



Fasting as a Spiritual Practice

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Why do the majority of Christians fail in their discipleship? John Wesley wrestled with this question in his essay *The causes of the inefficacy of Christianity*, and came to a simple, but startling conclusion. It is the failure to fast! For Wesley, “the man that never fasts is no more in the way to heaven, than the man that never prays”!

We can learn a lot about the purpose of fasting from the experience of Jesus in the wilderness (Luke 4:1-14). At his Baptism, we are told that Jesus was filled with the Holy Spirit, who led him into the wilderness, and sustained him in the midst of temptation. Afterwards, he returned to Jerusalem, full of the Holy Spirit, and entered the synagogue where he told people that the Spirit was upon him, to empower his mission (Luke 4:18). Later, Jesus says, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me” (Luke 9:23). Fasting or ‘self-denial’ reminds us that being a follower of Jesus means surrendering to God’s agenda for our lives, and being filled with the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit. This life-transforming relationship with God, knowing God’s guidance and finding God’s strength, is the ‘reward’ that Jesus promises to those who fast (Matthew 6:18).

Do you long for a deeper walk with God? Do you hunger to become more like Jesus? Do you thirst for the joy of a Spirit filled life? Then you should seriously consider developing the habit of fasting or abstinence.

The trouble with fasting

In the liturgical tradition of the Church, we remember the story of Jesus in the wilderness, and the call to fast, during the season of Lent. But how often do we reluctantly ‘give something up’ for Lent from a sense of religious duty, to impress others, or just because it makes us feel more serious about the Christian life?

We can all too easily become like the ‘hypocrites’ who do things for outward show, without seeking the ‘secret’ reward of God’s real presence and power (Matthew 6:2-4).

The first disciples were infamous for not fasting at the expected times of religious observance (Mark 2:18-20), and it is possible to conclude that fasting is a kind of optional extra in the Christian life. The trouble is that this can cause us to neglect the discipline altogether.

From these reflections, we can identify three traps to be avoided when it comes to the practice of fasting:

- Formalism – making the discipline an end in itself
- Legalism – making the discipline a matter of mere religious duty
- Neglect – making the discipline an optional extra, perhaps for super-spiritual people.

The challenge of fasting is how to take it up as a spiritual discipline, and experience its unique benefits, without descending into formalism, legalism or sheer neglect.

Fasting as a Spiritual Discipline

Fasting is often called a spiritual discipline. It is a ‘discipline’ in the sense that we are meant to put it into practice, intentionally. It is only ‘spiritual’, however, when it connects us with the presence of God and the power of the Holy Spirit, as we seek to deepen our discipleship in daily life. This is what Jesus has in mind when he tells the disciples to wash their faces and put oil on their heads as a preparation for fasting (Matthew 6:17).

John Wesley also describes the discipline of fasting or abstinence as a ‘means of grace’. In other words, it is an activity in and through which God has promised to embrace us, just as we are, with life-transforming

presence and power. Through fasting, we can experience the grace of what God has done for us in Christ, to forgive our sins, and we can become more fully open to what God does in us by the Holy Spirit, to help us become more like Jesus.

Wesley warns us, however, not to turn the means into ends in themselves:

- There is nothing inherently transformative about fasting in itself. It is not some kind of magical technique that has the power to change our lives.
- There is nothing inherently meritorious about fasting. It is not a way of finding favour with God, or of twisting God's arm to bless us.

The discipline of fasting is not rooted in proving how serious we are, or how determined we are to resist temptation, or how desperate we are to see answers to our prayers. These might well be Christian virtues, and benefits of fasting, but the proper motivation is a longing for more of God, a hungering for the godly life and a desire to seek God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength (2 Chronicles 7:14; Zechariah 7:5; Matthew 22:37).

Fasting and self-denial

Every day, we are steeped in cultural influences that have the power to take hold of our souls, and shape our lives in ways that lead us away from God. The 'world' plants its own ideas in our minds, and desires in our hearts, about what it means to be healthy, wealthy and happy. Over time, we can find ourselves craving for things that we know cannot ultimately satisfy, and discover that we have formed ungodly habits that seem hard, if not impossible, to break.

What do you crave? Rich food? Strong drink? The latest fashions? Entertainments? Do you have selfish habits that seem to rule your life? Sex? Shopping? Television? The internet? Fasting is one way that we can stare our cravings and habits in the face and say, 'You shall not have my life! I was made for more than this'. By denying ourselves, and abstaining from such things, we can express our longing for God to break their power over us.

As a way of self-denial and 'taking up our cross' (Mark 8:34), fasting can help us put our sinful cravings and habits to death; and open us to the same overcoming power of the Holy Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead.

As we look to God, and the power of the Holy Spirit, we can find the strength to resist our temptations. But more than that, we are also asking God to help us

"hunger and thirst for righteousness" so that we might be filled (Matthew 5:6).

Prayer and fasting

Fasting can truly become a spiritual discipline, however, as an aid to prayer (eg Psalm 35:13; Daniel 9:3; Acts 14:23). Although there are many ways to pray (adoration, confession, thanksgiving, intercession etc), the spiritual reality behind all authentic prayer is practising the presence of God. Prayer is about being attentive to the presence of God in all the circumstances of our lives, and becoming more responsive to the leading of the Holy Spirit in our hearts. Fasting helps bring this focus to our prayers.

On the one hand, the discipline of fasting is about paying attention to God by intentionally turning away from the things that distract us most. It is about prayerfully saying 'No' to all that hinders our walk with God, and looking to the Holy Spirit for guidance and strength to do what is right. On the other hand, fasting makes us more attentive to the presence and activity of God in the lives of others. It is about prayerfully saying 'Yes' to the inner voice of God that calls us, in the flow of everyday life, to deny ourselves and seize every opportunity for loving our neighbour in works of service and words of witness. The kind of fasting that God positively demands is that we love God without rival, and love others by sharing all we have.

In this sense, fasting can also be described as a kind of spiritual warfare. It is a means for overcoming the sin and evil in our own hearts, as well as working together with God for the deliverance of others, whether casting out demons (Mark 9:29), binding up the broken-hearted or feeding the hungry (Isaiah 58:6-7).

The outcome of fasting

The trouble with fasting is that it seems like something we can really do without, because it doesn't really 'do' anything in particular. But that is the point! When we fast alongside the other disciplines, it reminds us that they don't 'do' anything either, other than increase our knowledge and love of God, while connecting us with the presence and power of the Holy Spirit.

If the spiritual life can be likened to a boat, then our spiritual discipline is more like sailing than rowing. It is a mistake to think that using the disciplines is like rowing a boat, where our progress depends upon how hard and fast we pull on the oars. Rather, using the disciplines is more like hoisting a sail, in the expectation that it will catch the wind. The boat will

make no progress if we do not hoist the sail; but it is not hoisting the sail that drives it along. By fasting and prayer we hoist the sails of our soul, and wait on God to move us with the Holy Spirit. It is the witness of Christians throughout the ages that the regular habit of fasting simply makes our everyday lives more open to God, and more ready to do God's will.

Going further

This is one of a series of three resources on fasting by Philip Meadows. To read further in this area, see his resources, 'Fasting in Scripture' and 'Developing the habit of fasting'.

For a range of resources on engaging spiritual practices, visit www.deepeningdiscipleship.org.uk.



This resource has been produced in collaboration with the Inspire Network, which offers a wide range of resources and training to develop the spiritual life of mission-shaped disciples (www.inspire-network.org.uk).