

ON THE FAST TRACK

Deepening Your Prayers

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Control is such an issue in interpersonal relationships!

Children, at a young age, begin to assert themselves, seeking to control their surroundings and the adults who serve them.

They beg, they whine, they demand attention and compliance. If their wishes are ignored, they move to tantrums and defiance,

Have you known such a child?

Were you such a child?

Who, here, met that child again in the last 24 hours, because you intended to fast until noon today? The mere consideration of fasting will rouse those childish responses, nearly every time.

Fast on Purpose

Isaiah 58 reveals the kind of fast that pleases God, and it not a matter of starving oneself or punishing oneself. It is not the fast from food that moves God's heart, but the fast from selfishness. To give...to God, and to give...to those in need — these are the results of a godly fast.

Fasting is about breaking that defiant childish spirit that is in each of us. And, like a wild horse, it *must* be broken for your life to become useful in God's Kingdom.

Fasting is also about subduing the selfish one — your flesh — by taking charge of its intake and making no provisions for its excessive satisfaction.

Only then, can fasting become about intentionally giving your attention to the Lord, and giving back to Him the control of your very life.

And, until you have given Him control, you have given Him nothing, for if He is not Lord of all, He is not Lord at all.

Jesus began His ministry — the great work of human salvation — by fasting. During that season in the desert, He was confronted by the adversary with various attempts to induce Him to cater to His human whims, to take things into His own hands, to turn His back on the call of God.

By His fasting, though His body was weak with hunger, His spirit became strong with passion for God and His mind became clear about the truth of God's Word.

How can a Christian who does not fast truly believe the One who said, "Man does not live by bread alone"? Fasting witnesses that our true nourishment is not earthly but heavenly. Fasting builds zeal for the Lord and His ways.

Fast for Power

The disciples of Jesus were confronted with a difficult case: a young man who suffered severe seizures, due to demonic influence. They wrestled to release him, as many of us would do — I imagine there was shouting, and pointing the finger in authoritative gestures, with loud and passionate commands to be still and get out — all without success.

The young man's father was beginning to lose hope. When he saw Jesus approaching, he desperately appealed to Him for help: "If you can do anything, please help him."

Puzzled, Jesus asked, "If *I* can do anything...?" Then He set Him straight, "If *you* can trust, all things are possible for him who trusts God."

With a word He commanded the spirit to leave, and with a shriek, it did just that. Dumbfounded and amazed, his disciples cornered him later and asked, "Why couldn't we drive it out?"

Mark 9:29 Jesus replied, "This kind can be cast out only by prayer and fasting."

All of us have had the miserable experience of praying ineffective prayers (unless you have not prayed at all). It is quite possible to pray earnestly, and even make a great commotion, and still have only the form, but lack the power.

Prayer and fasting are the lever and fulcrum of the spiritual life. You have an idea about leverage, but what is a fulcrum, you ask?

"Give me a lever long enough, and a fulcrum strong enough, and single-handed I can move the world," said Archimedes.

A fulcrum is the prop or support on which a lever rests and pivots to move a load. The position of the fulcrum, relative to the positions of the load and effort, determines the mechanical advantage and effect of the lever.

If you should need to move a large rock that is too heavy for you to lift, a lever and fulcrum can enable you to move that too-heavy load.

Another example is the seesaw. To lift another person off the ground with only your arms or legs could be difficult, but to lift them on a seesaw is relatively easy. That is the advantage a fulcrum gives.

Fasting is prayer's fulcrum. By adding fasting to your prayers, you can multiply their effectiveness. It was fasting that gave Jesus sufficient spiritual focus and power to resist the devil during those days in the wilderness until the adversary gave up and went away. It made Him weak in the flesh, but strong in the spirit.

Fast as Practice

The practice of fasting, as the first disciples did it, has largely been lost or abandoned.

The Roman Catholic Church distorted its practice, and fasting became primarily a means of atonement, penance, and self-punishment, or for earning spiritual merit.

The Protestant Reformers wisely abandoned the idea of gaining merit with God, but retained the notion of self-atonement, and now it has been generally abandoned.

Today, fasting may be more widely practiced for its mere physical benefits, than anything spiritual.

Sadly, we are the losers for this decline.

Jesus once said to the Pharisees, *“You are careful to tithe the mint, the dill, and the cumin, but you ignore the more important matters of the Law — justice, mercy, and faith. You should tithe, yes, but you should not leave undone the more important things.”* (Matthew 23:23)

The same could be said of fasting — it is one of the weightier matters of the spiritual life that is often overlooked, while we scrupulously contend that a style of worship or version of the Bible or manner of praying is what really matters.

After all, fasting is inconvenient and it is uncomfortable. It does not please my taste or my smell. And nothing is more disturbing to the eye of a hungry person than an empty dinner plate!

I believe we *must* regain this spiritual habit, free of the encumbrance of false objectives or superficial applications.

If sin entered this world through eating what was forbidden, surely we can begin to undo sin’s grip on us by refusing to eat what is granted.

Fasting withers sensual desire and gives the Holy Spirit opportunity to develop the fruit of self-control.

As long as we must live in this fleshly tent, our life of worship must involve heart, mind, *and* body. The Lord’s Supper reminds us that our communion with God and our worship are not only spiritual, but also physical (we touch and taste and smell the wafer and the cup). So, also, is fasting.

A friend and former pastor in Marin, said that fasting is a matter of giving up something that is good. Giving up something that is bad is called repentance. Fasting gives up something that is good for something that is better: the personal knowledge and experience of the glory of God.

The Fasted Life

Long ago, God’s prophet said, *“Obedience is better than sacrifice”* (1 Samuel 15:22), meaning that routine obedience is preferred by God to occasional or sporadic sacrifice.

The practice of fasting should become routine, along with Bible reading, prayer, and gathering for worship. It shouldn’t be reserved for one time in your life or one month of the year, but should be a part of every week.

How can that be? Will I have to leave my family and career to join a monastery or a convent? Nonsense. You can lead a very active and engaged life and still live a “fasted life.”

One of the reasons most of us fast so seldom, is that we imagine it must be done as an all-consuming act if it is to be done at all. Therefore, grievously, most of us choose not to do it at all.

Some of us have just undertaken a 24-hour fast. This is one of those “all-consuming” methods of fasting. Drink water, but do not eat three consecutive meals. If we link them to praying, such fasts

can be effective, but they do not represent the fasted life. They are, of necessity, occasional and emphatic —unusual efforts that have their place.

The fasted life, however, is about everyday experience. It is a way of fasting that is more like breathing — regular and consistent.

When we run, we must breathe harder and deeper to support the effort. 24-hour fasts, or 3-day, or 2-week fasts, similarly, lend support to an unusual spiritual effort of renewal.

But if we ceased breathing between sprints, we would pass out or die. Neither can we afford, spiritually, to cease from the fasted life between seasons of personal renewal.

The early church fathers identified four degrees of eating: (1) temperance or self-control (ceasing to eat when you are still somewhat hungry), (2) sufficiency (ceasing to eat when you are neither hungry nor weighed down by the meal), (3) satiety (ceasing to eat when you are slightly weighed down by the food), and (4) gluttony (continuing to eat after you are full).

In the fasted life, a follower of Christ may eat every day, but not to fullness. Take a smaller portion than your eyes would claim. Push away from the table while you still want one more mouthful. Generally avoid foods that are eaten solely for the enjoyment of their taste. In this way, you may retain your physical strength and energy, yet keep the fast ever before you. You may fast in this way one or more days every week, without suffering harm.

Some would prefer to skip one meal each day — not by accident or over-busyness, but intentionally, to give their attention to God.

Others would routinely fast one day each week, as many Christians once did.

Whatever you choose as a starting plan, couple your fasting with prayer. Fasting sobers the mind and temperament for prayer, generating a clarity and focus that little else can provide.

*Isaiah 40:30 Even youths will become weak and tired,
and young men will fall in exhaustion.
31 But those who trust in the Lord will find new strength.
They will soar high on wings like eagles.
They will run and not grow weary.
They will walk and not faint.*

Prayer and fasting are the two wings that lift us high in the Spirit and enable us to soar with God above the world around us.

Will you choose to practice a fasted life? Your calling, your spiritual destiny depends on it.