

Fasting breaks addictions

Notice that Jesus said to His disciples in the Sermon on the Mount, "When you fast..." (Mt 6:16) He assumed that His disciples would fast after He was ascended into heaven. The record of the early church is that fasting was a part of regular Christian practice. We live in a culture in which fasting has almost never been practiced, though for more and more Christians today, fasting is becoming a regular spiritual discipline.

What is fasting and why should we practice it?

To fast for religious reasons is to go without food for a set period of time. The Hebrew practice at the time of Jesus was to skip breakfast and lunch, but then have supper. Most Christian fasting has followed this pattern as well. Extended fasts have also been practiced—a week, two weeks, a month. The hunger pangs we feel when we are late for a meal is not real hunger. It is simply the conditioned response of our tummy signaling us that we are late putting food in our mouth. Though we can only go a short time without water, the human being can actually go 40 days without food before the body starts to become damaged.

The first three days are the most difficult. Once that time has passed, the one fasting is aware of not eating, but finds that strength actually increases. There will be occasional times of feeling weak, or even a little dizzy, but you will also find a sense of the divine presence upholding you. But I would like to be clear: fasting is not just going without food. It is abstaining from a necessary part of life in order to rely directly on the resources of God. To use the words of Dallas Willard, author of *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, "fasting is feasting—on God." In fasting, we come to understand exactly what Jesus meant when He said, "Man does not live on bread alone, but on every Word that proceeds from the mouth of God."

If fasting was effective simply because we were doing without food, all the starving people in Africa would be spiritual giants. No, much more than just going without food is involved. When we fast, we are humbling our spirit before God. Our spirit is our inner core, our heart, the place where our will is exercised, where all our intentions are activated. There are depths to our spirit of which we are not aware. For the believer though, the Holy Spirit is in the deepest part of our human spirit. His light is what shines in the deep places of our heart. Fasting is something in our power to do that provokes our own body, soul, mind, and spirit to be humbled before God, so as to interact with Him at that deep level.



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My German Shepherd dog, SandyBear, is an affectionate and clever pet. I love her. I just wish I could communicate better with her. Sometimes when I speak to her, she just cocks her head, listening to me, looking puzzled. The problem does not lie with me. My thoughts and speech are clear. The problem is with SandyBear. She has only a little capacity to understand me. She responds to the sound of my voice, knows a few verbal commands, and interacts with me in the usual doggy way, but if our communication was to improve, changes would have to take place within her. So too with our ability to interact with God. Jesus said, "My sheep hear my voice and I know them and they follow me." (Jn 10:27) This is true. But most of us are not Moses, with whom God spoke "face to face." It is not that God is not speaking—we are not tuned-in. The problem in divine-human communication does not lie with God. Fasting "tunes us in" to the divine voice.

Fasting also trains our body, soul, mind, and spirit to draw our resources from God. Again, in the words of Dallas Willard, fasting enables us "to be sweet and strong when we don't get our way." In an odd way, when we have become trained by fasting to ignore the discomfort signals of our tummy, we find also the ability to bear with injustice from others and the thwarting of our personal plans with calmness. We are whole persons. Our body affects our soul; our soul affects our mind; our spirit affects our mind, body, and soul. All parts of our being are trained in godliness when we fast unto the Lord.

Fasting also breaks addictions.

Addictions arise from a need for comfort. Torn and damaged souls will seek comfort. Alcohol, drugs, food, sex, cigarettes, and shopping are common ways people in our culture comfort themselves. These things do work, but only up to a point. Then they kill. For the one who is ready to be free of addictions, fasting will provide a very

powerful means to set aside the seeming unconquerable force of the habit. The Holy Spirit trains our whole being through fasting to say "no" to self, and "yes" to God. Then we are enabled to find our comfort in God.

Trusting Jesus Christ by becoming His disciple is the way into real life. As we trust Jesus and begin to learn from Him how to live life in the kingdom of God, we discover that the first effect of seeking Him and His kingdom is that we receive love. We never move away from this. We turn our face to God's face so as to constantly be receiving divine love (agape in the Greek). Like enjoying the fresh breezes of springtime, so too we get to live receiving fresh breezes of divine love into our soul. Much of Jesus' instructions to His disciples in the Sermon of the Mount have to do with LETTING GO of hurtful things, such as anger, contempt, lust, trying to impress others. For me, in particular, when I am confident that this universe really is at its center a universe of love, because God is love, and that this God is in covenant with me by His own action towards me through Jesus, that there really is an unseen hand guiding the details of my daily life, encouraging me, protecting me, covering for me, providing for me, leading me into paths of righteousness "for His name's sake," restoring my soul with green pastures and quiet waters, so that my life is becoming a destiny of peaceful fruitfulness, now and forever—knowing this, really knowing this, I am able to let go of haste, having to have my way, trying to force others to my will, and the need to defend myself. The result in my soul of this letting-go is then one of serenity and divine comfort. I really can "let go and let God."

So where do you start with fasting? Pray first. Ask God how you might proceed. If just starting, I would pick a day in which you are going to be busy, so that you won't constantly be thinking about food. If you are a coffee lover like me, you will probably want to still drink coffee—or wean yourself off the caffeine first. Then go without breakfast and lunch, but do plan to eat supper. If you are fasting "unto the Lord," you will discover that you are not nearly as hungry as you expected to be. It will be uncomfortable, but bearable. You will find that because of the discomfort your mind will more naturally turn to God in prayer to sustain you. Like hard physical exercise, the time of fasting may be difficult, but the benefits will come later. You will be glad that you fasted!

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