

**“Fasting Directs Our Hunger to God”**  
Deuteronomy 9:9, 10:10, Luke 4:1-2, 5:35  
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I am going to talk about ‘fasting’ as a spiritual practice this morning. People fast for different reasons. **First, dieting.** Some people may lose weight by fasting. According to some medical research, fasting can result in weight loss and other health benefits such as resistance to stress or increasing life spans if we practice fasting on a regular basis. **Second, self-control.** I found an interesting experiment about self-control from the New York Times (September 2, 2011). In the late 1960s, psychologist Walter Mischel tested preschoolers with the agonizing choice of one marshmallow now or two marshmallows 15 minutes later. When he followed up decades later, he found that the 4-year-olds who waited for two marshmallows turned into adults who were better adjusted, were less likely to abuse drugs, had higher self-esteem, had better relationships, were better at handling stress, obtained higher degrees and earned more money. But improving our health condition or enhancing our individual maturity are not my concerns on this subject. I would like to introduce fasting as a way of spiritual discipline and practice, especially for our Lenten journey. I would call it ‘spiritual fasting.’ Some of you may not be familiar with the subject of fasting or some of you may feel a little uncomfortable to practice this ‘appetite-denying work’ as a way of spiritual discipline.

Methodists, including me, love food and fellowship. Don’t get me wrong. I am not a fan of dieting. I am not used to this practice of fasting either. So, today’s message will be challenging to me, too. But I am talking about fasting not because our body likes it, but because our souls need it! I want to be honest with you. My last memory of fasting is over 25 years ago. When I joined a youth leadership summer camp, I had to participate in a program of fasting for 24 hours. The purpose of the fasting was to lay down our personal desires and wishes. Unfortunately, I felt I was starving and I couldn’t concentrate on God. So, don’t worry. I am not going to challenge you to practicing fasting every day nor every week. For a meaningful experience of Lent this year, I would like to propose a new way of fasting for all of us. On Ash Wednesday, March 5<sup>th</sup>, we will be beginning our season of Lent for forty days journey and we will end our Lent celebrating Easter on April 20<sup>th</sup>. During this period of Lent, I would like to propose a ‘simple meal’ every Thursday evening to observe our spiritual fasting. There will no extra preparation for you. Just come to the church and join our soup supper if you are able to come and have a simple meal with us or eat your simple meal at home. Church will provide a meal for you and spiritual activity

every Thursday. Please come and join us! But there will be one rule that we want to keep every Thursday during Lent. It's simple. On every Thursday, keep yourself from eating any snacks, more food or any dessert after dinner time. No food overnight until breakfast! Breakfast actually signifies breaking the fast observed through the previous night. I also want to be sure first that your fasting is never to be a public display—it is between you and God alone. Jesus reminded us of this practice in Matthew 6:18 as a spiritual discipline not to be seen by others, but only by God. Fasting should be always done privately and in humility.

What is our goal of this spiritual practice of fasting? Fasting is a traditional spiritual practice in our Christian faith. In the Old Testament era, Moses, David, Daniel and Nehemiah and many other of God's people practiced fasting as a way of discovering God's will and listening to God. And in the New Testament era, Jesus fasted for forty days to prepare himself and to discern God's will and plans in the wilderness. Fasting has been a part of Methodism from its early beginnings. John Wesley also considered fasting an important part of a Christian's life and he personally fasted weekly. To Wesley, fasting was an important way to express sorrow for sin and penitence for overindulgence in eating and drinking. Simply speaking, the focus of fasting is not '**giving up our appetite**', but it is for '**transformation in us**' to deepen our faith in God and to hear God more clearly in our daily lives. God is still speaking! Without our faith, we are not able to listen to God. In Grace Adolphsen Brame's book, *Faith, the Yes of the Heart*, Martin Luther said, "Faith is the yes of the heart, a confidence on which one stakes one's life." When he wrote this, he was saying faith is a response of the whole self to God. It is not just our words: the creeds we confess, the prayers we pray, the way we argue our faith. It is not just our works and deeds: our faithful attendance at church, our participation on committees, or our acts of love towards others. This yes is an inner assent of the will. It is a willingness to receive the grace and the guidance of God. Spiritual fasting will be a great way to deepen our faith in God.

One church member shared a story with me. This story reminds us of the importance of God in our life. I would like to pass it on to you as I close my message. A professor stood before his philosophy class and had some items in front of him. When the class began, wordlessly, he picked up a very large and empty mayonnaise jar and proceeded to fill it with golf balls. He then asked the students if the jar was full. They agreed that it was. The professor then picked up a box of pebbles and poured them into the jar. He shook the jar lightly. The pebbles rolled into the open areas between the golf balls. He then asked the students again if the jar was full. They agreed it was.

The professor next picked up a box of sand and poured it into the jar. Of course, the sand filled up everything else. He asked once more if the jar was full. The students responded with a unanimous "yes." The professor then produced two cups of coffee from under the table and poured the entire contents into the jar, effectively filling the empty space between the sand. The students laughed. "Now," said the professor, as the laughter subsided, "I want you to recognize that this jar represents your life.

"The golf balls are the important things -- your God, family, your children, your health, your friends, and your favorite passions -- things that if everything else was lost and only they remained, your life would still be full.

"The pebbles are the other things that matter like your job, your house, and your car.

"The sand is everything else -- the small stuff.

"If you put the sand into the jar first," he continued, "there is no room for the pebbles or golf balls. The same goes for life. If you spend all your time and energy on the small stuff, you will never have room for the things that are important to you.

"Take care of the golf balls first -- the things that really matter. The rest is just sand."

One of the students raised her hand and inquired what the coffee represented. The professor smiled. "I'm glad you asked. It just goes to show you that no matter how full your life may seem, there's always room for a couple of cups of coffee with a friend."

As we live our lives, we encounter unexpected challenges, barriers or hardships. Sometimes, we doubt the presence of God. But God is always with us. Spiritual practices like fasting will help us to discover God and listen to God's voice clearly. In order to feel the presence of God, we continue to practice our spiritual discipline. This is why we worship every Sunday and do our church ministries. Amen.