

IS FASTING FOR TODAY'S CHRISTIAN?

April 3, 2012

Fasting is a subject that has often been misunderstood. Fasting, in the biblical sense, is the abstaining from food and drink for spiritual reasons. Under the Law of Moses, the Jews fasted often. When we make our way to the New Testament, we still see that not only the Jews, but also Christians participated in the fasting process.

Though we do see the Jews fasting throughout the year, there was only one fast that was commanded by God. Once each year, on the Day of Atonement, the Lord said to the Jews, "and ye shall afflict your souls" (Lev. 16:31), which meant fasting (Isa. 58:3). We find no such commandment in the New Testament that the Christian is commanded to fast in any way. Though there are no commands to fast today, the New Testament seems to take for granted that children of God would see the need to fast occasionally.

It would not be an everyday or a common occurrence to fast. When the followers of Jesus were condemned, for not fasting, He said, "But the days will come, when the bridegroom shall be taken away from them, and then shall they fast in those days" (Lk. 5:35). The Lord indicated that it was not appropriate for them to fast while He was with them. The time would come, however, when He would be taken away.

When cautioning against improper motivation in worship, Christ warned: "Moreover when ye fast, be not, as the hypocrites, of a sad countenance: for they disfigure their faces, that they may appear unto men to fast. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward" (Mt. 6:16). The Lord did not make a commandment to fast, but on this occasion He said "when ye fast", not "if ye fast", so perhaps He expected His followers to fast on occasion.

We should understand that fasting, for the Christian, is strictly a voluntary matter. Again, there is no commandment in the New Testament that requires a Christian to fast. However, if one chooses to fast, it should be done out of a feeling of intense need and not as a mere formality.

If one chooses to fast, when might it be of spiritual value?

1. In times of personal sorrow. David and his men fasted upon hearing that Saul had died (2 Sam. 1:12). When David's son was struck sick by God because of David's sinful actions with Bathsheba, he fasted for his son (2 Sam. 12:16). Nehemiah fasted when informed about Jerusalem's decimated condition (Neh. 1:4). Fasting and prayer seems fitting when a loved one is sick, as in the case of David and his son.
2. Fasting accompanied repentance as an outward indication to God of contriteness. The people of Nineveh declared a fast when brought to recognition of their sins (Jonah 3:5).
3. Fasting was practiced prior to any important religious event. Moses fasted during the period that he received the law (Ex. 34:28). Christ fasted prior to His being tempted by Satan in the wilderness (Mt. 4:2). The church fasted prior to sending Saul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey (Acts 13:2-3). Fasting played a prominent role in Paul's ministry (2 Cor. 6:5; 11:27). It appears that fasting would be appropriate when one is trying to accomplish the goals of the church such as evangelism.

However, fasting can be done improperly. The act of fasting should never take the place of personal godly living. Isaiah rebuked those that did just that (Isa. 58). One must also not use fasting to demonstrate how godly he or she is to others. This is just what the Pharisees were guilty of and the reason Jesus rebuked them (Mt. 6:16-18).

There does seem to be some benefit to voluntary fasting at certain times. Consider the following:

1. The scriptures do seem to suggest that God honors fasting when performed as a token of deep and sincere dedication.
2. Physicians have indicated that moderate fasting can be of physical benefit to our health, having the effect of allowing our systems to cleanse themselves.
3. The mind appears to be able to consider greater depths of contemplation during fasting.
4. Fasting is able to help with one's self-discipline.
5. Fasting can also allow us to have a greater appreciation for those things of which we are deprived during a fast.

We need to always remember that fasting is strictly a voluntary act, but it can be beneficial when done in accordance with biblical precedence.