

In Secret: (How) Shall We Fast?

Went I went online Friday, as I always do, to take a look at the morning news, I was greeted with this headline: “Catholic Priests Say It’s OK to Eat Corned Beef on St. Patrick’s Day Despite Lent.” The article said that this permission had to be granted by each individual bishop, so after doing a little research I was able to verify that any Catholic friends you may have been out with eating corned beef and cabbage on Friday were ok.

The reason behind this special dispensation, of course, is because during Lent Roman Catholics observe Fridays as a day of fasting, and abstaining from eating meat is part of that. It’s a myth, by the way, that the practice of eating fish on Friday began due to a secret pact between a powerful medieval pope and his friends in the fishing industry. Abstaining from meat on Friday actually is as a way of remembering that Jesus died on the cross on a Friday, and eating fish was considered an acceptable substitute.

I bring all this up because fasting is something we Protestants also talk about during Lent. And more importantly than that, it’s one of the three spiritual practices Jesus teaches about in the Sermon on the Mount. But for most of us—fasting is something that we don’t really do, during Lent or at any time. We may talk about it in some sort of trivial way, like giving up chocolate or French fries during Lent, and sometimes we may even give up some more substantial things.

But most of us, myself included, have little understanding and less experience with fasting as a spiritual discipline.

I gave this sermon a complicated title with parentheses in it, because although Jesus asks one question, we may be asking an entirely different one. He asks, “How should we fast?” But we may be thinking, “Should we fast at all?”

Let's begin with what Jesus is talking about. Like giving alms and praying, fasting was a common spiritual practice in Jesus' time. And fasting was understood in a fairly precise way. To fast for a day was to abstain from eating any food at all—usually from sunup to sundown. The Jewish scriptures actually only commanded fasting one day a year—Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. But over time, Jewish tradition added some other fast days each year. And by Jesus' time some people—like the Pharisees—also fasted on a voluntary basis. And this voluntary fasting seems to be what Jesus is talking about.

Based on the little evidence we have, we know, that the Pharisees probably believed in fasting twice a week. And their usual days to fast were Monday and Friday—which also happened to be market days in the villages. So these were perfect days to show off a bit if you wanted everyone to know how spiritual you were. And that's what Jesus is warning about in the reading. The people he calls “hypocrites” were taking another good and valuable spiritual practice and making it an opportunity to put on a show.

So let's go one step further. Why did people fast in biblical times? Fasting could be a sign of repentance. In the book of Jonah the people of Nineveh

fasted when Jonah came proclaiming God's judgment on their city. Fasting could go along with seeking a revelation from the Lord—like Moses who fasted on Mt. Sinai before the Lord gave him the Law. People sometimes fasted at times of national crisis—like the Israelite exiles in the book of Esther. The thing that ties all of these together is making a special intense effort to seek God in prayer.

Fasting is closely connected to the two great commandments to love God and our neighbor. Fasting and prayer go together. By denying ourselves, we create a space to listen to God. And by denying ourselves we also make room for others. The Lord says this through the prophet Isaiah:

Is not this the fast that I choose:
to loose the bonds of injustice,
to undo the thongs of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke?
Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,
and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover them,
and not to hide yourself from your own kin? (Isaiah 58:6-7 NRSV)

Denying ourselves puts us in a position where we can stand in solidarity with the poor and the oppressed.

The spiritual dynamic at the heart of fasting is self-denial. And this something that's especially important for people like us. Because the messages we receive from our culture tell us just the opposite—that we should never deny ourselves anything! Beginning with food and drink. Our consumer culture breeds in us a dissatisfaction with what we have. There's always something

newer, better, or faster. Sometimes commercials just come out and tell us we need and even deserve those things. Our culture of personal achievement also tells us that we should have it all—and have it all at once—money, career, family, a beautiful home, and a host of toys to entertain ourselves.

One thing about the Bible—that I know I've mentioned before—is that the paragraphs we find in our Bibles are really artificial, put in there by modern editors for our convenience. The title headings in our Bibles aren't there in the original languages either. So if you look at the pew Bible, for instance, it looks like Jesus ends this topic in at verse 18, and then moves on to talk about our material possessions. But I think they need to be connected. Because fasting has everything to do with what we treasure in our hearts.

Do we pile up more and more material stuff? And once we have it, how much time and energy and money do we put into making enough room for it, and protecting it from moths and thieves? How easily do we justify to ourselves that we always need just a little bit more?

The practice of fasting calls us to confront our need to always have more, and to have it now. It reminds us how attached we are – even how addicted we are – to our possessions. I'd like to quote a paragraph from a book called *Soul Feast*, written by Marjorie Thompson. She writes:

This is why fasting remains so relevant for people of faith today. In a more tangible, visceral way that any other spiritual discipline, fasting reveals our excessive attachments and the assumptions that lie behind them. Food is necessary to life, but we have made it more necessary than God. How often have we neglected to remember God's presence when we would

never consider neglecting to eat! Fasting brings us face to face with how we put the material world ahead of our spiritual Source.

One reason why we run the other way if someone happens to talk about fasting is that we have the impression that all about guilt, or about torturing ourselves, or that's is saying that material things are evil.

But abstaining from food for a time is actually a path to freedom. It allows us to remember that everything—beginning literally with our daily bread—is a gift of God's good creation. It allows us to remember that we don't live by bread alone, but that God is the source of our life and strength. It reminds us that our ultimate hope isn't in material things but in the grace of God and the power of the Holy Spirit. It reminds us that an abundant life and an abundance of material possessions are not the same thing. Fasting is a way to reorient our lives, to call us to prayer and reflection, to call to our attention all the people in this world – and here in Dixon -- who are not hungry by choice. It calls us to treasure what God treasures, and tune our hearts to the heart of God.

So, shall we fast? If we say yes, then we need to ask how? The more I ponder this, the more it seems to me that as much as possible we should literally fast from eating food—if that's something we can safely do. I say this knowing that for medical reasons it's not advisable for everyone. And I would recommend seeking some practical guidance if you feel a call to begin. The chapter on fasting in the book by Marjorie Thompson that I quoted, *Soul Feast*, is a good and readable place to start. Richard Foster's classic book, *Celebration of Discipline*, also has a good chapter on fasting. They both recommend fasting

as a regular practice—maybe fasting once a week—because like any form of exercise the benefits don't come from just trying it once or twice. And like many spiritual practices, the difference it may make in us isn't always all that obvious in the short term.

There are other things that we might abstain from—but there's something unique about food. It's something that we literally can't live without, and we don't have to abstain from it very long to be aware of that. There aren't many things like that. So if you were to fast from your morning coffee, or the from Internet, or from shopping for new clothes—you would probably need to do it for a longer period of time for it to have the same impact. But the main thing is to break a pattern of saying "yes" to our impulses long enough to do the spiritual work that fasting is intended to do.

The bottom line is really this: What do you treasure? What is it that you truly cannot live without? The fast the Lord chooses is the one that opens our hearts to him and our eyes to his people. It allows us to search our hearts and to be honest with ourselves and God. Because where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. Amen.

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