

THE DISCIPLINE OF FASTING

“Some have exalted religious fasting beyond all Scripture and reason; and others have utterly disregarded it.”

– John Wesley

In a culture where the landscape is dotted with shrines to the Golden Arches and an assortment of Pizza Temples, fasting seems out of place, out of step with the times. In fact; fasting has been in general disrepute both in and outside the Church for many years. For example, in my research I could not find a single book published on the subject of Christian fasting from 1861 to 1954, a period of nearly one hundred years. More recently a renewed interest in fasting has developed, but we have far to go to recover a biblical balance.

What would account for this almost total disregard of a subject so frequently mentioned in Scripture and so ardently practiced by Christians through the centuries? Two things. First, fasting has developed a bad reputation as a result of the excessive ascetic practices of the Middle Ages.

Second, the constant propaganda fed us today convinces us that if we do not have three large meals each day, with several snacks in between, we are on the verge of starvation. This, coupled with the popular belief that it is a positive virtue to satisfy every human appetite, has made fasting seem obsolete. Anyone who seriously attempts to fast is bombarded with objections. “I understand that fasting is injurious to your health.”

“It will sap your strength so you can’t work.”
“Won’t it destroy healthy body tissue?” All of this, of

course, is utter nonsense based upon prejudice. While the human body can survive only a short time without air or water, it can go for many days before starvation begins. It is not an exaggeration to say that, when done correctly, fasting can have beneficial physical effects.

Fasting in the Scriptures

Scripture has so much to say about fasting that we would do well to look once again at this ancient Discipline. The list of biblical personages who fasted reads like a “Who’s Who” of Scripture: Moses the lawgiver, David the king, Elijah the prophet, Esther the queen, Daniel the seer, Anna the prophetess, Paul the apostle, Jesus Christ the incarnate Son.

Throughout Scripture fasting refers to abstaining from food for spiritual purposes. It stands in distinction to the hunger strike, the purpose of which is to gain political power or attract attention to a good cause. It is also distinct from health dieting which stresses abstinence from food for physical, not spiritual, purposes. That is not to say that these forms of “fasting” are wrong necessarily, but their objective is different from the fasting described in Scripture. Biblical fasting always centers on spiritual purposes.

In Scripture the normal means of fasting involves abstaining from all food, solid or liquid, but not from water. In the forty-day fast of Jesus, we are told that “he ate nothing” and that toward the end of the fast “he was hungry” and Satan tempted him to eat, indicating that the abstaining was from food but not from water (Luke 4:2). From a physical standpoint, this is what is usually involved in a fast.

Sometimes what could be considered a partial fast is described; that is, there is a restriction of diet but not total abstention. Although the normal fast seemed to be the custom of the prophet Daniel, there was a three-week period in which he declares, “*I ate no delicacies, no meat or wine entered my mouth, nor did I anoint myself at all*” (Dan. 10:3).

We are not told the reason for this departure from his normal practice of fasting; perhaps his governmental tasks precluded it.

In most cases fasting is a private matter between the individual and God. There are, however, occasional times of corporate or public fasts. The only annual public fast required in the Mosaic law was on the day of atonement (Lev. 23:27). It was to be the day in the Jewish calendar when the people were to be in sorrow and affliction as atonement for their sins. (Gradually, other fast days were added until today there are over twenty!) Also, fasts were called in times of group or national emergency: *“Blow the trumpet in Zion; sanctify a fast; call a solemn assembly; gather the people”* (Joel 2:15). When Judah was invaded, King Jehoshaphat called the nation to fast (2 Chron. 20:1-4).

Regular or weekly fasting has had such a profound effect in the lives of some that they have sought to find a biblical command for it so that it may be urged upon all Christians. The search is in vain. There simply are no biblical laws that command regular fasting. Our freedom in the gospel, however, does not mean license; it means opportunity. Since there are no laws to bind us, we are free to fast on any day. Freedom for the apostle Paul meant that he was engaged in *“fastings often”* (2 Cor. 11:27, KJV). We should always bear in mind the apostolic counsel, *“Do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh”* (Gal. 5:13).

Although many passages of Scripture deal with this subject, two stand out in importance. The first is Jesus’ startling teaching about fasting in the Sermon on the Mount. Two factors bear directly on the issue at hand. His teaching on fasting is directly in the context of his teaching on giving and praying. It is as if there is an almost unconscious assumption that giving, praying, and fasting are all part of Christian devotion. We have no more reason to exclude fasting from the teaching than we do giving or praying. Second, Jesus states, *“When you fast...”* (Matt. 6:16).

He seems to make the assumption that people will fast, and is giving instruction on how to do it properly.

The second crucial statement of Jesus about fasting comes in response to a question by the disciples of John the Baptist. Perplexed over the fact that both they and the Pharisees fasted but Jesus' disciples did not, they asked "Why?" Jesus replied, "Can the wedding guests mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them? The days will come, when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast" (Matt. 9:15). That is perhaps the most important statement in the New Testament on whether or not Christians should fast today.

In the coming of Jesus, a new day had dawned. The kingdom of God had come among them in present power. The Bride groom was in their midst; it was a time for feasting, not fasting. There would, however, come a time for his disciples to fast although not in the legalism of the old order. The most natural interpretation of the days when Jesus' disciples will fast is the present Church age, especially in light of its intricate connection with Jesus' statement on the new wine-skins of the kingdom of God which follows immediately (Matt. 9:16, 17). Jesus made it clear that he expected his disciples to fast after he was gone.

The Purpose of Fasting

It is sobering to realize that the very first statement Jesus made about fasting dealt with the question of motive (Matt. 6:16-18). To use good things to our own ends is always the sign of false religion. How easy it is to take something like fasting and try to use it to get God to do what we want. At times there is such stress upon the blessings and benefits of fasting that we would be tempted to believe that with a little fast we could have the world, including God, eating out of our hands.

Fasting must forever center on God. It must be God-initiated and God-ordained. Like the prophetess Anna, we need to be "worshipping with fasting" (Luke 2:37). Every other purpose

must be subservient to God. Like that apostolic band at Antioch, “fasting” and “worshiping the Lord” must be said in the same breath (Acts 13:2). God questioned the people in Zechariah’s day, “When ye fasted . . . did ye at all fast unto me, even to me?” (Zech. 7:5, kjv). If our fasting is not unto God, we have failed.

Once the primary purpose of fasting is firmly fixed in our hearts, we are at liberty to understand that there are also secondary purposes in fasting. More than any other Discipline, fasting reveals the things that control us. This is a wonderful benefit to the true disciple who longs to be transformed into the image of Jesus Christ. We cover up what is inside us with food and other good things, but in fasting these things surface. If pride controls us, it will be revealed almost immediately. David writes, “I humbled my soul with fasting” (Ps. 69:10).

Fasting reminds us that we are sustained “by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God” (Matt. 4:4). Food does not sustain us; God sustains us. In Christ, “All things hold together” (Col. 1:17). Therefore, in experiences of fasting we are not so much abstaining from food as we are feasting on the word of God. Fasting is feasting! When the disciples brought lunch to Jesus, assuming that he would be starving, he declared, “I have food to eat of which you do not know. . . . My food is to do the will of him who sent me, and to accomplish his work” (John 4:32, 34). This was not a clever metaphor, but a genuine reality. Jesus was, in fact, being nourished and sustained by the power of God.

Fasting helps us keep our balance in life. How easily we begin to allow nonessentials to take precedence in our lives. How quickly we crave things we do not need until we are enslaved by them. Paul writes, “All things are lawful for me, but I will not be enslaved by anything” (1 Cor. 6:12). Our human cravings and desires are like rivers that tend to overflow their banks; fasting helps keep them in their proper channels. “I pommel my body and subdue it,” says Paul (1 Cor. 9:27). Like wise, David writes,

“I afflicted myself with fasting” (Ps. 35:13). This is not excessive asceticism; it is discipline and discipline brings freedom.

The Practice of Fasting

As with all the Disciplines, a progression should be observed; it is wise to learn to walk well before we try to run. Begin with a partial fast of twenty-four hours’ duration; many have found lunch to lunch to be the best time. This means that you would not eat two meals. Fresh fruit juices are excellent to drink during the fast. Attempt this once a week for several weeks. In the beginning you will be fascinated with the physical aspects of your experience, but the most important thing to monitor is the inner attitude of the heart. Outwardly you will be performing the regular duties of your day, but inwardly you will be in prayer and adoration, song, and worship. In a new way, cause every task of the day to be a sacred ministry to the Lord. How ever mundane your duties, for you they are a sacrament. Cultivate a “gentle receptiveness to divine breathings.” Break your fast with a light meal of fresh fruits and vegetables and a good deal of inner rejoicing.

After two or three weeks you are prepared to attempt a normal fast of twenty-four hours. Drink only water but use healthy amounts of it. You will probably feel some hunger pangs or discomfort before the time is up. That is not real hunger; your stomach has been trained through years of conditioning to give signals of hunger at certain hours. In many ways the stomach is like a spoiled child, and a spoiled child does not need indulgence, but needs discipline. Martin Luther says “...the flesh was wont to grumble dreadfully.” You must not give in to this “grumbling.” Ignore the signals, or even tell your “spoiled child” to calm down, and in a brief time the hunger pangs will pass. If not, sip another glass of water and the stomach will be satisfied. You are to be the master of your stomach, not its slave. If family obligations permit it, devote the time you would normally use eating to meditation and prayer.

It should go without saying that you should follow Jesus' counsel to refrain from calling attention to what you are doing. The only ones who should know you are fasting are those who have to know. If you call attention to your fasting, people will be impressed and, as Jesus said, that will be your reward. You, however, are fasting for far greater and deeper rewards. The following was written by an individual who, as an experiment, had committed himself to fast once a week for two years. Notice the progression from the superficial aspects of fasting to ward the deeper rewards.

“1. I felt it a great accomplishment to go a whole day without food. Congratulated myself on the fact that I found it so easy.

2. Began to see that the above was hardly the goal of fasting. Was helped in this by beginning to feel hunger.

3. Began to relate the food fast to other areas of my life where I was more compulsive.... I did not have to have a seat on the bus to be contented, or to be cool in the summer and warm when it was cold.

4. Reflected more on Christ's suffering and the suffering of those who are hungry and have hungry babies.

5. Six months after beginning the fast discipline, I began to see why a two-year period has been suggested. The experience changes along the way. Hunger on fast days became acute, and the temptation to eat stronger. For the first time I was using the day to find God's will for my life. Began to think about what it meant to surrender one's life.

6. I now know that prayer and fasting must be intricately bound together. There is no other way, and yet that way is not yet combined in me.”

After having achieved several fasts with a degree of spiritual success, move on to a thirty-six-hour fast: three meals. With that accomplished, it is time to seek the Lord as to whether

he wants you to go on a longer fast. Three to seven days is a good time period and will probably have a substantial impact on the course of your life.

It should be obvious to all that there are some people who for physical reasons should not fast: diabetics, expectant mothers, heart patients, and others. If you have any question about your fitness to fast, seek medical advice.

Although the physical aspects of fasting intrigue us, we must never forget that the major work of scriptural fasting is in the realm of the spirit. What goes on spiritually is much more important than what is happening bodily. You will be engaging in spiritual warfare that will necessitate using all the weapons of Ephesians 6. One of the most critical periods spiritually is at the end of the fast when we have a natural tendency to relax. But I do not want to leave the impression that all fasting is a heavy spiritual struggle—I have not found it so. It is also “...righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Rom. 14:17).

Fasting can bring breakthroughs in the spiritual realm that will never happen in any other way. It is a means of God’s grace and blessing that should not be neglected any longer.

Excerpts from Richard J. Foster, Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth, Chapter 4. HarperCollins, 1978, 2003.