

prayer & fasting

Scripture

Matthew 6:16–18 (ESV)

“And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. ¹⁷But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, ¹⁸that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

Acts 13:1–3 (ESV)

Now there were in the church at Antioch prophets and teachers, Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen a lifelong friend of Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. ²While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.” ³Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off.

Introduction

A prayer meeting in Antioch in [Acts 13:1–3](#) became one of the most important moments in the history of the world. With their prayers and fasting, the church leaders said, God, we want your provision, not our small plans. We want your abundance, not our small-mindedness. We want more than we know how to ask, more than we can think, more than we could expect, more than we can dream. We want you, God. We’re not satisfied with our abilities and experience and what we can plan on our own and do apart from you. We want you and your leading. We don’t want to lean on our own understanding.

The Antioch church had been founded by nameless Christians who ventured to share the gospel with Greek speakers ([Acts 11:20](#)). Mass conversions followed ([Acts 11:21, 24](#)). The work of God became so vibrant at Antioch that others took notice and gave it a name. Here in Antioch **“the disciples were first called Christians”** ([Acts 11:26](#)).

“We want more than we know how to ask, more than we can think, more than we could expect, more than we can dream. We want you, God.”

Sermon Guide

Why Did the Church at Antioch Fast?

1. They were looking for direction for the church.

“They were worshiping the Lord and fasting” ([Acts 13:2](#)).

The Holy Spirit is about to speak to them, and when he does, it’s not because they were carrying out their normal routine. They were fasting for a particular reason. Godly fasting always has a purpose. They were seeking God in special measure. Fasting is an unusual measure, expressing special need for God. You don’t “fast” by accident or without purpose. **They want to share the wealth.** They want to give away what God has so richly, so generously given to them.

They will not be content with their own planning and what they can dream up on their own. We want more than we can ask or think ([Ephesians 3:20](#)). We want direction from God almighty, who makes foolish the wisdom of the world ([1 Corinthians 1:20](#)). We want guidance from the God who guides heaven’s armies. We want counsel from the one whom none can counsel ([Romans 11:34](#)).

2. Instead of consulting conventional wisdom, crafting plans, and acting on them, the teachers in Antioch wait on God. From an earthly perspective, and especially through modern eyes, this seems like such an inefficient way to lead.

“Unless God is on his throne. Unless he hears. Unless he cares. Unless he stands ready to lead and guide and empower his church by his Spirit through the glorious inefficiency of prayer. They sought God’s leading in Antioch, and he answered. “While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, ‘Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the (missionary) work to which I have called them’” ([Acts 13:2](#)). And the glorious inefficiency of prayer again proved gloriously effective. God changed the course of history as he directed them.” David Mathis Executive Editor, [desiringGod.org](#)

What is a Fast?

Fasting is voluntarily going without food — or any other regularly enjoyed, good gift from God — for the sake of some spiritual purpose.

Jesus assumes his followers will fast, and even promises it will happen. *Matthew 6:16 (ESV)*

“And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward.

Jesus doesn’t say his followers might fast, but “they will” *Matthew 9:15 (ESV)*

And Jesus said to them, “Can the wedding guests mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them? The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast.

We fast in this life because we believe in the life to come. We don’t have to get it all here and now, because we have a promise that we will have it all in the coming age. We fast from what we can see and taste, because we have tasted and seen the goodness of the invisible and infinite God — and are desperately hungry for more of him.

Radical, Temporary Measure

Fasting is for this world. When Jesus returns, fasting will be done. It’s a temporary measure, for this life and age, to enrich our joy in Jesus and prepare our hearts for the next — for seeing him face to face.

How to Start Fasting

Fasting is hard. It sounds much easier in concept than it proves to be in practice.

1. Start small.

2. Plan what you’ll do instead of eating.

Fasting isn’t merely an act of self-deprivation, but a spiritual discipline for seeking more of God’s fullness.

3. Consider how it will affect others.

4. Try different kinds of fasting.

The typical form of fasting is personal, private, and partial, but we find a variety of forms in the Bible: personal and communal, private and public, congregational and national, regular and occasional, absolute and partial.

5. Fast from something other than food.

Fasting from food is not necessarily for everyone. Some health conditions keep even the most devout from the traditional course.

However, fasting is not limited to abstaining from food. “Fasting should really be made to include abstinence from anything which is legitimate in and of itself for the sake of some special spiritual purpose.” Martyn Lloyd-Jones

If the better part of wisdom for you, in your health condition, is not to go without food, consider fasting from television, computer, social media, or some other regular enjoyment that would bend your heart toward greater enjoyment of Jesus. Paul even talks about married couples fasting from sex “for a limited time, that you may devote yourselves to prayer” (1 Corinthians 7:5).

Conclusion

Christian fasting turns its attention to Jesus or some great cause of his in the world. Christian fasting seeks to take the pains of hunger and transpose them into the key of some eternal anthem, whether it’s fighting against some sin, or pleading for someone’s salvation, or for the cause of the unborn, or longing for a greater taste of Jesus. Fasting is a way of saying with our body how much we need and want and trust Jesus.

Food is good.

We feast on it with gratitude for God’s goodness and we forfeit food out of hunger for God himself. When we feast we gladly taste the emblem of our heavenly food, the bread of life, Jesus himself.

And when we fast we say: I love the reality more than I love the emblem. Both feasting and fasting are worship for the Christian. Both magnify Christ. And, of course, both have their peculiar dangers. The danger of feasting is that we fall in love with the gift. And the danger of fasting is that we belittle the gift and boast in our willpower, our discipline.

At its best, Christian fasting is not a belittling of the good gift of food. It is simply a heartfelt, body-felt exclamation point at the end of the sentence: I love you, God. I need you more than I need food, more than I need life. John Piper