

FASTING: MANY CHRISTIANS HAVE NEVER BEEN TAUGHT HOW OR WHY TO FAST

Many Christians practice fasting during Lent. As Lent is now upon us, some theologians are drawing attention to the fact that the practice of fasting might be waning because many Christians have never been taught why it's necessary or even how to do it. But it's undoubtedly biblical and its importance has not disappeared just because fewer Christians now practice it, they say. Fasting is completely out of step with the way the West approaches Christianity (and religion as a whole), and, because the world has so penetrated the church, this may well be the primary reason why fasting is so unfamiliar to Western Christians in the 21st century.

Guy M Richard, assistant professor of theology at Reformed Theological Seminary in Atlanta, in a piece published in the November 2018 edition of *Tabletalk* magazine said "We need to remember that Jesus is not interested in Christians' simply going through the motions. He is not looking for mere rote performance of fasting, any more than He would be looking for mere rote performance of giving or praying or anything else," Richard added. Fasting is a "game-changer," and that is because it's a form of unbroken intercession, says author Jennifer Eivaz, in her book *Glory Carriers: How to Host His Presence Every Day*, which was recently released.

"When Jesus spoke to His disciples and He asked them some questions in connection to the Lord's prayer, He didn't just ask them questions, He made some very clear statements. And He said 'when' you pray, and then He said, 'when' you fast," Eivaz explained. That language is clear, she noted, as it's understood that prayer and fasting are essential disciplines for followers of Christ. "When you are fasting, and that is in connection with prayer, too many people don't realize that you are making your own physical body a sacrifice and when you do that you are literally in a continuous prayer.

"Just because you may not be verbalizing something in the moment, that act alone is a continuous prayer," Eivaz, who pastors at Harvest Christian Centre in California, explained. Imagine the power of fasting for an entire day, she continued. That is 24 hours of straight prayer. Such discipline yields breakthroughs and answered prayer on much higher levels than when people pray ordinarily. Eivaz believes that many Christians, especially those who do not fast, have simply never had solid teaching on it and leaders have not called people to fast. Meanwhile, Scripture is replete with examples of prophets, speaking for God, both calling people to and teaching them how to do it.

Pastors and lay leaders should revisit this whole concept and its accompanying spirituality, the author urged, particularly given what Jesus says in Mark 9:29, speaking of a demonically tormented boy. Mark 9:29 reads: "He told them, 'This kind can come out only by prayer and fasting.'" "So, if there's someone with a spiritual oppression and you can't break it, well, fast and pray and then you will break

it,” she said. “We’ve lost contact with some of the spiritual dimensions of fasting. We’ve become more flesh-oriented, entertainment-oriented, and we’ve neglected the spiritual realm.”

When dealing with distinctly spiritual forces, both good and evil, how can people not practice it if they care about the advance of God’s Kingdom, Eivaz asked, “because you will deal with things that require fasting.” God honours a Christian who fasts to seek His will and pray for breakthrough and will also do so in communities who fast together. When people mix their prayers with fasting it brings speed to answered prayer, she said, citing Isaiah 58:8. When fasting is done as God prescribes, “Then your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear; then your righteousness will go before you and the glory of the Lord will be your rear guard.”

While the Bible shows there are different kinds of fasts, the prophet Daniel fasted choice meat and wine, for example, they all centre around going without food, Eivaz said. “In a lot of Christian circles they are having negativity fasts or maybe they’ll turn off their phones for a season. I think all of that is helpful, but it’s not a biblical fast,” she said. “Me, having the body type that I have where my blood sugar just goes nuts [if I don’t eat], I train my body to fast one hour at a time. I just added an hour just to stretch myself. You have to work with what you have and the Lord honours that.”

Donald Whitney, a professor of biblical spirituality and associate dean of the School of Theology at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky, concurs. “Fasting appears in the Bible more often than something as important as baptism,” he said, “by my count, fasting is mentioned about 77 times versus 75 times for baptism.” People are not going to do what they have not been taught to do, he said, echoing Eivaz. “It’s hard to be an advocate for something from the pulpit you’re not doing,”

Whitney said. “It’s hard to get up to urge people to fast if you’re not fasting. The same is true for family worship or any other practice.”

He explained there are many purposes to fasting, but the most common one is to strengthen prayer. For fasting to be done right, there must be a biblical purpose, he emphasized. If not done with such a purpose, it will only be something to endure. “It’s not the church’s idea, it’s God’s idea,” he stressed, adding that “we don’t manipulate God by doing it and we don’t gain anything necessarily by doing it.” “If, when you get hungry and your stomach growls and your head aches and you say, ‘Man, I’m hungry,’ and your next thought is ‘Oh, that’s right, I’m fasting today,’ and then your next thought is ‘How long until this is over?’ you’re doing it wrong.”

For it to be done right the thought that should follow the hunger pangs and remembrance that one is fasting is, for example, remembering to pray for one’s spouse or for someone’s conversion. “Your hunger serves your larger purpose,” Whitney reiterated, “and without that it is just something to be endured and we think that we are impressing God by making ourselves suffer and somehow that earns us points. That’s just a works-based, not Gospel-based view of fasting. And that’s probably the most common mistake by those who do fast.” He regards the practice as so important that he requires his students to fast twice per semester.

He doesn't rigidly enforce as he always has pregnant or diabetic students who will endanger their health if they do not eat. "We want to make sure that we always cover our bases in saying that we never want to ask people to do anything that would cause them or an unborn child any kind of harm." "But I have found that where there is a will there is way," he said, noting there are ways to give up food in order to still feel the hunger and a sense of lack that inclines them to pray while simultaneously maintaining a nutritional intake that will enable them to function. Whitney is the author of *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*, which explores the purpose of fasting.

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