

Welcome to **Discipleship training On The Air**. In this teaching series you may learn to become a disciple of Jesus Christ. A teacher will teach from the Bible that a disciple of Jesus prays. As you listen to this programme, make notes in a notebook or record the programme.

Jesus says, "Ask and it will be given to you" (Matthew 7:7). Paul says, "Pray continually" (1 Thessalonians 5:17). And James says, "The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective" (James 5:16). The Bible teaches much about prayer. The fourth series of 8 teachings is about "The practice of prayer". The four topics are: "A disciple is motivated to pray", "A disciple is sensitive to the physical aspects of prayer", "A disciple persists in prayer" and "A disciple is convinced about the effects of prayer". Every topic will be in two parts. Today we will learn about "A DISCIPLE IS SENSITIVE TO THE PHYSICAL ASPECTS OF PRAYER - PART 2". In part 2 we will consider "prayer and fasting" in both the Old Testament and New Testament. As you listen, make notes. Christians often ask the question, "What does the Bible teach about fasting?" We are going to look at many Bible passages that speak about fasting. Write the Bible references down so that you can read them again.

POINT 4. PRAYER AND FASTING

Fasting is the voluntary abstinence from food for spiritual purposes. Fasting is different than a *hunger strike*, the purpose of which is to attract attention to a particular cause, usually a political cause. Fasting is also different than *dieting*, the purpose of which is to promote physical health. The normal way of fasting in the Bible involved only the abstinence from food, not from water and for one day only.

First. The purposes of fasting.

One. A purpose of fasting was to express humiliation, during which a person grieved for his sin and confessed his sin. It was often accompanied by wearing sackcloth and dust or ashes on the head. For example in Nehemiah 9:1-3, the Israelites confessed their sins and the wickedness of their forefathers during fasting.

Two. Another purpose of fasting was to express lamentation, during which people grieved their losses or feared coming threats. Sometimes the tearing of their clothes and loud weeping accompanied their fasting. For example in 2 Samuel 1:11-12, king David and his men mourned the death of king Saul and many Israelite soldiers. And in 2 Chronicles 20:2-4, king Jehoshaphat proclaimed a national fast in order to avert a threat of war.

Three. A third purpose of fasting was to promote concentration on an important religious act or event. This was always in connection with prayer. For example in Matthew 4:2, Jesus fasted in order to concentrate on preparing the work, which God the Father gave him to do. In Acts 13:2-3 church leaders fasted in connection with the sending of missionaries and in Acts 14:23 in connection with the appointment of elders in the church.

Four. People also fasted for very wrong purposes. In 1 Kings 21:9, queen Jezebel proclaimed a national day of fasting in order to murder an innocent person. In Zechariah 7:3-5 and Isaiah 58:1-12, people fasted to feign humiliation before God. Zechariah rebuked the Israelites for feasting for themselves instead of fasting for the Lord. In Isaiah, the right kind of fasting the Lord required was not abstinence from food, but abstinence from injustice, oppression and malicious talk!

Second. The times of fasting.

In the Old Testament, *the Law required only one day of fasting* in the entire year, namely, on the Day of Atonement! This day was regarded as a Sabbath. People abstained from food and made atonement for their sins (Leviticus 16:29-34).

In the course of time, fasts began to multiply. There were fasts for one day from only sunrise to sunset (2 Samuel 1:12), a fast for seven days (1 Samuel 31:13), a partial fast for three weeks (Daniel 10:3), a supernatural and absolute fast for forty days (1 Kings 19:8), fasts during the fifth and seventh month (Zechariah 7:3-5), and soon during the fourth, fifth, seventh and tenth month (Zechariah 8:19). Finally, the Pharisees in the time of Jesus fasted twice every week (Luke 18:12)! Fasting became a very visible way of pretending piety! However, all these other fasts were purely human institutions! God never ordained them!

Third. True biblical fasting is not the abstinence from food, but the abstinence from wickedness.

In Isaiah 58:3-12 God teaches what is the right kind of fasting that pleases him. The people of Israel asked, "Why have we fasted and you have not seen it? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you have not noticed?" Then God replied, "On the day of your fasting you do as you please and exploit all your workers. Your fasting ends in quarrelling and strife, and in striking each other with wicked fists. You cannot fast as you do today and expect your voice to be heard on high. Is this the kind of fast I have chosen, only a day for a man to humble

himself? Is it only for bowing one's head like a reed and for lying on sackcloth and ashes? Is that what you call a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord?" God says that he is not impressed with the traditional fasting of the various religions. God teaches what is the kind of fasting that pleases him. He says, "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? 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?" God teaches that *true biblical fasting is to make a clean break with sin and injustice on the one hand and to share your food and clothes with the needy in the world on the other hand.*

God promises that when his people fast like this, then he will answer their prayers and bless their lives. He says, "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. Then you will call and the Lord will answer; you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I."

Again God repeats what he regards as true biblical fasting: not the abstinence of food, but the stopping of sin in your own life and the giving of your possessions and efforts to help the needy and oppressed. He says, "If you do away with the yoke of oppression, with the pointing finger and malicious talk, and if you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed, then your light will rise in the darkness, and your night will become like the noonday."

With regard to true biblical fasting, God's blessings are much greater than the sacrifices you can bring. God promises, "The Lord will guide you always; he will satisfy your needs in a sun-scorched land and he will strengthen your frame. You will be like a well-watered garden, like a spring whose waters never fail. Your people will rebuild the ancient ruins and will raise up the age-old foundations; you will be called Repairer of Broken Walls, Restorer of Streets with Dwellings."

Conclusion. True biblical fasting does not emphasise abstaining from food, but abstaining from sin and injustice and sharing of yourself and your possessions with the needy and oppressed in this world.

Fourth. Voluntary fasting should be done inconspicuously.

In the New Testament, in Matthew 6:16-18 Jesus Christ teaches, "When you fast, do not look sombre as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting. I tell you the truth, 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 men 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." Jesus speaks of *fasting as an expression of humiliation*. He condemned the act the Pharisees were putting up, when they covered their faces with ashes and wanted all people to notice their piety. Jesus does *not command* his disciples to fast. He also does not *forbid* them to fast. If they wanted to fast, they may. But when they fasted, they should do it as inconspicuously as possible.

Fifth. The New Testament joy of salvation does not go together with the Old Testament mourning of fasting.

One. The parable of the bridegroom and the guests. In Matthew 9:14-15 Jesus Christ teaches, "How can the guests of the bridegroom mourn while he is with them? The time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them: then they will fast. According to 2 Corinthians 11:2 and Ephesians 5:32, Christ is "the bridegroom" and Christians are "the bride". Does Jesus in this passage teach that Christians should fast? Based on Matthew 25:1 and Revelation 19:7 and 21:9, some people teach that the bridegroom, Christ, is *absent right up to the Second Coming*. Therefore, they teach that Christians should fast throughout the New Testament period right until the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. That is not correct. Jesus Christ is not absent from the life of every Christian and also not absent from the Christian Church during the New Testament period. In stead in Matthew 28:20 he promised to be with Christians until the end of the age and in Galatians 2:20 Paul teaches that Jesus Christ now lives in the hearts and lives of Christians!

When was Jesus Christ absent from his followers? In John 16:16-22, Jesus himself said, "In a little while you will see me no more, and then after a little while you will see me." Then he explains to them what he meant by "a little while". "You will weep and mourn while the world rejoices. You will grieve, but your grief will turn to joy. ... Now is your time of grief, but I will see you again and you will rejoice, and no one will take away your joy." Jesus Christ himself explained that his rejection by the evil authorities and people was at hand. That he would be condemned to death and would be taken away from them in death for a little while. According to John 16, during that time the disciples of Jesus would weep and mourn and according to Matthew 9, during that time they would fast. Jesus Christ predicted that his disciples would mourn and fast only while he was dead for three days in the grave. After his resurrection they would see him again, their joy would return and no one would take away their joy! With the resurrection, ascension and outpouring of the Holy Spirit, the Church came into being. According to Revelation 21:9-10 and Hebrews 12:22-23, the Church is the bride of Jesus Christ. And, according to Matthew 28:20, the bridegroom, Jesus Christ, is with the bride throughout every day until the end of the age!

Two. The parable of the wine and the wineskins. In Matthew 9:16-17, which is the context of the above passage about fasting, Jesus Christ continues to teach, “No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment, for the patch will pull away from the garment, making the tear worse. Neither do men pour new wine into old wineskins. If they do, the skins will burst, the wine will run out and the wineskins will be ruined. No, they pour new wine into new wineskins, and both are preserved.”

In this parable, “the old wine” represents the mourning of fasting and “the old wineskins” represent the regulated fasting days and fasting practises of the Jews. “The new wine” represents the joy of salvation and the blessings, which Jesus Christ brings and “the new wineskins” represent the joyous and spontaneous service of the Christians. Jesus teaches that the religious practice of mourning of the Jews needed *the outward form* of a fasting day and fasting practices, like clothing themselves in sackcloth, putting ashes on their head and abstaining from all food. Likewise, Jesus teaches that *the contents of the Christian gospel*, namely, the joy of forgiveness, salvation and renewal, *needs a new outward form to express itself!* The new wine needs a new wineskin! Instead of the mourning and fasting of the Jews, Christians express their new life in singing with music and in joyous and spontaneous service of God and people. Jesus Christ teaches that “the joy of salvation” does not go together with “the mourning of fasting”. The old way of fasting excluded joy completely. But now the joy of salvation introduces the new way of relating to God and serving God!

Sixth. The Old Testament requirement of fasting has been abolished.

After the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, things changed.

One. In Colossians 2:14 is written that by his death, Jesus Christ *cancelled the requirements of the ceremonial law, which included fasting*, sacrificing animals, bringing harvest offerings and tithes, eating only clean foods and circumcision. Jesus Christ took these requirements away from Christians!

Two. In Ephesians 2:15 is written that by his death, Jesus Christ *destroyed the ceremonial law, which brought separation* between Jews and Gentiles. He *abolished it forever from the Christian Church!* Fasting is no longer a religious requirement for Christians and it may not even be reintroduced as a religious requirement into the Christian Church, because it would cause a new division!

Conclusion.

The decisive Bible passages concerning fasting are the following.

One. Isaiah 58:6-12 emphasises fasting as abstaining from injustice, oppression and malicious talk.

Two. Matthew 9:15-17 teaches that the joy of salvation does not go together with the mourning of fasting.

Three. Colossians 2:14 and Ephesians 2:15 teach very clearly the ceremonial law, which included fasting, has been cancelled and abolished. Christians may fast if they like, but they may not require other Christians to fast!

ASSIGNMENT FOR NEXT WEEK

First. Evaluate your motives and attitudes with regard to prayer. Do you still pray to impress people by your prayer and especially by your fasting? If so, change your motives and attitudes. Commit yourself to real biblical fasting, which is not the abstinence from food, but the abstinence from injustice, oppression and malicious talk!

Second. See the workbooks “Go and make disciples” and Internet on www. Etc

Third. Listen on short wave radio every SATURDAY to WEDNESDAY to “Discipleship training on the air”.