



ASKING BETTER QUESTIONS -
THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT
SESSION 18 -FASTING (Mt 6;16-
18)

Fasting (Mt 6:16-18)

When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show others they are fasting. Truly I tell you, 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 others 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..

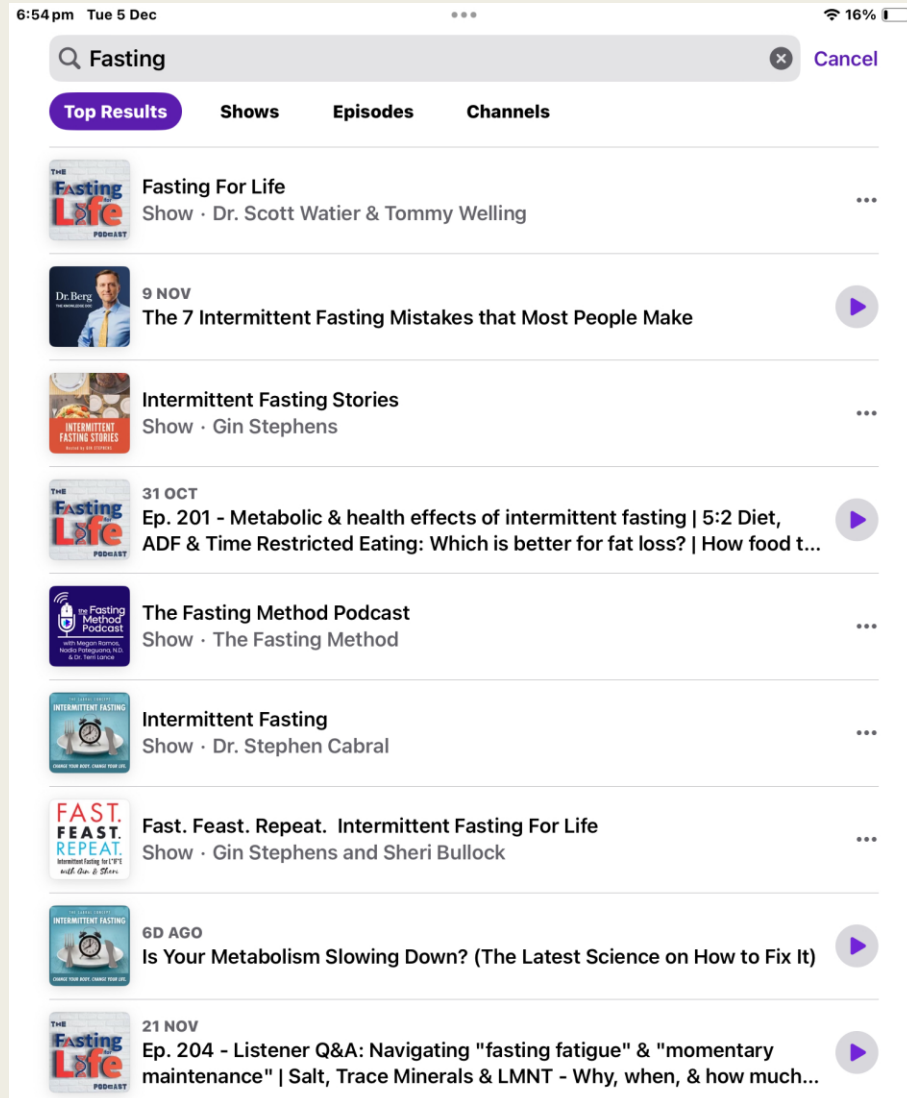


Initial Questions

- When you fast? Am I supposed to be doing this?
- Can I use gel instead of oil?
- Why fast in the first place?

Explaining Righteousness

- Matt 5 – Blessed are.... , You have heard it said, but now I tell you, salt, light...
- Matt 6 – do not be like
 - *The conspicuous givers (Mt 6:1-4)*
 - *The conspicuous prayers. (Mt 6:5-15)*
 - *The conspicuous fasters (Mt 6:16-18)*



So, fasting, eh?

- We know about intermittent fasting....
- But fasting and faith? Is that a thing?
- What's your experience?

Fasting in the Bible



- Only one fast commanded in the Torah in the day of Atonement (Lev 23:26-32)
- Known as “the fast”. Acts 27:9 *Since the Fast was already over, Paul gave his advice*
- *4 additional fasts instituted while in exile to commemorate the anniversaries of key events such as the capture of Jerusalem. Zech 7:1-7, 8:19*
- *Esther’s 3-day fast Est 4:16*
- *Public national fasts in times of calamity, repentance or seeking God’s favour (1 Sam 7:6, 2 Chron 20:3, Jer 36:6-10, Neh 9:1)*
- *Various personal fasts – Moses 40 days (Ex 24:18, 34:28) Elijah 40 days (1 Ki 19:8), Jesus 40 days (Mt 4:2).*
- *Source: Easton’s Bible Dictionary*



Sackcloth and ashes

- 1 Kings 21:27 (HCSB): When Ahab heard these words, he tore his clothes, put sackcloth over his body, and fasted. He lay down in sackcloth and walked around subdued.
- Esther 4:1–3 (HCSB): When Mordecai learned all that had occurred, he tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and ashes, went into the middle of the city, and cried loudly and bitterly. 2 He only went as far as the King's Gate, since the law prohibited anyone wearing sackcloth from entering the King's Gate. 3 There was great mourning among the Jewish people in every province where the king's command and edict came. They fasted, wept, and lamented, and many lay on sackcloth and ashes.

Fasting in the Bible



- Ezra 8:21–23 (HCSB): 1 I proclaimed a fast by the Ahava River, so that we might **humble ourselves before our God** and ask Him for a safe journey for us, our children, and all our possessions. I did this because I was ashamed to ask the king for infantry and cavalry to protect us from enemies during the journey, since we had told him, “The hand of our God is gracious to all who seek Him, but His great anger is against all who abandon Him.” So we fasted and pleaded with our God about this, and He granted our request
- Group and national days of fasting
- Times of calamity and special requests
- Humbling of self.
- Connected with prayer.

Fasting in the Bible



- This is what the LORD of Heaven's Armies says: The traditional fasts and times of mourning you have kept in early summer, midsummer, autumn, and winter are now ended. They will become festivals of joy and celebration for the people of Judah. So love truth and peace. (Zech 8:19 NLT)
- Fasting associated with mourning.
- But will become festivals of joy and celebration (in contrast).
- Prophetic reminder here to love (maintain) truth and peace (in obedience to God's desires for his world). Then the blessings will one day come.

Fasting in the Bible (Isa 58:3-8)

Why have we fasted,' they say,
'and you have not seen it?
Why have we humbled ourselves,
and you have not noticed?'

"Yet on the day of your fasting, you do as you
please
and exploit all your workers.

⁴Your fasting ends in quarreling 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.

⁵Is this the kind of fast I have chosen,
only a day for people to humble themselves?

Is it only for bowing one's head like a reed
and for lying in sackcloth and ashes?

Is that what you call a fast,
a day acceptable to the Lord?

⁶"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?

⁷Is it not to share your food with the hungry
and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—
when you see the naked, to clothe them,
and not to turn away from your own flesh and
blood?

⁸Then your light will break forth like the dawn,
and your healing will quickly appear;
then your righteousness^[a] will go before you,
and the glory of the Lord will be your rear guard.

**What does God have to say about their
fasting practices here?**

Fasting and Repentance

Joel 2:12–13 (CSB): Even now—this is the Lord’s declaration—turn to me with all your heart, with **fasting, weeping, and mourning**.

Tear your hearts, ***not just your clothes***, and return to the Lord your God.

For he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger, abounding in faithful love, and he relents from sending disaster

- Tearing of clothes was a way of expressing extreme distress and grief.
- God is always looking for **heart transformation** (changed attitudes) not merely **external actions**.
- Saul fasted for 3 days after his Damascus road experience. “What have I done?”



Fasting in the NT

- Jesus' 40 day fast. (Mt. 4:1-3)
- Sermon on the mount (Mt 6:15-20)
- Jesus and disciples did not fast like John's disciples and Pharisees did. (Mt 6:14-15)
- Self-righteous Pharisee "I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get."
- Big decisions- direction of the work, selection of Paul and Barnabas (Acts 13:1-3)
- Prophet Anna – worshipped night and day, fasting and praying (Lk 2:36-37)
- Appointing elders – Acts 14:23

- NT picture of fasting seems to disconnect the practice from traditional observance and move it to much more of a personal, focussing spiritual practice. Jesus speaks of fasting in much the same way he speaks of prayer, and does not prohibit it. Rather he positions as a heart-related discipline
- What's your impression?.



What we learn

- Again we learning that is not the mere performance of the religious duty or practice that God is looking for from us.
- God is always looking at the “inside of the cup” – What are you really like **inside**?
- God – you haven’t **noticed** my fasting !1#@? (Isa 58:3)
- Doing as you please in your actual day of fasting.
- Exploiting workers.
- Quarrels, strife, fist-fights!
- Humble for a day only?
- What about justice, dealing with oppression, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked?

Compare and contrast

Cultural/Religious

- Proclaimed/calendar driven fasts
- Participation.
- For show.
- Rending of clothes.
- Obvious self-abasement.

Spiritual

- Personal decision to fast
- Transformation
- In Secret
- Rending of heart.
- ‘Oil on your head, wash your face”.i

Fasting Today

- Jesus: “When you fast.”
- Intentional.
- Not for show.
- Connects with the physical. Mind and heart must deny the physical cravings over an extended period – no snacking! This is good spiritual self-discipline as it produces a season of self-denial.
- Hunger reminds us.
- Get to experience what many people experience every day which can strengthen our compassion for the needy, homeless, displaced, oppressed at home and around the world.
- If in doubt from a health perspective, consult your doctor!

In your own words

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How would you say it in your own words?



Reflection

- Has anything changed for me about how I think about fasting?
- Would I make fasting part of my personal spiritual disciplines?
- Do I tend to “let people know” somehow that I fast? Not being so secret.