

Key Principles of Biblical Fasting



Kay Arthur & Pete De Lacy

40minute
BIBLE STUDIES

Key Principles of Biblical Fasting

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PRECEPT MINISTRIES INTERNATIONAL



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P R E S S

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KEY PRINCIPLES OF BIBLICAL FASTING

Do you long for intimacy with God? Do you desire to feel His presence, to hear His voice, to sense His pleasure? If drawing near to God is the desire of your heart, then we invite you to join us in an invigorating study of the discipline of fasting.

Since ancient times, fasting has been considered an essential means of deepening one's faith and connection with God. But in recent years it has become an increasingly rare—and often misunderstood—practice. Many wonder if fasting is an outmoded form of spiritual discipline, something modern-day Christians needn't bother with. Others are convinced this discipline is only for the superspiritual. And some see it only as a bizarre ritual connected to other faiths.

The Bible refers to fasting more than fifty times, and in this six-week study we'll examine many of those

passages to learn what the Word of God teaches about the topic. We'll consider what fasting involves and what it means to the average Christian. As you discover for yourself the biblical principles behind this practice and observe its impact on the lives of the faithful throughout history, you'll discover the unique role fasting plays in the life of the church. And by the end of our time together, you'll be equipped to decide how you will enter into the discipline of fasting as a means of deepening your walk with God.

WEEK ONE

Let's start our study of fasting by examining what Jesus said on the subject in His Sermon on the Mount. Then we'll look at some Old Testament references to this practice to see what we can learn about its nature and purpose.

OBSERVE

The Sermon on the Mount records Jesus' teaching about the basics of righteous living. Let's look specifically at what He said about fasting.

Leader: Read Matthew 6:1, 16–18 aloud. As you read, have the group say aloud and...

- underline every occurrence of ***whenever*** or ***when you***.
- circle every reference to ***fasting***.

As you read the text, it's helpful to have the group say the key words aloud as they mark them. This way everyone will be sure to mark every occurrence of the word, including any synonymous words or phrases. Do this throughout the study.

MATTHEW 6:1, 16–18

¹ Beware of practicing your righteousness before men to be noticed by them; otherwise you have no reward with your Father who is in heaven....

¹⁶ Whenever you fast, do not put on a gloomy face as the hypocrites do, for they neglect their appearance so that they will be noticed by men when they are fasting. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full.

17 But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face

18 so that your fasting will not be noticed by men, but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you.

INSIGHT

The word *fast* in this passage is translated from the Greek word *nesteuo*, which means “to abstain from food or drink.”

DISCUSS

- What did you learn from marking *when-ever* and *when you*?
- What did you learn from marking the references to fasting?
- From what you read in this passage, did Jesus seem to expect His listeners to fast? Explain your answer.
- If you’ve ever fasted, describe your experience. What prompted you to fast and what was the outcome?

OBSERVE

We've seen what Jesus expected of His followers when it came to fasting, but did He ever observe this practice Himself?

Leader: Read aloud Matthew 4:1–4 and have the group...

- mark each reference to **Jesus**, including pronouns, with a cross: †
- circle the word **fasted**.

DISCUSS

- What did you learn from marking the references to Jesus?
- What does this passage reveal about His perspective on fasting?

MATTHEW 4:1–4

¹ Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.

² And after He had fasted forty days and forty nights, He then became hungry.

³ And the tempter came and said to Him, “If You are the Son of God, command that these stones become bread.”

⁴ But He answered and said, “It is written, ‘Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God.’”

ISAIAH 58:1–3A

¹ Cry loudly, do not hold back; raise your voice like a trumpet, and declare to My people their transgression and to the house of Jacob their sins.

² Yet they seek Me day by day and delight to know My ways, as a nation that has done righteousness and has not forsaken the ordinance of their God. They ask Me for just decisions, they delight in the nearness of God.

^{3A} “Why have we fasted and You do not see? Why have we humbled ourselves and You do not notice?”

OBSERVE

Now let’s go to Isaiah 58, the most comprehensive passage about fasting in the Bible. This message originally was given to God’s people, the Jews, yet we know from Romans 15:4 that “whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction.”

The context for this passage is that God’s people had been fasting in the wrong spirit. Though they outwardly seemed sincere, God knew their hearts and saw through their attempts to manipulate Him.

Leader: *Read Isaiah 58:1–3a aloud. As you read, have the group...*

- *underline all references to **My people**, including pronouns and synonyms such as **the house of Jacob**.*
- *circle the word **fasted**.*

WRAP IT UP

What does it take to be close to God and hear from Him? We saw that Jesus expected fasting to be a regular part of His followers' lives, something that would be rewarded by God. In addition He Himself fasted in the wilderness.

The people of Israel thought they could be right with God simply by performing the ritual of fasting. But they didn't hear from God, and they didn't understand why.

The answer was sin! Sin had separated them from God so that He *would* not listen to their cry. God was concerned with their motives as well as their behavior. Fasting would have no effect until they dealt with their sin.

The perspective of eternal God has not changed since the days of Isaiah. He wants us to obey from our hearts, not merely follow a ritual. If we are living in disobedience, then fasting won't draw us close to God. He won't listen. It's not that God *can't* hear, but that He *chooses* not to listen to the cry of the unrepentant sinner.

What is your response to this warning from God? Will you respond by saying, "I'm okay. The Lord knows my heart." Or will you fast, examining your heart and your ways to see if there be any way in you that is displeasing to the Lord (Psalm 139:23–24)?

If you truly want to draw closer to God, you'll find you can only connect with Him according to His Word.



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