

An invitation to Fast

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Within our culture we live in the tension of food excess vs body idolatry - The body has become our master. Fasting is a spiritual habit that can help us break free from an unhealthy attitude towards food and body image?"

1. What is fasting? It's going without food for a given period of time. That sounds crazy. Why would anyone choose to go without food unless they are on some sort of diet? This might surprise you but our lives are not simply determined by our bodies.

Right at the beginning of the bible we find the first human formed from dust. The word man or human is 'adam' and God makes him from the dust, the word being 'Adama'. Then God breathed his spirit into his body and he became a living being. (Gen 2:7). Humans are both Physical and Spiritual. We are different. Animals have a body but no spirit. Angels have a spirit but no body. We are like a hybrid. Body and spirit: Our bodies are not simply a shell to carry our spirit around. It's compelling that the very first action to separate humans from God was over something edible. The allure of food points to a greater craving in us to be our own kings and queens of our own kingdoms and queendoms and not subjects of King Jesus and the beauty of his Kingdom.

2. Jesus and fasting

The means of temptation in the Genesis story is food. It was the same first temptation Jesus faced after fasting for forty days. Jesus knew a thing or two about food and fasting and temptation. In Matthew 4 we read how Jesus fasted for forty days and forty nights and afterwards he was hungry! And he was tempted but this time he passed the test. He did not give into temptation.

Why did Jesus fast? For Jesus fasting was feasting on God. Through fasting Jesus became more attuned to the vision and mission of the kingdom. Through fasting, Jesus became spiritually strong even though his body would have been weakened. Fasting, rather than making him spiritually weak seemed to make him spiritually strong. He may have been physically weakened but he was spiritually strong to face the testing and temptation of the enemy.

In Jesus day fasting was a normal practice. It was as a mark of sincerity and of repentance, and as a reinforcement to prayer. Pharisees would fast twice a week. Fasting was done in response to national repentance and at times of mourning. But it was also often done with the wrong attitude.

Jesus expected his followers to fast. In Matt 6:16-18 Jesus tells his followers "when you fast" not if, when. Then he warns them not to "look sombre as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show others they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full." Don't make it obvious to others that you are fasting. Don't make a show of it. When we fast for the right reasons, God will see it and reward us. What are the rewards of fasting? We will come to that later.

In the book of Acts we read of two separate times when the followers of Jesus in the early church fasted.

While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, 'Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.' (Acts 13:2-3)

Paul and Barnabas appointed elders for them in each church and, with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord, in whom they had put their trust. (Acts 14:23)

It seems clear that fasting should be expected from those who call themselves followers of Jesus.

3. So how should we fast? What happens when we fast? What are the rewards of fasting?

- a. **When we fast...** we focus our attention on God. Every time our stomach rumbles for food. We can take that as a prompt to pray, as a physical indicator of our spiritual hunger. Our hunger for God is awakened. we are saying that it is God who sustains us, not simply food.
- b. **When we fast...** we remove ourselves from being the centre of everything. Instead of thinking that the world revolves around us. Instead of behaving like a spoilt toddler, always wanting our way and not thinking about the needs of others. When we pray and fast, we put God in the centre, instead of putting ourselves in the centre.
- c. **When we fast...** we feast on the greatness of God. Dallas Willard writes that *"fasting is one of the more important ways of practicing that self-denial required 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."*
- d. **When we fast...** we learn self-control and moderation and restraint with regard to all our fundamental drives. Thomas a Kempis remarks: *"Refrain from gluttony and thou shalt the more easily restrain all the inclinations of the flesh."*
- e. **When we fast...** we bring to the surface what is going on inside of us. Fasting exposes the emptiness inside. It also exposes the dysfunction inside. When I fast I know that I can tend to get grumpy. Just ask Vicki! What seems to happen is that all the stuff I've managed to stuff down and ignore comes to the surface to be dealt with by God. Anger, impatience, fear, anxiety, shame and guilt all get exposed like rocks at low tide and Jesus lovingly says, "let's deal with this".

If you want to grow spiritually if you want to become a more loving person, the sort of person described in Paul's account of what love is in 1 cor 13

Patient, kind, not jealous or boastful or proud or rude.

Not demanding or irritable.

Keeping no record of being wronged.

*Concerned about injustice and truth
Perseverance, faith, hope and endurance*

Or if you want to grow in the fruit of spirit (Gal 5) and develop...

*love, joy, peace,
patience, kindness, goodness,
faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.*

Then fasting is a helpful practice in developing these characteristics and for you to bear fruit. Fasting helps you expose a faulty way of thinking and embrace a kingdom way of being.

4. What fasting is not...

- Fasting is not a magical way to manipulate God into doing our will; it's not a way to get God to be an accomplice to our plans.
- Fasting is not a spiritual way to lose weight. It's not a divine diet.
- Fasting is not the same as abstaining. Fasting is a form of abstaining. It's when we abstain from food. You may want to abstain from other things, e.g. social media, TV, The internet, computer games, but it's not really a fast. It may however be a really helpful way to remove the junk, silence the noise of your life and make space for God to speak.

5. How do we fast? Some suggestions for fasting...

- a. Don't fast when... you are sick, traveling on a long journey, pregnant or nursing. People with diabetes, liver or kidney disease, ulcers, cancer and blood diseases should not fast. Don't fast if you are in a hurry and are fasting for immediate results regarding some decision. Remember fasting is not magic. Don't fast if you want to try to manipulate God to do something for you
- b. Always listen for a 'nudging' or prompting from God to fast. There is no commandment to fast in the NT. Fasting is always an invitation. Are you being invited to fast?
- c. If you are new to fasting, begin by fasting for one meal. Spend the time with God that you would normally be eating. Open your bible and have a glass of water. In the time you set apart for fasting, spend the time you would of spent digging into a plate of chips, by digging into the word of God.
- d. If you decide to fast regularly, give your body time to adjust to new rhythms of eating. You may feel more tired on days you fast. Adjust your responsibilities appropriately. Stay hydrated. Always drink plenty of water and fluids.
- e. Begin a fast after your evening meal. Fast until your next evening meal on the next day. This way you miss two, rather than three, meals.
- f. Work up to longer fasts. Don't attempt prolonged fasts without guidance. Check with your doctor before attempting long periods of fasting.
- g. Don't break your fast with a huge meal. Eat small portions of food. The longer the fast, the more you need to break the fast gently.

6. Finally, Fasting helps us live life in the Kingdom...

Just after Jesus talks about fasting when challenged about the poor religious behaviour of his disciples he makes this comment...

"...who would patch old clothing with new cloth? For the new patch would shrink and rip away from the old cloth, leaving an even bigger tear than before. And no one puts new wine into old wineskins. For the old skins would burst from the pressure, spilling the wine and ruining the skins. New wine is stored in new wineskins so that both are preserved." -Matt 9:16-17

God was doing something new with the coming of Jesus, and this was not just a revision or an update of the Jewish religious system. This was a transformation of everything. The royal bridegroom was making a way for people to come to God. This was a time for celebration.

Whilst for those living in Jesus time fasting was a way of looking back, repenting and mourning. For us we may well look back to the death of Jesus but we also look to the resurrection of Jesus and the promise of new life. Fasting helps us focus on the availability of His kingdom for us now and the future inbreaking of the kingdom. What we are longing and fasting for is the day when the King will put an end to everything which causes us, and this world, pain and suffering, fear and grief.

With his kingdom, King Jesus is making everything **new**: A new way of living, a new way of being, a new creation: body and spirit. As Paul wrote, *"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: the old has gone, the new is here!"* (2 Corinthians 5:17) Newness is all over these pages as Jesus ministers to those who were the ordinary, destitute, deprived, unprivileged outcasts of society; the people who the religious leaders perceived as far from God, and Jesus gives them New life, New sight, New speech

You and I are invited into the practice of fasting to taste and see that

- the Kingdom is here and now,
- there is more going on than our body obsessed culture claims and
- that Jesus is making everything new.

Three questions...

1. Are you being invited to fast?
2. What will this look like for you?
3. What steps will you take to grow in the practice of fasting?