

The Spirit of the Disciplines

By Dallas Willard

In fasting, we abstain in some significant way from food and possibly from drink as well. This discipline teaches us a lot about ourselves very quickly. It will certainly prove humiliating to us, as it reveals to us how much our peace depends upon the pleasures of eating. It may also bring to mind how we are using food pleasure to assuage the discomforts caused in our bodies by faithless and unwise living and attitudes—lack of self-worth, meaningless work, purposeless existence, or lack of rest or exercise. If nothing else, though, it will certainly demonstrate how powerful and clever our body is in getting its own way against our strongest resolves.

There are many ways and degrees of fasting. The desert fathers such as St. Antony often subsisted for long periods of time on bread and water—though we must understand that their “bread” was much more substantial than what we have today. Daniel and his friends would not eat the king’s meat or drink his wine; they had vegetables and water only (Dan. 1: 12). At another time, Daniel “ate no pleasant bread, neither came flesh nor wine in my mouth, neither did I anoint myself at all, till three whole weeks were fulfilled” (10: 3). Jesus in the time of his preparation for temptation and ministry seems to have forgone all food for more than a month (Matt. 4).

Fasting confirms our utter dependence upon God by finding in him a source of sustenance beyond food. Through it, we learn by experience that God’s word to us is a life substance, that it is not food (“bread”) alone that gives life, but also the words that proceed from the mouth of God (Matt. 4: 4). We learn that we too have meat to eat that the world does not know about (John 4: 32, 34). Fasting unto our Lord is therefore feasting—feasting on him and on doing his will. The Christian poet Edna St. Vincent Millay expresses the discovery of the “other” food in her poem entitled “Feast”:

I drank at every vine.

The last was like the first

I came upon no wine

So wonderful as thirst.

I gnawed at every root.

I ate of every plant.

I came upon no fruit

So wonderful as want.

Feed the grape and the bean

To the vintner and the monger;

I will lie down lean

With my thirst and my hunger. 14

Hence, when Jesus directs us not to appear distressed and sad when we fast (Matt. 6: 16–18), he is not telling us to mislead those around us. He is instead explaining how we will feel—we really will not be sad. We are discovering that life is so much more than meat (Luke 12: 33). Our belly is not our god, as it is for others (Phil. 3: 19; Rom. 16: 18); rather, it is his joyful servant and ours (1 Cor. 6: 13).

Actually fasting is one of the more important ways of practicing that self-denial require of everyone who would follow Christ (Matt. 16: 24). In fasting, we learn how to suffer happily as we feast on God. And it is a good lesson, because in our lives we will suffer, no matter what else happens to us. Thomas a Kempis remarks: “Whosoever knows best how to suffer will keep the greatest peace. That man is conqueror of himself, and lord of the world, the friend of Christ, and heir of Heaven.” 16

Persons well used to fasting as a systematic practice will have a clear and constant sense of their resources in God. And that will help them endure deprivations of all kinds, even to the point of coping with them easily and cheerfully. Kempis again says: “Refrain from gluttony and thou shalt the more easily restrain all the inclinations of the flesh.” 17 Fasting teaches temperance or self-control and therefore teaches moderation and restraint with regard to all our fundamental drives. Since food has the pervasive place it does in our lives, the effects of fasting will be diffused throughout our personality. In the midst of all our needs and wants, we experience the contentment of the child that has been weaned from its mother’s breast (Ps. 131: 2). And “Godliness with contentment is great gain” (1 Tim. 6: 6).

Fasting, though, is a hard discipline to practice without its consuming all our attention. Yet when we use it as a part of prayer or service, we cannot allow it to do so. When a person chooses fasting as a spiritual discipline, he or she must, then, practice it well enough and often enough to become experienced in it, because only the person who is well habituated to systematic fasting as a discipline can use it effectively as a part of direct service to God, as in special times of prayer or other service.”