

The Discipline of Fasting

(Excerpts taken from Richard Foster's Celebration of Discipline)

Open: What are your thoughts, feelings, experiences, or questions about the concept of fasting?

Some Preliminaries:

1. 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.
2. 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?
 - a. First, fasting has developed a bad reputation as a result of the excessive practices of the Middle Ages.
 - b. 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
3. Without needing to subscribe to the inflated claims of some groups, it is not an exaggeration to say that, when done correctly, fasting can have beneficial physical affects.

Fasting in the Bible

1. 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.
2. In Scripture the normal means of fasting involves abstaining from all food, solid or liquid, but not from water (cf. Luke 4:2—no mention of thirst).
3. Sometimes what could be considered a partial fast is described; that is, there is a restriction of diet but not total abstention (cf. Daniel 10:3 where specific foods are mentioned).
4. There are also several examples in Scripture of what has been called an "absolute fast," or abstaining from both food and water (cf. Esther 4:16; Acts 9:9; Deut. 9:9; 1 Kings 19:8).
5. The absolute fast appears to be a desperate measure to meet a dire emergency. It must be understood that the absolute fast is the exception and should never be engaged in unless one has a very clear command from God, and then for no more than three days.

6. Scripture describes different types of fasting.
 - a. In most cases fasting is a private matter between the individual and God. There are, however, occasional times of corporate or public fasts (cf. Lev. 23:27).
 - b. Fasts were called in times of group or national emergency (cf. Joel 2:15; 2 Chron. 20:1-4; Ezra 8:21-23).
 - c. Throughout history what could be called regular fasts also developed (cf. Zech 8:19; Luke 18:12). The Didache (teaching of the twelve apostles begun ca. 50 A.D., completed somewhere in 3rd century) prescribed two fast days a week: Wednesday and Friday.

Is Fasting a Commandment?

1. One issue that understandably concerns many people is whether or not Scripture makes fasting obligatory upon all Christians.
2. Although many passages of Scripture deal with this subject, two stand out in importance.
 - a. First is Jesus' startling teaching about fasting in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 6:16). It is as if there is an almost unconscious assumption that giving, praying, and fasting are all part of Christian devotion. Having said this, however, we must realize that these words of Jesus do not constitute a command.
 - b. The second crucial statement of Jesus about fasting comes in response to a question by the disciples of John the Baptist (Matt. 9:15). It is clear from this passage that Christ both upheld the Discipline of fasting and anticipated that his followers would do it.
3. Why has the giving of money, for example, been unquestionably recognized as an element in Christian devotion and fasting so disputed? Perhaps in our affluent society fasting involves a far larger sacrifice than the giving of money.

The Purpose of Fasting

1. It is sobering to realize 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.
2. Fasting must forever center on God (cf. Zech. 7:5). If our fasting is not unto God, we have failed. Physical benefits, success in prayer, the enduing with power, spiritual insights—these must never replace God as the center of our fasting.
3. 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. We cover up what is inside us with food and other good things, but in fasting these things surface. If pride controls us, it will be revealed almost immediately (cf. Psalm 69:10).

4. Fasting reminds us that we are sustained “by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God” (Matt. 4:4). 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.
5. Fasting helps us keep our balance in life. How easily we begin to allow nonessentials to take precedence in our lives. How quickly we crave things we do not need until we are enslaved by them (cf. 1 Cor. 6:12).

NOTE: At the end of chapter 4, Foster talks practically about the practice of fasting, offering suggestions and cautions about the practice.