

Title: The Book of Mark: Part 6, Fasting

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Passage: Mark 2.13-22

Big idea: Fasting is a helpful spiritual discipline to build spiritual muscles.



One of the things that you may or may not know about me is that I like good food and I like to eat.

I especially like these.



I like all you can eat buffets.

My metabolism rate used to be so high when I was young, that one Christmas before Sherryl and I were married, I was visiting her home in Mississippi. Mississippi is known for soul food like fried okra, grits, biscuits and gravy, fried chicken, banana puddin', and lots of Christmas time goodies.

Well, true story, I ate so much during those few days of Christmas that after Sherryl's dad noticed how much I ate he pulled her aside and, in all sincerity, asked her if I had a tapeworm. Well, I don't and didn't. It was simply my high metabolism.

Food is necessary for living and it is a gift from God, as are our taste buds and ability to smell which makes food more enjoyable. Experts have developed a food pyramid that pictures a balanced diet.



In Mark 2.13-22, we see Jesus responding to some questions from some of his critics and non-critics about food as it related to a biblical spiritual discipline called fasting.

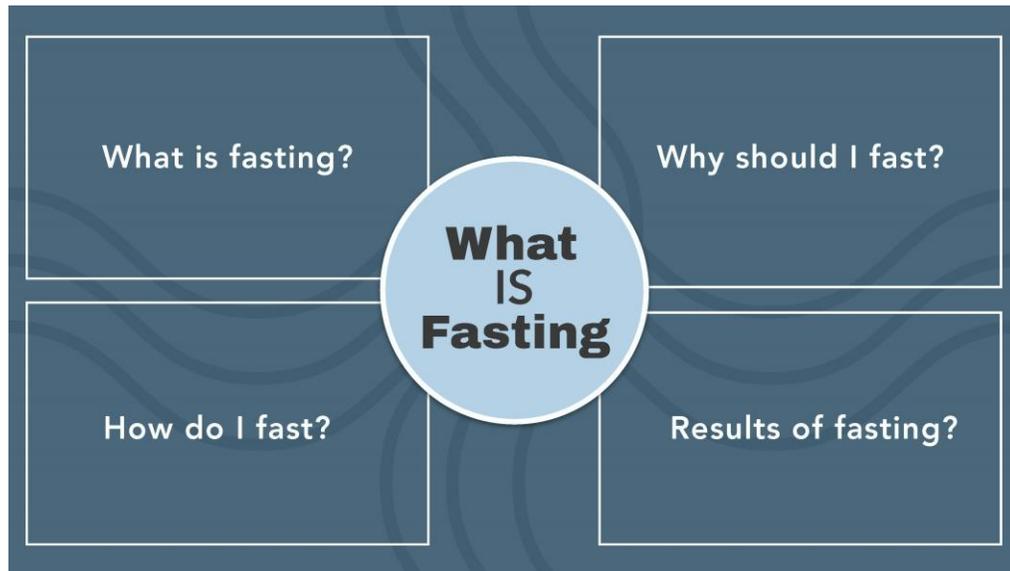
What do you think the Bible says about fasting?

BIG IDEA

Fasting is a helpful spiritual discipline
to build our spiritual muscles.



I'm going to answer four questions about fasting and use the passage in Mark as a springboard to look at some other bible verses on this discipline.



¹³ Once again Jesus went out beside the lake. A large crowd came to him, and he began to teach them. ¹⁴ As he walked along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax collector's booth. "Follow me," Jesus told him, and Levi got up and followed him.

¹⁵ While Jesus was having dinner at Levi's house, many tax collectors and sinners were eating with him and his disciples, for there were many who followed him. ¹⁶ When the teachers of the law who were Pharisees saw him eating with the sinners and tax collectors, they asked his disciples: "Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?"

¹⁷ On hearing this, Jesus said to them, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."

¹⁸ Now John's disciples and the Pharisees were fasting. Some people came and asked Jesus, "How is it that John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees are fasting, but yours are not?"

¹⁹ Jesus answered, "How can the guests of the bridegroom fast while he is with them? They cannot, so long as they have him with them. ²⁰ But the time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them, and on that day they will fast.

²¹ "No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment. Otherwise, the new piece will pull away from the old, making the tear worse. ²² And no one pours new wine into old wineskins. Otherwise, the wine will burst the skins, and both the wine and the wineskins will be ruined. No, they pour new wine into new wineskins."

Mark 2.13-22

Mark 2.13-14, "Once again Jesus went out beside the lake. A large crowd came to him, and he began to teach them. As he walked along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax collector's booth. "Follow me," Jesus told him, and Levi got up and followed him."

Jesus is again picking some of his disciples. This one, however, was an unusual pick. A hated tax collector whose name was Levi, we also know him as Matthew. Levi was his given name and Matthew his apostolic name.

Taxes were collected same as they are now and there were a lot of them. Taxes included poll taxes, a crops tax, income tax, and various taxes you would pay as you went from one region to another.

So, this was a tax booth something like a toll booth we pass through on many Canadian roads.

With all these taxes, there was plenty of opportunity for extortion, charging the tax plus more on top of that that unscrupulous tax agents would then pocket. So, tax collectors were a hated bunch.

In addition to that, Jews considered fellow Jews who were tax collectors as traitors because they cozied up to the Roman government at the expense of their fellow Jews. They were even excommunicated from the synagogues and could not serve as a witness in court.

They were, in the Jewish people's minds, the lowest of the low. So, they were included in this class called sinners.

So, when Jesus called, Matthew responded and left this vocation and his job. To leave such a job was a real sacrifice because those were coveted jobs as tax collectors made a lot of money. If Matthew left, he probably could not go back to it because the position would be quickly filled by someone else. On the other hand, the first four disciples who were fishermen could easily go back to their fishing vocation if this "following Jesus" didn't work out. Some of the disciples actually did go back to fishing for a while after Jesus was crucified.

Mark 2. 15, "While Jesus was having dinner at Levi's house, many tax collectors and sinners were eating with him and his disciples, for there were many who followed him."

Levi's life was revolutionized so he threw a party to share Christ with his friends, who were considered unsavory by society like himself.

His house was obviously large because, again, tax collectors made lots of money.

Mark 2.16, "When the teachers of the law who were Pharisees saw him eating with the sinners and tax collectors, they asked his disciples: 'Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?'"

The word 'sinners' denotes people who refused to follow the Mosaic Law as interpreted by the Pharisees. The Pharisees saw such people as inferior, and these so-called sinners were social outcasts themselves for various reasons, like the tax collectors.

Now, the Pharisees were also sinners, but Jesus refers to them as self-righteous. They may have looked respectable outwardly, but inside they were hypocrites, prideful, bitter, and legalistic.

Although many of the Pharisee were certainly pious and godly men, Jesus came into conflict with those who represented some of the worst elements of traditional religion: jealousy, hypocrisy, and religious formalism.

Yet, Jesus was a friend of sinners. This was grace in action. Jesus sought out the people nobody else wanted. This *picking the least* became a trademark of Jesus' ministry. Jesus saw who these people could become if they followed Him. Jesus sees us for what we can become if we give our lives to Him. He sees what no one else can see.

That Jesus would befriend a man who was part of such a bad profession (eating with them implied intimacy and friendship), the Pharisees, who meticulously kept the law, just couldn't keep quiet.

Mark 2.16, "When the teachers of the law who were Pharisees saw him eating with the sinners and tax collectors, they asked his disciples: 'Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?'"

Pharisees would often attend such banquets but were scrupulous to avoid any ritual impurity and they would certainly not sit near these sinners. What a disgrace for Jesus who claimed to be a teacher of the law to ignore these time-honored customs, they thought.

The message here is that believers need to befriend those far from God.

- We are on mission from God to spread the gospel to those far from Him.
- We shouldn't isolate ourselves from those far from God.
- While doing so we certainly shouldn't embrace a lost world's views and behavior that contradicts true spirituality.

Jesus responds to the Pharisees' questions with this:

Mark 2.17, "On hearing this, Jesus said to them, 'It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.'"

Jesus would define righteous differently from how the Pharisees did.

"Righteous" here is the sense of self-righteous (I'm not really that bad a sinner) and sinners here represent those who recognize their sin and their separation from God.

It is as if He is saying, "To people who think they are righteous, I have nothing to say to you. But to those who know they have need, I have come for you."¹

We then change scenes to a later date and see this topic of fasting presented.

Mark 2.18, "Now John's disciples and the Pharisees were fasting. Some people came and asked Jesus, 'How is it that John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees are fasting, but yours are not?'"

John is John the Baptist who came to pave the way for Jesus.

The Pharisees placed a high value on religious ritual, such as fasting in public. So, because it was assumed that fasting indicated true religious piety, some asked why Jesus' disciples were not fasting.

The Pharisees' attitude about this came from, among other things, the false assumption that true religion was a solemn, joyless life, an assumption which some people even hold today.²

When they would fast, the Pharisees would actually

- whitened their faces,
- put ashes on their heads,
- wear shoddy clothes,
- refuse to wash, and
- they would look as forlorn as they possibly could.
- You could not be spiritual unless you were uncomfortable. They thought spirituality makes you do things you do not want to do and keeps you from doing the things you want to do³

Jesus answers them with a parable.

Mark 2.19-20, "Jesus answered, 'How can the guests of the bridegroom fast while he is with them? They cannot, so long as they have him with them. But the time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them, and on that day they will fast.'"

A Jewish wedding was and is a time of great joy and celebration. In ancient times weddings could last up to a week and were considered to be one of the most joyous times ever. Why would you fast during such a time as this Jesus is saying. He is paralleling himself to the bridegroom, with the church being his bride, and saying that while He was physically with them, they should rejoice. At the proper time, fasting would be appropriate.

He adds two more parables.

Mark 2.21, "No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment. If he does, the new piece will pull away from the old, making the tear worse."

¹ Hughes, R. K. (1989). *Mark: Jesus, servant and savior* (Vol. 1, p. 72). Crossway Books.

² Hughes, R. K. (1989). *Mark: Jesus, servant and savior* (Vol. 1, p. 77). Crossway Books.

³ Hughes, R. K. (1989). *Mark: Jesus, servant and savior* (Vol. 1, p. 77). Crossway Books.

He uses this word picture to say that the new spiritual fabric which Christ brings cannot be interwoven with the tired fibers of old religion; it will simply tear it apart.⁴

Mark 2:22, “And no one pours new wine into old wineskins. If he does, the wine will burst the skins, and both the wine and the wineskins will be ruined. No, he pours new wine into new wineskins.”

In ancient times wine was kept in goatskin pouches. New skins were soft and pliable and would stretch when wine that had not yet completed fermentation was put in them. However, old wineskins that had been stretched would become brittle and, being no longer pliable, were thus unable to stretch. The gas from the fermenting wine burst them open, destroying both wine and wineskins. Putting new wine into old wineskins (v.22) and patching an old garment with a new cloth (v.21) are just as inappropriate as fasting at a wedding feast.

Jesus affirms fasting, when he says, on that day they will fast, but not in the way the Pharisees did it, to be noticed, and for legalistic reasons.

In Matthew 6 Jesus talks about the importance of giving and prayer. And then, almost in the same breath he says:

Matthew 6:16, “When you fast”

In the context here in Matthew, Jesus seems to place fasting at the same level of spiritual importance as giving and praying. He’s assuming his followers will fast, at the appropriate time.

So, Jesus is not saying with this parable don’t fast, but that an appropriate time to fast would come.

1. What is fasting?

Fasting is, abstaining from food (usually), voluntarily, for spiritual purposes.

The word fast means self-denial. You are denying yourself of something, in this case food, to grow your faith and focus on God through prayer, bible reading, and turning to Him for strength when hunger pains rise up. It could be no food, or no solid food (throwing a steak in a blender does not count). It could include abstaining for a period of time from sweets or coffee or meat.

To be voluntary means that it is a personal choice you must make for yourself. It is not a command from the Bible, like the 10 commandments.

It is not an end in itself, but for spiritual purposes, to help you focus more on God.

Joel 2:12 “‘Even now’, declares the LORD, ‘return to me with all your heart, with fasting.’”

We can be prompted to fast when we realized we need to make some changes in us like

- increased spiritual passion and spiritual focus,
- a pending decision when we need wisdom,
- a world event, or a
- church issue.

History:

- In the New Testament days, the early church fasted on Wednesdays and Fridays, several days before Easter, and in preparation for those who were to be baptized.
- Great revivals in history had an element of fasting that contributed to the revival’s impact.
- Handel’s *Messiah* was composed as a result of intense prayer and fasting by Handel.
- On February 6, 1756, England declared a day of fasting as it faced the threat of being conquered by Napoleon. They weren’t conquered.

⁴ Hughes, R. K. (1989). *Mark: Jesus, servant and savior* (Vol. 1, p. 78). Crossway Books.

- During WWII many countries set days of prayer and fasting.

A caution: Some people can't fast because of medical conditions. If that is true for you, you can enter into the spirit of fasting and fast from other physical pleasures like TV, desserts, hobbies, or even fasting from talking for a time period.

2. Why should I fast?

1. To lessen your focus on the physical and increase your focus on the spiritual.

Fasting can help keep the physical in perspective, like not letting the "hunger drive" rule your life. It serves to notice who is in charge: God, not my body. It loosens us from the tie to the physical realm which can consume our thoughts and shape our decisions.

It makes us face this question: Do I eat to live or live to eat?

As I said earlier, I love to eat and what I've learned through life is how much I really at times am driven by the physical and not the spiritual. I've had to ask myself: Is my passion for God as strong as my passion for food.

2. To uncover hindrances in your life.

Isaiah 58.3, "Why have we fasted,' they say, 'and you have not seen it? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you have not noticed?' 'Yet on the day of your fasting, you do as you please and exploit all your workers.'"

It can make us notice things in our lives we were blind to. It can uncover and expose things that control us.

3. To sharpen your spiritual senses.

God gave us our physical senses and they are an important dimension to life. Sometimes we can be controlled by our physical senses to such a great extent that our spiritual senses like discernment, sensing the quiet movements of God can be drowned out. Fasting can give us increased clarity about spiritual things.

4. To bring urgency to your prayer life.

It tells God that we really mean business in what we are praying for. Sometimes critical needs come up. Fasting can strengthen our prayer lives and help us focus our prayer.

5. To help you make better decisions.

Sometimes we face consequential decisions, and we need God's direction as we ponder the decision. Fasting can help us more clearly sense God's direction. Jesus often fasted and prayed before making major decisions like choosing his final group of disciples.

3 Don'ts

1. Don't fast to force God's hand.
2. Don't fast to impress others.
3. Don't fast as an empty ritual.

3. How do I fast?

There is a difference between a regular discipline of short fasting (a meal or two a week) versus longer fasting. It is a good discipline for every Christian to fast for a meal or for a day a week. If you normally skip breakfast, that doesn't count.

There are those special times when you clearly sense God's hand on your heart to fast for longer periods of time. Here are a few guidelines

Determine when.

Will it be monthly, weekly, for one meal, or for one day?

Is God drawing you to a longer fast?

It is important to walk before you run. Check with your doctor first for longer periods of fasting.

Decide why

Do you need to deal with a personal problem, a decision, a relationship issue, or you just simply want to sharpen your spiritual senses.

It could be corporate when church leaders are calling the church to pray and fast like our corporate prayer and fasting this coming Sunday when we are encouraging you to join the church corporately to pray and fast.

Get a prayer partner.

Especially for longer fasts, ask a good friend to pray for you during this time.

Beginning your fast.

- Drink water or juice only.
- Restrict physical activity. Skip exercise that day.
- Confess any sin as you begin.
- Spend the time you would have eaten, in Bible reading and prayer.
- It is not just skipping a meal, so you have more time to get more tasks done.
- Journal. Bring a little notebook or journal and write down Scriptures that stand out, write out your prayers, or what you believe God is impressing on you.
- Expect some discomfort like hunger pains, tiredness, headaches, or even crankiness.

Some time back, when my kids were small, I did an extended fast. During that time, they wanted me to get them a happy meal at McDonalds. (When you fast, your sense of smell will be more acute when it comes to food.) Well, I walked into McDonalds to get their happy meal and this blast of french fries smell hit me. I just wanted to stuff my face with McDonalds's french fries.

So, a word of caution. If you do an extended fast, don't go to McDonalds for your kids.

Ending your fast.

Don't pig out after you finish. For sure don't go to a buffet. I did that once after a few days of fast and learned the hard way that it is not a good idea. Eat mild food in small portions after a lengthy fast.

Summarize what you learned from your reflections in your journal and perhaps God directed you to do something specific as a result of your fast.

4. Results of fasting?

These 5 verses in Isaiah 58 describe a fast that the people did, and we get some insight into what fasting can ultimately do.

Isaiah 58:6, "Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke?"

Fasting can help you get freedom from personal bondage: fear, selfishness, pornography, jealousy, or some other sin or problem you have tried to overcome.

Isaiah 58.7, “Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter- when you see the naked, to clothe him, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?”

Fasting can increase your generosity, which is a real marker of spiritual maturity.

Isaiah 58.8a, “Then your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear”

Fasting can foster physical, emotional, and mental healing. In fact, research has found that fasting is good for your brain and your body.

Isaiah 58.8b, “Then your righteousness will go before you, and the glory of the LORD will be your rear guard.”

Fasting can give you a greater awareness of God’s protection as it helps us become more aware of how to deal with the spiritual battle we face and the spiritual weapons the Holy Spirit gives. God protects us front and rear.

Isaiah 58.9, “Then you will call, and the LORD will answer; you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I.”

Fasting can help us get a clearer perspective of what God wants us to pray for which results in more answers to prayer which in turn strengthens our faith. I think fasting makes us pray with a purer heart.

Isaiah 58.10, “Your light will rise in the darkness, and your night will become like the noonday. Your darkest hour will be like the noonday sun”

Fasting can help us become more confident in the dark times of life as we gain a clearer perspective and focus on the one who truly takes care of us. The darkest moments of life are opportunities for intense spiritual focus.

Isaiah 58.11, “The LORD will guide you always; he will satisfy your needs in a sun-scorched land and will strengthen your frame.”

Fasting can give us new strength for the journey of life.

So, there are many possible good outcomes when we fast with the right heart.

After Jesus rose from the dead, he appeared to his disciples. During his third appearance he ate a meal of bread and fish on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. After the meal he pulled Peter aside and asked him a penetrating question. As Jesus nodded or pointed to the nets and the boats which represented his occupation as a fisherman and his means to making a living, he asked Peter if he loved Him more than his love for making a living and getting food to eat.

That question Jesus asks points to an essential question that fasting poses, *who or what really drives my living, the physical or the spiritual*. Peter settled the issue of who was number one in his life and began the leadership of the early church that changed the course of history.

Now remember, food is good. Following Jesus is not a somber lifestyle what the Pharisees did when they fasted. Rather, fasting helps us break, in small ways, our dependence on things of the world.

Andrew Murray was a South African pastor and writer who wrote 240 books in late 19th and early 20th century. He wrote these words about fasting that captures what we’ve looked at today.

**Fasting helps to express, deepen,
and to confirm the resolution**

that we are ready to sacrifice anything, to
sacrifice ourselves to attain what we seek for
the kingdom of God.

(Andrew Murray)

So, my challenge to you is this, try fasting this week.

Consider putting fasting into your spiritual growth toolbox and joining our 12-hour prayer and fasting this coming Sunday from 6 am to 6 pm.

For more resources on fasting, scan this QR code:

