

# The Heart of Fasting

Matthew 6:16-18

1. What is the longest you have had to go without food for reasons *other than* spiritual fasting? Why couldn't you eat? How did you cope? What physical effects did you experience?
  
2. Discuss the following definitions of fasting:
  - a. Biblical fasting is deliberate abstinence from food for a spiritual purpose (cf. Matthew 4:2).
    - Why say "deliberate" abstinence?
    - Why do we need to clarify the purpose as "spiritual"? How is this different from other types of fasting?
  
  - b. Biblical fasting is the practice of focused self-denial for a spiritual purpose (1 Corinthians 7:5).
    - What is "focused" self-denial?
    - Why is it important to be specific about what you choose to deny yourself?
  
3. There are at least four gospel-shaped reasons why you should fast. Discuss each.
  - a. You should fast to focus your heart on your dependence (cf. Deuteronomy 8:3).
    - How will fasting from food help you to feel dependent?
    - How can you use these feelings to help your heart respond to the gospel?
  
  - b. You should fast to focus your heart on your weakness.
    - How will fasting from food help you to feel weak?
    - When you do feel weak, how can you use that experience to preach the gospel to yourself?
    - Can you think of Scripture passages that would help you with this?
  
  - c. You should fast to turn your heart toward Jesus (cf. John 6:48-51).
    - How can you use fasting to help you remember that Jesus is the bread of life?
    - Why will fasting help wean you from the things of this world and reorient your focus?
    - How can you use fasting to deepen your affection and desire for Jesus over against other things?
  
  - d. You should fast to discipline your heart for obedience (1 Corinthians 9:24-27).
    - What are some ways that athletes might deny themselves in order to be more competitive?
    - How will fasting help you learn to say "No!" to yourself?
    - How will learning to say "No!" to food help you learn to say "No!" to other fleshly temptations?

4. In Matthew 6:16-18, Jesus tells us for whom we should and should not fast.
  - a. We should NOT fast for others.
    - What does Jesus say in verse 16 that indicates that people were fasting for others?
    - What kinds of things were they doing to be seen as fasting? What kinds of things would we do today?
    - Why might you want others to know that you are fasting?
  - b. We should NOT fast for ourselves.
    - What statement does Jesus make in verse 16 that indicates that this fasting was self-centered?
    - What “reward” are they seeking? Will they get it?
    - From another angle on fasting, how might we be tempted to use fasting as a tool to manipulate God? Why is this way of thinking opposed to the gospel?
  - c. We SHOULD fast for the Lord.
    - What does Jesus say in verses 17-18 that indicate that our fasting should be “for the Lord”?
    - Does God need us to fast? How, then, is fasting “for” Him?
    - What does right-minded fasting say about our heart attitudes toward God?
  - d. We SHOULD fast for ourselves.
    - What does Jesus say in verse 18 that indicates that fasting is good for us?
    - Read Ephesians 2:8-9. What does this say that the reward is NOT?
    - What “rewards” are indicated for the righteous in passages like Matthew 25:21 or 25:34?
    - In this regard, why is fasting an act of faith?

**Practical Applications:**

5. If you do not fast, what keeps you from fasting?
6. If you have physical limitations that might prevent you from going entirely without food, what are some ways that you CAN deny yourself food for a time or food items that will require you to say “No!” to yourself?
7. What are some specific plans that you could use for fasting (e.g. skip just one meal each week, drink only juice for 24 hours one day each month, etc.)?
8. What steps can you take to help ensure that your time of fasting will truly be for a spiritual purpose (e.g. use the time normally spent eating to be in the Word or prayer, stop and pray whenever you feel hunger pangs, etc.)? How will you prevent fasting from becoming another spiritual duty or ritual?
9. What are other things you could give up that would force you to say “No!” to yourself or that would free up time for prayer or that would serve to remind you that you need Jesus more?