

Notes for the Ones Called–Out to Meet

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When You Fast

by Dan Trygg

“Whenever you fast, do not put on a gloomy face as the hypocrites *do*, for they neglect their appearance so that they will be noticed by men when they are fasting. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. ¹⁷ But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face ¹⁸ so that your fasting will not be noticed by men, but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees *what is done* in secret will reward you.”
Matthew 6:16-18

What is fasting? Fasting, in both the Old and New Testament, was going without food as an expression of grief, sorrow, humility, or intensity of soul. Initially, it probably grew out of the natural loss of appetite people experience under great stress or sorrow (e.g., I Sam. 1:1-7). For those who were godly, this intense emotion was accompanied not only by loss of appetite, but also by a passionate seeking after God in prayer. Tied together with this in the Hebrew mind was the relationship of “humility”, “humiliation”, and “affliction”. The Hebrew word translated as “humble” also means “afflicted”. Often, it was the afflictions which came into one’s life that made him or her “humble, needy or poor”. Such afflictions were often sorrowful experiences, and were accompanied with the customary expressions of grief, i.e., weeping, mourning, crying out, tearing one’s garments, wearing clothes of mourning (sackcloth for the Hebrews, black colored clothing for our culture), covering the head, or putting dust or ashes upon the head (Neh. 9:1), not caring for one’s personal appearance or hygiene (II Sam. 19:24), sleeplessness, and going without food. What originally were the natural expressions of the hurting heart came to be conventions of grief expressed by those who had been “humbled” in “affliction”.

Eventually, these acts also came to be seen as expressions of intense appeals to God for His intervention. Fasting, and these other expressions of grief and affliction, became dramatic demonstrations of the heart longing for God to act. The deep and desperate appeals of the fervent-hearted intercessor would include not just emotional cries uttered by the lips. The intensity and humility of the seeker were also demonstrated in action by fasting (Esth. 4:16), weeping (Neh. 1:4), laying all night upon the ground (II Sam. 12:16; cf. 13:30,31), walking about barefooted (II Sam. 15:30), wearing sackcloth (Esth. 4:1-3; Psa. 35:13,14), or any other means that the truly desperate of heart would grasp at to show the seriousness of their request.

Finally, in one more step in the progression, the serious of heart would choose to fast as a way of “afflicting oneself” in order to bring about, or to remember, humility toward God (Psa. 35:13 – the Hebrew is actually “I afflicted my soul with fasting”). Since fasting would quickly bring about feelings of physical weakness, it was a good method to use to remind oneself of human limitation and dependency upon God for life and strength. The Mosaic law required the people to fast once a year, on the day of atonement. They were to “afflict their souls” from morning until the evening of the 10th day of the 7th month (Lev. 16:29-31; 23:27). This was to be a day when they thought about and repented of their sin. Grief over sin and intense longing before God for forgiveness were entirely appropriate. By “afflicting their souls” on that one day, the Israelites were brought to an awareness again of their need for God’s grace toward them. Interestingly enough, the Mosaic Law, which so minutely describes and differentiates between acceptable and unclean dietary regulations, never commands the particular methods used for “humbling oneself”. These were left to the discretion of the worshiper. This is the only fast God commanded of His people anywhere in the Bible, although the many examples of fasting indicate that this practice was well understood and voluntarily practiced by many in the appropriate circumstances.

Most often fasting involved the abstaining of both food and drink until the evening. This would be impossible for extended fasts, so, once again the discretion was left to the person who fasts to determine the form his or her fast might take. Thus, on one occasion we find Daniel employing a partial fast, one where he ate no meat nor “tasty food” (Dan. 10:1-3). He ate a basic diet only for nourishment, and “humbled his soul” by abstaining from foods prepared with spices and sweeteners to be especially pleasurable. Other examples of people who fasted in the Bible are found in Ex. 34:27,28; Judg. 20:26; I Sam. 7:5,6; 20:34; 31:13; II Sam. 1:12; I Kg. 19:8; II Chr. 20:3; Ezra 8:21-23; 10:6; Dan. 6:16-18; 9:1-3; Jer. 36:6-10; Joel 1:14; 2:15; Jonah 3:1-10; Matt. 4:1,2; Lk. 2:36-38; Acts 13:1-3; 14:23; II Cor. 6:4,5; 11:27 (In these last two passages, the word for “fasting” is translated as “being hungry” or “going without food”, which obscures the apostles’ practice of fasting – cf. Mk. 2:18-20.).

In time, other fast days were introduced to Judaism, usually commemorating tragic events in their past. Currently there are 28 yearly fast days on the Jewish calendar. These were not specifically commanded by God to be observed, but came to be promoted and widely accepted by human initiative. Also the notion of fasting itself changed from simply *humbling* the soul to being perceived as a method to *purify* the soul. It came to be a discipline voluntarily

chosen by the spiritually minded to promote holiness. By the time of Christ, the devout Jew would fast two days a week, on the second day (our Monday) and the fifth day (our Thursday) (cf. Lk. 18:11,12). This is why people were puzzled that Jesus did not require His disciples to fast, as other rabbis did. His response (Mark 2:18-20) was to return fasting back to its proper place, a discipline of humbling the soul and longing for God, but one that has no power in itself. Why would His disciples fast if the Lord Himself was with them? When He would leave, then they will fast. Their fasting would be an expression of the intensity of their soul, not an act to gain righteousness by their performance. It is clear from this passage, and Matt. 6:16-18, that Jesus expects that His followers *will* fast. The how's, when's and why's are not prescribed. They are left up to us and the Holy Spirit (Rom. 14:1-6). To place undue emphasis upon fasting, however, is legalistic and misguided (Col. 2:16-23; I Tim. 4:1-5).

If done in the correct attitude, fasting can indeed be a helpful tool in our spiritual walk. Thus, it has been a recognized and respected spiritual discipline utilized by godly people throughout the centuries. Unfortunately, like almost everything else, it is also capable of being abused or manipulated to a selfish end. Jesus exposes one example of this in this passage, fasting to impress others. As was true in the other examples Jesus cites in this passage, almsgiving and prayer, those who perform these practices to impress others will have only that as their reward. They will have no reward from God. Some go so far as to draw attention to the fact that they are fasting by neglecting their appearance so obviously that others will notice. Jesus actually uses an interesting word play in the Greek to describe this in a catchy way. It is not an easy one to translate, but basically, the word for "notice" is a word meaning to "shine", and the word translated as "neglect their appearance" uses a negated form derived from the same root word. So, it's as if Jesus said, "do not put on a gloomy face as the hypocrites do, for they 'unshine' their faces so that they might 'shine' as fasting by men." In other words, they purposely go out of their way to be noticeably fasting, so that others would be duly "impressed" by their righteousness. Their focus is not on God; it is on the opinion of others. God is not given His due place as God in their lives. The idol they are serving is human praise. Jesus' advice: Do what you can to avoid being noticed as fasting. Do what you can to look as good and cheerful as ever, so others will not begin to wonder what is wrong with you. If they cannot detect that you are fasting, then there will be no question as to your motive. It will not even be a distraction to you. God sees in secret; He will reward you. – Now, this does not mean that if people do find out that you have been fasting, the entire fast is "spoiled". No. God knows your heart. Do what you can to avoid parading your fast before others. ...And for those of us who notice that someone is fasting, please do not make a big deal out of it. To do so is uncomfortable to those who are fasting for the right motives; and it feeds into the unhealthiness of those who are doing it for the wrong reasons.

There is another unhealthy twist that a person who fasts can fall into. They may not be fasting to impress others, but they may be doing it to impress themselves. Such self-righteousness eventually will grow to where others will notice, but initially it can start as a seemingly heroic effort toward spirituality. Self-importance, however, rapidly develops into a holier-than-thou arrogance, such as depicted in Jesus' parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector (Lk. 18:9-14). Notice that Jesus describes the self-righteous Pharisee as "praying... to himself". There was no genuine interaction with God. Like those in Matthew 6, who are praying to impress others, those who do religious things to congratulate themselves have received the only reward they will get. God will not hear them. That message comes out clearly in Luke, when Jesus says that the tax collector "went down to his house justified, rather than the other [man]" (vs. 14). Another way to explain this is that those who seek to "be justified by works of the law", even by religious practices, are under the requirement of keeping the entire law, which is an impossibility in human strength. They are not operating under the covenant of grace, but of self-performance. In doing that, they cut themselves off from the life flow of God's Spirit, and are left to find out the emptiness of human efforts alone (Gal. 5:1-4). "Self-made religion" or "will worship" do not impress God, and they are distasteful to men, as well. Furthermore, they do not work at producing real righteousness, anyway (Col. 2:23). If religious snobbery were not bad enough, it seems that those who begin to go down this road also tend to impose their so-called superiority on others, as well, and begin to drive them away from Jesus (Matt. 12:30).

The kind of fast that honors God is one that is sincere (Psa. 51:6; Jn. 4:23,24), is truly focused on God Himself (Zech. 7:5), and is willing to do all He would require. God hates hypocrisy. Religious practices that do not bring us to life-changing intimacy with Him and are not followed by absolute obedience to Him are vain. To seek God and live inconsistently toward our fellow human beings is a mockery which God rejects (Zech. 7:2-14; Isa. 58:1-12).