

Fasting

from

Spiritual Disciplines Handbook

by

Adele Ahlberg Calhoun

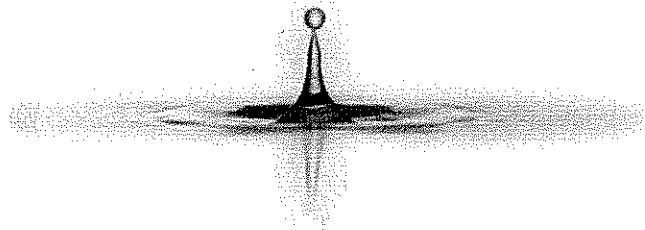


Thoughts on Fasting

by

Steve Froehlich

FASTING



FASTING HAS BEEN PART AND PARCEL OF THE Judeo-Christian tradition for millennia. Scripture is replete with examples of people who fast for a variety of reasons.

Old Testament saints fasted at times of mourning and national repentance. They fasted when they needed strength or mercy to persevere and when they wanted a word from God (see 1 Samuel 7:6; Nehemiah 1:4; Esther 4:16). However, fasting was no magical guarantee that God would answer as the intercessor wanted. King David fasted when he wanted God to spare the life of Bathsheba's child, but the child died (2 Samuel 12:16-20).

Fasting was a normal practice for the Jews of Jesus day. Jesus began his ministry with a forty-day fast. He also practiced fasting before healings and to overcome temptation. But he did not hold his followers to a strict regime of fasting (Matthew 4:2; Mark 2:18-19; Luke 5:33).

The New Testament church sometimes fasted when it sought God's will and needed the grace and strength to remain faithful to God's work. There were also fast times linked to times of worship (Acts 13:2-3).

In many Christian traditions fasting is an important part of preparing to embrace a particular liturgical season. During Lent, fasting reminds the church of how Jesus gave up everything—even his life—for us.

Scripture also gives a variety of warnings about fasting for the wrong reasons or with the wrong attitude: (1) When people do not live as God desires they should be prepared for fasting to accomplish nothing (Isaiah 58:3-7). (2) Fasting is not for appearances. It does not make anyone pious or holy, and it does not earn points with God (Matthew 6:16; Luke 18:9-14).

Fasting is not a magical way to manipulate God into doing our will; it's not a way to get God to be an accomplice to our plans. Neither is fasting a spiritual way to lose weight or control others. Fasting clears us out and opens us up to intentionally seeking God's will and grace in a way that goes beyond normal habits of worship and prayer. While fasting, we are one on one with God, offering him the time and attentiveness we might otherwise be giving to eating, shopping or watching television.

Fasting is an opportunity to lay down an appetite—an appetite for food, for media, for shopping. This act of self-denial may not seem huge—it’s just a meal or a trip to the mall—but it brings us face to face with the hunger at the core of our being. Fasting exposes how we try to keep empty hunger at bay and gain a sense of well-being by devouring creature comforts. Through self-denial we begin to recognize what controls us. Our small denials of the self show us just how little taste we actually have for sacrifice or time with God.

This truth is not meant to discourage us. It’s simply the first step in realizing that we have to lay down our life in order to find it again in God. Brian Taylor puts it like this in *Becoming Christ*: “Self-denial is profoundly contemplative for it works by the process of human subtraction and divine addition.” Deny yourself a meal, and when your stomach growls “I’m hungry,” take a moment to turn from your emptiness to the nourishment of “every word that comes from the mouth of God” (Matthew 4:4). Feed on Jesus, the bread of life. Skip the radio or TV for a day and become aware of how fidgety you are when you aren’t being amused or diverted. Then dodge the remote, and embrace Jesus and his words “my food . . . is to do the will of him who sent me” (John 4:34). Taste the difference between what truly nourishes the soul—the living bread and the life-giving water—and what is simply junk food.

Fasting reminds us that we care about “soul” things. We care about the church. We care about the world. We care about doing God’s will. Thus we willingly set aside a little comfort so we can listen and attend to the voice and nourishment of God alone. For God can give us grace and comfort and nurture we cannot get on our own.

Guidelines for Fasting from Food

- Don’t fast when you are sick, traveling, pregnant or nursing. People with diabetes, gout, liver disease, kidney disease, ulcers, hypoglycemia, cancer and blood diseases should not fast.
- Don’t fast if you are in a hurry and are fasting for immediate results regarding some decision. Fasting is not magic.
- Listen for a nudging from God to fast.
- Stay hydrated. Always drink plenty of water and fluids.
- If you are new to fasting, begin by fasting for one meal. Spend the time with God that you would normally be eating.
- Work up to longer fasts. Don’t attempt prolonged fasts without guidance. Check with your doctor before attempting long periods of fasting.
- If you decide to fast regularly, give your body time to adjust to new rhythms of eating. You may feel more tired on days you fast. Adjust your responsibilities appropriately. (Expect your tongue to feel coated, and expect to have bad breath.)
- Begin a fast after supper. Fast until supper the next day. This way you miss two, rather than three, meals.
- Don’t break your fast with a huge meal. Eat small portions of food. The longer the fast, the more you need to break the fast gently.

What to Do in the Time Set Apart for Fasting

- Bring your Bible and a glass of water during your fast.
- Relax and breathe deeply. Place yourself in the presence of God. Offer yourself and your time to God by repeating Samuel's words "Speak Lord, your servant is listening." Or simply say, "Here I am."
- Spend some time worshiping God for his faithfulness. Thank him for where he has come through for you. Psalm 103:1-5 also provides a starting point for praise.
- Bring your desires to God. Ask him if this desire is in line with his will and his word for you and the church. Be still and listen. Offer your desires and prayers to God.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. When you feel empty or restless, what do you do to try to fill the emptiness?

What does this tell you about your heart?

2. What is your attitude toward fasting or self-denial?

3. In what ways do you currently deny yourself?

4. When has self-denial brought you something good?

5. What has the experience of fasting been like for you?

6. Where do you operate from an entitlement mentality?

How can you wean yourself from this way of life?

SPIRITUAL EXERCISES

1. To deepen your understanding of how Jesus denied himself and embraced suffering and death for you, practice some sort of fasting during Lent. • When the fasting is difficult, share your thoughts and feelings with Jesus. What does Jesus say to you? • Tell Jesus what it means to you to share and fellowship with him in his sufferings.

2. Fast one meal a week. Spend your mealtime in prayer. When you feel hungry, sit with Jesus in the wilderness and feed on the bread of heaven. • Talk to Jesus about what his self-denial means to you.

3. For a period of one week, fast from media, sports, shopping, reading or use of the computer. Dedicate the time you now have to God. What feelings arise in you? What thoughts interrupt your prayer?

5. During Lent, particularly focus on Jesus and his temptation in the wilderness. Enter the story in your imagination. What do you and Jesus talk about? How are you tempted to indulge yourself? • How does it help you to talk to Jesus about this?

6. Make two lists: one of needs, the other of wants. Ask God to show you where to fast from some of your wants. Offer to God the time you spend hankering after your wants.

7. Abstain from purchasing morning coffee or daily sodas or evening videos. Offer the money or time to God.

8. When facing a trial, decide on a fast that gives you time to seek God's strength in your journey.

"Practices are the nuclear reactors of the Christian faith, arenas where the gospel and human life come together in energizing, even explosive ways. Practices create openings in our lives where the grace, mercy and presence of God may be made known to us."—Craig Dykstra

FASTING

DESIRE	to let go of an appetite in order to seek God on matters of deep concern for other, myself and the world
DEFINITION	A fast is the self-denial of normal necessities in order to intentionally attend to God in prayer. Bringing attachments and cravings to the surface opens a place for prayer. This physical awareness of emptiness is the reminder to turn to Jesus who alone can satisfy.
SCRIPTURE	<p>"When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting. . . . 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." (Matthew 6:16-18)</p> <p>"Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry, and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter?" (Isaiah 58:6-7)</p>
PRACTICE INCLUDES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • abstaining from food, drink, shopping, desserts, chocolate and so on to intentionally be with God • abstaining from media: TV, radio, music, e-mail, cell phones, and computer games to allow space for listening to the voice of Jesus • abstaining from habits or comforts: elevators, reading and sports in order to give God undivided attention • observing fast days and seasons of the church year • addressing excessive attachments or appetites and the entitlements behind them, and partnering with God for changed habits • repenting and waiting on God • seeking strength to persevere, obey and serve • overcoming addictions, compulsions, whims and cravings
GOD-GIVEN FRUIT	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • keeping company with Jesus in relinquishment • praying for needs in the body of Christ • identifying and fellowshiping with Jesus by choosing to follow his sacrificial example • freeing up more time for prayer • repenting of self-indulgent, addictive or compulsive behaviors • letting these small deprivations remind you of Jesus' great sacrifice on your behalf • seeking strength from God for obedient love and service

THOUGHTS ON FASTING

Ash Wednesday, the first day of the Lenten Season, and the Wednesday before Thanksgiving week are the two days each year we as a church family fast together. For many of us, fasting is an unfamiliar practice, and it may seem odd or foreign. In fasting we participate with God's people in an ancient act of worship, a spiritual discipline, a practical tool for daily living.

How do we fast?

The way in which we fast is not the most important part of what we do – typically most of us will set aside food, but that is only the most common form which fasting takes. Fasting begins by recognizing that God has filled our lives with good things, and the first action of fasting is gratitude to God for his lovingkindness. There is hardly anything more delightful to us or necessary for us than food, so it is understandable why food has often been linked to the spiritual discipline of fasting. However, some of us for reasons of age, health, or life circumstance may need to fast something other than food. You may find it meaningful to fast books, computers, music, or even conversation.

Fasting is temporary – when we lay aside good things, we do so for the moment or for a season. During the season of fasting, we experience heightened anticipation for the breaking of the fast, and that is part of the experiential value of fasting. Fasting assumes a positive view of Creation – when we lay aside good things, we do not repudiate material things as evil or bad. We do not say that the ascetic life of self-denial inherently takes us closer to God or makes us more like Christ. God has called us to live in the world, not withdraw from it. But, the world does take its toll on us.

Why do we fast?

In our walk of faith and in the exercise of spiritual disciplines, fasting often accompanies prayer. When we fast, we confess that we need to focus more of our lives on prayer and on communion with God. Fasting may have benefits for our physical health, but that is not our primary motivation for doing it. We are concerned about our spiritual health, and in fasting we confess that we depend too much on those things that we control, or (worse yet) on those things that control us. In fasting we repent of our lack of faith in God's faithful provision and in the way we have allowed the good things of this life to become idols which have stolen away our love for Jesus and for others. We repent of our indifference to those around us who suffer, perhaps because they lack the good things we take for granted.

Jesus fasted, so we know that fasting does not make us more godly people since Jesus had no spiritual deficiency. But, even though perfect in character, Jesus joins us in practicing dependence on our Heavenly Father. He also joins us in the suffering of the world. We have a deep need to have our senses sharpened to attend to those things that matter most. We must be ready to admit that our hearts too easily and too often are dulled by the cares of this life. Fasting is a way of exposing and focusing our desires. To a significant degree, fasting is about desire and the deep longing of our hearts. Because we are laying aside and letting go of something we desire and value greatly, fasting is an act of sacrifice accompanied by a measure of pain – it is a gift of love that costs us something, and there is no way engage in sacrificial love without it hurting even just a little.

John Eldridge writes in “The Journey of Desire”: “Christianity has nothing to say to the person who is completely happy with the way things are. Its message is for those who hunger and thirst -- for those who desire life as it was meant to be.”

Eldridge continues by quoting Augustine: “The whole life of the good Christian is a holy longing. What you desire ardently, as yet you do not see.... By withholding the vision, God extends the longing. Through longing he extends the soul; by extending the soul he makes room in it. So, let us long because we are to be filled.... That is our life, to be exercised by longing.”

CS Lewis adds his voice to the theme of desire: “The greatest enemy of holiness is not passion; it is apathy.... To live with desire is to choose vulnerability over self-protection; to admit our desire and seek help beyond ourselves is more vulnerable. It is an act of trust. In other words, those who know their desire and refuse to kill it, or refuse to act as though they don't need help, they are the ones who live by faith.... The deepest moral issue is always what we, in the heart of hearts, believe about God. And nothing reveals this belief as clearly as what we do with our desire.... We see the enemy's ploy: drain all the life and beauty and adventure away from the gospel, bury Christians in duty, and nobody will want to take a closer look. It's so very unappealing.”

In writing on delight and desire, John Piper also points us to Augustine: “Augustine's doctrine of delight in God is the root of all Christian living. He brings it to bear on the most practical affairs of life and shows that every moment in every circumstance we stand on the brink between the lure of idolatry and the delight of seeing and knowing God. Instead of minimizing the greatness and the beauty of the world, Augustine admired it and made it a means of longing for the city of God of which this is all a shadow.”

As you fast, keep in mind these things as your senses are sharpened by your hunger.

* Does my hunger for that physical thing I am missing help me cultivate a greater hunger for Christ? What does my hunger reveal about what I love the most?

* Am I more aware of how the cares of life choke my heart and rob me of true joy in life? Does the laying aside of a good thing deepen my gratitude for all the good gifts of God that surround me every day?

* Does my brief experience with hunger more deeply unite my heart with the poor and the oppressed and move me to acts of mercy and justice?

* Does my hunger awaken in me a greater awareness of my total dependence on the love and mercy of God?

* Can I delight in the anticipation – I look forward to the breaking of the fast, and I wait patiently for God to keep all his promises in Christ and make all things new and right in this broken world.

As you meet with God, may your heart be tuned to his, may he be pleased to answer your prayers, may he be pleased to deliver you from the chokehold of earthly cares, may he strengthen your love for one another, and may he give you great joy and delight in himself and in his many good gifts.

Yours for New Life,

Steve