

Barratt Ministries Challenge

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The Secret Life: Fasting Part 1: Principles

Sermon on the Mount Series, Matthew 6:16

by Maurice Barratt

Fasting is a subject which arouses a lot of contention amongst Christians. Some say it is not something Christians should do at all, that it is just an Old Testament practice belonging to the law of Moses. Why, they say, should we have to do such a legalistic thing as fasting if we are under grace? But here are the clear words of Jesus: "When you fast ...". It's not "If you fast ...". We are not given a choice in the matter. It is as imperative and basic as praying and giving. Fasting is for all disciples of Jesus. It's not just for "spiritual" or "mature" Christians.

I want to look at the principles of fasting, and I hope that by the time you have read this article you will be fully convinced that fasting is a scriptural New Testament practice which serves many different purposes and ought to be a part of our lifestyle.

First of all I want to state three things that fasting is not for:

1. Fasting is not to obtain power with God. It is not a formula ("If we fast, God will work and do what we ask"). If that were the case, fasting would be effectively a way of controlling God. And it is God who controls us, not the other way around.
2. Fasting is not a way of forcing God to work for us. In Isaiah 58:3-5 God rebuked his people for fasting "for strife and debate, and to smite with the fist of wickedness: ye shall not fast as ye do this day, to make your voice to be heard on high." Fasting isn't a way of somehow adding more power to your prayer so that God is more likely to listen, or even that he is forced to listen. Praying and fasting so that God's "fist" of judgement will come down is twisting God's arm and making him serve our purposes.
3. Fasting is not an exclusively Christian practice. Buddhists do it, witches do it, cults do it. And there is no reason why God should take notice of it. In itself it doesn't move God at all. In Jeremiah 14:12 God said of his own people, "When they fast, I will not hear their cry". Why? Because there was no real repentance of heart with their fasting; it was done with the wrong attitude, the wrong motive and the wrong purpose.

So what is fasting for? Very many things:

1. To entreat God.

Esther and her maidens fasted to plead with God on behalf of their nation in a time of great need (Esther 4:16). When King David's child by Bathsheba was sick, David fasted seven days. But this was

not to force God's hand, only to entreat him. Once the child died, David was content with God's judgement. As he said to his servants, "I said, Who can tell whether God will be gracious to me, that the child may live?" (1 Sam 12:22). In Joel 1:14, during a time of famine, Israel are called to "sanctify a fast, call a solemn assembly ... and cry unto the Lord". Why? The answer comes later from God himself: "Therefore also now, saith the Lord, turn ye even to me with all your heart, and with fasting, and with weeping, and with mourning: and rend your heart, and not your garments, and turn unto the Lord your God: for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and repenteth him of the evil. Who knoweth if he will return and repent, and leave a blessing behind him?" (Joel 2:12-14). This is not fasting to force God's hand; it is entreating God, knowing his character, understanding that he can change his mind if he sees a right heart and a right attitude in his people.

2. To avert judgement.

In Jonah we see a remarkable thing: a heathen city, Nineveh "fasted and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them even to the least of them" (Jonah 3:5). Even though they didn't know God, they understood his character, for they said exactly what God said of himself in Joel: "Who can tell if God will turn and repent, and turn away from his fierce anger, that we perish not?" (Jonah 3:9). And what happened because the Ninevites fasted? "God repented of the evil, that he had said that he would do unto them; and he did it not" (Jonah 3:10).

3. To humble ourselves.

Psalm 35:13 says, "I humbled my soul with fasting". Psalm 69:10 says "I wept, and chastened my soul with fasting". This is very far from trying to twist God's arm or get what we want. It springs from a deep recognition of our need and our insufficiency. It comes from conviction and poverty of spirit.

4. For God's protection.

Ezra proclaimed a fast before he journeyed to Jerusalem. He was ashamed to request an armed guard from the king, because he had told the king that "the hand of our God is upon all them for good that seek him" (Ezra 8:22); and having said that, he didn't want to then say that he needed human help. So he fasted "to seek of [God] a right way for us, and for our little ones, and for all our substance" (Ezra 8:21). Ezra had more courage of his convictions and integrity than many Christians today, who say they trust God and then look to the world for help!

Again, this is not a demand for protection; it is a recognition of need and insufficiency, a humble entreaty of God's help, and a prayer that God will vindicate his own name and character.

5. To intercede for the land.

Daniel, in captivity in Babylon, “set his face unto the Lord God, to seek by prayer and supplications, with fasting” (Daniel 9:3). He humbled himself, identified with the sins of the people, and pleaded with God on behalf of Israel. He did this because he had read in Jeremiah how God would accomplish seventy years captivity, and that time was coming to an end. So Daniel prayed according to God’s promise — again, not forcing God’s hand or telling him that he had to keep his promises, but confessing and pleading with him in humility, recognising that we deserve nothing but judgement, and all of God’s promises are grace and mercy.

6. Expression of repentance.

Samuel called all Israel together to fast before the Lord, as a recognition that they had sinned and a sign of their repentance (1 Samuel 7:5-11). The Philistines heard about it and took occasion to come in battle against them; but God heard their repentance and spared them from attack, giving Israel a surprise victory.

7. Expression of mourning.

When King Saul was killed in battle, it was God’s judgement, but nevertheless David was grieved, and mourned for Saul and Jonathan, and the people of Israel buried them and fasted for seven days (1 Samuel 31:13).

8. For special needs.

Jesus told the disciples, who had been trying to cast a demon out of a boy, that certain kinds “goeth not out but by prayer and fasting” (Matthew 17:21). There are special cases in which fasting is necessary to bring deliverance and victory.

9. For guidance.

When the early church were seeking God for guidance and direction, as they met together and “ministered unto the Lord, and fasted”, God spoke to them and gave them direction (Acts 13:2). If churches today would do this instead of being confident in their own ideas and plans, the effects on both the church and the nation would be tremendous.

10. For ordaining elders.

“And when they had ordained them elders in every church, and had prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord” (Acts 14:23). There is a great responsibility placed upon the leadership of the church to do things as God would have them; and when it comes to putting people into the ministry and ordaining them, it is something which demands God’s guidance. Even the

apostles would not take the matter into their own hands but diligently sought God with prayer and fasting.

11. In family life.

Paul encourages husbands and wives to enjoy sexual relations and not withhold themselves from each other, “except it be with consent for a time, that ye may give yourselves to fasting and prayer; and come together again, that Satan tempt you not”(1 Corinthians 7:5) . There is a time when fasting from food can be supported by fasting from sex, and the whole family will surely reap spiritual benefit.

With all these examples from the Old and New Testament, it is difficult to see how Christians can say that fasting is not for today, or even that it is only an option. Certainly fasting is not a legal requirement; even in our Old Testament examples it is never a legal thing but a spontaneous response from the heart. That is the fasting that God sees, and there is no doubt that when it is genuine and real, it moves God. Wicked King Ahab, when he heard God’s words of judgement upon him, “he rent his clothes, and put sackcloth upon his flesh, and fasted, and lay in sackcloth, and went softly. And the word of the Lord came to Elijah, saying, ‘See how Ahab humbleth himself before me? because he humbleth himself before me, I will not bring the evil in his days’ ” (1 Kings 22:27-29).

Like the Ninevites, many people who do not fully know God nevertheless understand his character. Cornelius, whose prayer, fasting and almsgiving had “come up for a memorial before God” (see Acts 10:2,4,30), had never heard of Jesus or the Sermon on the Mount. Yet he practised almsgiving, prayer and fasting, and because he did so, God heard him and was mightily gracious to him and his household. We may talk ourselves out of fasting; but we don’t know how much blessing we’re missing — both for ourselves and others — as a result.

Experiences From Life

by Joanna Barratt

Dare You Really Trust God?

I’ve just been reading through an old prophecy book in which I logged everything that God had been saying to me and the circumstances surrounding His words, when I came across a particularly unusual incident. I had been the church organist for a period of 15 years - half my life as I was then 30 years old — and God told me to stop playing in the church. It was such a strange thing to hear from God that I wasn’t absolutely certain it was God. I sought counsel and was told emphatically that God would never say such a thing — gifts were meant to be used, and if you don’t use them you lose them! Nevertheless I couldn’t get away from this niggling feeling. Needless to say, God proved beyond a shadow of a doubt to me that it actually was His commandment to me so I came off the

platform, and found myself all of a sudden just a normal member of the congregation. It was then that God began to really deal personally with me and made it very clear that He wanted me to do a 7-day water fast.

Reluctant

Just prior to the fast God gave me a vision in a private meeting which I'd been extremely reluctant to share as I had an awful suspicion that this vision was meant for me, and that if I spoke it out loud I was giving God permission to bring it upon me. I've always been brought up with the teaching that God wants the very best for each one of us, but when we glimpse the future, we don't always trust this. My reason ruled my emotions and so I gave the vision. I had seen a woman crouched on the floor with her head bowed, and upon her head was a hood so that I couldn't see her face. Then when she lifted up her head I saw that she was sorely tormented and in great agony for her face was absolutely covered in great festering boils which made her look monstrous and distorted all her beauty so that she was hideous to look at. She felt so ashamed of her condition that she tried to hide herself away. And I heard her voice as she cried so pitifully saying, "Though You slay me, yet I will always believe in You. Though You kill me, I will always love You. I will never forget the wonderful things You have done in my life, no matter what happens to me I cannot deny You." And she cried long and hard.

Inner Beauty

Then outside the small room where the woman was I saw a peacock in the open air with his tail open for all to see the splendour of his colourful and beautiful body. As he strutted about so proudly and pompously the woman beheld him through a little window and praised his beauty in her heart and could even envy this splendid creature. But the Lord spoke to her and said, "His beauty is only on the surface, there is no inner beauty in pride. He only has a birds' brain and cannot think wisely, and his prayers are never heard by Me. But I hear your prayers. When you pray for those oppressed I hear your words for you know what you are saying. You have suffered and know how to plead for others. Your sorrow wasn't because of any sin, I wanted to prove to the world and to Satan your sincere love for Me. I have tried you as I tried Job." Then it seemed as though her face was clear once more and there was not a trace of any blemish to be seen.

I'd never done a water fast before and I was frightened. I knew God was telling me to do this and was scared in case I didn't see it through without cheating, the biscuit barrel had an incredible attraction and offered such an easy solution to any hunger pains I may experience. I knew without doubt that I would fail if I stayed at home so I decided to hire a holiday house in Matlock away from friends and temptation.

I didn't realise just how far Matlock was from Manchester. Every mile I travelled seemed to fill me with trepidation, and pressed home to me the fact that I was going to spend a week alone with God ... and 7 days is a long time!

I felt impressed to take only my bible, paper and pens with me — no religious books, no tapes, no props at all. Just me and God, and this more than anything else frightened me because I didn't feel as though I knew Him enough to spend a whole week alone with Him.

At last I reached the house. I had no worries where breaking the fast by picking at food was concerned, because there wasn't a trace of food to be found, not even the usual "welcome pack". But I did begin to panic when I saw that neither was there a radio, cassette player, television or phone, because the full impact of my complete aloneness hit me. God had been serious when He said He wanted to spend a week alone with me, and He'd even gone to the trouble to arrange the perfect venue for this encounter.

I must admit, this is one of the hardest weeks I have ever experienced in my whole lifetime. I expected that God would visit me every day and give me marvellous revelations and spiritual experiences, but I felt totally abandoned and unspiritual. I disciplined myself to read my bible and pray for 2 hours every morning and 2 hours every afternoon, but it was a real effort, in fact most of the time my head was swimming and my vision completely blurred and I just couldn't concentrate on God. I felt unbelievably weak and during one evening had an incredible attack of cramp when I felt for certain I was going to die.

Useless

I felt utterly useless and helpless and absolutely unspiritual. Why on earth did God call me to this fast? If He'd intended to speak to me then the whole exercise had been a total failure because I was so devastated by this fast that my body and mind seemed to have just shut down. I was sorry I'd even come. If the telephone in the house had been in use I would have telephoned for help, but it wasn't. There was no escape, I just had to weather the storm and hope that God would have enough mercy to forgive my futile effort. I earnestly prayed that God would never, ever ask me to do such a fast again, and I really meant it, because I didn't want to be disobedient by refusing. Fasting in this way was not my calling! But strangely enough, as soon as the fast was over I felt a great surge of pride at my success entering my heart. I didn't know at this point that the peacock had been my old nature and God wanted to transform me into that humble, God-fearing woman of my vision.

I had only been home for a week when things started to go wrong for me. I was tempted with things I was convinced I'd been totally delivered from and found myself falling. It was during this week that I was relayed a compliment which my Pastor had paid me when he'd said that during the whole of his 30 years experience in the ministry he'd never seen anyone change so much in such a short period of time as me.

Struggling

I couldn't help it, I cried. The Pastor didn't know me at all. I'd just had a vision that very morning where God had reminded me of the time I'd had a grimy sore on my arm and how the angel had taken soap, water and a scrubbing brush to clean it, then he'd poured salt upon it to cleanse it

thoroughly and the skin which had grown over was soft and smooth, leaving no trace of a scar. Now God showed me my arm again, which at first sight looked fine, but then He began to knock the skin and I found that when the skin broke it revealed festering, grimy sores underneath which had to be dealt with in the same manner as that first sore. And there wasn't just one sore, there were about four on my arm, which had to be dealt with individually. I'd been struggling recently with about four things I thought I'd been completely delivered from.

It was all so strange really. You see when I'd done the 7 days fast I came away with the sense of achievement that I'd proved to God my obedience and desire to serve Him. I felt strong in my spirit, and as though nothing could stop my progress now. But in the light of my recent trials and experiences I realised that I'd proved and achieved nothing. No amount of fasting, praying or self-denial can win you favour and honour from God. All you did when you fasted was humble yourself. Everything after that was down to the grace and mercy of God and nothing else at all. Even the fasting was by Gods' grace, I'd been really afraid of it and had begged God to give me the strength to do it. I thought I'd paid the price and bought some gold from God during that week — but now I was not so sure. I hadn't done anything but humble myself, and indeed, had my true pitiful state revealed to me in some measure. Whatever happened from now onwards was all down to Gods grace and mercy.

That very same night God gave me another vision. I saw a spiders web. It had the dew upon it so that in the sunlight it sparkled and looked fascinatingly beautiful. I could even see the spider which was huge, as big in body as me, and yet this web seemed so enticing and inviting that I felt myself drawn towards it. I tried to move to go to it, but found that I couldn't. When I looked at myself to see what was stopping me I found that I simply couldn't budge because I'd been nailed to a cross!

The Bible says that our hearts are deceitful and desperately wicked and we don't even know ourselves. But don't worry, God will only go as far as you let Him. He has given us a free will and the only sacrifice which is acceptable to God is a willing sacrifice. Dare you willingly trust God completely to have His will in your life instead of your own? I think not, you are probably like me. But believe me, if you act like a Christian you will become one, because God will take over and do what you can't.