



Message by

Richard Foster

"Fasting - 20th Century style"

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Biography

Richard Foster is Professor of Theology and writer-in-residence at Friends University in Wichita, Kansas. He is best known for his books *Celebration of Discipline* and his new book *Money, Sex and Power*. He received his doctorate at Fuller Seminary and had been a pastor in the Quaker Church until he became a professor of Theology at Friends University. He also runs a Christian Writers Workshop. [Biographical information is correct as of the broadcast date noted above.]

"Fasting - 20th Century style"

The disciplined person is the person who can do what needs to be done when it needs to be done. Now I can take a basketball and I can get it into a basketball hoop - eventually. But I cannot take a basketball and get it into the basketball hoop when it **needs** to be gotten into the hoop. You see I am not a disciplined basketball player. But this ability to have the power to do what needs to be done when it needs to be done is so crucial in all of life, but it is never more central than in the life of the spirit because it is this life that impregnates and infiltrates and dominates absolutely everything that we do.

Now, I'm going to speak this evening on the subject, **Fasting - 20th Century Style**, but we must never turn this into another soul-killing law because there is a time to feast and there is a time to fast. It is the disciplined person who can feast when feasting is called for and fast when fasting is called for. In fact, the glutton and the extreme ascetic have precisely the same problem - they cannot do what needs to be done when it needs to be done.

Our experience is to be much more like that of Jean-Pierre de Caussade when he wrote, "The soul - light as a feather, fluid as water, innocent as a child - responds to the initiative of Divine Grace like a floating balloon."

In a world dominated by Pizza Temples and Shrines to Golden Arches fasting seems out of step with the times - out of place. In fact, fasting has been in general disrepute with the church for some time. In my research, as far as I know there was not a single full-length book on the subject of fasting from 1861 to 1954 - a period of almost 100 years. Now, what would account for such an almost total disregard of a discipline so frequently mentioned in scripture and so ardently practiced by Christians throughout the centuries?

Two things at least. First, there has been a reaction - and rightly so - to the excessive ascetic practices of the Middle Ages. But second, there has developed a prevailing philosophy which literally dominates American culture - including American religious culture - that it is a positive virtue to satisfy literally every human passion. We've turned it into a theology today with verses of scripture to buttress such a teaching, and whole churches have been built around the little tin gods of Affluence and Good Feelings. And if fasting is used at all today it is usually either to lose weight or for political pressure. That is, its purpose is either vanity or manipulation. And so fasting as a Christian spiritual discipline has had rough sledding in our day.

But if we would be willing to stop long enough to take another look at the Biblical tradition about fasting it would bring us up short. The list of Biblical fast-ers runs like a "Who's Who" of Scripture: Abraham's servant when he was seeking a bride for Isaac, Moses on Mt. Sinai, Hannah when she was praying for a child, David on several occasions, Elijah after his victory over Jezebel, Ezra when he was mourning over Israel's faithlessness, Nehemiah when he was preparing the trip back to Israel, Esther when God's people were threatened with extermination, Daniel on numerous occasions, the people of Nineveh - including the cattle (involuntarily no doubt), Jesus when he began his public ministry, Paul at the point of his conversion, the Christians at Antioch when they sent off Paul and Barnabas on their mission endeavor, Paul and others when they appointed all of the elders, and on and on it goes.

Not only that, but many of the great Christians throughout church history have fasted: Martin Luther and John Calvin, John Knox and John Wesley, Jonathan Edwards, David Brainerd, Mary Slessor, Charles Finney and many, many others. Of course fasting has not been confined to the Christian Faith. Zoroaster fasted as did Confucius and the Yogis of India. Socrates, Aristotle, Plato - they all fasted. Now the fact that these people, both in and out of Scripture, fasted does not make it right or even a good thing to do, but it ought to stop us long enough to take another look.

Now if we really expect to fast we ought to know what the basic notion is in the first place. The central idea of fasting is **the voluntary denial of an otherwise normal function for the sake of intense spiritual activity**. Now when we look at it from that perspective we can understand both the reasonableness of fasting as well as the broader dimensions to it. Contrary to what many of you have been thinking, I don't want at this time to speak specifically about fasting from food, which is the normal way that Scripture speaks about fasting - though not the exclusive way. What I would like us to do is to take a careful look at contemporary culture and see how fasting can speak to those issues.

First, I think there is a great need today for us to learn times when we can **Fast from People**. You see, we have a tendency to devour people, and we usually get severe heartburn from it! Now, when I suggest that we fast from people it is not because we are anti-social, or because we don't like people, but precisely because we love people intensely, and when we are with them we want to be a blessing and not a distraction. Thomas Merton observed, "It is in deep solitude that I find the gentleness with which I can truly love others. The more solitary I am the more affection I have for them; it is pure affection and filled with reverence for the solitude of others. Solitude and silence teach me to love others for who they are, not for what they say."

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote a very important little book entitled **Life Together**, and very perceptively he entitled one chapter "The Day Together" and the next chapter "The Day Alone." You see, he understood it so clearly. Until we have learned to be with people, being alone will be a dangerous thing, because it will cut us off from hurting, bleeding humanity. But until we have learned to be alone we cannot be with people in a way that will help them, because we will be constantly bringing to that relationship our own much-ness, our own many-ness. We will be so distracted that we won't even be able to hear their own experience in life because we'll be so full of our own agenda. Have you taken a day just to be alone, to hear God's voice and his wondrous, terrible, loving, all-embracing silence? What could be more re-creating, what could be more invigorating?

Now I know what you are thinking, "I don't have time. Besides I don't need it." Elijah needed it, David needed it. Peter needed it, Mary needed it. Paul needed it. Jesus Christ himself needed it. Who do we think we are - God Almighty? And if we need it, we'll find the time.

Second, I'd like to suggest that we need to find times when we can **Fast from the Media**. It is amazing to me how people seem to be incapable or at least unwilling to go through an entire day focusing on a single thing. Everything seems to interrupt our sense of concentration - television, magazines, the newspapers, radio - I mean, no wonder we feel like such fractured and fragmented people.

You know, we need the experience of listening to God. We send our youngsters off to camp or we go off to some family camp experience and we come back and we say, "God spoke to me!" Then we get back into the press of daily experience and God stops speaking - right? Oh, no - we stop listening! You see, what happened at camp is so incredibly simple. All we do is to get rid of enough distractions for a long enough period of time in order to listen. It's as simple as that. I always thought it was my great preaching!

You see, we don't need camp to do that. In the course of daily life we can take up little disciplines in which we can learn to focus our attention upon God -to hear his voice, to obey his word.

Third, let me suggest that we have times when we **Fast from the Telephone** -got you didn't I? You see, the telephone is a wonderful instrument if it doesn't control us. Why I have known people who have stopped praying in order to answer the telephone! I mean, can you think of anything more absurd than that? We had a big denominational executive in our home some time back and we had a meal together and afterwards were sharing back and forth and the telephone ran. I said, "Let it ring. If it's important they'll call back." He looked at me and he looked at that telephone and he looked back at me and he said, "I have never done this in my entire life." And then he turned to the telephone and - I'm not making this up - he stuck his tongue out at it!

In our home when I am reading stories to the boys or when we are eating a meal together we do not answer the telephone and the reason is very simple. I want those boys to know that they are more important than anything that can be on that machine. Now, I know you can't believe this, but people have lived for hundreds of years without that machine. You just let it ring sometimes, just as an experiment, and monitor your own feelings - "I'll miss the chance of a lifetime!" Believe me. If it's important, they will call back.

Fourth, will you consider times when you will **Fast from Conversation**? Some people just foam at the mouth constantly. The discipline of silence is one of the most needed disciplines today. Professors and pastors and politicians - those who make a living by being good with words - so desperately need this discipline of a spiritual life. You know, one of the reasons we find it so difficult to remain silent is because it makes us feel so helpless. We are so accustomed to relying upon words to control and manage people. If we are silent, who will take control? Well, God will take control. But we will not let him take control unless we trust him. There is an intimate connection between silence and trust. Remember Isaiah 30:15? "**In quietness and confidence shall be your strength.**"

The tongue is our most powerful weapon of manipulation. A constant stream of words flows from us because we are in this constant process of adjusting our public image. I mean, if I've done some wrong thing or even some good thing that I think you might not understand and I find out that you know about it, I'm going to be very tempted to speak up and try to straighten you out on that matter so that you understand that I'm okay. Let's just face it - I'm not okay and you're not okay, but that's okay because we live under grace, don't we? You see, silence is one of the deepest disciplines of the spiritual life simply because it puts the stopper on all of that self-justification.

James tells us that the tongue is a fire, and it is indeed. May I urge all of us that our words be full and few. Bonhoeffer said that when the tongue is under our authority much that is unnecessary remains unsaid, but the essential and the helpful thing can be said in a few words.

Then I'd like to urge us to have times of **Fasting from the Billboards**. I still remember the day I was on the Los Angeles freeway system when all of a sudden I realized that my mind had been dominated by the billboards for a solid hour. I mean, when you think of it, the notion that you are in good hands with Allstate is a first-class heresy! The idea that Pepsi is the real thing or Coke adds life is pornography of the first magnitude - that is it is a complete distortion of what is actually the case.

Now, when I suggest that we have time when we fast from the billboards I do not mean that we refrain

from looking at the billboards, but that the billboard be a signal to us of another reality. When the adman shouts out to us his four letter obscenities, "More, more, more," maybe that can trigger into our minds another four letter word, a rich, full-bodied word, "less, less, less." When we are bombarded with bigger-than-life pictures of foxy ladies and well-fed babies maybe that can trigger into our minds another world, a world in which 460 million people are the victims of acute hunger - 10,000 of them will be dead before you or I go to sleep tonight - a world in which a million hogs in Indiana have superior housing to a billion people on this planet.

That leads me to my sixth and final suggestion which is that we find times when we can **Fast from our Gluttonous Consumer Culture** which we find so comfortable. For our soul's sake we need times when we can be among Christ's favorites - the broken, the bruised, the dispossessed - not to preach to them but to learn from them.

Like Kagawa we need to go in Franciscan-like poverty to the slums of our cities to hear the whimpering, moaning songs from the slums. We need to step into the hovel of Sebastian and Maria Namenciento. We need to force ourselves to look around and see the three-year-old twins lying naked and unmoving on the small cot - they will soon die, the victims of malnutrition. And like me, you want to turn away and forget this world, but we need to stay there and see the little two-year-old whose brain is already vegetating from marasmus - a severe form of mal-nutrition. Maria, the mother, tries to speak to us but words do not come. Tears do come, the tears of a brokenhearted mother. I say that for the sake of our sanity, for the sake of our balance, we need times when we can be among those who, in the words of Mahatma Gandhi, live an eternal, compulsory fast.

The central idea in fasting is the voluntary denial of an otherwise normal function for the sake of intense spiritual activity. Remember, it is the disciplined person who can do what needs to be done when it needs to be done.

Interview with Richard Foster

Interviewed by Dave Hardin

Dave Hardin: Now let's talk with tonight's speaker, Richard Foster. Richard, this incredibly successful book you wrote, *Celebration of Discipline*, sold in just extraordinary numbers. Why did you write it?

RICHARD FOSTER: Well, it really came out of desperation. Let me give you the background just a little. I was pastoring a little church that would rank as a marginal failure on the Ecclesiastical scoreboards, but we had this influx of people who were desperately needy. I guess when they had a sense that the church was open to them, in they came from prison and people whose lives were terribly broken and battered. I gave them everything I'd learned in Graduate School for about three months and it didn't do any good. And I realized that they needed something more.

They really needed power in the best sense of that word and that led me to begin to study some of the older writers who, I sensed, knew something about God in a way that I hadn't seen, and I began to teach on that and we began to experiment, during that period, with all of the disciplines mentioned in *Celebration*.

And God began to do some wonderful things to us. We saw some of these very deep needs healed and people really began to be healed up. We began to worship God in a new way; we saw that God wanted to take the hearts back of his people. We began to pray for people in a way that they could really be healed. Now not always - we had a lot of tough situations - they didn't always work, but out of all of that wonderful experience that God was doing - and difficult experience really - these ideas began to emerge.

And then some years later when I had a little more freedom in terms of time I was able to put this down because there was a thought from some that it might be helpful to others. So that's how it came about.

D.H.: I'm surprised that it sold so well with the word "Discipline" in it. Because, you know, I think of Boot Camp or Basic Training or something, and discipline is not exactly a popular word.

R.F.: Isn't that amazing! What we have failed to see today is that discipline means freedom. You see, you heard these singers tonight - wasn't that beautiful; the pianist playing - now that is in their hands; that is in their vocal chords; that is in who they are because they have disciplined themselves, they're free. Now, if you got me down at that piano it would be a disaster because I'm not disciplined at that point. Discipline is freedom and liberation.

D.H.: I know you're teaching right now, but are you working on a book? What are you working on?

R.F.: Right now, it's very important for me to be silent and God has told me very clearly that I'm not to do those kinds of things and that's alright. There's plenty of other things to be about. And it's an important time for our family just to be together and God is teaching me about prayer, about ministry to people. And, you see, when you write a book, at least for me, you must focus on that and you must focus on that with a kind of intensity that keeps you from doing many other things. Well now is a chapter of my life where I want to be with people. We want to learn together, grow together - other experiences that God wants to give us. So, I'm not writing any books right now and I'm sure many people are very thankful.

D.H.: You're the first member of the Friends Church, the Quaker Church, we've had the privilege of having for awhile. And one of the things that intrigues me is it's not really a preaching ministry - Quaker meetings do not have a preacher lead the message. What does a Quaker pastor do?

R.F.: Well, there's plenty to do and there are many programmed Quaker Churches. I was in one of those and certainly did do my share of preaching, although, there was a strong emphasis on the priesthood of all believers, so that there were others who were engaged. In fact, in this little church I was telling you about - and we were doing some teaching on the spiritual disciplines - there was another man there who was just a member of the fellowship who taught me. He was my spiritual mentor in these things. I used to tell people that when I spoke people would come, but when Dallas spoke they'd bring their tape recorders.

But there's plenty of other things to do, isn't there? In terms of evangelism, in terms of ministry to people, in terms of prayer for people. There's a lot to be done and we need all the people we can get in every area of the ministry.

D.H.: You've created this Christian Writers Workshop at Friends University. Now, what kind of goals do you have for that? What would you like to see accomplished?

R.F.: Well, the essential idea of the Center for Christian Writers is to catch a new vision, to bring a renaissance of great writing among Christians. And we want to impact the world, nationally at the bare minimum, and hopefully to the entire English-speaking world. We do several things. We bring Fellows of the Center right there on the campus so that we can create a milieu - a context - by which great writing can be done. We have a novelist, we have a Fellow whose expertise is in Old Testament, we have someone in English Literature, and we have somebody in Education. We have about six Fellows of the Center.

Then we meet annually with a larger group of nationally known writers. We just finished, recently, a meeting of editors from around the country and I think it's going to become an annual gathering. And so our desire is to lift the level of writing done by Christians and to impact the culture at large. You see, there was a day when Christians were the leading framers of intellectual thought. I mean, a poet like John Milton, an essayist like Charles Williams, a novelist like Dostoevsky. You see, these were great thinkers

and we want to see that happen again and that's our dream for the Center for Christian Writers.

D.H.: And is it going alright? I mean, do you...

R.F.: Oh yes. We're having a wonderful time. Of course we'd like to be doing many more things than we are doing right now, but that demands certain resources. But we're working on them and about six of our writers are now producing books, they're coming out fairly regularly and we think it's helpful.

D.H.: That's great. I know we've had a number of these participants on our program. Thanks very much for being with us, it's been a grand evening.

R.F.: Well, it's been a delight to be with you.

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