

Hungering for God

A Biblical Examination of Fasting

Part A- Should 21st Century Believers Fast? Is Fasting Biblical?

Lesson 5- Christian Fasting is Feasting

Colossians 1:25-29

25 Of *this church* I was made a minister according to the stewardship from God bestowed on me for your benefit, so that I might fully carry out the *preaching of the word of God*,

26 *that is*, the mystery which has been hidden from the *past* ages and generations, but has now been manifested to His saints,

27 to whom God willed to make known what is the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.

28 We proclaim Him, admonishing every man and teaching every man with all wisdom, so that we may present every man complete in Christ.

29 For this purpose also I labor, striving according to His power, which mightily works within me.

Fasting Belongs in the Kingdom of God

Keith Main wrote,

“The prayer life of the New Testament is a sign of the inbreaking of the Kingdom of God. Fasting is no longer consistent with the joyous and thankful attitude that marks the Fellowship.”¹

But through what we have already studied- we see that Main's comment is an overstatement. Yes, the Kingdom has *already* come- but only in one sense. Yes, there is deep drinking right now in the “end-time Glory” that is manifested in Jesus Christ and by His Spirit. But, *no*, this experience is *not* so full and *not* so uninterrupted that *all* aching and *all* longing and *all* desiring are completely overcome.

Even Main himself begins to back of and admit this when he says,

“It is true that the crisis and the tragedy are there as a stark reality. The Kingdom is not fully realized yet. Granted, that the Bridegroom is present and now is not an appropriate time to mourn. Yet this is not entirely so, for we are still in the flesh and weak in faith... Within this ‘bitter struggle’ the believer, in his devotional life, might conceivably find

¹ *Prayer and Fasting: A Study in the Devotional Life of the Early Church*, page 83

occasion to fast. It would be only one among many of the ingredients that go to make up the life of the man in Christ.”²

That's right. The current Presence of the Bridegroom through His Spirit in the absolute Triumph of Forgiveness and Fellowship does *not* make fasting obsolete- but it *does* make it new.

Fasting as an Expression of a Holy Discontentment

As an act of faith- Christian fasting is an expression of dissatisfied contentment in the all-sufficiency of the Person and Work of Jesus Christ. And what I mean by that is that Christians are those who are *entirely* satisfied with all that Christ has *already* done for us in His Life, Ministry, Death, and Resurrection. And nothing we do or say or think should ever intimate that we are dissatisfied with any of that. But that is not *all* that we are. We are also those who are...

Hebrews 11:10b

... looking for the city which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God.

We are also those who ...

2Corinthians 5:2b

... groan, longing to be clothed with our dwelling from heaven

... and we are also those who desire that the...

Ephesians 1:17b-23

17 ...God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give to you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of Him.

18 *I pray that* the eyes of your heart may be enlightened, so that you will know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints,

19 and what is the surpassing greatness of His power toward us who believe. *These are in* accordance with the working of the strength of His might

20 which He brought about in Christ, when He raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly *places,*

21 far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come.

22 And He put all things in subjection under His feet, and gave Him as head over all things to the church,

23 which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all.

So Christian fasting does *not* tremble in the hope of earning anything from Christ. It looks *away* from itself to the final Payment of Calvary for every blessing

² Ibid p. 84

it will ever receive. So Christian fasting is *not* merely “self-wrought discipline” that tries to *deserve* more from God. It is a genuine hunger for God that has been *awakened* by the “Meal” that has *already* been given in the Gospel. So Christian fasting is actually “feasting” even further on God precisely because we have *already* “tasted and seen that the Lord is Good!” (**Psalm 34:8**) So fasting illustrates our holy “discontentment” in appreciating that which Christ has already provided while longing for that which Christ will bring with Him when He returns.

Christian Fasting *Affirms* the Goodness of Food

And this is *why* the warnings that we saw earlier from the Apostle Paul are *not* objections to fasting itself- but only against the *distortions* that fasting might cause in some people.

1 Timothy 4:1-5

1 But the Spirit explicitly says that in later times some will fall away from the faith, paying attention to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons,

2 by means of the hypocrisy of liars seared in their own conscience as with a branding iron,

3 men who forbid marriage *and advocate* abstaining from foods which God has created to be gratefully shared in by those who believe and know the truth.

4 For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with gratitude;

5 for it is sanctified by means of the word of God and prayer.

Paul’s praise here for the overall “Goodness” of food and for the Freedom of the Christian to enjoy *all* that God has made is *not* an inherent contradiction to fasting. So the Christian says, “Yes!” to

James 1:17

Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow.

So fasting is *not* us saying “No!” to the “Goodness” of food or to the Generosity of God in providing it. Rather it is a way of saying- from time to time- that having more of the Giver is preferred to rejoicing over the gift.

For example- if a married couple forgoes sexual intimacy for a season in order to deal with a problem that is driving them apart- this is *not* a rejection of the gift of sex. It is simply saying that being in right standing with the Giver of sex (that has been negatively affected by the problem) is more important- *at that time*- than rejoicing over the gift itself. So in *that* sense- this “forgoing” would actually be an expression of love.

So food is Good. *All* food is Good. *Every* creature is “clean” and we are able to eat them- because it has been sanctified by the Word of God and prayer. So food is Good. But God is better. And *normally*- we meet with God *in* His Good gifts and

we turn every enjoyment of those gifts into worship with thanksgiving. And God is honored and our joy is made full.

But from time to time- we need to set *aside* the good gift of food in order to assure that our hearts have not become so enamored with the goodness of the gift that we no longer see and savor God.

Christian Fasting is *Not* the Glory of Human Willpower

The great danger that Paul saw in "self-made" and "self-exalting" fasting does *not* make Christian fasting in and of itself- obsolete. Paul was warning that there exists a fasting where:

Colossians 2:23b

... self-made religion and self-abasement and severe treatment of the body, *but are of no value against fleshly indulgence.*

In other words- what Paul was denouncing is "willpower religion"- the kind of stoicism or Gnostic mysticism that attracts undiscerning people for no other reason than it is "against the flesh". Paul taught that *those* exercises actually stir up even *more* sinful passions in people- precisely because they are not of God.

But true Christian fasting is much different. Biblical fasting moves from broken and contrite poverty of spirit to sweet satisfaction in the free Mercy of Jesus Christ to ever greater desires and enjoyments of God's *inexhaustible* Grace. Therefore, Christian fasting does not encourage the boasting that comes from "will power religion"- it rests- with childlike contentment in the firmly accomplished justification of God in Christ- while all the while- continuing to long and hunger for however much of the fullness of God is possible in this life.

So Christian fasting is the normal and natural *response* to what Christ has already done *in us* and *for us*. Therefore- it *cannot* bring forth the pride and arrogance that *always* comes from those who engage in any duty or feat of accomplishment. It simply rejoices in the fruit of being filled with God's Spirit.

Galatians 5:19-26

19 Now the deeds of the flesh are evident, which are: immorality, impurity, sensuality,

20 idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions,

21 envying, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these, of which I forewarn you, just as I have forewarned you, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

22 But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness,

23 gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.

24 Now those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.

25 If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit.

26 Let us not become boastful, challenging one another, envying one another.

All Eating is *Lawful* but not all Eating is *Profitable*

Because Paul understood Grace properly- he was free to fast or not to fast.

1 Corinthians 6:12-20

12 All things are lawful for me, but not all things are profitable. All things are lawful for me, but I will not be mastered by anything.

13 Food is for the stomach and the stomach is for food, but God will do away with both of them. Yet the body is not for immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord is for the body.

14 Now God has not only raised the Lord, but will also raise us up through His power.

15 Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Shall I then take away the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? May it never be!

16 Or do you not know that the one who joins himself to a prostitute is one body *with her*? For He says, "*THE TWO SHALL BECOME ONE FLESH.***"**

17 But the one who joins himself to the Lord is one spirit *with Him*.

18 Flee immorality. Every *other* sin that a man commits is outside the body, but the immoral man sins against his own body.

19 Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own?

20 For you have been bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body.

And so the reason Paul was free to fast or not to fast was because the "act" of fasting was *not* the essential thing. Engaging in it (or *not* engaging in it) to the Glory of God was the essential thing!

Romans 14:6

He who observes the day, observes it for the Lord, and he who eats, does so for the Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and he who eats not, for the Lord he does not eat, and gives thanks to God.

Therefore, fasting gives Glory to God only when it is engaged in as a gift from God that is focused on knowing and enjoying more of God. God is glorified the best in us when we are pursuing- in thought, word, and deed- that our delight in Him becomes full. And we may do this- *not* merely by eating or fasting- but by *gratefully* eating *or gratefully* fasting.

The many gifts that God gives are *not* designed to be an end to themselves. And that is why we end up in idolatry when we focus only on the good gifts of God. Therefore, eating is not designed by God to fill us up and to nourish our bodies and then stop. *All* of God's gifts- including eating the food that God provides- are designed by God on purpose to leave a hunger for Him- that is beyond the capacity of the gift itself to fulfill. Therefore- periodic fasting *from* those gifts puts that hunger to rest.

Is it Correct New Testament Theology for a Christian to “Discipline His Body”?

It is misleading at best- without careful and thorough qualification- to say (as Keith Main and others do) that:

“Paul ... deliberately diverted the disciples’ attention away from fasting and any form of food asceticism and into prayer, service, and toil on behalf of the Kingdom”³

I absolutely agree with the *second* part of this statement but not the first part. I would suggest that Paul diverted our attention *toward* fasting- *not* as religious ritual designed to incur God’s Favor, and also *not* as an end in itself- but as a weapon in the ongoing fight of faith. Twice when Paul was cataloguing his trials- he mentioned going without eating.

2Corinthians 6:3-10

3 giving no cause for offense in anything, so that the ministry will not be discredited,
4 but in everything commending ourselves as servants of God, in much endurance, in afflictions, in hardships, in distresses,
5 in beatings, in imprisonments, in tumults, in labors, in sleeplessness, in hunger,
6 in purity, in knowledge, in patience, in kindness, in the Holy Spirit, in genuine love,
7 in the word of truth, in the power of God; by the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and the left,
8 by glory and dishonor, by evil report and good report; *regarded* as deceivers and yet true;
9 as unknown yet well-known, as dying yet behold, we live; as punished yet not put to death,
10 as sorrowful yet always rejoicing, as poor yet making many rich, as having nothing yet possessing all things.

2Corinthians 11:22-30

22 Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they descendants of Abraham? So am I.
23 Are they servants of Christ? — I speak as if insane — I more so; in far more labors, in far more imprisonments, beaten times without number, often in danger of death.
24 Five times I received from the Jews thirty-nine *lashes*.
25 Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, a night and a day I have spent in the deep.
26 *I have been* on frequent journeys, in dangers from rivers, dangers from robbers, dangers from *my* countrymen, dangers from the Gentiles, dangers in the city, dangers in the wilderness, dangers on the sea, dangers among false brethren;
27 *I have been* in labor and hardship, through many sleepless nights, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure.

³ *Prayer and Fasting: A Study in the Devotional Life of the Early Church*, p. 60

28 Apart from *such* external things, there is the daily pressure on me *of* concern for all the churches.

29 Who is weak without my being weak? Who is led into sin without my intense concern?

30 If I have to boast, I will boast of what pertains to my weakness.

Now it is *possible* in both of these accounts that Paul was merely relating his lack of food due to his intense circumstances- *not* that God had led him to fast. But *that* understanding would have been out of context with what also said about “disciplining his body”:

1Corinthians 9:23-27

23 I do all things for the sake of the gospel, so that I may become a fellow partaker of it.

24 Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but *only* one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win.

25 Everyone who competes in the games exercises self-control in all things. They then *do it* to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable.

26 Therefore I run in such a way, as not without aim; I box in such a way, as not beating the air;

27 but I discipline my body and make it my slave, so that, after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified.

This Passage shows us that the Apostle Paul understood that *some* ascetic discipline was useful as a weapon in the fight of faith and that he personally engaged in it. And he used the rigorous training that athletes who participated in the “**Games**” went through so they could “**receive the prize**” as an example of how *all* believers are to be focused and disciplined in their daily walk with God.

Again, I am *not* suggesting here that we should all become monks in a monastery. But what I *am* suggesting is that the “pull of the world” on our flesh is so strong and so pervasive that believers need weapons to use in the ongoing battle to “walk by faith and not by sight”. And I am suggesting that- *periodically*- we should *pull away* from the hustle and bustle of our busy lives and *push away* from the table and *turn off* the machines and get alone with God so we can:

Psalms 34:8b

... taste and see that the Lord is good; How blessed is the man who takes refuge in Him!

So “holding fast to Christ by faith” is the key to not being “**disqualified**”. So fasting is not a tool that makes us qualified- it is one of the weapons that God gives to believers to help them hold on to Jesus and not grow weary and lose heart.

Hebrews 12:1-3

12 Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us,

2 fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

3 For consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

This is what Paul meant when he said,

Colossians 1:22b&23

22 ... He has now reconciled you in His fleshly body through death, in order to present you before Him holy and blameless and beyond reproach —

23 if indeed you continue in the faith firmly established and steadfast, and not moved away from the hope of the gospel that you have heard, which was proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, was made a minister.

So in order for any of us to be presented before God “**holy and blameless and beyond reproach**”- we must do two things:

1. Continue in the Faith (firmly established and steadfast)
2. Not be moved away from the Hope of the Gospel

And yes, it is true that God will do that *sovereignly* by Grace. But it is *also* true that the “means” by which God will sovereignly do that in us- is by us persevering in the fight against everything that would hinder that. So “persevering faith” is the key to standing before God acceptable in the last day.

And Paul taught that one of the “means” that God has given that helps us persevere in faith- is “**disciplining the body** (flesh)”. Paul was well aware that the desires of the flesh are deceitful as well as temporarily delightful.

Ephesians 4:17-24

17 So this I say, and affirm together with the Lord, that you walk no longer just as the Gentiles also walk, in the futility of their mind,

18 being darkened in their understanding, excluded from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the hardness of their heart;

19 and they, having become callous, have given themselves over to sensuality for the practice of every kind of impurity with greediness.

20 But you did not learn Christ in this way,

21 if indeed you have heard Him and have been taught in Him, just as truth is in Jesus,

22 that, in reference to your former manner of life, you lay aside the old self, which is being corrupted in accordance with the lusts of deceit,

23 and that you be renewed in the spirit of your mind,

24 and put on the new self, which in *the likeness of God* has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth.

The nature of the "lusts of deceit" is that they lure us very subtly and quietly into believing that living for the fleeting pleasures of body and mind will bring us more joy and satisfaction than the spiritual delights of knowing and obeying God. And these pleasures begin with innocent delights in food and reading and resting and playing and relaxing- but very quickly- these things become very cruel tyrants that demand our full attention and expect our loyalty. And it doesn't take long until we are held captive by them as they choke off any spiritual hunger for God.

So Paul disciplined his body to put himself to the test. Has he already been overcome by these deceitful lusts? Does he still hunger for God? Is his faith real and powerful? Is he just going through the motions and worshipping God with his lips while his heart is a slave to comfort and pleasure? You can hear the earnestness of his heart when he said:

1Corinthians 6:12b

... I will not be mastered by anything

1Corinthians 9:27b

... I discipline my body and make it my slave, so that, after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified.

This is *not* the pride of Stoic self-exaltation. It is the passionate resolve to resist *anything* that would lure his heart away from the all-controlling satisfaction in God. Listen to the testimony of a young man that illustrates the kind of discipline of the body that Paul was talking about.

"I grew up on the mission field in Korea. There is one experience that is emblazoned on my mind to show the sacrificial dedication to prayer and fasting in Korea. My father worked with a leper colony and they had a prayer meeting that met at four o'clock in the morning. I was a little boy, but my father took me with him- getting me up at 3:30 am so we could get there on time. He sat me down in the back where I could see out the door. And I'll never forget one man who had no legs, no crutches and was using his hands and crabbing along the ground- dragging his body to pray at 4am. I'll never forget that."

Rising early to pray is a *form* of fasting. It is saying that periodically rising to meet with God is better than enjoying the good gift of sleep. And when I say that- I'm *not* advocating that we neglect sleep to the point of harming our bodies. I am simply saying that this is an example of what Paul was talking about.

You see, when we make choices like that- we do so out of seeing the need to make war on the deceitfulness of our desires and- at the same time- we declare the *preciousness* of prayer and the all-surpassing Value of God.

So is Fasting a Christian Thing to Do?

Yes- if it flows out from the Confidence of Jesus Christ and if it is sustained by the Power of Jesus Christ and aims at the Glory of Jesus Christ. Therefore, over every Christian fast- this banner should fly,

Philippians 3:7-11

7 But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ.

8 More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ,

9 and may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from *the* Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which *comes* from God on the basis of faith,

10 that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death;

11 in order that I may attain to the resurrection from the dead.

In fasting- as well as in all other privations- every "loss" is for the sake of "gaining Christ". And this doesn't mean that we seek to gain a Christ that we do not already have in fullness. Nor does it mean that our progress in God depends solely on what we do.

In the very next verse- Paul makes the dynamics of the entire Christian life very clear- including fasting- when he said:

Philippians 3:12

I press on so that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus.

This is the very essence of Christian fasting. We ache and yearn to fast- so that by periodically forgoing the good gifts of food and relaxation- we come to know more and more of all that God is for us in Jesus. But only because He has *already* "laid hold" on us and is drawing us ever forward and upward into "all the fullness of God".

My prayer for this Church is that God will awaken us to a new hunger for Him. *Not* because we haven't *already* tasted the New Wine of Christ's Presence- but precisely because we *have*. And so now we hunger for *more* of His Presence and Power in our midst.

Amen. Come Lord Jesus. The Grace of our Lord be with your spirit. Be watchful and quicken your pace. To the Glory of God Alone.

Blair Bradley
Gulfport, Mississippi
June 2015

Recap

1. What is the basic argument that some give as to why Christians living under the New Covenant have no need to fast? _____

2. Why is this argument faulty? _____

3. What is a "Holy Discontentment"? _____

4. What was the Apostle Paul warning us about in **1Timothy 4:1-5** in relation to "abstaining from foods"? _____

5. How is that not a prohibition on fasting? _____

6. How is the exercise of human willpower dangerous? _____

7. How are we to eat or not eat? _____

8. What is the concept of "disciplining the body"? _____

9. Explain how us "persevering in faith" is a Work of the Spirit and not merely an exercise of human willpower or endurance. _____

10. What are the "lusts of deceit"? _____

11. So should Christians fast? _____

Notes: