

Barratt Ministries Challenge

Issue 38

The Secret Life: Fasting Part 2: Practical

Sermon on the Mount Series, Matthew 6:16-18

by Maurice Barratt

"Whoever shall be ashamed of me and my words, ... of him also shall the Son of man be ashamed when he cometh in glory ..." (Mark 8:34)

Few Christians are embarrassed about Jesus. But many are embarrassed about some of his teachings — and particularly the Sermon on the Mount, because it challenges our lifestyle. We know Jesus said uncomfortable things, but we take it no further than that, because it will mean change, discipline, denial of things we like. But Jesus warns us that only those who "hear my sayings and do them" are building their house on a rock (Matthew 7:24).

"When you fast ...", says Jesus, indicating that for a disciple, fasting is not an option. Our attitude to fasting is one proof of whether we love God or we just say we love God, for Jesus says very simply, "If a man love me, he will keep my words" (John 14:23).

Fasting is a matter of obedience. God has forgiven our sins and given us eternal life, but he wants to do far more in our lives than that. He wants to change our characters so that we manifest the character of Jesus; but he cannot change us without our permission. How do we give him permission? By obeying his words. If we will obey God and start to fast (nothing too big or drastic at first, just a first step of obedience), then that gives God the right to do things in our lives that we can't do, to change the things we can't change.

In this study I want to address some of the practical issues surrounding fasting, and some of the questions people commonly ask.

Attitude and appearance

Jesus says we should "appear not unto men to fast" (Matthew 6:18). In other words, don't let people know you're fasting; keep it a secret business between you and God. Look normal, behave normally; don't draw attention to yourself or "drop hints" that let people know you're fasting.

Clearly this only applies to individual fasting; which is part of the "secret life of the disciple". There are also times for corporate prayer and fasting with one or more other people, and in that situation there is obviously nothing wrong with those others knowing you are fasting. But the personal secret fasting is the one of which Jesus says, "thy Father, which seeth in secret, shall reward you openly".

Motives

It is all too possible to fast with the wrong motive. One common problem is prevalent among women who are watching their figure, and say, “I feel guilty about my fasting because I know I’m really only doing it to slim, and that’s a wrong motive, so I think I’d be better off not fasting at all.” But that should not be a reason to stop fasting. Having a wrong motive should not stop us from being obedient, it should make us work on our motives! It’s worse to be disobedient. If we had to have perfect motives before we performed any act of obedience, we’d never do anything!

What is the right motive for fasting? What should we be aiming for? Firstly, to simply be obedient to God. We really need no other reason. Second, to deny ourselves. When we realize just how much power self has in our lives, how much it can interfere with and frustrate God’s plans and desires for us, how much we are our own worst enemy, we begin to understand the value of denying self. It gives God a right to work in our lives and to truly exercise his Lordship. Thirdly, to please God. This sounds similar to the first motive, obedience, but it goes further. One can be obedient out of a sense of duty or responsibility, but lack a heart that desires to please God. Obedience can be a cold thing, but the desire to please God comes out of love for him.

Time

How long should we fast for? If fasting is new to you, start small. Try missing one meal a week. Fasting doesn’t have to be painful and difficult to be “real” or effective. It’s a discipline, a lifestyle which is developed, and in the end it should be “unassuming”, just a part of normal life that you accept — and even enjoy! Yes, fasting and prayer can be a delight. Just because disciplines are always a bit difficult at first, and the flesh grumbles and puts up a fight, doesn’t mean it will always be difficult. Give yourself time for the discipline to become habitual before you move on.

Once you’ve started and developed a discipline in a small way, aim towards fasting for one day a week, say from the end of your evening meal time up to the next day’s evening meal. That’s a 24 hour fast, and you’ll find it’s not difficult at all once you get into the habit. If fasting on water alone is too hard, try having only drinks (tea, coffee, cold drinks).

Longer fasts are a different matter. Jesus fasted for 40 days on water, and so have many other people; but a long fast like that is something you need to be called to, not something every Christian should be expected to attain.

Help

You’ve tried once, maybe many times before, to fast alone, and you keep failing. What do you do? One way forward is to find a friend who you can fast with. The company will help your discipline and perhaps it will be helpful to pray together as well. Alternatively, you can try making a “rod for your back”. When I was developing the practice of fasting I used to miss my breakfast on Sunday morning before church — so when I set off for church I had no opportunity to eat until I got back home again! The “rod” helped my discipline until the habit was established.

Another help is to have a specific aim to your fasting. Decide to pray for a specific person or need. Making a focus to your fasting in this way helps to provide the motivation to go through with it.

Feelings

"I don't feel spiritual when I fast — in fact I always feel very unspiritual, dead and dry — I can't pray, I can't concentrate ..." Is that a good reason to give up and forget the whole idea of fasting? Not at all. Feelings aren't important when you're learning a discipline, and positive or negative feelings don't have any relevance to the spiritual value of fasting. In fact, it's good if you feel pretty awful at first. Poverty of spirit — which is another way of saying feeling very low — is the first of the beatitudes. It's not nice that you've lost the comfort of eating which you've had all your life. But you're getting a taste of how it feels to be without that "crutch". No-one who has fasted could ever doubt that food gives us a tremendous psychological lift as well as spiritual nourishment. People who habitually eat more, or binge, when they're depressed, know all about "comfort food". Sometimes food (like so many other things with which we crowd our lives) can be a cover for reality. Without food we are left alone with God and alone with ourselves, and that's not comfortable. You can learn some painful truths about yourself through fasting. But if poverty of spirit is humility, which (according to John Wesley's definition) means "seeing yourself as you really are", then fasting can mean real spiritual progress.

Lifestyle

Fasting needs to become a part of our lifestyle. Daniel made it his lifestyle, and his ready response to a spiritual crisis or a word from God was to fast. When he understood from the prophets that the 70 years of Israel's captivity were coming to an end, he said, "I set my face unto the Lord God, to seek by prayer and supplications, with fasting ..." (Daniel 9:3). And as a result of his prayer and fasting, an angel visited him with tremendous prophetic revelation. Another time he says, "I was in mourning three full weeks. I ate no pleasant food, neither came flesh or wine into my mouth ..." (Daniel 10:2-3). Because fasting was a regular part of Daniel's lifestyle, he was ready to respond when a burden came, and he carried this burden in fasting for three weeks. God answered his prayer immediately and sent an angel to him, but the angel was delayed fighting the "Prince of Persia" for the entire three weeks that Daniel was fasting. Only at the end of that time did Daniel get the message from the angel. But if he hadn't been fasting, would the angel ever have got through with the message? When the angel did arrive, he called Daniel "greatly beloved" and again brought him great revelation. Daniel's perseverance in fasting brought powerful results, but he was only able to respond because it was already a habitual part of his lifestyle.

At Barratt Ministries we decided years ago that we had to make fasting a regular habit if we wanted to call ourselves disciples of Jesus, and from small beginnings we have been able to build up the place where fasting is no longer a huge and fearful thing to us. Some time ago a friend phoned us in great and urgent need of physical healing and spiritual deliverance. Because fasting was a regular part of our lives, it was natural to us to respond immediately by having a 3 day fast for this person, it

was not truthfully not difficult to do the fast, knowing the situation and the need of prayer. But God answered swiftly and wonderfully, and brought about a miracle in this person's life.

When you're trained, God can use you as an intercessor. But most people won't go through the training, with all the discipline it involves. Of course it's natural to not want to do it. Self denial is never going to be appealing to the flesh. But those who, despite what they want, will obey Jesus and go through the discipline of training, will become of great use to God, because God can call on them when the need arises, and like trained soldiers they can "jump to attention" and be a "rapid response team". When the needs arise, whether they are needs for ourselves or others, there is no time for preparation and training. That has to be done beforehand. If we'll do that training now, simply because God asks us to, simply because Jesus says, "If you love me, keep my commandments", this is greatly pleasing to God, because we have proved that we don't just want to be Christians who have received grace, we also want to be useful to God, trained and ready for his service.

Experiences From Life

The Power of Fasting

by Joanna Barratt

In the last edition of Challenge I shared how I personally started fasting and found out from bitter experience that fasting was not to obtain power or to force God to work for us. It is a means of paying the price to give God the legal right to change us or situations.

Some years ago we had a friend who was in a desperate plight. She had given her heart to God but the devil had strongholds in her life and was severely tormenting her. God revealed to us later on that her problem had been listening to music, but at the time we had no idea why she was troubled. She was seeing demons and all sorts of manifestations and was eventually committed to a mental hospital as the doctors thought she was mad. But far from it, she tricked the staff and managed to escape. In desperation she tried to commit suicide. She took an overdose of pills, but they had no effect on her. She put her fingers into an electric socket but was merely thrown to the other side of the room. Finally, armed with her brother's shotgun, she went into the middle of a field and shot herself through the stomach, but someone found her hours later and she ended up in hospital. The bullet had gone in the front and come out the back of her body and the operation she needed to repair the damage left her with 19 stitches and in a very sorry state. She wrote to us from hospital and asked for help. I was absolutely shocked to hear of all that she had gone through, I had no idea of the torment she had been in. The tears flowed as I felt compassion for her and I asked Maurice if, as a ministry, we at Barratt Ministries could call a fast for her. We did, and God heard us. At the end of our fast we sent her a prayer cloth which she placed on her wound in hospital. Within a matter of days she was at our house, very scarred, but wonderfully healed.

Maurice and I visited an organisation in Holland on a regular basis and had forged very strong links with them. God had given one particular man an incredibly large vision, and although it is said that Holland is a difficult country to reach with the gospel, this man had managed to plant churches in 13 major cities including Amsterdam, The Hague and Gouda, some congregations had as many as 800 members. His office complex was situated in The Hague and from there he published books, a regular magazine (which he gave out free of charge), ran a cassette ministry, produced videos and put out television programmes of his church services on the local television station. Indeed, this man had done such a vast work for God in his country that when we had disembarked from our ferry on our very first trip, Maurice and I told the customs officer who had stopped us for inspection that we were carrying goods to take to his complex, and the officer immediately became less formal saying that he watched his programmes and went on to give us directions of how to get there. In fact, whenever we stopped to ask en-route for directions, everyone without exception had heard of this man and was able to point us further.

This man ran his operation entirely on faith. He never asked outside his own members for finance and apart from all the work in Holland he was also able to run 2 orphanages in India and Indonesia. During one of our trips Maurice and I visited a Christian Resources Exhibition, and out of scores of stands his was the only one which was giving away free literature - tracts (published by themselves) and magazines. We were extremely impressed. But unfortunately, when God richly blesses a man and makes him effective, there is always a cost - and this man had many enemies. Not, I hasten to add, in the world, but in the churches ... his own churches, people who were ambitious and jealous. After many years one man in particular tried to usurp the man of God and did untold damage. His ambitious spirit spread like a cancer and effected every one of the churches, causing members and in some cases the pastors to rebel. I have heard of splits, but I have never witnessed before or since anything so devastating and malicious as what I saw here. A terrible depression came over the whole complex, instead of men and women serving the Lord by supporting this man in the vision God had given to him, they now had to question for themselves who was right and who was wrong, because obviously both parties couldn't be right, and this made people so confused and frightened in case they were out of God's will. At this particular point in time Maurice and I, along with our first child Nathan, had committed ourselves to live on the complex for 6 months whilst Maurice built a television edit suite for them. It was a horrible period, our stomachs churned and our hearts ached for the havoc the devil was causing, but as a testimony to this man of God and his family, never once did we hear them speak against or slander their enemies who were doing them so much harm, they left everything with God.

It was during this 6 months period that Barratt Ministries retreat week cropped up, when we spend a whole week fasting and seeking God. God spoke to us very specifically when he gave us the scripture "you make unto yourselves instruments of music ... but you are not grieved for the affliction of Joseph" (Amos 6:5,6). We had helped them plenty with our musical capabilities, but God was telling us that He wanted us to identify with their pain. We decided to dedicate this particular week to our friends in Holland as there was a real atmosphere of grieving over the place which was almost tangible, affecting everyone and everything, and I think many people were leaving just because they couldn't stand this awful atmosphere. Maurice and I came back to England to join up with our other members and we earnestly prayed and fasted. A week later we travelled back to Holland and even though we had begged God in faith to alter this situation, we were amazed at the incredible change around in the attitudes of the people. It was as though everyone had suddenly

become positive and their godly fighting spirit had returned. I know many people must have been praying for the situation, but I honestly believe that God answered our prayers because we had paid the price in fasting for our friends.

But fasting has many purposes, i.e.

1. to entreat God (Esther 4:16);
2. to avert judgement (Jonah 3:5-10);
3. guidance (Acts 13:1-4);
4. protection (Ezra 8:21);
5. humble ourselves (Psalm 35:13);
6. intercession (Daniel 9:3);
7. special needs (Matthew 17:21),
8. ordaining elders (Acts 14:21-23);
9. family (1 Corinthians 7:5);
10. repentance (1 Samuel 7:6),
11. mourning (1 Samuel 31:13).

I really do believe that God honours efforts that we make, so much so that we can actually change his mind and cause Him to do something else other than what he had first intended - like the time God spared the children of Israel when Moses pleaded for them in the wilderness. When we prayed for our friends in Holland it was because we felt the burden of God upon us, but I know of occasions when people have taken situations into their own hands and caused God to give them what they wanted to their detriment.

Some time ago a minister friend of ours was sharing with us and told us of a man who had been critically sick in his church. The deacons or elders had come to him with the request that the whole church be called to a time of prayer and fasting for this man, but when he had sought God about it he couldn't feel at peace and so turned the request down. The church was up in arms and were adamant that they were to call a fast, and so to appease them our friend gave in to their request. The man was miraculously healed from off his sick bed and the church were elated as they had obviously been right to fight through ... or were they? Not long after this man who had received a tremendous healing from God murdered someone, and the minister was now in a state of having to beg God's forgiveness for having allowed his members to pressurise him into going against God's will.

Fasting is not a formula, it is a very powerful tool which will effect real results. Christians are not the only ones who fast, occultists, new agers, and all false religions practice it. It is a vital part of Christianity, but use it prayerfully and allow God to give you the burden when you exercise it on the behalf of others.