



FASTING AND PRAYER

WEEK ONE - WHEN YOU FAST

Read Luke 4:1-14

This is a topic that doesn't get a lot of airtime. Most of us are comfortable and familiar with the concept of prayer but we tend to duck out when fasting is added to the equation. There is no specific commandment in the Bible that tells us we must fast **BUT** in Matthew 6:16, a passage where Jesus is teaching his disciples the basics of godly living, he says: "*When you fast*" not "*If you fast*". We can therefore assume that Jesus expected his followers to fast as part of normal spiritual life.

Coming up to the season of Lent, it is a timely opportunity to look at this topic.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in his book *The Cost of Discipleship*, said, "*Jesus takes it for granted that His disciples will observe the pious custom of fasting. Strict exercise of self-control is an essential feature of the Christian life. Such customs have only one purpose — to make the disciples more ready and cheerful to accomplish those things which God would have done.*" I like that last line!

There may be many reasons why people fast such as when praying for a loved one who is sick, or when needing direction from God regarding a change of job or location. Fasting focuses the mind on God. Generally, we think of fasting as not taking any food but sometimes people will fast from things that take up a great deal of their time. Not because these things are intrinsically wrong, but if anything in our lives is preventing us finding time to pray and read God's word, then we need to consider how we spend our time.

Fasting shows God that we are serious. We know how difficult it can be at times to keep our concentration during times of prayer and so fasting is a way of reminding us that our life is more than food and drink. Matthew 25:6 says "*That is why I tell you not to worry about everyday life—whether you have enough food and drink, or enough clothes to wear. Isn't life more than food, and your body more than clothing?*"

Fasting is self-denial and a way of humbling ourselves before God. Our generation is very 'me' centred, concerned with what we want, what we need and reluctant to do

anything that isn't comfortable. However, there are times when we need to put this aside and come before God with the right attitude.

- Are you able to see things in your life that prevent you from coming into a deeper relationship with God? Write these down as this will help you to keep focussed but will also help you to acknowledge these areas of our life.

Read 1 Samuel 7:1-6

How do we set about fasting? First, we need to come to God in prayer confessing our sins and asking forgiveness. In the previous chapter, we learn that the ark of the Lord had been stolen by the Philistines and had not been in its rightful place for 20 years. The reason for wanting it to be returned was that the ark represented God's presence. So, for all this time, God had not physically dwelt among the Israelites according to the instructions given to Moses (see Exodus 31:1-9).

- This is an important lesson for us. Is God central to your life? Do you honour him as Lord and King?

We read that Samuel told the people to assemble at Mizpah, get rid of all the sinful things in their lives, *'their foreign gods'*, and to worship only the Lord God. After they had done this, Samuel said, *"I will intercede with the Lord for you."* (verse 5) and then they fasted and confessed their sins against God.

Some of you may remember the song: *"And I will serve no foreign gods, nor any other treasure,..."*.

- Do we serve things other than God? Pray that God will enable us to examine our lives and to get rid of those things, as did the Children of Israel, that have drawn us away from God or prevent us from having a close relationship with him. Notice that later in chapter 7, God miraculously delivers them from the Philistines.

Read Matthew 6

Another important thing is to keep your fasting secret. In verses 16-18 Jesus instructs his disciples: *"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."*

Don't just jump into fasting without preparation. We must make sure we are physically able to do this (some cannot because of medical conditions) and ensure

that we have prepared ourselves. It is not wise to jump into long-term fasting. Everyone must decide what is the right course for themselves.

Also, as previously mentioned, some may not be able to fast from food. If that's the case, perhaps we should look to other areas of our lives such as the time we spend watching television, or on social media. This is not penance, it is an acknowledgement of our desire to come closer to God so that he can use us in his service.

If we decide that fasting is something we should do, then we must use the time we would have spent eating or socialising in prayer. Fasting and prayer go hand in hand.

Prayer

Father help us to give more of ourselves to you. May we, through fasting and prayer, draw closer to you, learn more of you, and more fully serve you.

