

The following comment on Fasting from John MacArthur

The following "Question" was asked by a member of the congregation at Grace Community Church in Panorama City, California, and "Answered" by their pastor, John MacArthur Jr. It was transcribed from the tape, GC 70-17, titled "Bible Questions and Answers." A copy of the tape can be obtained by writing, Word of Grace, P.O. Box 4000, Panorama City, CA 91412 or by dialing toll free 1-800-55-GRACE. Copyright John MacArthur Jr., All Rights Reserved.

Question

In Matthew six, it talks about giving alms, and further on it talks about when you are praying, and then it says, "when you fast." It looks as though that fasting should be just as regular as praying and giving alms, and I wondering how we should be applying fasting in today's day and age.

Answer

Well, I think fasting is a very important part of Christian experience. He's talking about verse 16, of Matthew 6, "Whenever you fast do not put on a gloomy face as the hypocrites do." A Couple of things to say about fasting:

First of all, fasting is never commanded, prayer is: "pray without ceasing," "praying always, with all prayer and supplication," "watch and pray," repeatedly we are called to pray, we are commanded to pray. We are never commanded to fast. In fact, fasting is obviously identified with unique circumstances. The best way to illustrate that is: when the disciples of Jesus were confronted by the Jewish leaders, the Jewish leaders said to Jesus, "Why don't your disciples fast?" Now, it was typical of devout traditionalist Jews to fast twice a week. You remember that the Publican in Luke 18, said, "I fast twice a week," so he was following, not the Biblical prescription, but the traditional prescription, that if you wanted to be spiritual, that you fasted twice a week. You deprived yourself of food twice a week, and to them that was emblematic of holiness. So the Jews came to Jesus and said, "Your disciples don't fast! Why?" Well that's very interesting. Jesus' response was, "When the bridegroom is with you, you don't fast, in other words, this is not a time for fasting, because this is a time of joy. Jesus was telling us that fasting is an unique experience that is identified with times of grief, and sorrow, and pain, and isolation, and loneliness, and fear--those kinds of times that would not exist while you were walking around in the presence of Jesus Christ.

So the first thing to remember is, that fasting, at least in the teachings of Jesus, was for those times of great need, those times of great stress. You say, "Well, Jesus isn't here now!" Yes, but it is still true that having left, He said to His disciples, "When I go I'll send the Comforter, another Comforter, one like Myself, even the Holy Spirit." In fact, the Holy Spirit is so much like Him that He said, "I will come to you," and He has come to us in the form of the Holy Spirit.

So for those who are believers, for those who are walking with Jesus Christ, we experience His presence at all times. Fasting then is not a normal course of life for us, because we enjoying the fullness of the blessing of the presence of Christ. However, having said that as the general pattern, and acknowledging that fasting is not commanded in the New Testament, fasting is in the Bible, associated with times of great concern, and great sorrow, great anxiety, and

great prayer--all of that kind of issues in prayer, and fasting is always associated with prayer. It is not isolated from prayer, it is a part and parcel of times of prayer. So I think that the time to fast is of course those times when we are swept up in prayer, to the degree that we are we are so somber, so serious, so engulfed, that we have no desire to eat, and no desire to satisfy any of the cravings of the flesh. In fact, in times like that it may be that the flesh doesn't have such cravings, because one is so overwrought with prayerful concerns.

I think that is all we can really say is in the New Testament about fasting; that there are times when it wouldn't be appropriate to fast, because you are enjoying the fullness of the presence of God and all of His blessing; there are times when it would be appropriate to fast, and that would be associated with times of importunity, which means times of relentless prayer and concern about those matters that are on our hearts.

I can give you some personal experiences from my own life when great crisis come into my own life; fasting is a somewhat normal response to those kinds of exigencies. The longest time of fasting that I ever experienced in my life was a nine or ten day fast, in which I ate nothing. That was at a time when I was in great concern and prayer over the fact that my son Mark had been diagnosed as having a brain tumor, which could be fatal. He was in his last year of college, I think it was his last year, and of course, it was a tremendous amount of concern over that, and there was just a sort of a very immediate response to fast and pray on behalf of that kind of serious situation, and come before the Lord, and God was so tremendously gracious during that time.

I remember when the doctor told me, the neurosurgeon at Cedar-Sinai (hospital) that it could be fatal, it was just immediate that I wanted to come into the presence of the Lord and beseech Him. First of all, naturally, you pray for the well-being of your son. You ask the Lord, "Are you sure that You have the right kid? This is a good one, You know you could use him down the road." I prayed and fasted, and of course Patricia [John's wife] was aware. Mark was not aware of the seriousness of his tumor situation. But during that time I can honestly say that I spent nine days taking him back and forth to the clinic while they were doing non-evasive techniques to determine what this tumor was, before they drilled a hole in his skull, and went in and actually got inside, because the implications were so severe, because it was near the optic nerve, and the pineal gland, and things like that. They didn't want to do any invasive things, and so those were times of intense prayer. You could see a flow going from, "Lord, spare his life, and so forth and so on," to a sort of a middle ground in a few days, where you are saying, "Lord, whatever your will is, whatever your will is," and by the time that I got to the end of it, I was saying, "You know this world isn't a fit place for anybody, He belongs to You, take him out." You know, you go through the whole process--I conducted his funeral about 100 times--just going through the process of yielding up to the Lord this young man.

I remember being up in my office on a Wednesday night. It was the ninth day, the next day the doctor was going to tell me the results of all the tests, and they were done at the Frank Norris Clinic, over at the USC Medical Center, by the finest cancer specialist around, and pediatric tumor specialist, and all of that. I was waiting for the next morning, and for the first time I was actually hungry. It was the first time that I actually felt any hunger pangs. And I actually got hungry sitting up there, it was on a Wednesday night, it was between the end of the day, and the office was closed, and Wednesday night services were going to start in an hour or so. I was up there, and everything was locked up, and I was just praying and thanking the Lord for the perfect

peace, that if He was going to take him to heaven--wonderful, glorious for him, and we would rejoice in that.

There was a knock on my door, and I don't even know how anybody got in there, because there are like four sets of double doors you have to go through, and they were all locked. And a lady was knocking on my door, and I was so surprised, because everything else was closed in the office. So I went to the door and opened the door, and there was a lady standing there, who had been in the church for many years, but who had never been in my office ever. I greeted her, and said, "Hi, how are you?" And she said, "Pastor, I saw your light on up here, as I was going by, and I thought you might be hungry, and I brought you a sandwich. And I think I said something like, "Ahhhh...Ahhhhh" I don't think it was any more coherent than that, it might have been less coherent than that actually. That woman had never given me a cookie, that woman had never done anything, she had never been in the office. I didn't even know that she knew where my office was, but somehow the Lord had impressed upon her heart to make me a Bologna sandwich, and I took that sandwich in a little bag, and I went back to my desk, and I said, "So, Lord, You are that involved in my prayer life that when the fast is over, You deliver the sandwich." I mean, that was a pretty profound moment for somebody who is not very mystical. I just rejoiced that God had concluded the fast in a most appropriate and gracious way. I mean, I just couldn't bring myself to going down to In-N-Out [A popular California fast-food Hamburger restaurant], or something, it seemed too carnal--it needed to be something more.

I only say that, to give you that little recitation, to say, that there are great times of fasting, that come along with great times of prayer. The next morning the doctor called me, and he said, "We are happy to tell you this is a benign epidermoid (sp.), it is a piece of misplaced skin tissue, it is not any problem at all, it is not even anything to worry about. We are just rejoicing down here, we really like your son, and we are so happy for him, and we just wanted to let you know that all the news is good, and we don't think it is a problem, and never will be a problem." I was so thrilled, I went to the college where Mark was, and I told him. And then I told him the whole story, and he hadn't known all the behind the scene details about the potential fatality, that they had told me about. He said to me, "Why do you think the Lord put me through that?" I said, "Put you through that! You didn't know what I knew. The question is, Why did the Lord put me through that?" Of course, the answer to that is, in order that the Lord might accomplish His purposes in our hearts and draw us to Himself. So God put Himself on display and was gracious in that regard.

Three years ago, you know, Patricia had a car accident, broke her neck, they gave her less than 5% chance to live. That was another time when prayer just kind of takes over your life, you just go into instant communion, unrelenting communion with God, and food has no place, as other kind of indulgences and things that entertain us don't.

So I think fasting needs to be associated with times of prayer. I say that carefully, because I think some people think that if you just arbitrarily don't eat, that there is some spiritual virtue in that. The fact of the matter, we ought to fast more, because we ought to be more concerned to pray more strongly about more things. So the real issue, I think, is in the prayer area.

Added to Bible Bulletin Board's "MacArthur's Questions and Answers" by:

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