

Fasting as a Family

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By Kim Butts

Fasting might seem like a somewhat strange topic to introduce into the family setting. In many cultures today, the regular practice of fasting is virtually unheard of – even in the Christian community. However, if you carefully consider Scripture in light of its living and active message for our lives today, you will see how relevant fasting is as we mature in our walk with Christ. If your family will endeavor to learn about and begin to practice this vital spiritual discipline as the Holy Spirit leads you, the Lord will honor your obedience.

Fasting can be defined as abstaining from food – doing without that which is essential for life in order to pray and draw closer to God. Fasting is also defined as the period of time during which one does without food. It is very important to note that the act of fasting, if not done in humility for the purpose of prayer and intimacy with God, serves no purpose. More time should be spent focusing on the Father. Fasting must be accompanied with the action of prayer.

My husband likes to call fasting the STP of prayer. (STP is an additive to boost the performance of your car's engine). Who wouldn't like an extra boost to achieve a deeper level of communication with the Father? After sharing some of the main reasons why fasting is a scriptural practice for today, I will share some practical ways for your family to enter into this discipline together.

Here are some of the reasons why Christians fast today based upon Scripture. I would suggest taking one at a time and teaching your family. Then, check below to find some practical applications to practice and learn together. Wouldn't it be God honoring and

powerful to raise up this next generation to seek His face with prayer and fasting? Can you imagine how His power will be poured out upon His people as they honor and obey Him in this way?

We fast:

1. Because Jesus indicates that we should. In Matthew 6:16-17, Jesus says, “*When you fast...*” He does not say, “If,” which would imply that we may decide for ourselves. He says, “When,” which clearly suggests that He intends for us to fast. Interestingly enough, in this same passage of Scripture (Matthew 6:1-18), He speaks of three acts of righteousness: “*When you give...when you pray... when you fast.*” A strong, clear connection between prayer, fasting and giving is made. We will speak more about this later on.

2. When we desire to humble ourselves before God in order to draw closer to Him. Scripture says, “*Come near to God and he will come near to you*” (James 4:8). What is the best way to draw closer to Him? Prayer! Again, James says, “*Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up*” (James 4:10). Doing without that which is essential for life to focus on prayer and intimacy with the Lord, will draw you into a powerful relationship with Him. It is basically saying to the Father, “I desire to know You more personally, and I am willing to give up what is essential in order to do it.” Daniel is a good example of fasting to humble himself before God: “*So I turned to the Lord God and pleaded with him in prayer and petition, in fasting, and in *sackcloth and ashes*” (Daniel 9:3). * Sackcloth and ashes were customarily worn by the Jews as a visible symbol of fasting, mourning, repentance, etc. Jesus, however, said about fasting: “*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). He also says, “*Be careful not to do your ‘acts of righteousness’ before men, to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven*” (Matthew 6:1).

3. As an act of repentance. There are several good examples in Scripture when God’s people recognized their sins and turned back to the Lord in confession and repentance. “*Then Samuel said, ‘Assemble all Israel at Mizpah and I will intercede with the LORD for you.’ When they had assembled at Mizpah, they drew water and poured it out before the LORD. On that day they fasted and there they confessed, ‘We have sinned against the LORD.’ And Samuel was leader of Israel at Mizpah*” (1 Samuel 7:5-6). We have already visited Daniel 9:3 to see that Daniel was pleading with the Lord and fasting on behalf of the Israelites because they had sinned against God. Here is his prayer: “*I prayed to the LORD my God and confessed: ‘O Lord, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with all who love him and obey his commands, we have sinned and done wrong. We have been wicked and have rebelled; we have turned away from your commands and*

laws. We have not listened to your servants the prophets, who spoke in your name to our kings, our princes and our fathers, and to all the people of the land” (Daniel 9:4-6). Nehemiah, upon hearing of the broken-down walls in Jerusalem and the condition of the people, said, *“When I heard these things, I sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven. Then I said: ‘O LORD, God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and obey his commands, let your ear be attentive and your eyes open to hear the prayer your servant is praying before you day and night for your servants, the people of Israel. I confess the sins we Israelites, including myself and my father’s house, have committed against you. We have acted very wickedly toward you. We have not obeyed the commands, decrees and laws you gave your servant Moses”* (Nehemiah 1:4-7).

Of course we can confess and repent without fasting; however, Christians should always be open to the gentle urging of the Holy Spirit if He is directing us to fast as we prayerfully lay down our sins at the feet of Jesus for His cleansing and forgiveness. Remember that our forgiveness doesn’t depend upon our outward acts, but upon the blood of Jesus Christ.

4. When we are interceding on behalf of someone else. David fasted and pleaded with God for the life of his son: *“David pleaded with God for the child. He fasted and went into his house and spent the nights lying on the ground”* (2 Samuel 12:16). Esther, as she prepared to go to the king on behalf of the Jews, fasted for three days. She asked the Jews to fast and pray for her. She was not going to casually come into the presence of the king when the penalty for doing so could mean her death. Instead, she gathered as much prayer support as she could behind her (intercessors), and prayed for favor with the king. *“Go, gather together all the Jews who are in Susa, and fast for me. Do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my maids will fast as you do. When this is done, I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish”* (Esther 4:16). Sometimes we are called to pray for others who are facing difficult or seemingly impossible circumstances. There may be times when the Holy Spirit prompts us to fast so that our prayer effort on their behalf is strengthened.

5. When we are seeking wisdom or direction. The early Church spent much time in prayer and fasting as they sought the Lord’s direction. When the Lord revealed that Barnabas and Saul were to be set apart as missionaries, they obediently did so. *“In the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen (who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch) and Saul. 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.’ So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off”* (Acts 13:1-3). Sometimes, when facing a difficult decision, or an uncertainty in life, fasting and prayer will help us to focus more clearly so that we can more readily discern the will of the Father.

6. When serving God. Many Christians are called by God to spend many hours each day interceding for others. A good biblical example is Anna: *“There was also a prophetess, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was very old; she had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, and then was a widow until she was eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying”* (Luke 2:36-37). Perhaps the very reason for her service was to pray for the coming of Jesus. Because of her faithful service, the Lord allowed her to proclaim the existence and presence of Jesus Christ in the temple where she had given so many years of her life: *“Coming up to them at that very moment, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem”* (Luke 2:38).

The All-Powerful God has chosen, to a certain extent, to limit the working of His power to the prayers of His people. We can serve Him as we respond to the urging of the Holy Spirit to intercede on behalf of people and situations. Sometimes the situation may call for us to fast for a period of time. If we desire to serve the Lord, we need to be good listeners, so that we can obediently do the work He has for us to do in prayer. If we have prepared our hearts and minds, and practiced the disciplines of prayer and fasting, we will be ready to serve.

7. When facing a crisis. Many people have been fasting and praying lately for the United States. This nation is in moral and spiritual crisis. Therefore, large numbers of Christians have been led to fast and pray during various times – before elections, when Congress is voting on particular issues affecting morality, when major decisions are being considered by government leaders, for the Church to wake up and be revived, etc. There are many nations where this is the case, and the need for intercessors is great. As mentioned before, Esther faced a crisis when the Jews stood to be annihilated at the hands of King Xerxes. She determined to go to the king on behalf of the Jews, at the risk of death. Because she and the Jews had come before the Lord for three days of prayer and fasting, Esther was welcomed into the presence of the king to make her petition, and the Jews were saved. Perhaps your family, or people you know, are facing a crisis. Or, perhaps your nation is in a moral freefall. Christians all over the world are being martyred for their faith...this should grieve us into action. Is the Lord calling you to fasting and prayer?

8. When we need protection. *“There, by the Ahava Canal, I proclaimed a fast, so that we might humble ourselves before our God and ask him for a safe journey for us and our children, with all our possessions. I was ashamed to ask the king for soldiers and horsemen to protect us from enemies on the road, because we had told the king, ‘The gracious hand of our God is on everyone who looks to him, but his great anger is against all who forsake him.’ So we fasted and petitioned our God about this, and he answered our prayer”* (Ezra 8:21-23). These were the words of Ezra, who sought the Lord’s protection for a large group of people.

A Word of Caution: Learn to Fast for the Right Reasons

The act of fasting can often lend itself to the very thing it is intended to guard against – pride. If an individual is not careful, the act of fasting can be used with and/or for the wrong intentions: to be seen by others, or to inflate one’s own sense of “spirituality.” If a person fasts, but carries on a life that is not pleasing to God while he does so, the Lord is not under any obligation to honor his prayers. In fact, He has some serious things to say about fasting for the wrong reasons: *“For day after day they seek me out; they seem eager to know my ways, as if they were a nation that does what is right and has not forsaken the commands of its God. They ask me for just decisions and seem eager for God to come near them. ‘Why have we fasted,’ they say, ‘and you have not seen it? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you have not noticed?’ Yet on the day of your fasting, you do as you please and exploit all your workers. Your fasting ends in quarreling and strife, and in striking each other with wicked fists. You cannot fast as you do today and expect your voice to be heard on high. Is this the kind of fast I have chosen, only a day for a man to humble himself? Is it only for bowing one’s head like a reed and for lying on sackcloth and ashes? Is that what you call a fast, a day acceptable to the LORD?”* (Isaiah 58:2-5)

Instead, God shares the fast that He prefers: *“Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—when you see the naked, to clothe him, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood? Then your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear; then your righteousness will go before you, and the glory of the LORD will be your rear guard. Then you will call, and the LORD will answer; you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I. If you do away with the yoke of oppression, with the pointing finger and malicious talk, and if you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed, then your light will rise in the darkness, and your night will become like the noonday. The LORD will guide you always; he will satisfy your needs in a sun-scorched land and will strengthen your frame. You will be like a well-watered garden, like a spring whose waters never fail”* (Isaiah 58:6-11).

Joel called for a rending of hearts and not of garments, such as the sackcloth and ashes that many Jews would dress in while fasting. *“Even now, declares the Lord, ‘return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning.’ Rend your heart and not your garments. Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, and he relents from sending calamity. Who knows? He may turn and have pity and leave behind a blessing—grain offerings and drink offerings for the Lord your God. Blow the trumpet in Zion, declare a holy fast, call a sacred assembly”* (Joel 2:12-15).

Wrong actions while fasting: prideful heart and attitude, fasting only to be seen by others (sackcloth and ashes, tearing clothes), harming or oppressing others, quarreling and strife, being unkind...doing anything that is opposite of what is mentioned below.

Right actions while fasting: fasting in secret, fasting with a humble heart, desiring to draw closer to God, spending the time in prayer, giving to others, serving, satisfying the needs of the oppressed, sharing food with the hungry, providing the homeless with shelter, clothing the naked, taking care of family, doing away with malicious talk.

Practical Ideas to Practice the Discipline of Fasting:

It is, first of all, important to know that God is not so concerned with the kind of fast you undertake, or the length of your fast, or by what you fast from (if it is different from food). Some people are unable to fast from food due to health reasons. Or, you may have young children in your family, who don't yet understand the purpose of fasting. The Lord is not a legalistic God – He is a loving Father. His only concern is that your heart is right before Him, and that your reasons for fasting are pure:

A. Drawing closer to God – as you fast, ask Him to reveal Himself to you in fresh, new ways. Spend time being quiet before Him. Worship the Lord with singing and the reading of Psalms. Ask Him to develop the fruit of the Spirit in your life...and then watch carefully to see how He works over the next several days and weeks. For example, if you asked Him to teach you patience...watch to see how your patience is tried. Or gentleness... see if He doesn't bring you opportunities to be more tender. After a time, come together as a family and talk about how you have come closer to God, and how He has drawn nearer to you.

B. Repentance – as you fast, confess to the Lord those things which you have done that are not pleasing to Him. Ask the Holy Spirit to reveal anything that you might not have thought about. As you seek His forgiveness, be prepared also to receive His forgiveness.

C. Interceding for someone else – as you fast, bring before the Lord those people who have asked you to pray for them...or pray for the missionaries from your church...or for the children at school, or for a family who has lost their home due to a fire, etc. There are so many needs. Pray for a people group, for a nation, for your own nation, for your city, etc.

D. When you are seeking wisdom and direction – if you have a decision to make, or you need wisdom to make a correct choice, etc., try seeking the Lord's direction as you fast and pray.

E. Serving God – Remember the right actions present in fasting? Maybe your family could help out a local ministry in some way. Volunteer together at a soup kitchen or food pantry to help feed the hungry. Write letters of encouragement or send cards to family members you haven't communicated with in a long time. Purchase or give away good used clothing for a homeless shelter. The list of needs is endless.

F. Facing a crisis – the next time there is a crisis in your family, or in someone else's... could you fast and pray for God to resolve the crisis?

G. Needing protection – from illness, from evil, from temptation? When one or more family members or someone else you know is in need of protection, are you willing to fast and pray?

ADDITIONAL IDEAS:

1. How much time does it take to prepare, eat and clean up after an average meal in your home? For example – if your family spends a collective time of 90 minutes for an average meal, try spending that same amount of time praying instead of eating. You will only be fasting from one meal, but you will have given yourselves a wonderful opportunity to draw near to God.
2. First Friday Fasts – this movement is sweeping the world. Thousands of Christians are fasting on the first Friday of every month for specific purposes. Perhaps you could choose to pray for missionaries, unsaved family and friends, or an unreached people group.
3. Has someone asked you to pray for them? Are you willing to give up a meal to do so?
4. Write down things that are very important to you – things that could be “idols” in your lives. Could you do without those things for one day...one week...one month? Could you take the same amount of time you would have spent on television, or on golf, or on playing video games, etc. and spend that time in prayer? Fasting from “things” can be a very good spiritual discipline as well. This is also a good kind of “fast” for anyone in the family who has a medical condition which will not allow them to fast – or for very young children who have not yet grasped the significance of doing without food for spiritual reasons.
5. As a family, write down special foods or treats that you especially enjoy. Could you give them up for a period of time? For example – if your family enjoys pizza one night a week – could you give it up? Could you fast that meal instead? Or eat something else? Maybe bread and water? Could you donate the money you didn’t spend on the pizza to a soup kitchen, or buy some canned goods for the local food bank?
6. Try a 24 hour fast. Here is a good one for stretching your family in the area of fasting: Have a meal together on Friday night (or whatever night you choose). Then, fast until the next night’s meal. You will only miss the morning meal and the noon meal, but you will have fasted for 24 hours. Spend some time together devotionally several times during that 24-hour period. Or, give each family member a devotional assignment to do individually.
7. When you fast, consider giving: In the second century, Hemas said that the real fast is living a good life, pleasing to the Lord. He also spoke of a fast in which only bread and water are eaten and the money which otherwise would be spent is saved to be spent on charity. Try eating only bread and water for a meal, or even for a day. Then, donate the money you would have spent on food as a family to a missionary, local ministry, your church, or anything else God may lay upon your hearts.

It is my prayer that your family will have a life-changing experience as you practice the discipline of fasting. Please do not succumb to guilt or legalism as you learn. The enemy will try to dissuade and confuse you. Stay firmly rooted and grounded in the Word.

“Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded...Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up” (James 4:7-8, 10).

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