

The Discipline of Fasting (Celebration of Discipline by Richard Foster)

WHAT HAS HAPPENED TO FASTING?

Two things:

- ❖ Fasting has developed a bad reputation as a result of the excessive ascetic practices of the middle ages. Fasting was subjected to the most rigid regulations and practised extreme self-mortification and flagellation.
- ❖ 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.

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 seer, Anna the prophetess, Paul the apostle, Jesus Christ the incarnate son. Great Christians throughout history fasted and witnessed to its value. Among them were: Martin Luther, John Calvin, John Knox, John Wesley, Jonathan Edwards, David Brainerd, Charles Finney and Pastor Hsi of China. All the major religions of the world recognize the merits of fasting. Zoroaster, Confucius and the Yogis of India practiced fasting. Plato, Socrates and Aristotle fasted and even Hippocrates practiced fasting. We should pause long enough to be willing to re-evaluate the popular assumptions of our day concerning the Discipline of fasting.

Fasting in the Bible

Throughout scripture fasting refers to abstaining from food for spiritual purposes. Biblical fasting always centres on spiritual purposes. In scripture the normal means of fasting involves abstaining from all food, solid or liquid, but not from water, this would be considered a **Normal Fast**. Jesus 40 day fast Luke 4:2.

Sometimes what could be considered a **Partial Fast** is described, i.e. there is a restriction of diet but not total abstention. Daniel 10:3

There are numerous examples in scripture of what has been called an **Absolute Fast**, i.e. abstaining from both food and water. Esther instructed Mordecai to gather the Jews and hold a fast on her behalf. (Esther 4:16) Paul engaged in a three day absolute fast following his encounter with the living Christ. (Acts 9:9) Moses and Elijah engaged in what must be considered supernatural absolute fasts for forty days (Deut. 9:9, 1 Kings 19:8). The absolute fast is an exception and should never be engaged in unless one has a very clear command from God, and then for no more than three days.

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 public fast in the Mosaic law was on the day of atonement (Lev. 23-27) Fasts were also called in times of group or national emergencies (Joel 2:15) (2 Chron. 20:1-4) (Ezra 8:21-23)

The **Group Fast** can be a wonderful and powerful experience provided there are prepared people who are of one mind in these matters. When a sufficient number of people rightly understand what is involved, national calls to prayer and fasting can also have beneficial results.

There simply are no biblical laws that command regular fasting. Our freedom in the gospel, however, does not mean licence, it means opportunity. Freedom for the apostle Paul meant that he was engaged in “fastings often” (2 Cor. 11:27)

We should always bear in mind the apostolic counsel, “Do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh (Gal. 5:13)

Paul’s warning should always be kept before us for, in any discussion of the Disciplines, we will discover many things that have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting rigour of devotion and self-abasement and severity to the body, but they are of no value in checking the indulgence of the flesh (Col. 2:23)

Is fasting a Commandment?

Two things stand out in scripture:

- ❖ Jesus' startling teaching about fasting in the Sermon on the Mount 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. Martin Luther said, “It was not Christ’s intention to reject or despise fasting it was His intention to restore proper fasting.

We need to realise that these words of Jesus do not constitute a command.

- ❖ Jesus' second statement about fasting comes in response to a question by the disciples of John the Baptist. They wanted to know why both they and the Pharisees fasted but Jesus' disciples did not. “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.

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 wineskins of the kingdom of God which follows immediately (Matt. 9:16, 17)

“Then they will fast” refers to the church now.

There is no way to escape the force of Jesus' words in this passage. He made it clear that he expected his disciples to fast after he was gone. It is clear from this passage that Christ both upheld the Discipline of fasting and anticipated that his followers would do it.

For the person longing for a more intimate walk with God, these statements of Jesus are drawing words.

Where are the people today who will respond to the call of Christ? Have we become so accustomed to “cheap grace” that we instinctively shy away from more demanding calls to obedience? “Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross” Why has the giving of money, for example been unquestionably recognised as an element in Christian devotion and fasting so disputed? Certainly we have as much, if not more, evidence from the Bible for fasting as we have for giving. Perhaps in our affluent society fasting involves a far larger sacrifice than giving of money.

The Purpose of Fasting

It is sobering to realise that the very first statement Jesus made about fasting dealt with the question of motive (Matt. 6:16-18). How easy it is to take something like fasting and try to use it to get God to do what we want. There is often such stress upon the blessings and benefits of fasting at times 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 centre on God. It must be God-initiated and God-ordained. Our fasting must be unto God. John Wesley declares “First, let it (fasting) be done unto the Lord with our eye singly fixed on Him. Let our intention herein be this, and this alone, to glorify our Father which is in heaven...”

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.

- ❖ Fasting reveals the thing that controls us.
- ❖ Fasting reminds us that we are sustained by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God. (Matt. 4:4)
- ❖ Fasting helps us keep our balance in life. How easily we begin to allow nonessentials to take precedence in our lives.

Increased effectiveness in intercessory prayer, guidance in decision, increased concentration, deliverance for those in bondage, physical well-being, revelation, and so on. In this, as in all matters, we can expect God to reward those who diligently seek him.

The Practice of Fasting

Those who desire to fast need to acquaint themselves with this basic information.

Starting from scratch: -

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. The most important thing to monitor is the inner attitude of the heart. 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. However mundane your duties, for you they are a sacrament. Cultivate a gentle receptiveness of divine breathings. Break your fast with a light meal of fresh fruit 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. Many feel distilled/spring water is best. If the taste of water bothers you, add one teaspoon of lemon juice. You will probably feel some hunger pangs or discomfort before the time is up. Martin Luther says, "... the flesh was wont to grumble dreadfully. You must not give in to grumbling. Ignore the signals, or even tell your spoiled child (your stomach) 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.

If you call attention to your fasting, people will be impressed and, as Jesus said, that will be your reward.

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.

The body's physical reactions during fasting: -

The first three days are usually the most difficult in terms of physical discomfort and hunger pains. The body is beginning to rid itself of the toxins that have built up over years of poor eating habits, and it is not a comfortable process. This is the reason for the **coating on the tongue** and **bad breath**. Do not be disturbed by these symptoms, rather be grateful for the increased health and well being that will result. You may **experience headaches** during this time, especially if you are an avid coffee or tea drinker. Those are mild withdrawal symptoms that will pass though they may be very unpleasant for a time. By the fourth day the hunger pains are beginning to subside though you will have **feelings of weakness** and **occasional dizziness**. The dizziness is only temporary and caused by sudden changes in position. Move more slowly and you will have no difficulty. The weakness can come to the point where the simplest task takes great effort. **Rest is the best remedy.** Many find this the most difficult period of the fast. By the sixth or seventh day you will begin to feel stronger and more alert. Hunger pains will continue to diminish until by the ninth or tenth day they are only a minor irritation. The body will have eliminated the bulk of toxins and you will feel good. Your sense of **concentration will be sharpened** and you will feel as if you could continue fasting indefinitely. Physically this is the most enjoyable part of the fast. Anywhere between twenty-one and forty days or longer, depending on the individual, hunger pains will return. This is the first stage of starvation and the pains signal that the body has used up its reserves and is beginning to draw on the living tissue. The fast should be broken at this time.

During fasting you will **feel the cold more**, simply because the body metabolism is not producing the usual amount of heat. If care is observed to keep warm, this is no difficulty.

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 questions about your fitness to fast, seek medical advice.

Before commencing an extended fast, some are tempted to eat a good deal to stock up. Slightly lighter than normal meals are best for the day or two before the fast. You should also abstain from tea or coffee three days before beginning a longer fast. If the last meal in the stomach is fresh fruits and vegetables, you should have no difficulty with constipation.

An extended fast should be broken with fruit or vegetable juice, with small amounts taken at first. Remember that the stomach has shrunk considerably and the entire digestive system has gone into a kind of hibernation. By the second day you should be able to eat fruit and then milk or yoghurt. Next you can eat fresh salads and cooked vegetables. Avoid all salad dressing, grease, and starch. **Extreme care should be taken not to overeat.**

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. 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.

Not all fasting is a heavy spiritual struggle. It is also righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit (Rom. 14:17)

Fasting can bring breakthrough 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.

Wesley declares, “it was not merely by the light of reason that people of God have been in all ages, directed to use fasting as a means: . . . but they have been . . . taught it of God Himself, by clean and open revelations of His will. . . . Now, whatever reasons there were to quicken those of old, in the zealous and constant discharge of this duty, they are of equal force still to quicken us.”

Now is the time for all who hear the voice of Christ to obey it.

For Study

The central ideal in fasting is the voluntary denial of an otherwise normal function for the sake of intense spiritual activity. There is nothing wrong with these normal functions in life; it is simply that there are times when we set them aside in order to concentrate. When we view fasting from this perspective we can see its reasonableness as well as its broader dimensions. The Bible deals with fasting in regard to food, but allow me to take the central principle and apply it to other aspects of contemporary culture.

First there is a need today to learn to fast from people. Second, let's learn times to fast from the media. Third, I would suggest times of fasting from the telephone. Fourth I would like to suggest the Discipline of fasting from billboards. Fifthly, we discover times to fast from our gluttonous consumer culture that we find so comfortable. For our souls sake, we need times when we go among Christ's favourites – the broken, the bruised, and the dispossessed - not to preach to them but to learn from them.

Fasting is a Spiritual Discipline ordained by God for the good of the Christian fellowship. May God find within us hearts that are open to appropriate this means of His grace.

Daily Scripture Readings

Sunday	The example of Christ. Luke 4:1-13
Monday	God's chosen fast. Isaiah 58:1-7
Tuesday	A partial fast. Daniel 10:1-14
Wednesday	A normal fast. Nehemiah 1:4-11
Thursday	An absolute fast. Esther 4:12-17
Friday	The inauguration of the Gentile mission. Acts 13:1-3
Saturday	The appointment of elders in the Churches. Acts 14:19-23

Study Questions

1. Check your first reaction to the thought of fasting?

- _____ UGH
- _____ HMMM
- _____ WOW!
- _____ OK
- _____ FREEDOM
- _____ YOU MUST BE JOKING

2. How does Christian fasting differ from the hunger strike and health fasting?
3. Define "a normal fast", "a partial fast", and an "absolute fast".
4. What is the primary purpose of fasting?
5. How can fasting show what controls your life?
6. What is the most difficult thing about fasting for you?
7. Fast for two meals (twenty-four hours) and give the time saved to God. Record anything you learn from the experience.
8. Try fasting from the media for one week and see what you learn about yourself.
9. Discuss the question of whether fasting is only a cultural expression of Christian faith or whether it is for all cultures at all times.
10. In his day John Wesley required that every minister ordained in the Methodist Church regularly fast two days a week. Discuss the implications in our day.