

Fasting (3)

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[0 : 0 0] fasting is one of the best friends we can introduce to our prayer lives fasting is one of the best friends we can introduce to our prayer lives so said American pastor writer Donald Whitney Jesus both practiced fasting and taught fasting as a spiritual discipline our fathers in the faith of whatever tradition but certainly ours in the Scottish reform tradition both taught and practiced fasting Donald Whitney in his in his excellent book *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life* which is available downstairs in the St Vincent building library charitably attributes our lack of fasting today to ignorance of the practice he writes the reason fasting is so misunderstood is due to the famine of contemporary awareness of it well as a friend of mine would say maybe's I and maybe's no I rather think that the ultimate reason we don't fast as Christians like Jesus taught us we should and our fathers modeled for us is not because we don't know about it but because we just plain don't want to do it we enjoy our food and pleasures more than we'd like to admit we might pretend ignorance of the spiritual discipline of fasting but really we aren't so ignorant are we the problem the problem the problem is not really with our heads it's with our hearts it's with our wills but then perhaps to be generously fair our ignorance is genuine it's news to us that Jesus fasted and he calls upon his disciples to fast and we really didn't know that from the earliest days of the church until really quite recently fasting was an indispensable element in the Christian life yes let's give each other on this zoom call this evening the benefit of the doubt well in our first study we agreed with Dr Martin Lloyd-Jones and his definition of fasting he wrote that fasting is abstaining from anything which is legitimate in and of itself for the sake of some special spiritual purpose and that's about as good a working definition as we're going to get and I hope we're all happy to agree with the doctor well fair enough let's get biblically practical and both describe fasting as it is in the bible and then perhaps move on to talk about what fasting will reveal to us about ourselves so this evening let's consider these two topics to take away our ignorance of this spiritual discipline descriptions of fasting and indications of fasting descriptions of fasting indications of fasting descriptions of fasting first of all for the purposes of our understanding I'm going to be referring to fasting merely in terms of abstaining from food the writers of the bible didn't have access to social media television or other things from which we might legitimately fast so we're going to stick to the three features of biblical fasting concerning abstention from food which I hope and pray will serve to describe it more fully to you degrees subjects and times degrees subjects and times and I'm unapologetically taking most of what I'm seeing

here from Donald Whitney why reinvent the wheel when Whitney has done a far better job than I could ever have done of it first of all degrees of fasting degrees of fasting degrees of fasting when he wants to speak about three degrees of fasting in the first instance he talks about what he calls normal fasting normal fasting this is when we abstain from all solid food but not from water all solid food but not water so he points to the example of Jesus Jesus fasting for 40 days where in Luke 40 in Luke 4 verse 2 we read he ate nothing during those days but it says nothing about water a human being can't survive for more than three days without water so fasting does not normally involve abstaining from water the most common kind of Christian fast that's why Whitney calls it normal is where one abstains from food for a period of time but allows oneself to drink fluids in the second instance Whitney refers to what he calls a partial fast a partial fast he defines this as not abstaining from all food but from from to carefully limiting one's diet that's what he calls it carefully limiting one's diet so he points to Daniel and to the three other young Jewish men in Babylon who for 10 days as we read in Daniel 1 verse 12 we read this together they only had vegetables to eat and water to drink so for us as Christians this might mean abstaining from a certain kind of food or limiting one's portion size in the third instance Whitney refers to what he calls an absolute fast an absolute fast this is where someone eats no food drinks no water nothing's

consumed except fresh air so we read in Acts chapter 9 verse 9 that after being blinded on the road to Damascus

Paul did not eat or drink anything for three days so when it comes to food and drink there are three kinds of fast in the Bible normal partial and absolute Bible characters Jesus and our fathers all practiced all three so we have all the mandate we need to follow their example so degrees of fasting Whitney wants them to talk about subjects of fasting subjects of fasting who should fast we might suppose that fasting is to be a merely individual exercise but once again the Bible talks of three subjects of fasting in the first instance Whitney talks about individual fasting individual fasting so he points to the cardinal passage on fasting

Matthew 6 verses 16 through 18 where the focus is very much on the privacy and intimacy of the act that the only other person that knows we're fasting is God and that's it but then in the second instance the Bible talks about congregational fasts congregational fasts in Acts 13 it was while the church in Antioch and in particular the leaders of the church in Antioch were fasting and praying that the Lord guided them to commission Paul and Barnabas to the work of international mission congregational fasting is what we in the Free Church of Scotland practiced on the Thursday of a communion the fast day not in the living memory may I say in living memory the congregational fast day has been anything but it's been more of a congregational feast day than it used to be a fast day but then in the third instance the Bible talks about national fasts national fasts so in the Old Testament there are many accounts of national fasts for example in 2nd Chronicles 20 the nation of Judah was invaded by foreign armies and King Jehoshaphat in 2nd Chronicles 20 verse 3 declares a fast for all Judah in our own national history both in Scotland and the United Kingdom national fast days were a feature of life one of the first things Winston Churchill did when he became Prime Minister of Great Britain in 1940 was to declare a national day of prayer for our forces besieged in northern France since then many have attributed the almost miraculous events of Dunkirk to that national day of prayer prayer and for many Christians faster so it's not just as easy as saying that fasting is merely a private discipline if you read through the diaries of the 17th and 18th century Scottish churchmen you'll find all these three kinds of fasts individual, congregational, national okay degrees of fasting subject to fasting third times of fasting times of fasting again I'm relying here upon Donald Whitney who when he's referring to the when of fasting he generalizes in two ways he speaks first of all of regular fasts regular fasts for example according to Leviticus 16 verses 29 to 31 on the Jewish day of atonement Yom Kippur the whole nation was expected to fast up still today most Jews will fast on Yom Kippur which is one reason the Arab nations launched their attacks upon Israel on the day of atonement in 1973 but then secondly

[10:50] Whitney refers to what he calls occasional fasts I quote these occur on special occasions as the need arises as the need arises the kind of fasts I've already mentioned might fall into this category the fasting of the church in Antioch concerning Paul and Barnabas a fast call by King Jehoshaphat in a day of national disaster yes perhaps even Jesus 40 day fast defeating the devil many Christians fast as we'll see next week and the week after when there is an important life decision to be made or there's a personal crisis as the need arises so I've given you a pretty comprehensive list of fasts from now on there is no possible way that any of us can claim ignorance because we've had fasting described according to its degrees subjects and even times descriptions of fasting but then secondly and more briefly indications of fasting indications of fasting you know fasting is an intriguing spiritual discipline because it reveals to us more about ourselves than perhaps we would like to admit it's very much an indicator of our spiritual health before God when we're fasting and our foods are our minds are taken away from food for a while and fixed on God it tends to focus not just upon who God is but also who we are so I'm relying for this section upon the work of a professor of Christian philosophy called Dallas Willard in UCLA whose work

The Spirit of the Disciplines makes excellent reading I found it to be true in my own experience over the years that removing the focus from myself by abstaining perhaps from food or from something else actually leads me to know myself better than I did before and in particular Willard Willard describes two unintentional as it were coincidental as it were impacts of fasting two effects of fasting two things fasting will teach us about who we are before God it will teach us first of all where our pleasures lie and it will also teach us what our main sins are it will teach us first of all where our pleasures lie let me quote from Willard fasting teaches us a lot about ourselves very quickly it will certainly prove humiliating to us as it reveals to us how much our peace depends on the pleasures of eating it may also bring to mind how we are using the pleasure of food to assuage the

