

# FASTING: The Misunderstood Discipline

Excerpts from Discipleship Journal  
by Don Whitney

Quick, What do people who fast look like?

What kinds of people come to your mind?

Are they John the Baptist types?

Legalists?

Health nuts?

Does Jesus come to your mind when you think of fasting and “fasters”? Jesus both practiced and taught fasting, you know. And yet, fasting is the most feared and misunderstood of all the spiritual disciplines.

Many believe fasting turns us into something we don't want to become and causes things to happen that we don't want to happen. We fear that fasting will make us hollow-eyed fanatics or odd for God. We're afraid that it will make us suffer dreadfully and give us a generally negative experience.

For some Christians, fasting for spiritual purposes is as unthinkable as shaving their heads or walking barefoot across a fire pit.

Fasting is so misunderstood because of the famine of contemporary awareness of it. Even more there's more interest in fasting today than during the last half of the twentieth centuries, how many people do you know who regularly practice fasting?

How many sermons have you heard on the subject? In most Christian circles you will rarely hear fasting mentioned, and few will have read anything about it.

And yet it's mentioned in Scripture more times than even something as important as baptism (about seventy-seven times for fasting and seventy-five for baptism).



Christians in a gluttonous, self-indulgent society may struggle to accept and to begin the practice of fasting. Few disciplines go so radically against the flesh and mainstream of culture.

Of course, there are some people who for medical reasons, can not fast. But most of us dare not overlook fasting's benefits in the disciplined pursuit of a Christlike life.

# FASTING EXPLAINED

The Bible defines fasting as a Christian's voluntary abstinence from food for spiritual purposes. It is a Christian, for fasting by a nonChristian has no eternal value since the discipline's motives and purposes are to be God-centered.

# FASTING EXPLAINED

Fasting is voluntary in the sense that it is not to be coerced. Fasting is more than just the ultimate crash diet for the body, it is abstinence from food for spiritual purposes.

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# FASTING IS EXPECTED

Notice Jesus' words at the beginning of Matthew 6:16-17, "When you fast..."

By giving us instructions on what to do and what not to do when we fast, Jesus assumes that we will fast.

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# FASTING IS EXPECTED

Compare these words with His statements about giving and praying in the same passage, “So when we give...” Matthew 6:2-3, “But when you pray...” Matthew 6:5-7. No one doubts that we are to give and to pray.

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# FASTING IS EXPECTED

Plainer still are Jesus' words in Matthew 9:14-15. The Pharisees asked Him, "How is it that we and the Pharisees fast, but Your disciples do not fast?" Jesus answered.

# FASTING IS EXPECTED

‘How can the guests of the bridegroom mourn while He is with them? The time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them; then they will fast.’ ”



# PURPOSES OF FASTING

Scriptures gives many purposes for fasting.

I've condensed them into several major categories. Whenever you fast, you should do so far at least one of these purposes.

# PURPOSES OF FASTING

*Notice that **not** one of the purposes is to earn God's favor.*

# PURPOSES OF FASTING

We cannot use fasting as a way to impress God and earn His acceptance. We are made acceptable to God through the work of Christ Jesus, not our work.

# PURPOSES OF FASTING

Fasting has no eternal benefit for us until we have come to God through repentance and faith (Ephesians 2:1-10; Titus 3:5-7)

# 1. TO STRENGTHEN PRAYER

There's something about fasting that sharpens the edge of our intercessions and gives passion to our supplications.

# 1. TO STRENGTHEN PRAYER

When Ezra was about to lead a group of exiles back to Jerusalem, he proclaimed a fast in order for the people to seek the Lord earnestly for safe passage.

# 1. TO STRENGTHEN PRAYER

They were to face many dangers without military protection during their nine-hundred-mile journey. So we fasted and petitioned God about this,” says Ezra 8:23, and he answered our prayer.

# 1. TO STRENGTHEN PRAYER

The most important aspect of this discipline is its influence on prayer. The Bible does not teach that fasting is a kind of spiritual hunger strike that compels God to do our bidding.



# 1. TO STRENGTHEN PRAYER

*If we ask God for something outside of God's will, fasting does not cause Him to reconsider. Fasting does not cause Him to reconsider.*

# 1. TO STRENGTHEN PRAYER

Fasting does not change God's hearing so much as it changes our praying.

# 1. TO STRENGTHEN PRAYER

You'll notice that in one way or another, all the other biblical purposes of fasting relate to prayer.

# 1. TO STRENGTHEN PRAYER

Nehemiah (in Nehemiah 1:14) “fasted and prayed before God of heaven.”

Daniel (in Daniel 9:3) devoted himself to plead with God “in prayer and petition, in fasting.”

# 1. TO STRENGTHEN PRAYER

In a direct command through the prophet Joel, Israel was told, “Even now,” declares the LORD *return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning* (Joel 2:12).

# 1. TO STRENGTHEN PRAYER

It wasn't until after "they had fasted and prayed" that the church in Antioch "placed their hands" on Barnabas and Saul of Tarsus and "sent them off" on the first missionary journey (Acts 13:3)

## 2. TO SEEK GOD'S GUIDANCE

There is a biblical precedent for fasting to more clearly discern the will of God. In Judges 20 the other eleven tribes of Israel prepared for war against the tribe of Benjamin.

## 2. TO SEEK GOD'S GUIDANCE

Through prayer they sought the Lord before going into battle. Even though they outnumbered the Benjamites by fifteen to one, they lost the battle and twenty-two thousand men.



## 2. TO SEEK GOD'S GUIDANCE

It wasn't until they prayed and *fasted* that the LORD told them:

“Go, for tomorrow I will give them into your hands”

-Judges

20:28

## 2. TO SEEK GOD'S GUIDANCE

According to Acts 14:23, before Paul and Barnabas would appoint elders in the churches they founded, they first prayed with fasting so receive God's guidance.

## 2. TO SEEK GOD'S GUIDANCE

Fasting does not *ensure* the certainty of receiving clear guidance from God. Rightly practiced, however, it does make us more receptive to the One who loves to guide us.

### 3. TO EXPRESS GRIEF

Three of the first four references in the Bible to fasting connect it with an expression of grief. As mentioned in Judges 20:26,

### 3. TO EXPRESS GRIEF

the Israelites wept and fasted before the LORD not only to seek His guidance, but also to express their grief for the forty thousand brothers they had lost in battle.

### 3. TO EXPRESS GRIEF

When King Saul was killed by the Philistines, the men of Jabesh Gilead “fasted seven days” after their burial (1 Samuel 31:13) When David and his men heard the news, they took hold of their clothes and tore them.

### 3.TO EXPRESS GRIEF

They mourned and wept and fasted until evening for Saul and his son Jonathan, and for the army of the LORD and the house of Israel (2 Samuel 1:11-12)

### 3. TO EXPRESS GRIEF

We may also fast because of grief over our sins. Although it's not a spiritual self-flagellation, biblical confession does involve at least some degree of grief for the sin committed.



### 3. TO EXPRESS GRIEF

And inasmuch as fasting can be expression of grief, it can serve as a voluntary, heartfelt part of confession.

### 3. TO EXPRESS GRIEF

There have been a few occasions when I've grieved so deeply over my sin that words alone seemed powerless to say to God what I wanted.

### 3. TO EXPRESS GRIEF

And though it made me no more  
worthy of forgiveness, fasting  
communicated the grief and confession  
my words could not.

### 3. TO EXPRESS GRIEF

Fasting also can be a means of expressing grief for the sins of others, those you know or society in general. When a jealous King Saul was trying unjustly to kill David,

### 3. TO EXPRESS GRIEF

Jonathan did not eat for a day,  
“because he was grieved at his father’s  
shameful treatment of David.” 1  
Samuel 20:34

## 4. TO SEEK DELIVERANCE OR PROTECTION

One of the most common fasts in biblical times was a fast to seek salvation from enemies or circumstances.

## 4. TO SEEK DELIVERANCE OR PROTECTION

After being notified that a vast army was coming against him, King Jehoshaphat was afraid and proclaimed a fast for all Judah. People from all over Judah came together to seek help from the Lord.  
(2 Chron. 20:3-4)

## 4. TO SEEK DELIVERANCE OR PROTECTION

We've already read of the fast called by Ezra when he led a group of exiles back to Jerusalem. There we noticed that they fasted in order to strengthen their praying.



## 4. TO SEEK DELIVERANCE OR PROTECTION

But notice from the larger context of Ezra 8:21-23 that they prayed with fasting for God's protection: "I proclaimed a fast, so that we might humble ourselves before our God and ask him for a safe journey for us and our children, with all our possessions."

## 4. TO SEEK DELIVERANCE OR PROTECTION

The best known cooperative fast in the Scripture is the one in Esther 4:16. It was called by Queen Esther as part of her appeal to God for protection from the king's wrath.

## 4. TO SEEK DELIVERANCE OR PROTECTION

She planned to enter the court of King Xerxes uninvited to appeal to him for the protection of the Jews from mass extermination.

## 4. TO SEEK DELIVERANCE OR PROTECTION

When our church has a day of fasting to grieve for the sins of our country, we also include prayers asking the Lord to protect and deliver us from enemies that might result from our sins.

## 4. TO SEEK DELIVERANCE OR PROTECTION

We realize that He often disciplined Israel for her sins by allowing national enemies to gain advantage over her militarily or economically.

## 4. TO SEEK DELIVERANCE OR PROTECTION

Perhaps we don't think as often of the reality of national sin as we should, and how Christians will experience part of any national judgment that comes.

## 4. TO SEEK DELIVERANCE OR PROTECTION

*Even though we did not contribute directly to the national sin.*

## 4. TO SEEK DELIVERANCE OR PROTECTION

Fasting, rather than fleshly efforts, should be one of our first defenses against “persecution” from family, schoolmates, neighbors, or coworkers, neighbors, because of our faith.



## 4. TO SEEK DELIVERANCE OR PROTECTION

Typically, we're tempted to strike back with anger, verbal abuse, counter-accu-sations, or even legal action, instead of appealing to God with fasting for protection and deliverance.

## 5. TO EXPRESS REPENTANCE AND A RETURN TO GOD

This is similar to fasting to express grief for sin. *But as repentance is a change of mind resulting in a change of action, fasting can also signal a commitment to obedience and a new direction.*

## 5. TO EXPRESS REPENTANCE AND A RETURN TO GOD

The Israelites expressed repentance through fasting in 1 Samuel 7:6 when “they drew water and poured it out before the LORD. On that day they fasted and there they confessed, “We have sinned against the LORD.”

## 5. TO EXPRESS REPENTANCE AND A RETURN TO GOD

In Joel 2:12, the LORD specifically commanded His people to signify their repentance and their return to Him by fasting: “Even now.” declares the LORD,

*return to Me with all your heart, with  
fasting and weeping and mourning”*

## 5. TO EXPRESS REPENTANCE AND A RETURN TO GOD

Not only can fasting express repentance. As with all spiritual disciplines, **fasting can be little more than a "dead work"** if we have persistently hardened our hearts to God's call to deal with a specific sin in our lives.

## 5. TO EXPRESS REPENTANCE AND A RETURN TO GOD

We must never try to immerse ourselves in a spiritual discipline as an attempt to drown our God's voice about forsaking a sin.

It is a perversion of fasting to try to use it to balance a sinful part of life we want to continue feeding.

## 6. TO HUMBLE ONESELF BEFORE GOD

Fasting, when practiced in right motives, is a physical expression of humility before God, just as kneeling or prostrating yourself in prayer can reflect humility before Him.

## 6. TO HUMBLE ONESELF BEFORE GOD

One of the most wicked men in Jewish history, King Ahab, eventually humbled himself before God and demonstrated it by fasting:



## 6. TO HUMBLE ONESELF BEFORE GOD

When Ahab heard these words, he tore his clothes, put on his sackcloth and fasted. He lay in sackcloth and went around meekly.” *As a result, God resolved to delay His judgment.*  
(1 Kings 21:27-29)

## 6. TO HUMBLE ONESELF BEFORE GOD

One of Israel's godliest man humbled himself before the Lord in the same

way. King David wrote, *I put on*

*sackcloth and humbled myself with fasting.*"

*(Psalm 35:13)*

## 6. TO HUMBLE ONESELF BEFORE GOD

*Remember that fasting itself is  
not humility before God, but  
should be an expression  
of humility.*

## 6. TO HUMBLE ONESELF BEFORE GOD

There was no humility in the Pharisee of Luke 18:12, who bragged to God in prayer that he fasted twice a week.

## 7. TO EXPRESS CONCERN FOR THE WORK OF THE LORD

Just as a parent might fast and pray out of concern for the work of God in a child's life, so Christians may fast and pray because they feel a burden for the work of God in a broader scope.

## 7. TO EXPRESS CONCERN FOR THE WORK OF THE LORD

A Christians might feel compelled to fast and pray for the work of God in a place that has experienced tragedy, disappointment, or apparent defeat.

## 7. TO EXPRESS CONCERN FOR THE WORK OF THE LORD

This was the purpose return for Nehemiah's fast when he heard that despite the return of many Jewish exiles to Jerusalem, the city still had no wall to defend it.

## 7. TO EXPRESS CONCERN FOR THE WORK OF THE LORD

After his fast, Nehemiah then went to work to do something tangible and public to strengthen this work of God.



## 8. TO OVERCOME TEMPTATION AND DEDICATE YOURSELF TO GOD

Ask Christians to name a fast by a biblical character and most will probably think of the supernatural fast by Jesus prior to His temptation in Matthew 4:1-11. Verse two of that familiar passage tells us that Jesus fasted “forty days and forty nights.”

## 8. TO OVERCOME TEMPTATION AND DEDICATE YOURSELF TO GOD

In the spiritual strength of that prolonged fast He was prepared to overcome a direct onslaught of temptation from Satan, the strongest He would face until Gethsemane.

## 8. TO OVERCOME TEMPTATION AND DEDICATE YOURSELF TO GOD

It was also during that fast that He privately dedicated Himself to the Father for the public ministry He would begin soon thereafter.

## 8. TO OVERCOME TEMPTATION AND DEDICATE YOURSELF TO GOD

Nowhere in Scripture are we asked to fast for forty days and forty nights, or for any specific length of time. But that doesn't mean there is nothing from Jesus' unique experience for us to apply ourselves.

## 8. TO OVERCOME TEMPTATION AND DEDICATE YOURSELF TO GOD

One principle is this: **Fasting is a way of overcoming temptation**, or we anticipate grappling with it, when we need extra spiritual strength to overcome it.

## 8. TO OVERCOME TEMPTATION AND DEDICATE YOURSELF TO GOD

Perhaps we are travelling (or our spouse is travelling) and temptations for mental and sensual unfaithfulness abound.

## 8. TO OVERCOME TEMPTATION AND DEDICATE YOURSELF TO GOD

At the start of school or a new job or ministry there may be new temptations, or it may seem appropriate to dedicate ourselves anew to the Lord.

## 8. TO OVERCOME TEMPTATION AND DEDICATE YOURSELF TO GOD

Often we face decisions that place unusual temptations before us. Do we take a new job that will mean much more money but much less time with the family?



## 8. TO OVERCOME TEMPTATION AND DEDICATE YOURSELF TO GOD

In times of exceptional measures are required. *Fasting to overcome temptation and renew our dedication to God is a Christlike response.*

## 9. TO EXPRESS LOVE AND WORSHIP GOD

By now you may have associated fasting only with dire circumstances. But **the Bible also says that fasting maybe an act of sheer devotion to God.**

## 9. TO EXPRESS LOVE AND WORSHIP GOD

In Luke 2 there is an unforgettable woman whose entire eighty-four years are flashed before us in three verses. Her name is Anna.

## 9. TO EXPRESS LOVE AND WORSHIP GOD

The summary of her life is found in  
Luke 2:37 : “She never left the temple  
but worshipped night and day, fasting  
and praying.”

## 9. TO EXPRESS LOVE AND WORSHIP GOD

Although Anna's story is significant primarily in the context of Mary and Joseph presenting the newborn Jesus at the Temple, how she lived from day to day is what concerns us here.

## 9. TO EXPRESS LOVE AND WORSHIP GOD

Anna was married only seven years before being widowed. Assuming she married as a young lady, this godly woman devoted at least half a century, night and day, to a worship of God characterized by “fasting and prayer”

## 9. TO EXPRESS LOVE AND WORSHIP GOD

*Fasting can be an expression of  
finding your greatest pleasure  
and enjoyment in God.*

## 9. TO EXPRESS LOVE AND WORSHIP GOD

*Fasting honors God and is a  
means of worshipping  
Him as such.*



## 9. TO EXPRESS LOVE AND WORSHIP GOD

It means that your stomach isn't your  
god as it is with some.

"Their destiny is destruction,  
their god is their stomach, and  
their glory is their shame."

Phil. 3:19

## 9. TO EXPRESS LOVE AND WORSHIP GOD

Instead is a God's servant, and fasting proves it because you're willing to sublimate its desires to those of the Spirit.

## 9. TO EXPRESS LOVE AND WORSHIP GOD

Christians throughout history have fasted in preparation for the Lord's Supper. In addition to the elements of repentance and humility before God in this kind of fast, it is also **intended to help the person focus on adoring the One** who is represented in the Supper.

## 9. TO EXPRESS LOVE AND WORSHIP GOD

Another way of fasting to express love and worship to God is to spend a mealtime in praise and adoration. A variation is to delay eating a particular meal until you have had your daily time of Bible intake and prayer.

## 9. TO EXPRESS LOVE AND WORSHIP GOD

*Just remember that your fast is  
a privilege not an obligation.*

## 9. TO EXPRESS LOVE AND WORSHIP GOD

It is the acceptance of a divine invitation to experience His grace in a special way. If you can't fast with the faith that you will find more satisfaction and joy at that time than in delaying a meal, then freely eat in faith (Romans 14:22-23)

## 9. TO EXPRESS LOVE AND WORSHIP GOD

So whatever you believe about these things keep between yourself and God. Blessed is the man who does not condemn himself by what he approves.

## 9. TO EXPRESS LOVE AND WORSHIP GOD

But the man who has doubts is condemned if he eats, because his eating is not from faith; and everything that does not come from faith is sin.  
(Romans 14:22-23)



## 9. TO EXPRESS LOVE AND WORSHIP GOD

But may we yearn for days when God will cause us to crave the spiritual banquet of worship more than any smorgasbord.

## 9. TO EXPRESS LOVE AND WORSHIP GOD

*Before we fast we must have a God-centered purpose.* But even at our best we do not deserve what we deserve what we desire, nor can we force God's hand.

## 9. TO EXPRESS LOVE AND WORSHIP GOD

Having said that, however, let's balance that truth with the incontestable promise of Jesus in Matthew 6:17-18 that God will bless a biblical fast by any of His children.

## 9. TO EXPRESS LOVE AND WORSHIP GOD

Or whether or not you receive the blessing you hope for, one thing is sure: If you knew what God knew, you would give yourself the identical blessing that He does. And none of His rewards are worthless.

**READY, SET, BEGIN!**

Will you confess and  
repent any fear of  
fasting?

# READY, SET, BEGIN!

There is something about saying “I’m not going to eat today,” that causes anxiety in many Christians. Most believers would rather give an offering of money than give up food for a day.

Do  
you  
have  
a  
mild  
case  
of  
fasting-phobia?

It's silly when you put it in perspective. We willingly miss meals sometimes while shopping, working or playing. Whenever we believe another activity is more important, we will go without food fearlessly and without complaint. We need to learn more important, but much more rewarding to feast on God than on food (Matthew 4:4)



Will you fast as the Holy Spirit directs?  
Are you willing to obey when God  
prompts you to fast?

Because Jesus expected His followers  
to fast, I believe that from time to time  
His Spirit will direct you to fast.

One of the ways the Holy Spirit prompts us is through a need in our lives. If you need a stronger prayer about a matter, that's an invitation from the Lord to fast. If you need God's guidance, that's an encouragement to fast. If you need deliverance or protection, that's a time to fast.

How long you fast is up to you and the leadership of the Holy Spirit. Just like all the other spiritual disciplines, fasting is not a legalistic routine. The Bible describes fast lasted anywhere from part of a day to forty days.

Remember to get medical counsel where necessary. If you're planning an extended fast, or if you are expecting or nursing or diabetic or have a physical condition that depends on a regular diet,

talk to your doctor before starting your fast. And if you've never fasted before, start with a one-, two-, or at a most three-meal fast.

But start somewhere. Don't look for loopholes to avoid it. Look for ways to experience to experience God's grace through fasting.

Remember that God thought it was good enough to command every Israelite to fast for one whole day each year on the Day of Atonement, and that would have included people in all conditions and circumstances.

Like all the spiritual disciplines, fasting hoists the sails of the soul in hope of experiencing the gracious wind of God's Spirit. But fasting adds a unique dimension to your spiritual life and helps you grow in Christlikeness in ways that are unavailable through any other means.



Why not set a time of fasting soon that will symbolize your dedication to the Lord and your willingness to discipline yourself to fast in the future.

# THE ABUNDANCE OF FASTING

The bible distinguishes between several kinds of fasts. Although it doesn't use the labels we frequently use today, each of the following is described in Scripture:

# THE ABUNDANCE OF FASTING

1. A *normal fast* is abstaining from all food, but not from water. Furthermore, Luke 4:2 says that Jesus “ate nothing” during His forty-day fast, but it does not say He drank nothing. Since body can normally function no longer than three days without water, we assume that He drank water during this time.

# THE ABUNDANCE OF FASTING

2. A *partial fast* limits food but is not abstention from all food. For ten days Daniel and three other Jewish young men had “vegetables to eat and water to drink.” (Daniel 1:12.) Historically, Christians have observed partial fasts by eating much smaller portions of food than usual for a certain time and / or eating only a few simple foods.

# THE ABUNDANCE OF FASTING

3. An *absolute fast* as is the avoidance of all food and liquid. We're told that Ezra (Ezra 10:60 Esther (Est 4:16), and the Apostle Paul (Acts 9:9) abstained from all food and drink for a short period of time.

# THE ABUNDANCE OF FASTING

4. The Bible also describes a *supernatural fast* . When Moses wrote of his meeting with God on Mount Sinai, he said, “I stayed on the mountain forty days and forty nights; I ate no bread and drank no water” (Deut 9:9)

# THE ABUNDANCE OF FASTING

1 Kings 19:8 maybe saying that Elijah did the same when he went to the site of Moses' miraculous fast: "So he got up and ate and drank. Strengthened by that food, he travelled forty days and forty nights until he reached Horeb, the mountain of God."

# THE ABUNDANCE OF FASTING

These fast required God's supernatural intervention and are not repeatable apart from the Lord's specific calling and miraculous provision.



# THE ABUNDANCE OF FASTING

5. A *private fast* is what Jesus was speaking of in Matthew 6:16-18 when He says we should fast in a way not to be noticed by others.

# THE ABUNDANCE OF FASTING

6. *Congregational fast* are described in Joel 2:15-16: Blow a trumpet in Zion, declare a holy fast, call a sacred assembly. Gather the people, consecrate the assembly.” At least a part of congregation of the church at Antioch was fasting together in Acts 13:2, as evidenced by Luke’s words, “While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting.”

# THE ABUNDANCE OF FASTING

## 6. *National fasts.*

Here is the response of King Jehoshaphat to an invasion: “Alarmed, Jehoshaphat resolved to inquire of the Lord, and he proclaimed a fast for all Judah (2 Chronicles 20:3)

# THE ABUNDANCE OF FASTING

## 6. *National fasts.*

The Jews were called to a national fast in Nehemiah 9:1 and Esther 4:16, and the king of Nineveh proclaimed a fast in a response to the preaching of Jonah (Esther 3:5-8)

# THE ABUNDANCE OF FASTING

7. There was one *regular fast* that God commanded under the Old Covenant . Every Jew was to fast on the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16:29-31) While they were in Babylon, the leaders of the Jews instituted four other annual fasts (Zechariah 8:19)

# THE ABUNDANCE OF FASTING

7. There was one *regular fast* that God commanded under the Old Covenant . Every Jew was to fast on the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16:29-31) While they were in Babylon, the leaders of the Jews instituted four other annual fasts (Zechariah 8:19) – Don Whitney

In every scriptural account genuine fasting is linked with prayer. You can pray without fasting, but you can not fast biblically without prayer, corollary of deep spiritual struggle before God. It is never an isolated act or a ceremony or ritual that has some inherent efficacy or merit.

It has no value at all – in fact becomes a spiritual hindrance and a sin – when done for any reason apart from knowing and following the Lord's will. Fasting is also always linked with a pure heart and must be associated with obedient, godly living

– John MacArthur