

As usual, I didn't allow time enough in Sunday's sermon to say all I wanted to say – in this case, about the spiritual discipline of fasting. Please accept this as my *coda* on the subject.

A national fast for the people of God was commanded in the Mosaic Law, which set aside a single day – the Day of Atonement (a.k.a. *yom kippur*) – for its observance. Four additional annual fasts were later instituted in Israel, each to be exercised in sad commemoration of separate catastrophic events in the nation's history. These fasts were *compulsory*, and so had little to do with voluntary discipline.

By the time of Jesus, the Pharisees in Jerusalem had taken upon themselves two additional days of fasting every week, on Mondays and Thursdays. They made a great public show of their piety, applying white pancake makeup and donning ragged garments (shredded just for the occasion) before dragging their sad, anguished faces down the streets of the city to be seen, admired, and (probably) ridiculed by folk who weren't so "holy" as they fancied themselves to be. It was this kind of self-centered religion that Jesus referenced in **Matthew 6:16-18**. Note also, however, that He acknowledged fasting as a common practice among at least some of His followers.

"And when you fast, don't make it obvious, and the hypocrites do, who try to look pale and disheveled so people will admire them for their fasting. I assure you, that is the only reward they will ever get. But when you fast, comb your hair and wash your face. Then no one will suspect you are fasting, except the Father, who knows what you do in secret. And your Father, who knows all secrets, will reward you." NLT

We learn in Mark's gospel that some of the disciples of John the Baptizer apparently also fasted (without the theatrics, we hope). Early in His ministry Jesus was approached by unnamed persons who thought it strange that His disciples did not practice voluntary fasting.

One day some people came to Jesus and asked, "Why do John's disciples and the Pharisees fast, but Your disciples don't fast?" (Mark 2:18 NLT)

Jesus, the Master Rabbi who seized upon every question as a teachable moment, offered a pithy, provocative, and parabolic answer.

Jesus replied, "Do wedding guests fast while celebrating with the groom? Of course not. They can't fast while they are with the groom. But someday he will be taken away from them, and then they will fast." (Mark 2:19-20 NLT)

Buried in Jesus' answer is an implication – that He was the "bridegroom" of His parable – and an indication – that a time would come when His disciples would indeed have reason to fast – when He would be "taken away from them". In response to this the early church, with its institution of Lent, built fasting into the Christian tradition. Initially believers were expected to keep a partial fast on each of the 40 weekdays (which included Saturdays)

during the season. Only one meal, a vegetarian supper, was eaten each day. The fast was broken each Sunday, and soon the big Sunday dinner became a cherished family tradition.

Over the centuries the rules of Lenten fasting were relaxed, but only in the western church. Over the centuries, the Eastern Orthodox churches have remained consistently strict in this regard. In 1966 only Ash Wednesday and Good Friday – the first and last days of the Lenten season – were designated by the Pope as “official” fast days, though most Catholics and some mainline Protestants have retained to this very day the tradition of “giving up” something or other for the entire liturgical season.

The Reformers of the 15th century sought to purge from the Church all of the extra-biblical religious trappings added to it by Rome over the centuries, and for some Protestant groups – most particularly the Anabaptists – this overhaul included the dismissal of Lent altogether and the de-valuing of fasting as a worthwhile Christian practice.

Personally, I have come to see these as unfortunate over-reactions. I now fully embrace the observation of Lent in the Church as a valuable tool by which to spiritually prepare for the annual celebration of the death and resurrection of our Lord, and my thinking has been changed and my life enriched by those writers* who, beginning in the 1970’s, encouraged all believers to embrace anew the “classic” spiritual disciplines (fasting among them) as key components of a deep and vibrant by-faith Christian life.

In regards to fasting, one fact must be fully understood: Christian fasting has by definition a divine center – its focus must be intensely fixed upon the Triune God. The purpose of a fast must be to draw the one who is fasting nearer to God, and its ultimate outcome must bring Him glory. Any blessing I might receive through my fasting should be understood as a gift of God’s grace.

Also noteworthy:

(1) “Secular” fasts -- hunger strikes or diets – stand outside our consideration of spiritual disciplines. Their purpose may indeed possess positive social, political or medical value, but they cannot be construed as “Christian” fasts.

(2) If I enter into a fast in order to somehow “manipulate” God into answering my prayer, I may be guilty of sinful presumption.

*Richard Foster: *Celebration of Discipline* (1978), Dallas Willard: *The Spirit of the Disciplines* (1983), and Bob and Michael Benson: *Disciplines of the Inner Life* (1989) stand out as my personal favourites. The Benson’s book is arranged as an excellent (and challenging) one-year devotional but is, sadly, now out of print. I found my copy at *Wonder Book and Video* – one of our region’s greatest retail treasures!

Please allow me to share some common questions raised about fasting.

1. *Are Christians commanded in the Scriptures to fast?*

A: No.

2. *What is fasting actually supposed to accomplish?*

A: Dallas Willard writes: “Fasting confirms our utter dependence upon God by finding in Him a source of sustenance beyond food [*or beyond whatever it is from which we are fasting*]”.

3. *Well, then: should I fast?*

A: Only when you feel compelled to do so. Like all of the spiritual disciplines, the value of and the blessings attached to fasting are connected to the believer’s decision to voluntarily enter into it – as an act of worship – in order to draw closer to God – for any reason known only to him or her – by means of this spiritual discipline.

4. *When should I fast?*

A: As has been said, the season of Lent provides an excellent opportunity to institute a personal fast. Also, fasting has been utilized for centuries in the Church as an “added” component of prayer, particularly when the believer is truly striving with God in regards to a personal need, during a time of crisis, testing or grief, or when interceding on behalf of another.

Fasting also has merit when exercised as a deliberate, disciplined response to our Lord’s challenge to all who would be His disciples to “deny” themselves and follow Him.

5. *Is food the only thing one can fast from?*

A: Oh, my – no, indeed. In *Celebration of Discipline* Richard Foster suggests fasting from anything that has become an out-of-balance habit, if not an actual obsession, in one’s life – anything which you have decided that you “cannot live without”. Some examples: television, video games, the internet, your cell phone, shopping....anything (including food) that you choose to surrender to the Lord for a season in order to make room for a closer relationship with Him.