

A Short Catechism On Religious Fasting

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I. Question: What is religious fasting?

Answer:

Religious fasting is denying the natural appetite for food from a true conviction of its warrant in Scripture and with a view to one's glorifying God by the crucifixion of sin and enjoyment of mercy on the grounds of the merit of Jesus Christ alone.

1. It is either the complete denial of food for a period of time (2 Samuel 12:16) or it is the partial denial of food for a period of time (Daniel 10:2,3).

2. It is not done out of a high view of tradition (though the saints throughout history have fasted). Nor is it to be performed out of implicit faith simply because one in authority has commanded it. Nor is it a legalistic act of mere external righteousness so as to be seen by men (Matthew 6:1,16-18). Nor is it to promote some view of asceticism (namely, that the body is evil and therefore must be punished). It is to be rendered as an act of worship to God out of a sincere conviction that God calls us in His Word to fast on certain occasions (Matthew 17:21; Acts 14:23).

3. The primary end of fasting as in all things is God's glory (I Corinthians 10:31).

4. The secondary end of fasting is the crucifixion of sin (the weakening of the hold of sin, the humiliation of self, the mourning and grieving over sin), and the enjoyment of God's mercy and grace.

5. The ground of all spiritual blessings that God graciously bestows is only and always the person and work of Jesus Christ. There is no merit in our works of righteousness.

II. Question: Where is religious fasting taught in Scripture?

Answer:

Religious fasting is taught throughout the Scripture.

1. David fasted when his son by Bathsheba hung between life and death (2 Samuel 12:16).

2. Nehemiah fasted when he heard of the desolations of Jerusalem (Nehemiah 1:4).

3. Jehoshaphat appointed a day of fasting when enemies came against him (2 Chronicles 20:3).

4. The inhabitants of Nineveh fasted at the preaching of Jonah (Jonah 3:7,8).
5. The Lord Himself fasted for 40 days (Luke 4:1-13).
6. The apostles fasted when elders were ordained to office (Acts 14:23).
7. Jesus assumes that His people will fast when He says, "Moreover, when you fast, do not be like the hypocrites" (Matthew 6:16-13).
8. The disciples were unable to cast the demon out of the young boy because Jesus said, "this kind does not go out except by prayer and fasting" (Matthew 17:21).

III. Question: Why should you fast?

Answer:

1. First, because God calls you to do so.
2. Second, because your affections and appetites are inclined to the things of this world (fasting turns your affections from the things of this life to the things of Christ).
3. Third, because pride and self-sufficiency hinder your fellowship with God (fasting, however, reveals your insufficiency and God's all-sufficiency). The physical weakness one feels from fasting should remind him of his weakness before an absolutely sovereign and infinitely holy God.
4. Fourth, because you desire to mourn over sin and rejoice in mercy.
5. Fifth, because you need the spiritual power and wisdom that comes from God. The disciples having been given the authority to cast out all demons in a specific missionary journey (Luke 9:1-6) returned to declare the mighty things that had been done in the cities they visited (Luke 9:6,10). However, these same disciples needed the means of prayer and fasting once the supernatural authority earlier given to them for their missionary journey had ceased (Matthew 17:21). Likewise the apostles and congregations of the first century recognized their desperate need for wisdom and power and ordained elders with a time of fasting (Acts 14:23).

IV. Question: Who is to fast?

Answer:

All those who can do so as an act of worship to God from a sincere conscience without superstition, legalism, implicit faith, asceticism, or hypocrisy. Children can be taught to fast even as they can be taught to pray, but they must be taught what fasting is and is not (also note some of the points under VI below in regard to more practical issues relating to small children).

V. Question: When should you fast?

Answer:

1. Individually-when personal needs arise.
2. As families-when there is need.
3. As churches-when called to do so by the elders.
4. As a nation-when called to do so by a lawful civil magistrate. In general, we should fast much more often than most of us do. It should not only be viewed

as a remedial cure when facing an impending crisis, but also as a preventative measure to be filled with wisdom and power long before any crisis arises.

VI. Question: How should you fast?

Answer:

1. Samuel Miller has noted, "Fasting, like the Sabbath, was made for man, and not man for fasting. No one, therefore, ought to carry abstinence to such an extreme as to impair or endanger his bodily health."
2. However, when, weakness appears from fasting, one ought not to think he/she is not able to fast. One will almost certainly experience weakness while fasting. For the bodily weakness is intended to remind one of his weakness in every way before the Almighty God.
3. If you have a physical problem (like high or low blood sugar etc.), you may be able to partially fast. However, do not eat to satisfy the appetite, eat only to satisfy the need.
4. If you must work very hard and require food, consider a partial fast. Do not think because your fast is not a complete fast that it is unacceptable to God ("God will have mercy and not sacrifice" Hosea 6:6).
5. Teach your children about fasting and involve them in the fast as they are able to bear it (perhaps they can fast for one meal if they are unable to fast for one day, or perhaps they can partially fast). Be careful not to deprive small children of needed nutrition.
6. Be careful to drink plenty of water while fasting (stay away from fluids on an empty stomach that have caffeine—the results will not be the kind of "fast" for which you are looking).
7. Try to order the day as much as you can so that you are reminded throughout the day that it is a day set aside to reveal your insufficiency and God's all sufficiency.
8. The day should not be spent in laughter or frivolous speech, but there should be a carefulness in both speech and conduct.
9. Be careful that you do not publicize the fact that you are fasting so as to be seen by men as did the Pharisees (Matthew 6: 1,16). Do not wear a gloomy face, nor lead others to ask what's wrong by your peculiar behavior. Rather try not to draw any attention to yourself while fasting (Matthew 6: 16-18). If someone should ask why you are not eating, seek to answer the question with as little attention drawn to yourself as possible.