

The kind of fasting that pleases God

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Sunday 8th January, 2017

Matthew 6:16-18 (NIV)

I hope you had a good Christmas and a peaceful start to the New Year.

True to my word at Glow on Christmas Eve, I did over-eat and did get just a little over-excited on the big day. It is one of those legitimate times of the year when you feel you can over eat without feeling guilty or getting told off - or so I thought.

On Boxing Day, I was standing in the hallway when a leaflet was posted through my door. It said, "Lose the fat and start the new year with our keep fit club."

For some reason, this really ticked me off. I saw it as sheer opportunism. No sooner had the Christmas pudding gone cold I was made to feel bad about my body. So I flung open the front door and said to this poor woman walking away, "Do I look like I need to lose the weight?" And pointed at myself.

It probably wasn't the best thing to have said or done. I mean, inviting comments from a stranger on your physique at 9am in the morning is never a good idea at the best of times. To her credit, she recovered and said, "Well, we thought we would get in quick!" She faintly smiled and quickly hurried off.

Of course, the best way to lose weight is not to eat. In fact, there is a name for it – "fasting".

Nutritionists say that fasting is good for you for a number of reasons. Firstly, it makes your day easier – because you're not having to worry about what to cook or eat.

Secondly, scientists say that restricting calories is a way to lengthen your life. Your body finds a way to survive without regular food. However, I am not sure there is much merit in starving yourself just to live longer.

Thirdly, according to some studies, fasting may reduce the risk of cancer.

Lastly, fasting is easier than dieting. Enough said!

It also finds its place in our spiritual lives. When you read through the Bible you'll find people fasting whenever needs aren't unmet through other ways. It is also accompanied with prayer.

A Day to Pray & Fast – Wednesday 19 January, 9am-9pm

On Thursday 19th January we are holding our first day of Prayer and Fasting, which will happen at Christchurch URC in, School Lane, Sudbury. This is the first time we have officially held a day like this, so I am keen that as many of as possible can be a part of this day in one way or another.

We want you to pray and fast, not just for yourselves, but for this church and for more spiritual breakthroughs in our community. We want to see more of an outpouring of God's Spirit. We want to see people come to faith, including our spouses, children, friends and neighbours. We want to see more breakthroughs in people's lives, more healing and hope, more change, more of everything. You get the picture.

Now, I am aware that a number of us may never have prayed and fasted before. It may just be something that has never occurred to us to do. Or it all sounds a bit serious and we're simply not sure about the whole thing.

But here's the thing, if we're really desperate for a breakthrough in our lives, I reckon we will want to try anything!

The question is, will we let things carry on as they were in 2016 or are we desperate enough to want to see a change in this New Year?

So, I want to share some things from the Bible to help us see why fasting is not something some do, but all do as part of our normal Christian life in Jesus. And why prayer, when accompanied with fasting, helps us move closer to God and move on deeper and fuller with our life.

Firstly, fasting with prayer is natural as using a knife with a fork.

You can eat your dinner with just a fork, but there are times when a knife is pretty useful. Ever tried eating a steak with just a fork? There are plenty of meals we can eat with just a fork, but there are also those that simply can't do without a knife. It is the same with prayer: we can pray and see plenty of things happen. But then there are times when a prayer alone simply doesn't cut it!

And this is where fasting comes in. All through the Old and New Testament the people of God fasted. It is always in times of desperation and usually because of a big problem or big decision facing them. Or because they were under attack. Or because their sin had become too great to bear that there was need of serious repentance to repair their damaged relationship with God.

When Nehemiah was in Babylon he heard the news of just how bad things were back in the holy and ancient city of Jerusalem. He wept and then prayed and fasted for some days. What did it do? It gave him the clarity and vision, not least the courage to talk to King Nebuchadnezzar about letting him go to repair it. And he did!

Daniel, in seeking the Lord's wisdom and guidance for timing, humbled himself before the Lord for answers in prayer and fasting (Daniel 9:2-3). He was living under captivity in Babylon when he read

God's promise to free the Israelites after a certain period of time. He earnestly sought the Lord by means of prayer and fasting. Then, through the angel Gabriel, God gave the young man greater understanding of what He had previously pledged.

Then there was corporate fasting.

When King Jehoshaphat learned that a powerful army was on the offensive, he called for all Judah to come together and fast. (2 Chron. 20:1-4). God gave them encouragement and strength for the future. In the early church the apostles prayed and fasted before they sent out Barnabas and Saul. (Acts 13:2)

And we know that Jesus believed in fasting as a normal part of our relationship with God the Father because it is there as part of his sermon on the mount.

Jesus spoke about the kind of fasting that pleases God

'When you fast, do not look sombre as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show others they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to others that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

(Matthew 6:16 NIV)

Notice how Jesus says twice – “When you fast”, not “if you fast”. He counted it as a normal thing for a disciple, a Christian, to do. In fact, Jesus fasted for an epic 40 days in the wilderness, which gives us a bit of an insight into just what he was up against in his spiritual fight to bring us our salvation.

(Luke 4:1-2 NIV)

How does fasting help?

1. It increases our sense of humility and dependence upon God.

When you cry out to God and you set aside everything else, you've given God permission to begin a work in your heart in a deeper, more intimate way than ever before. Because what you're doing is your humbling yourself before him and saying, “I need you!” That is what Nehemiah was saying, Daniel was saying, and what the Early Church was saying.

2. It allows us to give more time and attention to prayer.

When we cut out eating and put other things aside, we're showing God what is important to us, and what we think might be important to him that he wants to deal with in us. And, yes, it takes some willpower, which is why fasting is called one of the spiritual disciplines. We can choose to fast a whole day or half a day. We don't have to get legalistic. Remember, although it is a normal thing to do as a Christian, it is not an eleventh commandment!

3. It permits God to go deeper.

Fasting helps to reveal without distraction what is going on in the inside of a person. It also allows the Spirit of God to go, perhaps, deeper than before.

And, be prepared - it could well be sin! Something you've not thought about. Something that has just become a natural habit. Maybe something that you have put side and hidden years ago.

Because this is what happens, based on my own experiences and the experiences of others, when you fast, it heightens your spiritual and mental alertness. You begin to see, feel and sense things in your life that maybe you did not before. There is a new alertness to God and his Holy Spirit.

He is able to show you things about your life that you could not see before then. But for me, it brings a greater awareness of God's presence around me – I become aware of being drawn into a greater intimacy with him. And this is precious!

The gift of fasting helps express our earnestness and urgency about a situation in prayer. Essentially we are saying "God, this thing is so important. I want you to hear me. Please give me some directions. Hear the cry of my heart!"

There are real advantages to fasting and praying, but first here's a warning.

You cannot force God to give you an answer on something or force him to do something. You may say, "Well, I am going to fast and God is going to hear me and do what I want!" It would be like one of my daughter saying, "If I wash the car and clean my room, then Dad will feel compelled to give me what I want." But, here's the thing, if something is not right I still won't give it to them. I still won't capitulate, however much they try to get around me." But, I will find a way to show my love for them in another way! A way that is right for them.

So, in summary, here are the advantages of fasting...

It gets us ready to hear God's answer. The answer may not be the answer I want to hear, but it gets us ready to hear what he wants to tell us.

It cleanses our mind and heart and helps us to see things from His perspective. When everything else gets cleared out of the way and it's just us and God, we are drawn into a sense of oneness like nothing else.

God honours the right spirit and the right motive when we come to him and put everything else to one side. We don't need to parade or showcase our fasting. In fact, Emma and I usually never tell each other when either of us are fasting, because we see it has a thing between ourselves and God. But there are, of course, times to come together to fast as a couple too. And for those us with Christian partners, it's also good for our marriages.

Jesus says don't make a virtue out of it, because it will only tempt us to make ourselves look more holy and make us into *religious* people. But neither will it be missed. Jesus says that "*your Father, who is unseen, sees what is done in secret and will reward you*" (Matthew 6:18 NIV). He rewards us when we actively seek his face. He rewards us when we choose to seek first his kingdom before all else.

So fasting helps express, and deepen our decision that we are ready to yield everything to him, and deepens our desire to have a closer relationship with Jesus with all its blessings.

Lastly, I leave you with a challenge.

If you're not sure if you could fast and pray for a whole day, ask God to place something firmly on your heart today and set your mind on knowing his mind on the matter.

Maybe you already have one or two things lined up already. For you, then, the question is: how desperate are you to see a breakthrough!

"Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you."
(Matthew 6:33 NIV)

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Sunday 8 January, 2017, Sudbury, Suffolk