

Summer With Jesus Week 6

God Time – Fasting

Use a prayer journal. After you read the passages jot down what “jumped out” at you while reading. Then take a few minutes to write a prayer response to what you have read.

There are only five days of reading provided so if you miss a day you have time to catch up. Do not get legalistic! If you miss a day or even a week...God still loves you!

Monday: Hebrews 12:2

Tuesday: Isaiah 58:5-6

Wednesday: Philippians 3:13

Thursday: Matthew 6:5

Friday: Matthew 6:33

Diving Deeper

Understanding the context, look at Matthew 6:16-19 and discuss what Jesus is saying about fasting?

Jesus says that “when you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show others they are fasting...” In verse 16 Jesus is telling us just like prayer, there is a right way and a wrong way to fast. Here again Jesus is pointing out that it is not a question of if you fast, but when you fast. He is turning His focus on the heart of the one fasting. Are we fasting merely to impress other people, or are we fasting to communicate and connect with our Father in Heaven? One way is wrong and gains nothing from God, while the other way is correct and gives opportunity to hear from God. Jesus says the wrong way to fast invariably involves visible facial expressions to demonstrate to others that they are sacrificing something to gain favor with God. Do not seek to draw attention to yourself merely to show others that you are fasting. The pharisees were good at this. They wanted everyone to look at them and see that because they fasted God held them in special favor. Jesus says that is not fasting. They were fasting to be seen. The Pharisees wanted attention and approval for their fasting discipline. So, they made a point of showing their discomfort on their faces. Jesus said this is a

hypocritical way of fasting, because the point of the exercise became impressing men, not obeying God.

So, how should we fast? We should fast in secret and for the praises of God alone. Don't boast about what you are giving up. Just go about your normal routine of day-to-day life and don't show that you are fasting. Our Father in Heaven sees your devotion and He will reward you in the Kingdom.

Why has fasting fallen out of practice?

Perhaps the reason, is that Christians lack an appreciation for what it accomplishes spiritually. The principal purpose in denying our body nourishment or giving up something we depend on is to gain practical experience in disciplining the desires of the flesh. The Bible says sin dwells in our body, in our flesh, and our sinful flesh exerts an influence on our spirit, on our will. Our flesh has a mind of its own, and it's determined to get its way in opposition to the Spirit's desires. Therefore, if we are going to walk according to the Spirit, we must learn to actively resist our flesh's desires. Resisting the flesh requires strength, spiritually speaking, and like any muscle, you must develop that strength by repetition. So, we must practice disciplining our flesh, resisting its desires while attending to our spirit, so that we might become stronger in this battle. Fasting helps us discipline our body to resist the sins we are tempted by.

What are some of the benefits of fasting?

Fasting is a safe way to practice denying the flesh, because even if you fail, you won't be sinning, since eating or giving up something is not a sin. As you begin to regularly fast, you build spiritual strength, and as such, you are better able to gain control over your body. You will become better at controlling the body's lustful desire for other, more dangerous desires. We humble ourselves. We turn our thoughts back to the Lord. We reduce our attachment to the world.

Often, we see scripture where praying and fasting are mentioned together. In Luke 2:37, in referencing Anna, the scripture reads, "and then was a widow until she was eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshipped night and day, fasting and praying. When can fasting be a hindrance to prayer?

Read Isaiah 58:3-9. After the fall of Jerusalem, the number of days of fasting increased. Fasting is intended to lead to self-denial, repentance, and a humble spirit along with the care for others. But as fasting increased and became more prevalent, there was an attitude of bitterness. The Israelites did not humble themselves and they began to reclaim Hebrew slaves. They were

unrighteous and harmful to others. Listen to the words of 58:3-4, The Israelites ask, "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." It is clear that such hypocritical fasting is actually a hindrance to prayer. When our fasting becomes for show and a religious practice that seeks the approval of man rather than God, we become disobedient to God and the Lord will not hear our prayers. So, know that fasting is a key communication tool that God desires for us to use as we walk with Him, but when it is not taken seriously and is used for worldly gain or is followed by unrighteousness, God will not listen to us.