

The Practices of Jesus: practicing resurrection

The practice of fasting

"Fasting is feasting on our Lord and doing his will." D. Willard

"Jesus takes it for granted that His disciples will observe the pious custom of fasting. Strict exercise of self-control is an essential feature of the Christian life. Such customs have only one purpose – to make the disciples more ready and cheerful to accomplish those things which God would have done."

Dietrich Bonhoeffer - The Cost of Discipleship

I) Read and reflect:

A) Below are excerpts on fasting from the *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook* by Adele Ahlberg Calhoun

Fasting has been part and parcel of the Judeo-Christian tradition for millennia. Scripture is replete with examples of people who fast for a variety of reasons.

Old Testament saints fasted at times of mourning and national repentance. They fasted when they needed strength or mercy to persevere and when they wanted a word from God (see 1 Samuel 7:6; Nehemiah 1:4; Esther 4:16). However, fasting was no magical guarantee that God would answer as the intercessor wanted. King David fasted when he wanted God to spare the life of Bathsheba's child, but the child died (2 Samuel 12:16–20).

Fasting was a normal practice for the Jews of Jesus' day. Jesus began his ministry with a forty-day fast. He also practiced fasting before healings and to overcome temptation. But he did not hold his followers to a strict régime of fasting (Matthew 4:2; Mark 2:18–19; Luke 5:33).

The New Testament church sometimes fasted when it sought God's will and needed the grace and strength to remain faithful to God's work. There were also fast times linked to times of worship (Acts 13:2–3).

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. Neither is fasting a spiritual way to lose weight or control others.

Fasting clears us out and opens us up to intentionally seeking God's will and grace in a way that goes beyond normal habits of worship and prayer. While fasting, we are one on one with God, offering him the time and attentiveness we might otherwise be giving to eating, shopping or watching television.

Fasting is an opportunity to lay down an appetite – an appetite for food, for media, for shopping. This act of self-denial may not seem huge – it's just a meal or a trip to the mall – but it brings us face to face with the hunger at the core of our being. Fasting exposes how we try to keep empty hunger at bay and gain a sense of well-being by devouring creature comforts. Through self-denial we begin to recognize what controls us. Our small denials of the self show us just how little taste we actually have for sacrifice or time with God.

B) Take a few moments to reflect and journal your thoughts and responses to these questions:

- What is your immediate reaction to the idea of fasting?
- Why do you think fasting is such a neglected faith practice?
- What have your experiences been - if any - with fasting?
- Do you think our lack of hunger for God may be connected to our unfamiliarity with any kind of hunger?

II) Practice It:

A) What kind of fast?

- Skip one meal during the day - a great way to start out and practice fasting.
- Fast from solid foods but drink fruit or vegetable juices as well as water for one day. This could mean you would eat dinner one day, then not eat solid food again until dinner the next day. You would be missing two meals.
- Fast from solid foods but drink water for 12 hours (from sunup to sundown)
- A 24-hour fast - this usually does involve some hunger pains or discomfort before the time is up, but the spiritual benefits can be rewarding.
- If a full food fast is not possible (e.g. health concerns), consider an abstinence fast - abstaining from certain foods (coffee, meat, carbs), from noise or talk (a silence fast), from technology and media, or other pre-occupying habits.

B) Practicalities around fasting:

- Do this intelligently (fast only under clear and safe conditions; get medical advice, as needed)
- If you have an eating disorder, do not fast without good counsel, support and accountability. Also if you are diabetic, pregnant or nursing, have a serious disease, find a form of abstaining to replace your fast.
- Don't fast if you are in a hurry and are fasting for immediate results regarding some decision. Fasting is not magic.

- work your way into this practice; start as you can. If you are new to fasting, begin by fasting from one meal.
- Stay hydrated. Always drink plenty of water and fluids.
- Work up to longer fasts. Don't attempt prolonged fasts without guidance. Check with your doctor before attempting longer periods of fasting.
- If you decide to fast regularly, give your body time to adjust to the new rhythms of eating. You may feel more tired on the days you fast. Adjust your responsibilities appropriately. (Expect your tongue to feel coated, and expect to have bad breath.)
- Begin a fast after supper. Fast until supper the next day. This way you miss two, rather than three meals.
- Don't break your fast with a huge meal. Eat small portions of food. The longer you fast, the more you need to break the fast gently.
- don't make a show of it (e.g. moan about how hungry you are or Instagram a fasting selfie)
- recognize we don't need that much food

C) What to do in the Time Set Apart for Fasting:

Think of all the time and energy invested in eating - planning a meal, preparing the meal, eating it, cleaning up from a meal. What are you going to do with all that time?

What we do in place of meals is crucial - use it to commune with God. As Richard Foster notes, "Fasting reminds us that we are sustained by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God. Food does not sustain us; God sustains us. Therefore, in experiences of fasting we are not so much abstaining from food as we are feasting on the word of God." Fasting, like all the practices, is designed to deepen our love for God and of others. If it's not doing that, something is off.

- Spend time reading and meditating (feeding) on God's word
- Enjoy time in quiet prayer. Bring to God any special personal concerns (decisions to be made, sins you struggle with, crises you face) or use the time to intercede for others.