

Module : Fasting
Session 2 : Pre-eminent Purpose of Personal Fasting
Focus : Appearing before God and Humbling the Soul



PRIMARY NEW TESTAMENT PASSAGE ON FASTING

1.1. FASTING - A MARK OF CHRIST'S DISCIPLES

If you claim to be a disciple of Christ, fasting is one of the marks that will distinguish you as one.

Matt. 6:16-18 Whenever you fast, do not put on a gloomy face as the hypocrites do, for they neglect their appearance so that they will be noticed by men when they are fasting. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. But you, **WHEN YOU FAST**, anoint your head and wash your face so that your fasting will not be noticed by men, but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you.

Jesus stated to His disciples, "**WHEN YOU FAST**". This is not a suggestion but an implied commandment. Jesus expected that His followers would fast. In discipleship, fasting is not an optional extra - it is indispensable to spiritual growth and the effectiveness of sons of God.

Mark 2:18-20 John's disciples and the Pharisees were fasting; and they came and said to Him, "Why do John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but Your disciples do not fast?" And Jesus said to them, "While the bridegroom is with them, the attendants of the bridegroom cannot fast, can they? So long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast. But the days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast in that day.

See also Matt. 9:14, 15; Luke 5:33-36

Jesus stated emphatically that His DISCIPLES would fast when He would be taken away from them.

Disciple = mathetes = a learner, a pupil

A disciple, as a follower of Christ, is a LEARNER of Christ. The disciple positions himself/herself to learn of Christ's ways and words. Fasting as a form of self-denial, positions the disciple in a humble posture devoid of pride and of insisting on his view and practice, but rather being teachable, willingly agreeing with and embracing the principles of Christ so that they could easily be assimilated into his/her life. Fasting in this context thus highlights the disciples' determination to accede to and accept the ways of Christ above his

own. I personally believe that fasting facilitates the reception and understanding of God's Truth. James 1:21 indicates ...

James 1:21 Therefore, putting aside all filthiness and all that remains of wickedness, in **humility** receive the word implanted, which is able to save your souls.

Humility is prerequisite to receiving the implanted Word. Fasting is a means to humble the soul (Psalm 35:13; 69:10). The understanding and will of the unrenewed soul is silenced in submission to the will and understanding that a Word-saturated spirit brings to it. Thus the humbled soul bows more willingly to the Word of God received in the spirit of the man (see more on this issue below).

1.2. GENERAL MOTIVE IN FASTING - TO APPEAR UNTO GOD, THE FATHER

There are specific reasons why different people fasted in the Bible, and we shall examine these in later sessions in this series. In this session, I present a very broad and generalised motive for fasting, viz. appearing before God and the humbling of the soul. Essentially, Matthew 6 warns about performing spiritual activities to impress men (see Matt. 6:1).

Matt 6:1 Beware of practicing your righteousness before men to be noticed by them; otherwise you have no reward with your Father who is in heaven.

In Matthew 6, amongst other things, Jesus draws attention to giving, prayer and fasting as 'righteous' practices. We can therefore conclude that fasting is an expression of practical righteousness. It is part of the expression of our inward state of already attained righteousness through Christ.

Jesus focuses predominantly on the correct attitude and motive in fasting, more than on the act itself. Accurate and acceptable ATTITUDES and MOTIVES in fasting is equally important to the ACT of fasting. Matthew 6 is a warning against using any spiritual act for personal glory or aggrandisement.

Jesus isolates two motives in fasting:

Matt. 6:16-18 Moreover when ye fast, be not, as the hypocrites, of a sad countenance: for they disfigure their faces, that they may **APPEAR TO MEN** to fast. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward. But thou, when thou fastest, anoint thine head, and wash thy face; That thou **APPEAR** not unto men to fast, but **UNTO THY FATHER** which is in secret: and thy Father, which seeth in secret, shall reward thee openly. **(KJV)**

1. 'to **APPEAR** unto **MEN**' OR
2. 'to **APPEAR** unto the **FATHER**'

He who fasts makes an 'appearance'. A fast should never be used to generate or bolster a reputation of spirituality before men. This, at its core, is hypocrisy, because the very nature of fasting is self-abasement and humility. The arrogant use what is designed to engender a lowliness of heart and mind to fuel an obsession with spiritual image and reputation in the eyes of men. They negate the very nature and intent of fasting. Jesus said they APPEAR before men, and the reward of men they will have. In a fast, GOD and not MAN should be your focus. No person need ever even know or find out that you are fasting.

Zechariah 7:5 Say to all the people of the land and to the priests, 'When you fasted and mourned in the fifth and seventh months these seventy years, **was it actually for Me that you fasted**'

Do not go around boasting about your fast; other people may or may not find out; there are times when you are compelled to inform others that you are fasting, but the motive is not to receive commendation from them or increase or maintain your spiritual 'reputation' among them.

Fasting, as a spiritual exercise, can be the context of great hypocrisy. It can be abused to parade spirituality before men to receive their applause. One has got to deliberately guard against this.

Luke 18:10-14

"Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood and was **praying this to himself**: 'God, I thank You that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. **I fast twice a week**; I pay tithes of all that I get.' But the tax collector, standing some distance away, was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, the sinner!' I tell you, this man went to his house justified rather than the other; **for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted.**"

The Pharisee boasted of his fasting twice in a week. He is in fact negating one of the primary purposes of fasting, which is to humble oneself. He fasted unto himself and men, but not unto God. It is important that your fast has the attention, recognition and regard of God. This is what really matters. It would be a sad indictment upon us if the whole world knows of our fast, but yet God does not even acknowledge it at all.

In Isaiah 58, wrong motives, ungodly attitudes and disobedient lifestyles and behaviour rendered the fasting of Israel null and void, as it did not receive any recognition from God.

[We will examine Isaiah 58 thoroughly in a subsequent session].

Isaiah 58:3a 'Why have we fasted and **YOU DO NOT SEE?**
Why have we humbled ourselves and **YOU DO NOT NOTICE?**

The two broad motives of fasting in Matthew 6 are couched in terms of before whom you appear. Each motive has two different kinds of rewards, indicated by the use of two different Greek words translated 'reward'.

- (i) **In verse 16**, those whose fasting is performed with ostentatious pride to impress others with their piety, has the recognition of men but not of God. To these, Jesus declares that they have their 'reward in full'.

The Greek word for 'reward' here is '**misthos**' = **wages = immediate payment in full**. In other words, what you see is what you get and you get it immediately, i.e. the recognition and applause of people.

- (ii) Those who fast to be appear before their 'FATHER who sees in secret' receive a different kind of reward. The Greek word for 'reward' here in verse 18 is not the same as the one used in verse 16.

The word here is '**antapodosis**' = **to give back or to restore over a period of time; implies an inheritance of some sort**.

This reward implies the drawing of dividends from an investment over an extended period of time. Accurate and acceptable fasting recruits to the one who fasts a reward from God the Father that not only may have an immediate effect, but also has a perpetual or recurrent Divine response. So in a fast, do not only focus upon the immediate reward that might visibly be your portion as God responds to your need, but also bear in mind that you are positioning your life as the recipient of future blessings from God. Fasting is preparatory for God's present and future favourable response to you.

[An Overview of the Many Promises and Blessings of Fasting will be Explored in a Subsequent Session]

FAST SO THAT YOUR FATHER SEES:

Fasting, like prayer and financial giving, is never to be performed as a cold, clinical exercise outside of **RELATIONSHIP with God as FATHER**. Note in His discourse on the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5,6,7), Jesus references His 'FATHER' several times. We fast unto our 'Father'. We are His sons, who have a living and vibrant relationship with Him. Fasting is not some formula to attain some result devoid of strong relationship with God. Many fast with a cause and effect perspective, but without awareness of, or subjective practical experience of their status and executive privilege as God's son. Remember, your fast is UNTO Your FATHER!

THE PRIMAL PURPOSE OF PERSONAL FASTING

1. TO DISCIPLINE THE SOUL

Psalm 35:13b I humbled my soul with fasting

Psalm 69:10a I chastened my soul with fasting (KJV)

I humbled my soul with fasting (YLT)

A study of the reasons why different people in the Bible fasted as individuals or as a group, will reveal many and various motives for fasting (See subsequent section on the Product of Fasting). In this section we want to isolate one of the most important specific reasons for personal fasting: to discipline the soul and body.

N.B.: I encourage the reader to listen to and read through my two series on 'The Spiritual Man' and 'The Prosperity of the Soul' to gain more insight into the original design of God for the spirit and the soul – refer to my website: www.randolphbarnwell.com.

Man is a spirit, soul and body (1 Thess. 5:23/ Heb. 4:12). The strength of one's spirit should dominate that of the soul and body. The soul, like the spirit, is comprised of three parts, viz.

The Mind	:	What and how we think	:	Our thoughts
The Will	:	What I desire / Ambitions/ Choices	:	Our Intentions
The Emotions	:	How I feel	:	Our state of well-being

David said that God 'restores his soul' (Psalm 23). The soul is to be restored back to wholeness to God's original design for its proper function. The soul must be renewed on an ongoing basis through submission to the WORD of GOD as received in and through your SPIRIT (Romans 12:1,2). As the soul yields to a word-illuminated spirit, it is progressively restored to a place of wholeness. That which the spirit is 'compelled' by or 'pressed' with (Acts 18:5) must be **impressed** upon the soul.

Deut. 11:18a You shall therefore **impress these words** of mine on your heart and **on your soul**

The SOUL is purified by obedience to God's Word (1 Pet. 1:22,23). It must submit to the will of God through HIS Word, as it is revealed in the spirit of the man by the Holy Spirit. Whenever God's Word is heard, it is to be received and encoded within one's spirit, and then be IMPRESSED upon one's soul. The bringing of your soul into alignment with your spirit is an exercise that demands your conscious and aggressive focus. Left to itself, the unrenewed soul will degenerate further into inaccuracy and away from God's ways. Your soul requires leadership. You will only prosper in all dimensions of life and God's purposes AS YOUR SOUL PROSPERS (3 John 3:2). Soul prosperity is a critical priority that all sons of God must focus on. Without it, we will never realise the fullness of all the Divine intentions and possibilities attendant with our sonship.

The following illustrations appear in my study notes, The Spiritual Man, and assists to graphically illustrate some of the thoughts shared above.

Diagram 1:

The spirit leads, guides and conditions the soul, which through the body, expresses obedience.

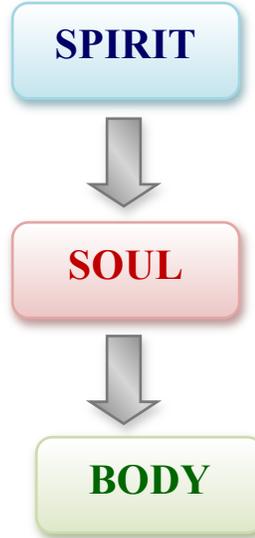


Diagram 2:

The centrality of the spirit indicates its pivotal and strategic placement and function in the man.

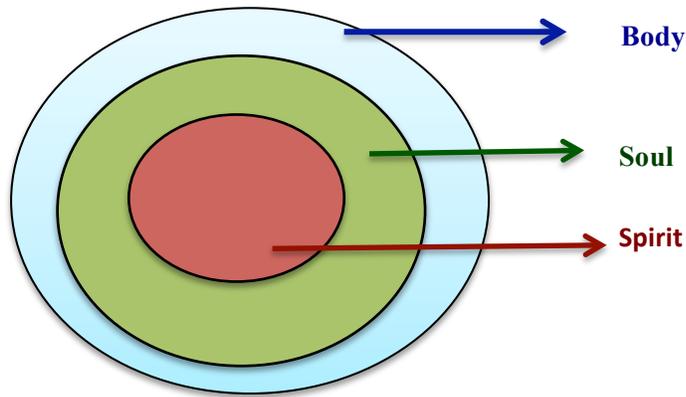


Diagram 3:

The size of the circles indicates the original Divine design for the predominance and influence of each part.

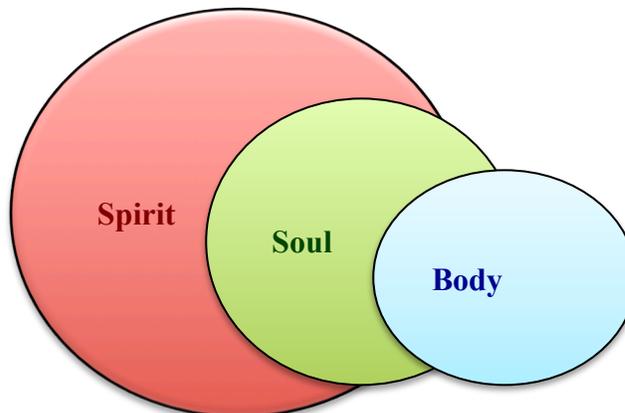
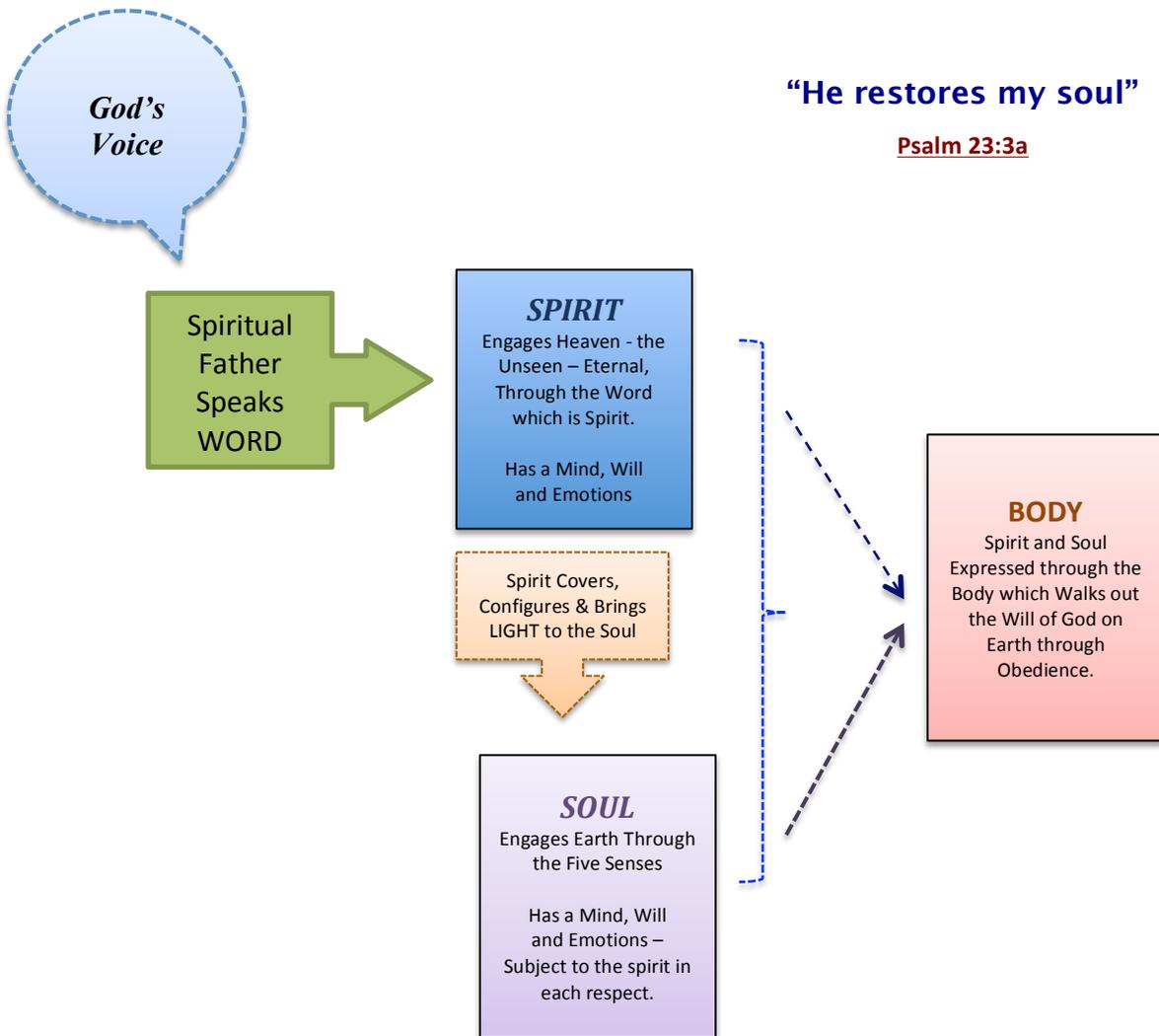


Diagram 4 illustrates how the reception of God’s Word, Way and Will should take place in your spirit and be impressed upon the soul, which humbly accepts God’s voice.



N.B. Diagram 4 above must be seen within a specific context. It is not intended to imply that you only hear God through the teaching, preaching and counsel of your spiritual father. A spiritual father’s fathering over is meant to actually get you to the place where you can access the voice of God through HIS Word for yourself. But the speaking of God’s Word through your spiritual father over the spiritual household of faith to which you belong is critical, for it provides direction and guidance on core matters God wants to highlight. This corporate dynamic, together with personal counsel of you, is meant to renew and bring wholeness to your soul as it submits to the word received in your spirit. The soul is that dimension over which your spiritual father and other spiritual elders have oversight and are accountable to God for.

Fasting is part of God's programme in bringing the soul of man to complete restoration and renewal. David twice spoke about using fasting to humble his soul (Psalm 35 and 69). **That area of your soul that still needs renewal and restoration will constantly rebel and attempt to assert its dominance over the leading of God through your spirit, and thus, it becomes absolutely imperative for you to SUBJECT the soul into obedience.**

Isaiah 58 is a great chapter on fasting. It highlights the principle of REST – the Sabbath principle. The soul needs to return to and find its rest (Matt 11:27-29; Psalm 116:7). Part of this soul rest is to not insist upon your own way, seeking to do that which only brings you pleasure – even to the displeasure of God, and speaking your own word based on your own misguided perception of things.

Isaiah 58:13-14

- 13 “If **because of the sabbath, you turn your foot** From doing your own pleasure on My holy day, And call the sabbath a delight, the holy day of the Lord honorable, And honor it, desisting from your own ways, From seeking your own pleasure And **speaking your own word,**
- 14 Then **you will take delight in the Lord, And I will make you ride on the heights of the earth; And I will feed you with the heritage of Jacob your father,** For the mouth of the Lord has spoken.”

Reference is made to the Sabbath which means rest. The overriding message of verse 13 is the desisting of doing your own thing, deriving your own pleasure, and speaking your own words. From these things we must ‘**TURN THE FOOT AWAY**’. There is the deliberate setting aside of your own inclination in preference for that which pleases God. We must call the Sabbath ‘a delight’ and a ‘holy day’ – i.e. we must give the issue of REST FOR THE SOUL high premium in our lives. This is a seriously important issue. Fasting aids this process.

The terms ‘humbled’ and ‘chastened’ all imply a disciplining of one’s soul:

- ❖ Our **thoughts and mindsets** need to be brought in line with God’s;
- ❖ Our **wills, desires, intentions, ambitions and choices** need to be brought in line with God’s expectations and desires for us;
- ❖ Our **emotions** need to be brought to the state of wholeness, healing, and maturity .



ON THE DAY OF ATONEMENT, ISRAEL HUMBLER THEIR SOULS BY FASTING

The English word atonement is derived from the two words "at onement" and denotes a state of togetherness and agreement between two people. Atonement presupposes two parties that are estranged, with the act of atonement being the reconciliation of them into a state of harmony. The theological meaning is the reconciliation between God and his fallen creation, especially between God and sinful human beings¹.

In ancient Israel, on the day of Atonement, the priests would atone for the sins of the nation by a series of sacrifices. On this day God expected Israel to be in a posture of deep humility in their souls.

Lev. 16:29-31 “This shall be a permanent statute for you: in the seventh month, on the tenth day of the month, you shall humble your souls and not do any work, whether the native, or the alien who sojourns among you; **for it is on this day that atonement shall be made for you to cleanse you; you will be clean from all your sins before the Lord.** It is to be a sabbath of solemn rest for you, that you may humble your souls; it is a permanent statute.

Lev. 16:31(KJV) It shall be a sabbath of rest unto you, and ye shall afflict your souls, by a statute for ever. The soul was brought into right relationship with God. It was freed from the guilt of sin. From the time of Moses onwards, the Jews have interpreted this as a commandment to fast. In Acts 27:9 it is the annual day of Atonement, which is referred to as ‘the fast’. Presently, under its Hebrew name, Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement is still observed by Orthodox Jews as a day of fasting.

Acts 27:9 When considerable time had passed and the voyage was now dangerous, since even the fast was already over, Paul began to admonish them.

By our acceptance of the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ and the shedding of His blood for us, we in the New Covenant have already received the atonement for our sins and are thus reconciled to God.

Rom. 5:11 And not only so, but we also joy in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom we have now received the atonement. **(KJV)**

Rom 5:11 And not only this, but we also exult in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received the reconciliation. **(NASB)**

We do not fast to receive atonement. It has been done already. Positionally, we are fully reconciled to God, through Jesus Christ. But there is a general underlying principle here, in that **atonement reconciles man to God, and that the soul specifically is to be humbled in this process in its bid to participate in and receive the gracious dealings of God with it. Fasting humbles the soul. Practically, or subjectively, there may be areas of your soul not yet fully renewed. Fasting facilitates the acceptance by the soul**

¹ Illustrated Dictionary of Biblical Imagery

of the will and way of God in a specific matter or respect. A humbled soul is essential for being 'AT ONE-MENT' with God.

Psalm 116:17 Return to your rest, O my soul, For the Lord has dealt bountifully with you. For You have rescued my soul from death, My eyes from tears, My feet from stumbling.

At the time of Nehemiah the people of Israel assembled in sackcloth with dirt on them and fast, confessing their sins (See also 1 Sam. 7:6; 2 Sam. 12:16).

Neh. 9:1,2 Now on the twenty- fourth day of this month the sons of Israel assembled with fasting, in sackcloth and with dirt upon them. The descendants of Israel separated themselves from all foreigners, and stood and confessed their sins and the iniquities of their fathers.

Fasting was practised during the course of repentance of sins as a symbol of humility and as a means of seeking the mercy of the Lord. This must not be viewed as legalism or a system of works to earn God's favour or forgiveness. We are forgiven when we simply confess our sins – whether we fast or not. Fasting simply aids us in our position of humility before a gracious and merciful God. For me, it is a natural response to a forgiving God. It assists the soul in its lowly posture to not only receive God's grace and mercy, but to also repair and be restored in that area in which it has fallen, and emerge to a new place of strength and resolve not to fall in the same area again.

2. TO DISCIPLINE THE FLESHLY NATURE: 'THE BODILY APPETITES'

If the soul is humbled and realigned to a place of rest and designated authority under the leadership of one's spirit, then the bodily and fleshly domain of one's life can be managed and regulated correctly. Thus, fasting being focused on the discipline and renewal of one's soul, will ultimately also have a secondary purpose of aid, fast-tracking and facilitating our rulership and overcoming position over our flesh.

It is often quoted, 'The way to a man's heart is through his stomach'. Satan has been operating by this principle for years. He gains rulership over man's heart by appealing to his physical appetites. The first temptation hurled at **Eve** related to her physical appetite: 'she saw that the tree was good for food' (Genesis 3:6). **Noah** abused his physical appetite and got drunk. **Esau** gave in to his physical craving and sold his birthright.

In 1 Cor. 10:6-7 **Paul equates the 'idolatry' of Israel to 'eating and drinking'**. There was a direct connection between their turning to idols and their inability to control their fleshly appetites.

1 Cor. 10:1-11

- 1 For I do not want you to be unaware, brethren, that our fathers were all under the cloud and all passed through the sea;
- 2 and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea;
- 3 and all ate the same spiritual food;
- 4 and all drank the same spiritual drink, for they were drinking from a spiritual rock which followed them; and the rock was Christ.

- 5 Nevertheless, with most of them God was not well-pleased; for they were laid low in the wilderness.
- 6 Now these things happened as examples for us, so that we would not crave evil things as they also craved.
- 7 Do not be idolaters, as some of them were; as it is written, “ The people sat down to eat and drink, and stood up to play.”
- 8 Nor let us act immorally, as some of them did, and twenty- three thousand fell in one day.
- 9 Nor let us try the Lord, as some of them did, and were destroyed by the serpents.
- 10 Nor grumble, as some of them did, and were destroyed by the destroyer.
- 11 Now these things happened to them as an example, and they were written for our instruction, upon whom the ends of the ages have come.

In Phil.3:19, we are warned to stay clear of people ‘whose god is their belly’ – this phrase is an image of sensuality.

Phil. 3:17-19

- 17 Brethren, join in following my example, and observe those who walk according to the pattern you have in us.
- 18 For many walk, of whom I often told you, and now tell you even weeping, that they are enemies of the cross of Christ, whose end is destruction,
- 19 whose god is their appetite, and whose glory is in their shame, who set their minds on earthly things

The **English Revised Version** frames ‘whose god is their belly’ as ‘**they have replaced God with their own desires**’.

The excessive preoccupation with food and eating in the world today is one of the signs of the return of the Lord (Matt.24:37, 38 and Luke 21:34).

Matthew 24:37,38

- 37 For the coming of the Son of Man will be just like the days of Noah.
- 38 For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noah entered the ark,
- 39 and they did not understand until the flood came and took them all away; so will the coming of the Son of Man be.

It is not so much the actual excessive, uncontrolled and almost gluttonous eating that is alluded to here, but what it represents – uncontrolled fleshly lust and craving. The one is indicative of the other.

FASTING AND ‘RULE’: Withholding food from the body is a form of establishing and entrenching the **RULE** of your spirit over your soul and flesh. As you exercise authority over your natural fleshly, reflexive response to eat when hungry, and rather refuse to eat, you express a measure of God-given rulership. If you cannot rule your own body – your own appetite, you will not rule any other significant domain. Ruling

your soul is prerequisite to ruling your body. If by the power of God's Word and Spirit, your spirit rules and leads the soul, the established joint authority of a spirit and soul in oneness will naturally and easily be able to dictate to the body and its fleshly cravings in every respect. Rule!

Paul said that he brings his body into subjection (1 Cor. 9:27). Jesus conquered where Eve failed - Matt 4:3; he refused the temptation to eat during His fast.

There is a direct opposition between the Holy Spirit and the carnal nature of man.

Gal. 5:17 For the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in **opposition to one another**, so that you may not do the things that you please

Withholding food from our bodies testifies to the dominance we have in our spirit man – fasting is a key facilitating factor for living in victory over the carnal man with its desires. In a sense, it demonstrates our mastery over fleshly appetite.

Derek Prince said, “Fasting deals with two great barriers to the Holy Spirit that are erected by man’s carnal nature. These are the stubborn self-will of the soul and the insistent, self-gratifying appetites of the body.”

TO BE CONTINUED

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