

Willing To Humble Yourself?

Do you fast? If so, do you fast for religious reasons or for better health? A major part of the world includes Christians, Muslims and Hindus who fast out of religious obligation or because they believe there is a special spiritual benefit. For example, the Muslims believe that SIYAAM or fasting, one of the five sacred pillars of Islam, grants special favor with Allah in this life and in heaven. Today there are all kinds of fasts: juice fasts, hygiene fasts, tissue cleansing fasts to name a few. Some of them are expensive such as the tissue cleansing fast which can cost as much as \$314 per day. Saint Ephrem has even written hymns about fasting to encourage you. Fasting has been around a long time. But for me, the idea of actually fasting had not appealed to me until I asked, “Why did Jesus say, ‘When you fast?’”

Moreover, when you fast, do not be like the hypocrites, with a sad countenance. For they disfigure their faces that they may appear to men to be fasting. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward. But you, when you fast . . . (NKJV)
Matthew 6:16-18

RELIGIOUS ACTORS. Once more Jesus warns His audience about living their spiritual lives like the Pharisees, Sadducees and scribes. So far, He has shown us that they did not understand the scriptures, and He has shown us that they pretended to be more spiritual than they were. These religious leaders did “spiritual things” to win the praise and admiration of the very people they were supposed to be ministering to. How appalling! So Jesus has called them hypocrites which really means actors. Or, if you please, they were like religious clowns and Jesus is removing their makeup and costumes and revealing their true hearts. In our passage this time, Jesus tells us they ONLY want to think they are really suffering when they fast. They are not really fasting. They are only acting! That is the meaning of a hypocrite.

Why does He call them actors? Jesus uses a play on words in describing them. He says they “disfigure” their faces to “figure” their faces. Sometimes during fasting, people would put on sackcloth or ashes as a sign of their grief or

significance. Fasting caused one to become weak because the person went without food.

My knees are weak from fasting; And my flesh has grown lean, without fatness. (NASB) Ps. 109:24

Fast & Faster

A man lying quietly in a cool room can live at most 12 days without water but given water he can fast for more than two months.

Rarely did a fast include going without water such as in Esther 4:16. So it is understandable that those who fast would feel weak and maybe even look miserable.

So these religious leaders put on an act. They put on make-up or made their faces look gloomy, sad, and mourning to impress others. They wanted others to think they were enduring a stressing fast. They were actors - to impress the lay people who probably regarded them as holy and spiritual.

May I ask a question? Have you ever acted “spiritual” to impress someone? In some way have you acted like the Pharisees did? Jesus said they had their reward - the praise and respect of the people but not God’s reward. We cannot

escape. God knows who we really are. Jesus is not condemning fasting but the heart that pretends to be something it is not. Psalm 139:2 reminds us that God

... understand[s] my thought from afar. (NASB) Ps. 139:2

He knows the intentions and motives of our hearts. God weighs our hearts (Prov. 21:2). He saw the proud hearts of the Pharisees, Sadducees and scribes.

GO FAST. Did you notice? Did you notice that Jesus assumed we will fast when He said,

But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, so that you do not appear to men to be fasting, but to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly. (NKJV)

Matt. 6:17-18

To anoint your head and wash your face was ancient hygiene. Jesus is telling them to clean-up and look their best. This is the opposite of a sad and gloomy face. This is like Jesus' encouragement to us to pray in secret (Matt. 6:6). God knows our heart. He knows when we are fasting and He knows when we are just acting. Jesus' message is clear. Do your fasting unto God the Father.

SEEKING GOD. Fasting occurred for many reasons. Most of the time fasting occurred at times of great stress (war, sin, fear, death) or very important decisions. Fasting was more than going without food. It was about begging God for help! It is about seeking God. It was about humility. That was how David viewed fasting,

But as for me, when they were sick, my clothing was sackcloth; I humbled my soul with fasting; And my prayer kept returning to my bosom. (NASB) Ps. 35:13

It was an act of humility. Ezra also viewed fasting as an act of humbling oneself before the Lord (Ezra 8:21). And so does God,

And it came about when Ahab heard these words, that he tore his clothes and put on sackcloth and fasted, and he lay in sackcloth and went about despondently. Then the word of the LORD came ... saying, "Do you see how Ahab has humbled himself before Me?" (NASB) 1 Kings 21:27-29

"Is it a fast like this which I choose, a day for a man to humble himself? (NASB) Isaiah 58:5

There is a curious passage in Leviticus 23:27 dealing with the day of atonement. It says that on ...

... the day of atonement ... you shall humble your souls and present an offering by fire to the LORD. (NASB) Lev. 23:27

The Hebrew word for "humble" means "to force submission." And so the Jews understand this day to be a day of fasting.

CONCLUSION. Fasting has a spiritual meaning. It is an

act of humility before God. God sees it as self-denial. Philipians 2:8 says Jesus humbled Himself by becoming "obedient." That is, He denied Himself. He submitted Himself to the Father.

Did you know that Jesus fasted too? We are told He fasted when He went into the desert to be tested by Satan (Matt. 4:2). It was a time of crisis. It was a time of spiritual preparation for testing by Satan.

Are you in a spiritual crisis, depressed, facing a major decision, or in real need? How about fasting? It simply says, "Father, I am humbling myself. I am submitting to you. I am seeking you. Please help me. Please forgive me. Please answer me!" Fasting is a choice to suffer as you seek His face

<i>Fasting At Times of Crisis</i>	
During War	Judges 20;26
Confession of Sin	1 Samuel 7:3-6
Death of an Adult	1 Samuel 31:13
Death of a Child	2 Samuel 12:16-23
Repentance Over Sin	Nehemiah 9:1-2
Fear	Esther 4:3, 16; 9:3
Lonely and Needy	Psalms 109:21-25
Seeking the Lord	Daniel 9:3
Mourning	Matthew 9:15
Exorcism	Matthew 17:21
Appointing Leaders	Acts 14:23

. . . It says, “Lord I am serious!” Jesus said, “Your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly.”