

Grace to You :: esp Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time

The Heart of Christian Fasting, Part 3: Fasting in the New Testament

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 8:8; 1 Timothy 4:1–5

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A friend recently dispelled any concerns I had about the importance of this topic when he sent me a link to a popular website promoting fasting. A self-appointed fasting guru gladly tells readers how to fast, when to fast, what to eat—and oh by the way, would you please post a favorable review of my book at amazon.com?

How bad is that website? Really bad. In the name of biblical fasting, you can find advice on “Tasty Breakfasts,” “Savory Soups,” and “Satisfying Casseroles.” If you can stomach still more, the author will treat you to gems like this in the comments section:

Semolina is a processed flour and the bran and germ have been removed leaving the starchy endosperm, so it's not allowed on [the fast]. Stick with simple whole wheat pasta.

You can't make this stuff up.

Trust me: a teacher alerting you to the dark dangers of semolina and starchy endosperm is nowhere near the galaxy that is remotely connected to what God means by what He says in His Word.

What's sad is the effect these self-appointed authorities have on those who follow them. They bind consciences with false guilt. Setting themselves up as judges of what goes into your mouth, they oppose our Lord Jesus Christ, who declared all foods clean and said that nothing should be rejected if it is received with gratitude (Mark 7:19; 1 Timothy 4:1-5).

I won't convince such hucksters to abandon their teaching—not when they are literally hawking their books to passersby. But if providence has brought you to this blog today, perhaps the Scriptures can set you free from bad teaching or enable you to help someone who has been deluded.

Our goal here today is not to regulate your diet, but to think biblically about fasting by looking further at the New Testament.

First summary: The New Testament leaves the details of fasting to the discretion of the believer and even de-emphasizes fasting in the progress of revelation.

When Jesus taught against hypocrisy in Matthew 6:1-18, he taught us to give, pray, and fast privately. If you do, your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

Notice the important contrast between Jesus' teaching on prayer and fasting. Jesus told us to “pray in secret” (Matthew 6:5-8) and then immediately gave extended instruction on prayer so we could pray properly (Matthew 6:9-15). He says, “Pray, then, in this way” and gives several themes that should inform our prayers. He addresses the frequency of prayer when He tells us to pray for our

“daily” bread (Matthew 6:11).

But fasting? Different approach altogether. Yes, he tells those who fast to fast in secret (Matthew 6:18). But he does *not* say, “Fast, then, in this way.” He does *not* give any instruction on fasting. He does *not* address frequency. He does *not* address diet. He does *not* address drinking liquids while fasting.

He *most certainly* does not address whether the starchy endosperm in semolina vitiates the purpose of the fast!

His silence shows that Jesus de-emphasized fasting in comparison to prayer. If you needed such details to live your Christian life, He would have given them (cf. 2 Timothy 3:16-17). His silence shows you shouldn’t preoccupy yourself with the matter. Teachers today should not regulate fasting or elevate it to prominence when Jesus left it in the shadows.

So forget about them. Take it from Jesus. What you eat cannot defile you (Mark 7:19-23). Don’t let anyone with a book to sell tell you any differently.

You want good news? You don’t have to tie yourself in knots trying to keep the wrong foods out of your mouth. You get to decide the nature of your fasting without some teacher scolding you if you decide not to fast or to break a fast.

There’s no shame on you.

The shame is on the teacher who falsely claims biblical authority to restrain your diet.

Like Jesus, the rest of the New Testament also de-emphasizes the role of fasting. True, Jesus opened his ministry with a 40-day fast. True, the apostle Paul fasted after his conversion in Acts 9:9. True, you see voluntary fasting as church leaders are chosen and sent out (Acts 13:3, 14:23). But those *descriptions* of fasting are not the same as *prescriptions* to fast today.

You see that clearly as you consider the progress of revelation. After the book of Acts, fasting is increasingly enveloped in biblical silence. The epistles do not even use the verb for fasting, even though they teach extensively on prayer. Such silence is inconceivable if God intended a regular, detailed approach to fasting to be an ongoing part of the life of every believer.

So what *is* the role of fasting in your Christian life? Before we can answer that question, we must embrace this second point.

Second summary: The New Testament warns Christians against a preoccupation with food and artificial self-denial.

Far from elevating fasting, the New Testament says food is not the issue as we pursue the kingdom of God. The Bible says not to submit to teaching that regulates your approach to food. Even though such teaching may *seem* to be wise and spiritual, it does not advance your sanctification (Colossians 2:16-17, 20-23).

That truth completely undermines teachers who would *compel* you to fast or those who would insinuate that those who fast love Christ more than those who don't. That is patently false. Listen to the apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 8:8:

Food will not commend us to God; we are neither the worse if we do not eat, nor the better if we do eat.

Food is spiritually neutral. So the more teachers insist on imposing fasting on you, the more they manifest that they are false teachers and purveyors of demonic doctrine.

Does that sound harsh? First Timothy 4:1-5 says in part:

*The Spirit explicitly says that in later times some will fall away from the faith, paying attention to deceitful spirits and **doctrines of demons** . . . men who forbid marriage and **advocate abstaining from foods** which God has created to be gratefully shared in by those who believe and know the truth. For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with gratitude, for it is sanctified by means of the word of God and prayer.*

Romans 14:17 says:

The kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.

The Scriptures are clear. So when a teacher belabors fasting to you, it's time to remove yourself from his influence. Don't submit to the yoke of that demonic bondage. Rather, inform your conscience with God's Word and let the Spirit set your heart free.

So where does that leave us? Does fasting have *no* role for the New Testament believer? Stay tuned. We'll get really practical next time.

For now, I'm going to grab a hamburger.

Don Green
Managing Director

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