

Should Christians Fast (or diet)?

1. There are three Greek words in the New Testament used for “FAST:”

A. NESTEIA (noun): “A fasting.” “Fast” is used —

(1) “of **voluntary abstinence from food**,” *Luke 2:37, Acts 14:23.*”

(2) “In *Acts 27:9*, ‘**The Fast**’ refers to the **Day of Atonement**, *Leviticus 16:29.*”

(3) “of **involuntary abstinence from food**, consequent upon trying circumstances, *II Corinthians 6:5; 11:27*)

B. NESTIS (verb): “**not eating**, fasting, is used of **lack of food**,” *Matthew 15:22, Mark 8:3.*

C. NESTEYO (verb): “to fast, to abstain from eating, is used of **voluntary fasting**,” *Matthew 4:2; 6:16,17,18; 9:14,15; Mark 2:18,19,20; Luke 5:33,34,35; 18:12; Acts 13:2,3; 14:23.*

3. Fasting was commanded once a year by God in *Leviticus 16 and 23:26-32*. This day was called “*The Day of Atonement*” in the Old Testament (*Leviticus 23:28*). “*The Fast*,” in the New Testament (*Acts 27:9*). And, today, the Jews called it “**Yom Kppur.**”

A. The Day of Atonement (or, “*The Fast*,” according to *Acts 27:9*) is explained in *Leviticus 16:3-10*:

(3) “*This is how Aaron (High Priest) is to enter the sanctuary area with a young bull for a sin offering and a ram (chosen from the “Israelite community” according to verse 5) for a burnt offering...(5) “From the Israelite community...two male goats for a sin offering.*

(6) *Aaron (High Priest) is to offer the bull for his own sin offering to make atonement for himself and his household. Then he is to take the two goats and present them before the Lord at the entrance to the Tent of Meetings. He is to cast lots for the two goats — one lot for the Lord and the other for the scapegoat. Aaron (High Priest) shall bring the goat whose lot falls to the Lord and sacrifice it for a sin offering. But the goat chosen by lot as the scapegoat shall be presented alive before the Lord to be used for making atonement by sending it into the desert as scapegoat.*

(20) *When Aaron (High Priest) has finished making atonement for the Most Holy Place, the Tent of Meeting and the Altar, he shall bring forward the live goat and confess over it all the wickedness and rebellion of the Israelites — all their sins — and put them on the goat’s head. He shall then send the goat away into the desert...(22) The goat will carry on itself all their sins...*

(29) *This is to be a lasting ordinance for you: On the tenth day of the seventh month (Jewish month, Tishri, or between our September and October),*

you must deny yourselves (fast, nesteia), and not do any work — whether native-born or an alien living among you — because on this day atonement will be made for you, to cleanse you. Then, before the Lord, you will be clean from all your sins. It is a sabbath of rest, and you must deny yourselves (fast, nesteia); it is a lasting ordinance.”

(1) *Leviticus 23:32* tells us they were to fast “from the evening of the ninth day of the month until the following evening.”

B. After the Babylonians wiped out Jerusalem, and the Temple, and took the Jews away into captivity (no more Israel), *Zechariah 7:4-6* says the **Jews started fasting on the fifth and seventh months of every year for 70 years before God sent Zechariah to them** to tell them He was going to bless them again. Zechariah then told them in *8:19*: “*The fasts of the fourth (Tammuz, between June and July), fifth (Av, between July and August), seventh (Day of Atonement, Tishri, between September and October) and tenth months (Tevet, between December and January) will become joyful and glad occasions and happy festivals for Judah.*”

(1) Why did God let them fast for 70 years before He sent Zechariah to answer their prayers and forgive them? God asked them in *Zechariah 7:5*: “*When you fasted and mourned in the fifth and seventh months for the past seventy years, was it really for Me that you fasted?*”

(2) **Jesus accused the Jews of the same thing in *Matthew 6:16-18***: “*When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces (with soot or charcoal) to show men they are fasting. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you fast (if you choose), put oil on your head (speaking of proper grooming) and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to men that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.*”

4. The most famous three fasting in the Bible were done by Moses (*Exodus 34:28*), Elijah (*I Kings 19:8*), and Jesus (*Luke 4:2*), who all fasted for 40 days. Moses represented the Law or the Pentateuch or The Torah (first five books of the Old Testament), Elijah represented the Prophets (the rest of the Old Testament), and Jesus represented what was soon to become The New Testament. The Jews were therefore divided on who’s rules they should follow.

A. *Matthew 17:1-8* tells us that Jesus took Peter, James and John to a high mountain and “*transfigured*” (changed to his heavenly body) before them. When he did this, **Moses (representing the Old Law), and Elijah (representing the Prophets) appeared talking with Jesus.** Peter wanted to build three sanctuaries for the three of them, but God spoke saying: “*This is my Son, whom I love; with Him I am well-pleased. Listen to Him.*” When they heard this, they all fell to the ground, and when they looked up, they saw **no one but Jesus.**”

(1) The Old Testament disappeared (Moses and Elijah), and only the New Testament (Jesus Christ) was left standing.

(2) **Galatians 3:10-25:** “All who rely on observing the Law are under a curse...(11) Clearly no one is justified before God by the Law...(13) **Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law by becoming a curse for us (like the “scapegoat”)**...(24) **The Law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith (in Christ). Now that faith has come, we are no longer under the supervision of the Law.”** Now we follow the law of Jesus Christ, which is **The New Testament!**

5. So, did Jesus command that His disciples (Christians) should fast?

A. According to Matthew 18:12, the Pharisees fasted “twice a week” (usually on Mondays and Thursdays from sunrise to sunset).

B. But, according to Mark 2:18-20: “Now John’s disciples and the Pharisees were fasting. Some people came and asked Jesus, ‘How is it that John’s disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees are fasting, but yours are not?’

Jesus answered, ‘How can the guests of the bridegroom fast while he is with them? They cannot, so long as they have him with them. But the time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them (He would be crucified), and on that day they will fast.’”

(1) **The ritual of fasting twice a week (Matthew 18:12), was not a commandment from God, it was a tradition started by the Pharisees.**

Matthew 6:16-18 quotes Jesus as condemning the way they fasted, and told people that if they were going to **fast** (and even John the Baptist’s disciples were fasting), make sure it is just between you and God, and for the right reasons (remember **Zechariah 7:5?**).

(2) **But, it is also a fact (as you just read) that neither Jesus nor His disciples fasted twice a week (showing it was not a commandment from God).**

C. Jesus had fasted earlier at the beginning of His Ministry (Luke 4:1,2) for 40 days before He started His ministry; and, His disciples fasted later (as Jesus predicted). So, after Christ’s Church was started, are we now to start fasting again?

6. Later, after the Church was started, fasting was used in The New Testament only for the ordination of Evangelists (Preachers) and Elders.

A. Acts 13:2,3: “While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, ‘Set apart (ordain) for me Barnabas and Saul (Paul) for the work which I have called them’ (Evangelist or Preacher). So after they had **fasted** and prayed, they placed their hands on them (ordained) and sent them off.”

B. Acts 14:23: “Paul and Barnabas appointed **Elders** for them in each church, and with prayer and **fasting**, committed them (ordained) to the Lord in whom they had put their trust.”

7. But, what about fasting just certain food or drink?

A. The Old Testament had the Nazirite Vow in Numbers 6:2-6: “...a special vow, of separation to the Lord as a Nazirite, **he must abstain from wine and other fermented drink and must not drink vinegar made from wine or other fermented drink. He must not drink grape juice or eat grapes or raisins...he must not eat anything that comes from the grapevine, not even the seeds or skins.** During the entire period of his vow of separation no razor may be used on his head...he must let the hair of his head grow long...he must not go near a dead body.”

B. The Israelites, since the days of Moses, were commanded by God not to eat (or fast) certain foods in Leviticus 3-42: “**You may eat any animal that has a split hoof completely divided and that chews the cud** (like cows and sheep). **There are some that only chew the cud or only have a split hoof, but you must not eat them.** The camel...the coney (badger)...the rabbit...the pig.

(9) Of all the **creatures living in the water** of the seas and the streams, **you may eat any that have fins and scales.** But all creatures in the seas or streams that do not have fins and scales (like catfish)...you are to detest...(12)Anything living in the water that does not have fins and scales is to be detestable to you.

(13) These are the **birds** you are to detest and **not eat**...the eagle, the vulture, the black vulture, the red kite, any kind of black kite, any kind of raven, the horned owl, the screech owl, the cormorant, the great owl, the white owl, the desert owl, the osprey, the stork, any kind of heron, the hoopoe and the bat.

(20) All **flying insects that walk on all fours** are to be detestable to you. There are, however, **some winged creatures that walk on all fours that you may eat:** those that have jointed legs for hopping on the ground. Of these you may eat any kind of locust, katydid, cricket or grasshopper. But all other winged creatures that have four legs you are to detest.

(29) Of the **animals that move about on the ground, these are unclean for you:** the weasel, the rat, any kind of great lizard, the gecko, the monitor lizard, the wall lizard, the skink and the chameleon.

(42) You are **not to eat any creature that moves about on the ground**, whether it moves on its belly (like snakes) or walks on all fours (like crocodiles), or on many feet (like centipedes); it is detestable.”

(1) **Leviticus 17:13-15 adds:** “Any Israelite or any alien living among you who hunts any animal or bird that may be eaten must drain out the blood...**you must not eat the blood of any creature**...anyone...who eats anything found dead or torn by wild animals...will be unclean till evening.”

C. According to **Daniel 1**, Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego refused to eat the meat, or drink the fermented wine from the King's table. They said they only would eat vegetables, and drink water. Were they vegetarians? Or, did the table of the heathen King Nebuchadnezzar include booze and "unclean" foods (like pork), and meat with blood in it (which was the common practice in Babylon)?

D. It is important to note that in the New Testament, Mark 7:14-19 quotes Jesus as saying: *"Listen to Me, everyone, and understand this. Nothing outside a man can make him 'unclean' by going into him. Rather, it is what comes out of a man that makes him 'unclean.'*

After He had left the crowd and entered the house, His disciples asked about this...(18)'Are you so dull?' He asked. 'Don't you see that nothing that enters a man from the outside can make him 'unclean'? For it doesn't go into his heart but into his stomach, and then out of his body.' In saying this, Jesus declared all foods 'clean.'"

E. Even after Jesus died, rose again, and sent the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost to start His Church (Acts 2), He still had to remind Peter again of this new command about fasting certain foods ("unclean" animals).

Acts 10:1-15: After an angel told a God-fearing Gentile to send some men to get Peter to come and tell him (and his household) about Christ Jesus, Peter also had a vision: *"He saw Heaven opened and something like a large sheet being let down to earth by its four corners. It contained all kinds of four-footed animals, as well as reptiles of the earth and birds of the air. Then a voice told him, 'Get up, Peter. Kill and eat.'*

'Surely not, Lord!' Peter replied. *'I have never eaten anything impure or unclean (Leviticus 11).'*

The voice spoke to him a second time, 'Do not call anything impure that God has made clean (Mark 7:19).'"

(1) Jesus was commanding Peter to take Christianity to the Gentiles. Up until now, Peter had ignored this command, and still refused to eat (fasted) unclean animals (**Mark 7:19**); and he had also refused Christ's command in **Matthew 28:19,20**, to take Christianity to the Gentiles (whom he also still looked upon as "unclean"). But, up to this point, Peter and the first 3,000 Jewish Christians who formed Christ's first Church, were refusing to do both.

F. Paul also wrote to Timothy about Jesus' change to the Old Testament command about fasting certain unclean animals in I Timothy 4:3-6: *"They (Jewish leaders) ...order them to abstain (fast) from certain foods (Leviticus 11), which God created to be received with thanksgiving to those who believe and who know the Truth. For everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, because it is consecrated by the Word of God and prayer.*

If you point these things out to the brothers, you will be a good Minister of Christ Jesus, brought up with the Truths of the faith and good teaching that you have followed."

8. Remember, although from Adam to Noah everyone was a vegetarian (fasting meat); after the flood, according to *Genesis 9:2,3*, God gave animals to people for food:

“The fear and dread of you (Noah and family) will fall upon all the beasts of the earth and all the birds of the air, upon every creature that moves along the ground, and upon all the fish of the sea; they are given into your hands. Everything that lives and moves will be food for you. Just as I (God) gave you the green plants (and all men were vegetarians), I now give you everything.”

A. People started out with Adam as vegetarians (fasting meat); then, after the flood, they were allowed to eat any animal (meat) for food. Later, in the time of Moses, God made His people (Israelites) fast certain “unclean” animals (*Leviticus 11*); but, in the time of Jesus, God allowed people to go back to eating anything (*Mark 7:19*) — NO FASTING (WHETHER OF ALL OR CERTAIN FOODS) REQUIRED.

9. So, does the New Testament command Christians to fast (either from all, or at least certain foods)? Aren't some foods and drinks bad for you? Shouldn't Christians eat and drink healthy? Some foods and drinks are even dangerous for certain people (alcoholics, diabetics, obesity, combined with certain medications, etc.)!

A. Paul answers these questions in *Romans 14:1-6*: “Accept him whose faith is weak, without passing judgment on disputable matters. One man's faith allows him to eat everything, but another man, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables (vegetarian). The man who eats everything must not look down on him who does not, and the man who does not eat everything must not condemn the man who does, for God has accepted him.”

(6) He who eats meat, eats to the Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and he who abstains, does so to the Lord and gives thanks to God.”

(10) You, then, why do you judge your brother? Or why do you look down on your brother? For we will all stand before God's judgment seat...(12) So then, each of us will give an account of himself to God.”

*(13) Therefore, let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in your brother's way. As one who is in the Lord Jesus (Christian), I am fully convinced that no food is unclean in itself (*Mark 7:14-19*). But if anyone regards something as unclean, then for him it is unclean. If your brother is distressed because of what you eat, you are no longer acting in love. Do not by your eating destroy your brother for whom Christ died. Do not allow what you consider good to be spoke of as evil. For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking...”*

*(19) Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification. Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food. All food is clean (as Jesus declared in *Mark 7:18,19*), but it is wrong for a man to eat anything that causes someone else to stumble. It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or to do anything else that will cause your brother to fall.*

(22) 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. 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.”

(1) **Verses 1-12** tell us not to pass judgment on disputable matters (which foods and drinks are right or wrong for Christians)

(2) **Verse 14** tells us: If you think it’s wrong to eat or drink it, then for **you** it is wrong (but not necessarily for everyone else!)

(3) **Verse 16** tells us not to allow what we think is alright to eat or drink to be spoken of as evil (so you don’t always eat or drink what you think is alright in front of some people).

(4) **Verse 19** tells us eat and drink what will lead to peace and mutual edification (not what will cause a controversy)

(5) **Verse 21** tells us not to eat or drink anything that will cause your brother (fellow Christian) to stumble (do something that may harm them or their Christian faith). For example: Maybe they see you drinking, and so then they think it is alright for Christians to drink, and they end up as an alcoholic.

(6) **Verse 22** tells us that whatever you believe about what you can eat or drink — keep between yourself and God. What may be alright for you to eat or drink, may not be alright for someone else.

(7) **Verse 22** also tells us not to condemn ourselves by not setting ourselves up as the Judge, and approving certain foods and drinks as alright for all Christians.

(8) **Verse 23** tells us not to eat or drink anything that we have doubts about. If you’re not sure it’s alright for you to eat or drink it — DON’T!

B. So, before you eat or drink it, ask yourself these questions:

(1) Is there any food that I am eating or drinking that is bad for me, or that I am addicted to?

*I Corinthians 6:12: “Everything is permissible for me (“all food is clean” according to Jesus in **Mark 7:18,19**; and Paul, in **Romans 14:20**), but **not everything is beneficial**. ‘Everything is permissible for me’ but **I will not be mastered by anything**. ‘Food for the stomach and the stomach for food’ — but God will destroy them both...”*

(2) Does my stomach tell me what to feed it?

Philippians 3:19: “Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is on earthly things.”

(3) If I eat or drink this, will it desecrate the Temple of the God?

I Corinthians 3:16,17: “Don’t you know that you yourselves are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit lives in you? If anyone destroys God’s temple (your body), God will destroy him; for God’s temple is sacred, and you are that temple.”

(4) If another young or immature Christian sees me eating or drinking this, will I damage my witness and reputation as a Christian?

*I Corinthians 8:9-13: “Be careful, however, that the exercise of your freedom (to eat or drink anything) does not become a stumbling block to the weak (immature or young Christians). For if anyone with a weak conscience sees you who have this knowledge (that I can eat or drink what I want) eating in an idol’s temple (like a bar, or party), won’t he be emboldened to eat what has been sacrificed to idols? So this weak brother, for whom Christ died, is destroyed by your knowledge. When you sin against your brothers in this way and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ. **Therefore, if what I eat causes my brother (fellow Christian) to fall into sin, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause him to fall.**”*

(a) In Corinth, they had all the workers gather in their heathen temple, to eat a free meal together. Before the meal, an animal (or animals) was sacrificed to their particular pagan god. Afterwards, the sacrificed animal was served as the main course. Obviously, when one of these people became a Christian, they would be very upset to see one of their Christian brothers still taking part in such a meal. It would be for them, like it would be for us today, to see a brother in Christ go back into a strip club to eat, and take part in a dinner that was blessed in the name of Satan.

(5) If a child see me eating or drinking this, could it cause that child to later sin? *Luke 17:1,2: “Jesus said to His disciples: ‘Things that cause people to sin are bound to come, but woe to that person through whom they come. It would be better for him to be thrown into the sea with a millstone tied around his neck than for him to cause one of these little ones to sin.’”*

(6) But how do I always know if I’m going to cause someone to stumble by eating or drinking something?

I Corinthians 10:27-33: “If some unbeliever invites you to a meal and you want to go, eat whatever is put before you without raising questions of conscience. But if anyone says to you, ‘This has been offered in sacrifice’ (meaning they know that this food or drink is traditionally wrong for a Christian to eat), then do not eat it, both for the sake of the man who told you and for conscience’ sake — the other man’s conscience, I mean, not yours. For why should my freedom be judged by another’s conscience? If I take part in a meal with thankfulness, why am I denounced because of something I thank God for (not the pagan god, that it may have been offered to)?

So, whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of

God. Do not cause anyone to stumble, whether Jews, Greeks or the church of God — even as I try to please everybody in every way. For I am not seeking my own good but the good of many, so that they may be saved.”

C. II Corinthians 6:3: *“We put no stumbling block in anyone’s path, so that our ministry will not be discredited.”*

10. So, if you decide to fast (either all food, or certain foods), for whatever reason, make sure it’s just between you and God, making no judgments on those who choose not to fast. Remember Jesus’ words in Matthew 6:16-18: *“When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting (or even dieting?). I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to men that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.”*