

# The Discipline of Fasting

Celebration of Discipline

*By Richard Foster*

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. For example, in my research I could not find a single book published on the subject of Christian fasting from 1861 to 1954, a period of nearly one hundred years. More recently a renewed interest in fasting has developed, but we have far to go to recover a biblical balance. 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? Two things. First, fasting has developed a bad reputation as a result of the excessive ascetic practices of the Middle Ages. With the decline of the inward reality of the Christian faith, an increasing tendency to stress the only thing left, the outward form, developed. And whenever there is a form devoid of spiritual power, law will take over because law always carries with it a sense of security and manipulative power. Hence, fasting was subjected to the most rigid regulations and practiced with extreme self-mortification and flagellation. Modern culture reacts strongly to these excesses and tends to confuse fasting with mortification. 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. This, coupled with the popular belief that it is a positive virtue to satisfy every human appetite, has made fasting seem obsolete. Anyone who seriously attempts to fast is bombarded with objections. "I understand that fasting is injurious to your health." "It will sap your strength so you can't work." "Won't it destroy healthy body tissue?" All of this, of course, is utter nonsense based upon prejudice. While the human body can survive only a short time without air or water, it can go for many days before starvation begins. 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 effects. Scripture has so much to say about fasting that we would do well to look once again at this ancient Discipline. The list of biblical personages who fasted reads like a "Who's Who" of Scripture: Moses the lawgiver, David the king, Elijah the prophet, Esther the queen, Daniel the seer, Anna the prophetess, Paul the apostle, Jesus Christ the incarnate Son. Many of the great Christians throughout church history fasted and witnessed to its value; among them were Martin Luther, John Calvin, John Knox, John Wesley, Jonathan Edwards, David Brainerd, Charles Finney, and Pastor Hsi of China. Fasting, of course, is not an exclusively Christian Discipline; all the major religions of the world recognize its

merit. Zoroaster practiced fasting as did Confucius and the Yogis of India. Plato, Socrates, and Aristotle all fasted. Even Hippocrates, the father of modern medicine, believed in fasting. Now the fact that all these persons, in and out of Scripture, held fasting in high regard does not make it right or even desirable, but it should make us pause long enough to be willing to reevaluate the popular assumptions of our day concerning the Discipline of fasting.

#### “Fasting in the Bible:

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. It is also distinct from health dieting which stresses abstinence from food for physical, not spiritual, purposes. Because of the secularization of modern society, “fasting” (if it is done at all) is usually motivated either by vanity or by the desire for power. That is not to say that these forms of “fasting” are wrong necessarily, but their objective is different from the fasting described in Scripture. Biblical fasting always centers on spiritual purposes. In Scripture the normal means of fasting involves abstaining from all food, solid or liquid, but not from water. In the forty-day fast of Jesus, we are told that “he ate nothing” and that toward the end of the fast “he was hungry” and Satan tempted him to eat, indicating that the abstaining was from food but not from water (Luke 4: 2). From a physical standpoint, this is what is usually involved in a fast. Sometimes what could be considered a partial fast is described; that is, there is a restriction of diet but not total abstention. Although the normal fast seemed to be the custom of the prophet Daniel, there was a three-week period in which he declares, “I ate no delicacies, no meat or wine entered my mouth, nor did I anoint myself at all” (Dan. 10: 3). We are not told the reason for this departure from his normal practice of fasting; perhaps his governmental tasks precluded it. There are also several examples in Scripture of what has been called an “absolute fast,” or abstaining from both food and water. It appears to be a desperate measure to meet a dire emergency. Upon learning that execution awaited herself and her people, Esther instructed Mordecai, “Go, gather all the Jews . . . and hold a fast on my behalf, and neither eat nor drink for three days, night or day. I and my maids will also fast as you do” (Esther 4: 16). Paul engaged in a three-day absolute fast following his encounter with the living Christ (Acts 9: 9). Since the human body cannot go without water much more than three days, both Moses and Elijah engaged in what must be considered supernatural absolute fasts of forty days (Deut. 9: 9; 1 Kings 19: 8). It must be underscored 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.

In most cases fasting is a private matter between the individual and God. There are, however, occasional times of corporate or public fasts. The only annual public fast required in the Mosaic law was on the day of atonement (Lev. 23: 27). It was to be the day in the Jewish calendar when the people were to be in sorrow and affliction as atonement for their sins. (Gradually, other fast days were added until today there are over twenty!) Also, fasts were called in times of group or national emergency: “Blow the trumpet in Zion; sanctify a fast; call a solemn assembly; gather the people” (Joel 2: 15). When Judah was invaded, King Jehoshaphat called the nation to fast (2 Chron. 20: 1–4). In response to the preaching of Jonah, the entire city of Nineveh including the animals— involuntarily, no doubt—fasted. Before the trip back to Jerusalem, Ezra had the exiles fast and pray for safety while traveling on the bandit-infested road (Ezra 8: 21–23).

The group fast can be a wonderful and powerful experience provided there is a prepared people who are of one mind in these matters. Serious problems in churches or other groups can be dealt with and relationships healed through unified group prayer and fasting. When a sufficient number of people rightly understand what is involved, national calls to prayer and fasting can also have beneficial results. The king of Britain called for a day of solemn prayer and fasting because of a threatened invasion by the French in 1756. On February 6 John Wesley recorded in his Journal, “The fast day was a glorious day, such as London has scarce seen since the Restoration. Every church in the city was more than full, and a solemn seriousness sat on every face. Surely God heareth prayer, and there will yet be a lengthening of our tranquillity.” In a footnote he wrote, “Humility was turned into national rejoicing for the threatened invasion by the French was averted.”<sup>1</sup>

Throughout history what could be called regular fasts also developed. By the time of Zechariah four regular fasts were held (Zech. 8: 19). The boast of the Pharisee in Jesus’ parable evidently described a common practice of the day, “I fast twice a week” (Luke 18: 12).<sup>\*</sup> The Didache prescribed two fast days a week: Wednesday and Friday. Regular fasting was made obligatory at the Second Council of Orleans in the sixth century. John Wesley sought to revive the teaching of the Didache and urged early Methodists to fast on

Wednesdays and Fridays. He felt so strongly about this matter, in fact, that he refused to ordain anyone to the Methodist ministry who did not fast on those two days. Regular or weekly fasting has had such a profound effect in the lives of some that they have sought to find a biblical command for it so that it may be urged upon all Christians. The search is in vain. There simply are no biblical laws that command regular fasting. Our freedom in the gospel, however, does not mean license; it means opportunity. Since there are no laws to bind us, we are

free to fast on any day. Freedom for the apostle Paul meant that he was engaged in “fastings often” (2 Cor. 11: 27, KJV). We should always bear in mind the apostolic counsel, “Do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh” (Gal. 5: 13).

There is a “discipline” that has gained a certain popularity today that is akin, but not identical, to fasting. It is called “watchings” and stems from Paul’s use of the term in connection with his sufferings for Christ (2 Cor. 6: 5, 11: 27, KJV). It refers to abstaining from sleep in order to attend to prayer or other spiritual duties. There is no indication that this has any essential connection to fasting, otherwise we would be confined to very short fasts indeed! While “watchings” may have value and God at times may call us to go without sleep for specific needs, we must take care not to elevate things that have only the slightest biblical precedent into major obligations. Paul’s warning should always be kept before us for, in any discussion of the Disciplines, we will discover many things that “. . . have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting rigor of devotion and self-abasement and severity to the body, but they are of no value in checking the indulgence of the flesh” (Col. 2: 23).

### Is Fasting a Commandment?

One issue that understandably concerns many people is whether or not Scripture makes fasting obligatory upon all Christians. Numerous attempts have been made to answer this question, resulting in a variety of conclusions. One of the finest defenses of an affirmative answer was penned in 1580 by Thomas Cartwright in a book, something of a classic in the field, entitled *The*

### *Holy Exercise of a True Fast.*

Although many passages of Scripture deal with this subject, two stand out in importance. The first is Jesus’ startling teaching about fasting in the Sermon on the Mount.\* Two factors bear directly on the issue at hand. His teaching on fasting is directly in the context of his teaching on giving and praying. It is as if there is an almost unconscious assumption that giving, praying, and fasting are all part of Christian devotion. We have no more reason to exclude fasting from the teaching than we do giving or praying. Second, Jesus states, “When you fast . . .” (Matt. 6: 16). He seems to make the assumption that people will fast, and is giving instruction on how to do it properly. Martin Luther said, “It was not Christ’s intention to reject or despise fasting . . . it was His intention to restore proper fasting.” 2

Having said this, however, we must realize that these words of Jesus do not constitute a command. Jesus was giving instruction on the proper exercise of a

common practice of his day. He did not speak a word about whether it was a right practice or if it should be continued. So, although Jesus does not say “If you fast,” neither does he say “You must fast.” His word is, very simply, “When you fast.” The second crucial statement of Jesus about fasting comes in response to a question by the disciples of John the Baptist. Perplexed over the fact that both they and the Pharisees fasted but Jesus’ disciples did not, they asked “Why?” Jesus replied, “Can the wedding guests mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them? The days will come, when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast” (Matt. 9: 15). That is perhaps the most important statement in the New Testament on whether or not Christians should fast today.

In the coming of Jesus, a new day had dawned. The kingdom of God had come among them in present power. The Bridegroom was in their midst; it was a time for feasting, not fasting. There would, however, come a time for his disciples to fast although not in the legalism of the old order.

The most natural interpretation of the days when Jesus’ disciples will fast is the present Church age, especially in light of its intricate connection with Jesus’ statement on the new wineskins of the kingdom of God which follows immediately (Matt. 9: 16, 17). Arthur Wallis argues that Jesus is referring to the present Church age rather than just the three-day period between his death and resurrection. He concludes his argument, “We are therefore compelled to refer the days of His absence to the period of this age, from the time He ascended to the Father until He shall return from heaven. This is evidently how His apostles understood Him, for it was not until after His ascension to the Father that we read of them fasting (Acts 13: 2, 3). . . . It is this age of the Church to which our Master referred when He said, ‘Then they will fast.’ The time is now!” 3

There is no way to escape the force of Jesus’ words in this passage. He made it clear that he expected his disciples to fast after he was gone. Although the words are not couched in the form of a command, that is only a semantic technicality. It is clear from this passage that Christ both upheld the Discipline of fasting and anticipated that his followers would do it.”

Perhaps it is best to avoid the term “command” since in the strictest sense Jesus did not command fasting. But it is obvious that he proceeded on the principle that the children of the kingdom of God would fast. For the person longing for a more intimate walk with God, these statements of Jesus are drawing words.

Where are the people today who will respond to the call of Christ? Have we become so accustomed to “cheap grace” that we instinctively shy away from

more demanding calls to obedience? “Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross.” 4 Why has the giving of money, for example, been unquestionably recognized as an element in Christian devotion and fasting so disputed? Certainly we have as much, if not more, evidence from the Bible for fasting as we have for giving. Perhaps in our affluent society fasting involves a far larger sacrifice than the giving of money.

### The Purpose of Fasting

It is sobering to realize that the very first statement Jesus made about fasting dealt with the question of motive (Matt. 6: 16–18). To use good things to our own ends is always the sign of false religion. How easy it is to take something like fasting and try to use it to get God to do what we want. At times there is such stress upon the blessings and benefits of fasting that we would be tempted to believe that with a little fast we could have the world, including God, eating out of our hands.

Fasting must forever center on God. It must be God-initiated and God-ordained. Like the prophetess Anna, we need to be “worshiping with fasting” (Luke 2: 37). Every other purpose must be subservient to God. Like that apostolic band at Antioch, “fasting” and “worshiping the Lord” must be said in the same breath (Acts 13: 2). Charles Spurgeon writes, “Our seasons of fasting and prayer at the Tabernacle have been high days indeed; never has Heaven’s gate stood wider; never have our hearts been nearer the central Glory.” 5

God questioned the people in Zechariah’s day, “When ye fasted . . . did ye at all fast unto me, even to me?” (Zech. 7: 5, KJV). 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. John Wesley declares, “First, let it [fasting] be done unto the Lord with our eye singly fixed on Him. Let our intention herein be this, and this alone, to glorify our Father which is in heaven. . . .” 6 That is the only way we will be saved from loving the blessing more than the Blessor.

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. More than any other Discipline, fasting reveals the things that control us. This is a wonderful benefit to the true disciple who longs to be transformed into the image of Jesus Christ. 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. David writes, “I humbled my soul with fasting” (Ps. 69: 10). 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

will realize 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.

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. In Christ, “All things hold together” (Col. 1: 17). Therefore, in experiences of fasting we are not so much abstaining from food as we are feasting on the word of God. Fasting is feasting! When the disciples brought lunch to Jesus, assuming that he would be starving, he declared, “I have food to eat of which you do not know. . . . My food is to do the will of him who sent me, and to accomplish his work” (John 4: 32, 34). This was not a clever metaphor, but a genuine reality. Jesus was, in fact, being nourished and sustained by the power of God. That is the reason for his counsel on fasting in Matthew 6. We are told not to act miserable when fasting because, in point of fact, we are not miserable. We are feeding on God and, just like the Israelites who were sustained in the wilderness by the miraculous manna from heaven, so we are sustained by the word of God.

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. Paul writes, “‘All things are lawful for me,’ but I will not be enslaved by anything” (1 Cor. 6: 12). Our human cravings and desires are like rivers that tend to overflow their banks; fasting helps keep them in their proper channels. “I pommel my body and subdue it,” says Paul (1 Cor. 9: 27). Likewise, David writes, “I afflicted myself with fasting” (Ps. 35: 13). This is not excessive asceticism; it is discipline and discipline brings freedom. In the fourth century Asterius said that fasting ensured that the stomach would not make the body boil like a kettle to the hindering of the soul.

Numerous people have written on the many other values of fasting such as increased effectiveness in intercessory prayer, guidance in decisions, increased concentration, deliverance for those in bondage, physical well-being, revelations, and so on. In this, as in all matters, we can expect God to reward those who diligently seek him.

### The Practice of Fasting

Contemporary men and women are largely ignorant of the practical aspects 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.” 8 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.” 9 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. 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. The following was written by an individual who, as an experiment, had committed himself to fast once a week for two years. Notice the progression from the superficial aspects of fasting toward the deeper rewards.

1. I felt it a great accomplishment to go a whole day without food. Congratulated myself on the fact that I found it so easy. . . .
2. Began to see that the above was hardly the goal of fasting. Was helped in this by beginning to feel hunger. . . .
3. Began to relate the food fast to other areas of my life where I was more compulsive. . . . I did not have to have a seat on the bus to be contented, or to be cool in the summer and warm when it was cold.”



4. Reflected more on Christ's suffering and the suffering of those who are hungry and have hungry babies. . . .
5. Six months after beginning the fast discipline, I began to see why a two-year period has been suggested. The experience changes along the way. Hunger on fast days became acute, and the temptation to eat stronger. For the first time I was using the day to find God's will for my life. Began to think about what it meant to surrender one's life.
6. I now know that prayer and fasting must be intricately bound together. There is no other way, and yet that way is not yet combined in me."

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 by 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 question 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 or 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. Wesley declares, “. . . it was not merely by the light of reason . . . that the people of God have been, in all ages, directed to use fasting as a means: . . . but they have been . . . taught it of God Himself, by clear and open revelations of His Will. . . . Now, whatever reasons there were to quicken those of old, in the zealous and constant discharge of this duty, they are of equal force still to quicken us.” 11

Now is the time for all who hear the voice of Christ to obey it.”