

The Practice of Fasting

Those who desire to fast need to acquaint themselves with this basic information.

As with all the Disciplines, a progression should be observed; it is wise to learn to walk well before we try to run. 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. Attempt this once a week for several weeks. In the beginning you will be fascinated with the physical aspects of your experience, but the most important thing to monitor is the inner attitude of the heart. Outwardly you will be performing the regular duties of your day, but inwardly you will be in prayer and adoration, song, and worship. In a new way, cause every task of the day to be a sacred ministry to the Lord. However mundane your duties, for you they are a sacrament. Cultivate a "gentle receptiveness to divine breathings." Break your fast with a light meal of fresh fruits and vegetables and a good deal of inner rejoicing.

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. Many feel distilled water is best. If the taste of water bothers you, add one teaspoon of lemon juice. 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. In many ways the stomach is like a spoiled child, and a spoiled child does not need indulgence, but needs discipline. Martin Luther says ". . . the flesh was wont to grumble dreadfully." You must not give in to this "grumbling." Ignore the signals, or even tell your "spoiled child" to calm down, and in a brief time the hunger pangs will pass. If not, sip another glass of water and the stomach will be satisfied. You are to be the master of your stomach, not its slave. If family obligations permit it, devote the time you would normally use eating to meditation and prayer.

It should go without saying that you should follow Jesus' counsel to refrain from calling attention to what you are doing [see Matthew 6:16-18]. The only ones who should know you are fasting are those who have to know. If you call attention to your fasting, people will be impressed and, as Jesus said, that will be your reward. You, however, are fasting for far greater and deeper rewards. . . .

After having achieved several fasts with a degree of spiritual success, move on to a thirty-six hour fast: three meals. With that accomplished, it is time to seek the Lord as to whether he wants you to go on a longer fast. Three to seven days is a good time period and will probably have a substantial impact on the course of your life.

It is wise to know the process your body goes through in the course of a longer fast. The first three days are usually the most difficult in terms of physical discomfort and hunger pains. The body is beginning to rid itself of the toxins that have built up over years of poor eating habits, and it is not a comfortable process. This is the reason for the coating on the tongue and bad breath. Do not be disturbed by these symptoms; rather be grateful for the increased health and well-being that will result. You may experience headaches during this time, especially if you are an avid coffee or tea drinker. Those are mild withdrawal symptoms that will pass though they may be very unpleasant for a time.

By the fourth day the hunger pains are beginning to subside though you will have feelings of weakness and occasional dizziness. The dizziness is only temporary and caused by sudden changes in position. Move more slowly and you will have no difficulty. The weakness can come to the point where the simplest task takes great effort. Rest is the best remedy. Many find this the most difficult period of the fast.

By the sixth or seventh day you will begin to feel stronger and more alert. Hunger pains will continue to diminish until the ninth or tenth day they are only a minor irritation. The body will have eliminated the bulk of toxins and you will feel good. Your sense of concentration will be sharpened and you will feel as if you could continue fasting indefinitely. Physically this is the most enjoyable part of the fast.

Anywhere between twenty-one and forty days or longer, depending on the individual, hunger pains will return. This is the first stage of starvation and the pains signal that the body has used up its reserves and is beginning to draw on the living tissue. The fast should be broken at this time.

The amount of weight lost during a fast varies greatly with the individual. In the beginning a loss of two pounds a day, decreasing to one pound a day as the fast progresses, is normal. 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.

Before commencing an extended fast, some are tempted to eat a good deal to “stock up.” That is most unwise; in fact, slightly lighter than normal meals are best for the day or two before a fast. You would also be well advised to abstain from coffee or tea three days before beginning a longer fast. If the last meal in the stomach is fresh fruits and vegetables, you should have no difficulty with constipation.

An extended fast should be broken with fruit and vegetable juice, with small amounts taken at first. Remember that the stomach has shrunk considerably and the entire digestive system has gone into a kind of hibernation. By the second day you should be able to eat fruit and then milk or yogurt. Next you can eat fresh salads and cooked vegetables. Avoid all salad dressing, grease, and starch. Extreme care should be taken not to overeat. It is good during this time to consider future diet and eating habits to see if you need to be more disciplined and in control of your appetite.

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 much more important than what is happening bodily. You will be engaging in spiritual warfare that will necessitate using all the weapons of Ephesians 6. One of the most critical periods spiritually is at the end of the 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” (Rom. 14:17).

Fasting can bring breakthroughs in the spiritual realm that will never happen in any other way. It is a means of God’s grace and blessing that should not be neglected any longer.

Richard J. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth*, 20th Anniversary ed. (New York, NY: HarperOne, 1998), 56-60.