



What Is Biblical Fasting

(A look at Isaiah 58)

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Introduction

The topic of Christian Fasting is often the centerpiece of the conversations that I have with other Christians. These conversations are often powered by questions like, “What is the purpose of Fasting?”, “What is the Biblical definition of fasting?”, “What are the elements of Fasting”. The list of questions concerning Fasting could easily go on and on.

Most of the time when we (the leadership of Parkview Church) are asked about Christian Fasting we almost always ask the person asking to take a look at Isaiah 58. More often than not we are able to answer most Fasting questions by carefully looking into this chapter.

It is my goal to do a brief *run-through* (for lack of better terms) of Isaiah 58, in hopes that it will give the reader a better and deeper understanding of what it actually means to practice the Christian Fast. Going through the chapter I will break it down into the “4 key points, which are;

- 1) False Fasting (What not to do).
- 2) The Biblical Definition of Fasting.
- 3) Christian Conduct During a Fast.
- 4) The Purpose of Fasting

False Fasting (What not to do.)

Isaiah 58:1-4 “Cry aloud; do not hold back; lift up your voice like a trumpet; declare to my people their transgression, to the house of Jacob their sins. ² Yet they seek me daily and delight to know my ways, as if they were a nation that did righteousness and did not forsake the judgment of their God; they ask of me righteous judgments; they delight to draw near to God. ³ Why have we fasted, and you see it not? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you take no knowledge of it?’ Behold, in the day of your fast you seek your own pleasure, and oppress all your workers. ⁴ Behold, you fast only to quarrel

and to fight and to hit with a wicked fist. Fasting like yours this day will not make your voice to be heard on high.

The first that we need to keep in mind is that we are in no way to make Fasting a miserable experience, especially to the point of where it is effecting those around us. There's no being in a bad mood because you're hungry or thirsty. No arguing or being snappy. How is any of that honoring God.

Jesus, during the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 6:16-18), Jesus teaches us a little more on what not to do during a fast.

Matthew 6:16-18 *“And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. 17 But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, 18 that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.*

Jesus tells us that not only are we not to do the “woe is me” routine, but we are not even allowed to make it be known to others that we are Fasting. I think that is one of the most ignored points of Fasting. So often people tell their friends and family that they are on a Christian Fast, not as a thing of bragging, maybe the discussion of their Fast comes from a place of excitement. Jesus tells us not to do that, He tells us in verse 18 “that your fasting may not be seen by others”. That simply means that we keep our Fast between ourselves and God only. It is something very personal between God and an individual.

The Biblical Definition of Fasting

Isaiah 58:5-6 ⁵ *Is such the fast that I choose, a day for a person to humble himself? Is it to bow down his head like a reed, and to spread sackcloth and ashes under him? Will you call this a fast, and a day acceptable to the LORD?* ⁶ *“Is not this the fast that I choose: **to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?**”*

Verse 5 is a description of what most people will use to define a Christian Fast, if asked the average Christian would answer something like; it is going without food (see Hebrew definition for Fast below), for matter period of time while completely humbling oneself before the Lord for that period.

The Greek word for fast (som pronounced “tsome”) literally means, “to cover ones mouth or to abstain from food”. But according to the two verses above that, the Christian Fast is much more than just going without food for a period. I use the bold part of verse 6 as the Biblical definition of Fast. Lets look at these four elements.

To loose the bonds of wickedness sinning is not allowed during a fast. I know as Christians we're supposed to try not to sin, yet we fail in this. During a Fast we are to absolutely abstain from **all**

wickedness. The reason for Fasting is to get Gods' attention, to "call on the Lord", which we'll look at in a moment. So sinning is a big NO NO.

To undo the straps of the yoke this simply means, do everything you can, no matter what it is, to achieve a goal.

to let the oppressed go free this is the 2nd part of undoing the straps just mentioned. Together they mean that part of Fasting is that we must do absolutely 100% of whatever it takes, to forgive everyone whom you have an offense against, no matter whatever the offense may be. That means no negative thoughts about anyone regardless of the circumstance.

to break every yoke this means that we are to stay away from anything that causes our focus to stray from God. As we'll see in a few minutes, the whole purpose of a Fast is to call on the Lord and for Him to answer. If we are to call on Him, then we must keep our focus completely on Him.

These four points of interest are an extremely important part of the Fast. If you think about it, it's probably not a very good idea to get God's attention when violating any of those points.

Christian Conduct During a Fast

Isaiah 58:7 Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh?

The four points just mentioned are not the only things a person Fasting has to do. The next part of this chapter states that good works must also be an element of a Fast. The verse here tells us that we have to care for the needy. An unconditional love for all mankind must be practice in the physical sense. AKA GOOD WORKS TOWARDS ALL, ESPECIALLY THOSE IN NEED. Good works are a mandatory factor of True Fasting. They are not maybes, good works are an absolute must during a Fast.

The Purpose of Fasting

Isaiah 58:8-10 Then shall your light break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up speedily; your righteousness shall go before you; the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard. 9 **Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer; you shall cry, and he will say, 'Here I am.'** 10 If you pour yourself out for the hungry and satisfy the desire of the afflicted, then shall your light rise in the darkness and your gloom be as the noonday.

After someone does all of the above the whole purpose for the Fast kicks in, Verses 8 & 9 begin with the word “Then”. That means they are the results of a successful Fast, or the purpose of the True Christian Fast.

Verse 8 & 10 tell us that we get God’s attention (in a good way), and verse 9 gives us the answer to the question, “Why do we Fast?”. The answer to that question is, so that we” can call on the Lord and He will answer”. That is the Biblical reasoning for Fasting. I view Fasting as the key to the door for and audience with God Himself. Now with that in mind we always remember that sometimes God says “no”. So just because someone Fasts does not mean in any way that God will do whatever the Fasting person wants.

As we have just seen, the Bible teaches that Fasting is more than just going without food and humbling oneself before God. It is also manifesting complete forgiveness and unconditional love for all mankind especially those in hard need. After someone does all of that for a planned period of time , then the purpose or reason of Fasting sets in, which is; “then you will call on the Lord and He will answer”.

I hope this has helped in your understanding of the practice of the Christian Fast and thank you for taking the time to read It.