

4. THE DISCIPLINE OF FASTING

The central idea in fasting is the voluntary denial of an otherwise normal function for the sake of intense spiritual activity. There is nothing wrong with any normal life-functions; it is simply that there are times when we set them aside in order to concentrate. When we view fasting from this perspective, we can see its reasonableness as well as its broader dimensions. The Bible deals with fasting in regard to food, but allow me to take the central principle and apply it to other aspects of contemporary culture.*

First, there is a need today to learn to fast from people. We have a tendency to devour people, and we usually get severe heartburn as a result. I suggest that we must learn to fast from people not because we are antisocial, but precisely because we love people intently and because, when we are with them, we want to be able to do them good and not harm. The Discipline of solitude and the Discipline of community go hand in hand. Until we have learned to be alone, we cannot be with people in a way that will help them, for we will bring to that relationship our own scatteredness. Conversely, until we have learned to be with people, being alone will be a dangerous thing, for it will cut us off from hurting, bleeding humanity.

Second, let us learn to fast from the media at times. It has always amazed me that many people seem incapable (or at least unwilling) to go through an entire day while concentrating on a single thing. Their train of thought is constantly broken up by this demand and that—the newspaper, the radio, the television, the magazines. No wonder so many people feel fractured and fragmented. Obviously, there is a time for the media, but there is also a time to be without

*Some of the following ideas have appeared in a somewhat different form in another book of mine, *Freedom of Simplicity* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981), pp. 138–139.

the media. Parents send their children to summer camp and the children come back thrilled because “God spoke to me!” What happened at camp was this: they simply were freed of enough distractions for a long enough period of time that they were able to concentrate. We too can do that through the course of our ordinary days.

Third, I would suggest times of fasting from the telephone. The telephone is a wonderful invention, but it must not control us. I have known people who stop praying in order to answer the telephone! I want to let you in on a secret: you are under no obligation to answer that gadget every time it rings. In our home, when we are eating or when I am reading stories to the children, we do not answer the telephone because I want my boys to know they are more important than any phone call. And it is terribly offensive to interrupt an important conversation just to answer a machine.

Fourth, I would like to suggest the Discipline of fasting from billboards. I still remember the day I was driving on the Los Angeles freeway system when, all of a sudden, I realized that for one solid hour my mind had been dominated by the billboards. Now when I suggest that we fast from billboards, I do not mean that we should refrain from looking at them. But I do suggest that the billboard should become a signal to us of another reality. When the ad man shouts his four-letter obscenity, “More, more, more,” let it remind us of another four-letter word, a rich, full-bodied word, “Less, less, less.” When we are bombarded with bigger-than-life pictures of foxy ladies and well-fed babies, perhaps we can use those pictures to trigger in our minds another world, a world in which 460 million people are the victims of acute hunger (ten thousand of them will be dead by this time tomorrow), a world in which a million hogs in Indiana have superior housing to a billion people on this planet.

This leads me to my fifth and final suggestion concerning fasting, which is that we discover times to fast from our gluttonous consumer culture that we find so comfortable. For our soul’s sake, we need times when we go among Christ’s favorites—the broken, the bruised, the dispossessed—not to preach to them, but to learn from them. For the sake of our balance, our sanity, we need times when we are among those who, in the words of Mahatma Gandhi, live an “eternal compulsory fast.”

Fasting is a Spiritual Discipline ordained by God for the good of

the Christian fellowship. May God find our hearts open to this means of receiving grace.

Daily Scripture Readings

- Sunday: The example of Christ / Luke 4:1-13.
Monday: God's chosen fast / Isaiah 58:1-7.
Tuesday: A partial fast / Daniel 10:1-14.
Wednesday: A normal fast / Nehemiah 1:4-11.
Thursday: An absolute fast / Esther 4:12-17.
Friday: The inauguration of the gentile mission / Acts 13:1-3.
Saturday: The appointment of elders in the churches / Acts 14:19-23.

Study Questions

1. Check your first reaction to the thought of fasting:
_____ ough
_____ hmmm
_____ wow!
_____ ok
_____ freedom
_____ you have to be kidding
2. How does Christian fasting differ from the hunger strike and health fasting?
3. Define "a normal fast," "a partial fast," and "an absolute fast."
4. What is the primary purpose of fasting?
5. How can fasting reveal what controls your life?
6. What is most difficult about fasting for you?
7. Fast for two meals (twenty-four hours) and give the time saved to God. Record anything you learn from the experience.
8. Try fasting from the media for one week and see what you learn about yourself during that time.
9. Consider whether fasting is a cultural expression of Christian

faith only or whether it is an expression of faith for all cultures at all times.

10. In his day, John Wesley required that every minister ordained in the Methodist Church regularly fast two days a week. Discuss the implications that such a requirement would have in our day.

Suggested Books for Further Study

- Cartwright, Thomas. *The Holy Exercise of a True Fast*. London: 1610. (Written by a Puritan leader who was the first minister in England, after the Reformation, to make clear the important distinction between fasting for health purposes and fasting for spiritual purposes.)
- Ehret, Arnold. *Rational Fasting*. Beaumont, Tex.: Ehret Literature Publishing Co., 1971. (A consideration of fasting from the perspective of physical health and well-being.)
- Knox, John. *Order and Doctrine of a General Fast*. Edinburgh: 1565. (Written by the leader of the Scottish Reformation.)
- Prince, Derek. *Shaping History through Prayer and Fasting*. Old Tappan, N.J.: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1973. (Filled with many interesting historical examples, this study by a leader in the charismatic movement seeks to show the impact of fasting upon societies.)
- Rogers, Eric N. *Fasting: The Phenomenon of Self Denial*. Nashville, Tenn.: Thomas Nelson Inc., 1976. (A survey of fasting among the great religions of the world, including a study of fasting for political and health purposes.)
- Smith, David R. *Fasting*. Fort Washington, Penn.: Christian Literature Crusade, 1969. (An excellent study that includes the best bibliography to be had on fasting.)
- Smith, Fred W. *Journal of a Fast*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1972. (The journal notations of a blue-collar worker who undertook an extended fast. It is filled with human interest and practical wisdom, even though you may find some of his philosophical and theological comments strange.)
- Wallis, Arthur. *God's Chosen Fast*. Fort Washington, Penn.: Christian Literature Crusade, 1971. (In my opinion, the best single book on the market today that brings together the theory and the practice of Christian fasting.)