

The Discipline of Fasting
– Richard Foster, in *Celebration of Discipline*

“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. 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.

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, David, Elijah, Esther, Daniel, Anna, Paul, Jesus Christ. ... Fasting, of course, is not an exclusively Christian Discipline; all the major religions of the world recognize its merit. Zoroaster practiced fasting as did Confucius and the Yogis of India. (Our brothers and sisters in Islam practice fasting during the month of Ramadan; Jews fast on the Day of Atonement.)

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...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. Sometimes what could be considered a partial fast is described; that is, there is a restriction of diet but not total abstention. There are also several examples in Scripture of what has been called an ‘absolute fast,’ or abstaining from both food and water (Esther, Paul, Moses, and Elijah). It must be underscored that the absolute fast is the exception.

In most cases fasting is a private matter between the individual and God. There are, however, occasional times of corporate or public fasts. The group fast can be a wonderful and powerful experience provided there is a 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.

It is sobering to realize that the very first statement Jesus made about fasting dealt with the question of motive (Matt. 6:16-18). ... Fasting must forever center on God. 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. ... We cover up what is inside us with food and other good things, but in fasting these things surface. ... Fasting reminds us that we are sustained ‘by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God’. Food does not sustain us, God sustains us. Therefore, in experiences of fasting we are not so much abstaining from food as we are feasting on the word of God.

The Practice of Fasting

As with all the Disciplines, a progression should be observed. ...

- ❖ 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. ...
- ❖ 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.
- ❖ 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.

From a website about fasting:

In spite of the absolute safety and benefits of fasting, there are certain persons who should NEVER fast without professional supervision. For example:

- Persons who are physically too thin or emaciated
- Persons who are prone to anorexia, bulimia, or other behavioral disorders
- Those who suffer weakness or anemia
- Persons who have tumors, bleeding ulcers, cancer, blood diseases, or who have heart disease
- Those who suffer chronic problems with kidneys, liver, lungs, heart, or other important organs
- Individuals who take insulin for diabetes, or suffer any other blood sugar problem such as hyperglycemia
- Women who are pregnant or nursing

If you plan on fasting for several days, you will find it helpful to begin by eating smaller meals before you abstain altogether. Resist the urge to have that "last big feast" before the fast. Cutting down on your meals a few days before you begin the fast will signal your mind, stomach, and appetite that less food is acceptable.

Some health professionals suggest eating only raw foods for two days before starting a fast. I also recommend weaning yourself off caffeine and sugar products to ease your initial hunger or discomfort at the early stages of your fast.