

Spiritual Practices - Fasting

Week 5

Adapted from the resources of "Practicing the Way"

For over a thousand years, fasting was one of the central practices of the Way of Jesus. Similar to essential spiritual disciplines like prayer or the reading of Scripture or church on Sunday, fasting was simply one of the things that practicing Christians did. After all, Jesus began his life's work with 40 days of fasting, a practice he continued throughout his lifetime. And he said, "Follow me." It makes sense that we would follow his example and incorporate fasting — in both longer and shorter intervals — into our discipleship to Jesus.

Four reasons we fast:

1. To offer ourselves to Jesus
2. To grow in holiness
3. To amplify our prayers
4. To stand with the poor

In the modern world, you are more likely to hear about fasting from a Muslim, Buddhist, nutrition expert, or fitness guru than from a serious disciple of Jesus. Most followers of Jesus in the West no longer fast; if they do, it's rarely on a weekly basis, despite the fact that it was the common practice of the church for well over a millennium and a half to do so. Yet in his teaching on fasting in Matthew 6:16, Jesus said, "*When* you fast," not "*If* you fast." He assumed his apprentices would follow his example and incorporate fasting into their discipleship. What if we are missing out on one of the most essential and powerful of all the practices of Jesus?

One of the reasons fasting has fallen by the wayside in the Western church is we have lost sight of what Pope John Paul II called a "theology of the body." This is the biblical theology of the human as a whole person. In the biblical view, you don't *have* a body, you *are* a body; your body is a part of who you are. As powerful as the mind is, because we are holistic beings, we can't simply think our way into spiritual maturity. Our discipleship to Jesus must take seriously our body, as it is "the temple of the Holy Spirit" — a home where we make room for God to dwell.

Most of us are used to approaching our spiritual formation and life with God through the door of our mind — by thinking, talking, praying, reading, or hearing teaching and preaching. But very few of us are comfortable approaching our spiritual formation through our stomach, or our body as a whole. Fasting is one of the best disciplines we have to reintegrate our mind to our body, and offer our whole selves to God in surrender.

When we fast, at least four things are happening in our body and soul.

1. It's weaning us off the pleasure principle
2. It's revealing what's in our heart
3. It's re-ordering our desires
4. It's drawing on the power of God to overcome sin

Our fight is not *against* the body — the body is broken, but it is a good gift. Our fight is *for* the body. It's against the flesh, or sinful appetites within us all. And fasting is one of the most powerful disciplines of the Way to free our body and soul from the chains of sin and the prison of shame.

Early on in the history of the church, fasting was tied to what Jesus and the early Christians called “almsgiving” — a practice that combined generosity, serving, and justice. On fasting days, Christians would take the food or the money they would have spent on food and give it to the poor. Often, they would also give the time they would have spent cooking, eating, and cleaning up to serve the poor. This simple practice of giving away the money we would have spent on ourselves has the potential to transform not only the lives of the poor, but also our own lives and communities.

The ultimate aim of fasting is to get in touch with our hunger for God. Hunger is the state of wanting or needing something you do not have. When we fast, we awaken our body and soul to its deep yearning for life with the Father. We become able to say with Jesus, “I have food to eat that you know nothing about.” (John 4:32)

4 Questions:

1. Is fasting a new practice for you in your discipleship? What experience do you have with it so far?
2. What fears or questions do you have as you think about incorporating fasting into your discipleship of Jesus?
3. What do you think about the idea of using your body to change your heart toward God and sin?
4. How might you integrate this practice into your daily, weekly, or monthly spiritual life? What's a small attainable goal you can pursue?