

TO FAST OR NOT TO FAST?

WHAT THE BIBLE SAYS ABOUT ABSTAINING FROM FOOD

The elders are inviting Highfields Church members to join us on **Friday 19 May 2023** as we look to the Lord to guide us as we consider church planting as part of our *Gospel Growth* initiative. Here are some quick pointers to help you think about whether you might take part.

→ What is fasting?

The Christian life, like that of the Lord Jesus whom we follow, involves first suffering, then glory. Ultimately, we are heading towards the glories of a great wedding feast (Rev 19:9), and we anticipate that whenever we celebrate the Lord's Supper. But until then it involves taking up our crosses & following Jesus. And such gospel living can involve fasting now as we look forward to our Lord's return (Matt 9:15) and the abundant feasting at the New Creation.

We might define Christian fasting as a God-ward abstinence from food (or some other staple of life) for a short period of time, to particularly focus on the Lord and his work. As John Piper says: *'If we are full of what the world offers, then perhaps a fast might express or even increase, our soul's appetite for God.'*

From the Early Church onwards, many Christians throughout history and around the world have faced important decisions, challenges and opportunities for the gospel by seeking the Lord's will and blessing through prayer & fasting (Acts 13:1-4).

'Whenever ... any difficult matter of great importance is to be discussed ... 'tis a holy ordinance and one salutary for all ages, that pastors urge the people to public fasting and extraordinary prayers.' John Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.xii.14

→ Reasons not to fast

Paul warned Timothy against false teachers who were insisting on abstinence (1 Tim 4:1-5). Such asceticism has no value in rooting out sin (Col 2:20-1) and can in fact become a great source of pride & self-righteousness ('I fast twice a week', Luke 18:12-14). And while we invite the church family to join us in these forthcoming fasts, those taking part should do so with humility and discretion (Matt 6:16-14): only the Lord should know what's done in secret.

As well as these spiritual issues, there may be practical considerations too. We wouldn't encourage pregnant or breastfeeding mothers to fast from food;

likewise if you suffer from diabetes or an eating disorder and especially if you have an exam that day! In these instances, however, perhaps you might consider fasting something other than food (see below).

→ Reasons why you might consider fasting

For many of us in 21st Century Britain, we rarely have to go without. This means our conscious dependence & reliance on the Lord is easily dulled. With such an important issue as the Highfields Church finances at stake, accompanying prayer with fasting can be a powerful way of reminding ourselves that we rely on God for everything.

The elders are suggesting days of fasting *and prayer*. The actual act of fasting from food can serve to remind your hungry body (throughout the day) of your commitment to pray *during the day* for God's wisdom as we collectively ask him to guide us, provide for us & pray 'your will be done.'

While recognising the need for humility and discretion (cf. Matt 6:16-14), committing to fast on these Fridays with others could wonderfully *deepen your relationships* with your brothers and sisters at church.

→ Some practical suggestions

- You might consider fasting from Thursday dinner until Friday dinner (i.e. miss dinner, breakfast, then lunch in that order).
- Make sure you drink plenty during the day & sugary drinks may help keep you going.
- If you need to eat for some reason during the day, you are of course free to do so (1 Tim 4:4) and mustn't see it as a failure. Ultimately fasting is a heart issue before you and the Lord.
- The time you save in not having to prepare food could be used to pray with friends or family.
- If it's not appropriate for you to give up food for the day, why consider abstaining from some other 'staples of life'? E.g., no caffeine / TV / smart phone / internet / newspaper.
- If you have any questions, do speak to an elder.

Further reading:

John Piper, *A Hunger For God* (Leicester: IVP, 1997).

Peter Leithart, *Keep the Fast, Keep the Feast*, online <http://www.firstthings.com/onthesquare/?p=1334>