

The Discipline of Fasting

“And Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness for forty days, being tempted by the devil. And he ate nothing during those days. And when they were ended, he was hungry.”

(Luke 4:1-2)

“And when you fast . . .” (Matthew 5:16)

Why did Jesus do it? Why should we?

Fasting, biblically speaking, is the practice of abstaining from food for spiritual purposes. There is no commandment in the Bible that says we have to do it and, obviously, some people physically cannot: diabetics, expectant mothers, and others with physical limitations. But for those without such limitations, the ancient discipline of fasting may have much to offer.

Generally speaking, fasting can help to clear and focus the mind for prayer and meditation on God’s Word. Fasting can also reveal the things that control us. “We cover up what is inside us with food and other good things, but in fasting these things surface. . . . Anger, bitterness, jealousy, strife, fear—if they are within us, they will surface during fasting. At first we will rationalize that our anger is due to our hunger; then we know that we are angry because the spirit of anger is within us. We can rejoice in this knowledge because we know that healing is available through the power of Christ” (Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 48).

Most people today don’t know how to fast, because we haven’t been taught. A few dos and don’ts: Don’t eat heavily before a fast; lighter than normal meals are best for the day or two before, for your stomach is going to get smaller. Do eat fruits and vegetables as the last meal before a fast, to help your digestive tract. Don’t drink coffee, tea, or alcohol before a fast; do consume water.

Don’t jump into a lengthy fast right away; walk before you run. Do begin with a partial fast of twenty-four hours, say from lunch to lunch, so you’d not eat for two meals. At first, you can replace food with fruit juices, and gradually eliminate those.

Don’t be distressed by hunger pains; your stomach has been trained to give signals at certain hours of the day. Luther said, “the flesh was wont to grumble dreadfully”; you must not give in to this grumbling. Do sip a glass of water to satisfy the stomach.

Don’t call the attention of others to what you’re doing. Do spend time in reading and reflection on God’s Word and in prayer; pay attention to what’s going on in your heart and mind.

Don’t break a fast with a big meal. Do break a fast with fruits or vegetable juice, small amounts at first.

“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 of much more consequence than what is happening bodily. You will be engaged in spiritual warfare that will necessitate all the weapons of Ephesians six. One of the most spiritually critical periods is at the close of the physical 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’ (Romans 14:17)” (Foster, 52).

Should you choose to “give up something for Lent” this year, be serious about it. Make it a truly spiritual discipline, a time to focus on Jesus Christ: his suffering, death, and resurrection, his forgiveness, his gifts of life, peace, and salvation. Be in His Word, and grow with God!