** Leader Guide**

**June 10, 2018**

**Fasting, Silence, and Solitude…**

**For the Purpose of Godliness**

**Chapters 9 & 10**

**Central Idea:** Christians who do not know much about the Discipline of Fasting tend to misunderstand and fear it. It’s also difficult to go so radically against the mainstream of culture by fasting. Yet, purposeful fasting provides strong benefits in the disciplined pursuit of a Christlike life. It is a discipline that Jesus both taught and practiced. Likewise, the Discipline of silence and solitude, which Jesus practiced, are foreign to many who have learned to be comfortable only with noise and crowds. Yet these Disciplines contribute much to our spiritual growth and development.

**Fasting for the Purpose of Godliness:** Fasting explained: Christian fasting is a believer’s voluntary abstinence from food for spiritual purposes. It is for *believers* in Christ, for the Discipline must be rooted in a relationship with Christ and practiced with the desire to become more like Christ. Believers should fast according to biblical teaching and with purposes that are God-centered. It is *voluntary* in that fasting should not be coerced. And fasting is more than just the ultimate crash diet for the body; it is *abstinence from food* for *spiritual* purposes. To understand fasting for *spiritual purposes*, realize that the Bible distinguishes between several *kinds* of fasts.

* Normal Fast - Matthew 4:2; Luke 4:2
* Partial Fast - Daniel 1:12
* Absolute Fast - Ezra 10:6; Esther 4:16; Acts 9:9
* Supernatural Fast - Deuteronomy 9:9
* Private Fast - Matthew 6:16-18
* Congregational Fast - Joel 2:15-16; Acts 13:2
* National Fast - 2 Chronicles 20:3; Nehemiah 9:1; Jonah 3:5-8
* Regular Fast - Leviticus 16:29-31
* Occasional Fast - 2 Chronicles 20:3; Esther 4:16; Matthew 9:15

(Whitney discusses these facts in detail on pp. 192-195.)

**Fasting is Expected:** Notice Jesus’ words at the beginning of Matthew 6:16-17: *“And when you fast….. But when you fast….”* by giving instruction on what to do and what not to do when we fast, Jesus assumes that we will fast. Plainer still are His words in Matthew 9:14-15: Jesus said that the time would come when His disciple *“will fast.”*

That time is now. He expects us to fast. He gave us no command regarding how often or how long we should fast, but like the Spiritual Disciplines, fasting should never develop into an empty routine. God offers to bless us through fasting as often as we desire.

**Fasting Is to Be Done for a Purpose:** Without a *spiritual* purpose, fasting can be a miserable, self-centered experience about willpower and endurance. Scripture sets forth many purposes for fasting. Whitney condensed them into ten major categories. Notice that none of the purposes is to earn God’s favor. Having a biblical purpose for your fast may be the single most important concept to take from this chapter.

Although the physical discomfort is unpleasant -- perhaps even painful -- it is important to feel some degree of hunger during your fast. Your hunger helps you, serving as a continual reminder of your spiritual purpose. As a Christian then, whenever you fast, you should do so for at least one of these biblical purposes.

1. *To Strengthen Prayer:* There’s something about fasting that sharpens the edge of our intercessions and deepens the passion of our supplications. The people of God have frequently utilized fasting when they have felt a special urgency about the concern they lift before the Father.
2. *To Seek God’s Guidance:* A second purpose for fasting is to more clearly discern the will of God (Judges 20:26-28; Acts 14:23). Fasting does not ensure the certainty of receiving such clear guidance from God. Rightly practiced, however, it does make us more receptive to the One who loves to guide us.
3. *To Express Grief*: In Judges 20:26, one of the reasons the Israelites wept and fasted before the Lord was not only to seek His guidance, but to express grief for the forty thousand brothers they had lost in battle. Christians have fasted because of grief for their sins and as a means of expressing grief for the sins of others.
4. *To Seek Deliverance or Protection:* One of the most common fasts in biblical times was a fast to seek salvation from enemies or circumstances (Psalm 109:20-24). Fasting, rather than fleshly efforts, should be one of our first defenses against “persecution” because of our faith.
5. *To Express Repentance and the Return to God:* Fasting for this purpose is similar for the purpose of expressing grief for sin (1 Samuel 7:6; Joel 2:12; Jonah 3:5-8). But as repentance is a change of mind resulting in a change of action, fasting can represent more than just grief over sin. It also can signal a commitment to obedience and a new direction.
6. *To Humble Oneself Before God:* Fasting, when practiced with the right motives, is a physical expression of humility before God, just as kneeling or prostrating yourself in prayer can reflect humility before Him. King David did this in Psalm 35:13.
7. *To Express Concern for the Work of God:* Nehemiah 1:3-4 and Daniel 9:3 describe this fast. Just as a parent might fast and pray out of concern for the work of God in the life of a child, so Christians may fast and pray because they feel a burden for the work of God on a relatively broad scale.
8. *To Minister to the Needs of Others:* Those who think the Spiritual Disciplines foster tendencies of introspection or independence should consider Isaiah 58. In the most extensive passage in Scripture dealing exclusively with fasting, God emphasizes fasting for the purpose of meeting the needs of others.
9. *To Overcome Temptation and Dedicate Yourself to God:* Ask Christians to name a fast by a biblical character and most will probably think first of the lengthy fast of Jesus prior to His temptation in Matthew 4:1-11. In times of exceptional temptation, exceptional measures are required. One such exceptional measure in your situation might be a Christlike fast for the purpose of overcoming the temptation and renewing your dedication to God.
10. *To Express Love and Worship to God:* Fasting can be a testimony -- even one directed to yourself -- that you find your greatest pleasure and enjoyment in life from God. It’s a way of demonstrating to yourself that you love God more than food, that seeking Him is more important to you than eating, that Jesus -- the Bread of heaven (John 6:51)--is more satisfying to you than earthly bread.

(Whitney discusses these biblical purposes for fasting in detail on pp. 198-215.)

Fasting is when we hunger for God -- for a fresh encounter with God, for God to answer a prayer, for God to save someone, for God to work powerfully in our church, for God to guide us or protect us -- more than we hunger for the food God made us to live on.

**Silence and Solitude…for the Purpose of Godliness**

**Explanation of Silence and Solitude:** The Discipline of silence is the voluntary and temporary abstention from speaking so that certain spiritual goals might be sought. Sometimes silence is observed in order to read the Bible, meditate on Scripture, pray, journal, etc. Though there is no outward speaking, there may be intentional, biblical self-talk or prayer to God. At other times you might choose not to talk at all, but simply to focus your mind upon God and to “set your mind on things that are above” (Colossians 3:2), resting your soul in the love He displayed through Christ.

Solitude is the Spiritual Discipline of voluntarily and temporarily withdrawing to privacy for spiritual purposes. The period of solitude may last only a few minutes or for days. As with silence, solitude may be sought in order to participate without interruption in other Spiritual Disciplines, or just to be alone with God and think.

First, think of silence and solitude as complementary Disciplines to fellowship. Second, silence and solitude are usually found together. Third, recognize that culture conditions us to be comfortable with noise and crowds, not with silence and solitude. There are many biblical reasons for making priorities of the Spiritual Disciplines of silence and solitude.

* To Follow Jesus’ Example - Matthew 4:1; 14:23; Mark 1:35; Luke 4:42
* To Minimize Distractions in Prayer - 1 Kings 19:8, 11-13; Habakkuk 2:1
* To Express Worship to God...in a way that does not require words, sounds, or actions - Habakkuk 2:20; Zephaniah 1:7; Zechariah 2:13
* To Express Faith in God - Psalm 62:1-2, 5-6; Isaiah 30:15
* To Seek the Salvation of the Lord - Lamentations 3:25-28
* To Be Physically and Spiritually Restored - Mark 6:31
* To Regain a Spiritual Perspective - Luke 1:5-25, 57-64
* To Seek the Will of God, for at times He discloses it only in private - Luke 6:12-13
* To Learn Control of the Tongue - Proverbs 17:27-28; James 1:19, 26; 3:2

**Fasting Explained:**

List the ten biblical purposes of fasting (pp. 198-215).

Review the various kinds of fasts mentioned in the Bible (pp. 192-195). Then determine which kind of fast each of the following passages describes:

* Deuteronomy 9:9
* Ezra 10:6
* Esther 4:16
* Daniel 1:12
* Jonah 3:5-8
* Matthew 3:4
* Matthew 4:2
* Luke 4:2

Consider these passages, noticing the word WHEN: Matthew 6:2, 5-7, 16-17. What do they reveal about the importance of fasting?

What specific instructions about fasting are given in Matthew 6:16-18?

**Fasting Is to Be Done for a Purpose:**

Why is having a biblical purpose for your fast perhaps “the single most important concept” to take from this chapter?

God is always pleased to hear His peoples’ prayers and is also pleased when we choose to strengthen our prayers through fasting. Why did the following people fast?

Nehemiah (Nehemiah 1:3-4)

The early Christians (Acts 13:2-3)

What is the relationship between repentance and fasting? (1 Samuel 7:6; Joel 2:12; Jonah 3:5-8)

What does Isaiah 58:6-7 reveal about the role of fasting in meeting the needs of others?

**Explanation of Silence and Solitude:**

Look up these verses: Matthew 4:1; 14:23; Mark 1:35; Luke 4:42. What do they tell us about Jesus?

Why do you think many of us are uncomfortable when we are alone with our own thoughts and God’s Word?

Read Mark 6:31. Do you receive enough rest? What steps can you take to have time alone with God to restore your body and spirit?

In which area(s) do you need to seek God’s will? What can you learn from Jesus’ actions in Luke 6:12-13?

**Purposeful Prayer:**

* Psalm 62:1-2, 5-6 contain some beautiful phrases that relate to our faith. Read and pray through these verses. Pray to yourself if you are uncomfortable to pray aloud.