Nehemiah 9:1. Here the Hebrews were confessing their sins as a nation. David, too, used the same word when describing his fasting over being chastened (Psalm 69:10. Also see our article on 'chastening'). David recognised that fasting would bring weakness:

"My knees are weak through fasting; and my flesh faileth of fatness."

(Psalm 109:24). In my own case fasting can bring about headache, weakness and even sneezing! Also, as a diabetic, fasting can have negative effects.

At times God Himself requires men to fast (in the Old Testament):

"Therefore also now, saith the LORD, turn ye even to me with all your heart, and with fasting, and with weeping, and with mourning:" (Joel 2:12)

Here, God is directing his people to repent. Note that he does NOT ask them to tear their clothing, but to tear apart their souls... that is, to be truly repentant and to return to Himself. The people's sins were so advanced they had to show real tears and grief for their bad spiritual state.

Why Fasting? General Notes

Fasting shows seriousness in an approach to God. This can range from Old Testament repentance for national sins to individual sins. Fasting is the abstinence from food; drinking water was excluded, so water was acceptable when fasting.

We are not commanded to fast under the new promises, though some fast when prompted to do so by their own conscience or even by godly leading, for something that is serious. If anyone fasts today it should be to show to the Lord our deep intention to listen and obey, and to seek his compassion, forgiveness, or guidance. This is a one-to-one activity, and is not required normally.

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As I have discovered myself, there are bodily problems with fasting from food, especially if one fasts for too long (more than a day). In my own case I lasted for about 24 hours, but then felt 'fuzzy' in the head, so had to stop – especially as I was asked to drive my son to his place of work. In between, I drank water flavoured with lime, several glassfuls at a time. With the fast came prayer to the Lord.

We should note that when Jesus spoke of fasting, He told those who fasted to keep themselves washed and fresh, and not to show discomfort, whether in the face or in what was worn. Fasting, then, is very much an individual action that should not be made known to others – like prayer. (See Matthew 6:16-18). As the text tells us, when we do this in all humility, God rewards us for our faithfulness.

Note also that when Jesus said "When you fast..." He was not commanding us to fast (the particle, 'when', *hotan*, can have other meanings, including 'if'). Rather, IF people fast they must bear in mind certain factors. Too many Christians think that because something is mentioned in scripture, it is a command to us today. This is not necessarily so. And, when Jesus gave His counsel. He was talking to men still under Old Testament Mosaic laws. These laws do not apply to Christians, so fasting is a voluntary activity of those whose spirits are prompted by the Holy Spirit, usually before a time of intense prayer for something important.

Conclusion

Christian fasting is not commanded by God. It is done by individuals, secretly, when they are sure they need to give all their attention to God, and when it is accompanied by prayer. No-one should fast for longer than, say, 24 or even 48 hours, and this specially applies to those with conditions where fasting can be harmful. When fasting one should still drink water. And do not drive. The long fasts of both John the Baptist and Jesus (both unique persons) were ultra-special occasions when the Father Himself took care of their bodies, so their fasts were not models for us to follow.

Remember that even something like fasting can become a fad, when it is constantly repeated for no real reason other than poor interpretation of scripture, or church group fashion! Then, fasting is just as fashionable as any other fad, with no spiritual worth, detracting from genuine spirituality.

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