



# A Fast Focus

Adapted from “Christian Discipline” series by Dennis Marquardt

The Bible teaches us that a real fast—abstaining from something for a period of time as a religious observance—can be a powerful time of refocusing our lives spiritually.

It is not a time to hopefully force God’s hand through fervent requests (though asking for a miracle, wisdom, or leading is often part of it). Rather, fasting is a time to focus our hearts and minds on what God desires for us.

This is where Old Testament Israel and the Pharisees of Jesus’ day missed the boat. They often regarded fasting as a way to elevate themselves in the eyes of others, or to manipulate God. But a fast must be real to have any power, not just the appearance of power.

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“The *Queen Mary* was the largest ship to cross the oceans when it was launched in 1936. Through four decades and a world war she served until she was retired, anchored as a floating hotel and museum in Long Beach, California.

“During the conversion, her three-massive smokestacks were taken off to be scraped down and repainted. But on the dock, they crumbled. Nothing was left of the 3/4-inch steel plate from which the stacks had been formed. All that remained were more than thirty coats of paint that had been applied over the years. The steel had rusted away.

When Jesus called the Pharisees ‘Whitewashed tombs,’ He meant they had no substance, only an exterior appearance.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Donnie Martin, “The *Queen Mary* Was the Largest Ship to Cross the Ocean,” Sermon Central, July 27, 2003, <https://www.sermoncentral.com/illustrations/sermon-illustration-donnie-martin-stories-sinwagesof-13921#> (accessed July 8, 2017).

## **COURAGE Level Questions**

**C1:** In the illustration of the ship named *Queen Mary* ship, we learn the smokestacks had rusted away – outwardly they may have looked good, but inwardly they were a mess. Consider any fasting you have done previously. Were you more concerned with an outward appearance of prayer and fasting rather than an inward change of our lives? If so, how do you know this?

**C2:** What does the word “fasting” mean to you?

**C3:** Have you ever fasted? Describe your experience.

**Exercise #1:** Read and answer the following.

Matthew 6:16–18 (ESV) And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

Luke 18:10–14 (ESV) “Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.’ But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.”

**C4:** From these verses, what do you learn about the discipline of fasting?

**C5:** Scripture notes that the Pharisees' prayers were not being answered when they fasted. To what reason(s) would you point?

**C6:** How might we make sure fasting is genuine, meaningful, connects us closer to God, and yields answers to prayer? Be specific.

**Exercise #2:** Read and answer the following.

Isaiah 58:1–7 (ESV) “Cry aloud; do not hold back; lift up your voice like a trumpet; declare to my people their transgression, to the house of Jacob their sins. Yet they seek me daily and delight to know my ways, as if they were a nation that did righteousness and did not forsake

the judgment of their God; they ask of me righteous judgments; they delight to draw near to God. ‘Why have we fasted, and you see it not? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you take no knowledge of it?’ Behold, in the day of your fast you seek your own pleasure, and oppress all your workers. Behold, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to hit with a wicked fist. Fasting like yours this day will not make your voice to be heard on high. Is such the fast that I choose, a day for a person to humble himself? Is it to bow down his head like a reed, and to spread sackcloth and ashes under him? Will you call this a fast, and a day acceptable to the LORD? Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh?”

**C7:** From these verses, what is the foundation of fasting and prayer?

**C8:** How can you make fasting and prayer more meaningful, spiritually healthy, and effective?

## STRENGTH Level Questions

**S1:** Why do you feel that fasting as a spiritual discipline is not often discussed or practiced in some places?

**S2:** How often do you fast and pray? What steps can you take to more seriously and honestly practice this spiritual discipline in your life? Be specific.

**Exercise #1:** Read and answer the following.

Matthew 6:16–18 (ESV)

Luke 18:10–14 (ESV)

**S3:** The Pharisees used prayer and fasting as a way of drawing public attention to themselves. But fasting done correctly puts your heart and mind on God rather than drawing attention to yourself. What can you do to ensure your focus is on God when you fast?

**S4:** When you fast, you refocus your desires to be aligned with God's. What does God desire in you, and how can fasting help bring that desire to life?

**Exercise #2:** Read and answer the following.

Isaiah 58:1–7 (ESV)

**S5:** From these verses, what is needed in order to honor God in your fasting?

**Exercise #3:** For the next 30 days, set aside a period of time to fast from something dear/important to you (food, recreation, mobile devices, intimacy, etc) each week.

Then, write down what you learned during these times of fasting and share your findings with another man.

# ENDURANCE Level Questions

**Exercise #1:** Read and answer the following.

Jonah 3:5–10 (ESV)

**E1:** From these verses, what do you learn about the discipline of fasting?

**E2:** God responded to the repentance and fasting of the people of Nineveh because they were genuine in their regret. Describe how that looks in a man's life and how a man can integrate that into his walk with Christ.

**Exercise #2:** Read and answer the following.

Matthew 6:16–18 (ESV)

Luke 18:10–14 (ESV)

**E3:** The Pharisees were more concerned with how their fasting appeared to others, rather than if it connected them closed to God. Have you ever had that same attitude? What needs to change within you to make your spiritual life more honoring of God?

**E4:** Sometimes the position of your heart becomes focused more on what **you** want God to accomplish, rather than aligning your desires to those of God. How can you make changes to your heart so the things accomplished through prayer and fasting are the things God wants to accomplish?

**Exercise #3:** Read and answer the following.

Isaiah 58:1–7 (ESV)

**E5:** Have you ever tried to accomplish something important or critical, but did not get the desired results? What is the connection between your desires when you fast and pray, and being aligned with God's will?

**Exercise #4:** Create a six-month fasting schedule for these specific areas:

- Helping and/or giving to those who are needy
- Ministering to your family at home
- Sharing the gospel message with lost people
- Knowing how to bless/support your pastor
- Serving in critical points of need in the church
- Seeking more of the Holy Spirit

**Exercise #5:** After you've spent six months practicing the spiritual disciplining of regular fasting, determine to contact and and meet with three other Christian men to discuss the importance of prayer and fasting.

What did you learn from your fasts what did you learn from those three Christian men?