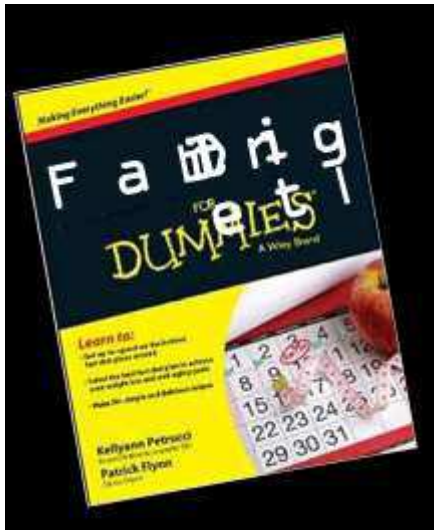




Fasting for Dummies

Vienna Presbyterian Church
The Rev. Dr. Peter G. James
Matthew 6:16-18

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There is no *Fasting for Dummies* book of which I am aware. The closest I can find is titled *Fast Diets for Dummies*. So, with a little editing, we can create another book to be included in this wildly popular series of beginner books on most any subject. In the past 25 years, 2000 different “dummy” books have been written. These “dummy” books are distinctive in their yellow and black design with “Dummy Man” on the cover.

I don't mean to insult you with this sermon on *Fasting for Dummies*, but vast numbers of Christians do not fast. It's one of the most misunderstood and neglected of all Scriptural practices. Chances are, you are among the overwhelming majority of Christians who have rarely, if ever, fasted. Incidentally, it doesn't really count if you have fasted before a medical procedure.

Jews fast from sunrise to sunset on Yom Kippur, also known as the Day of Atonement. Muslims are fasting right now in the month of Ramadan. So, what about Christians? Are we expected to fast?

Jesus speaks about fasting in his famous Sermon on the Mount. He begins with the words, “When you fast” (6:16). Notice, he doesn't say “if” you fast but “when” you fast. Jesus assumes his listeners will be fasting.

Jesus continues, “Do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to appear as though they are fasting” (6:16). If recognition is what they're after, he says, they have their reward in full. Jesus then seizes the moment to appeal for greater modesty and humility when it comes to fasting.

There's a play on words that is obvious in the Greek text. "They disfigure (aphanizo) their faces because they want to be seen (phanosin) by others."

Do not look somber as the hypocrites do for they **disfigure** (aphanizo) their faces to **show** (phanosin) others they are fasting. Mt. 6.16

Do you catch the irony? While they camouflage their identity, they also want to be seen by others.

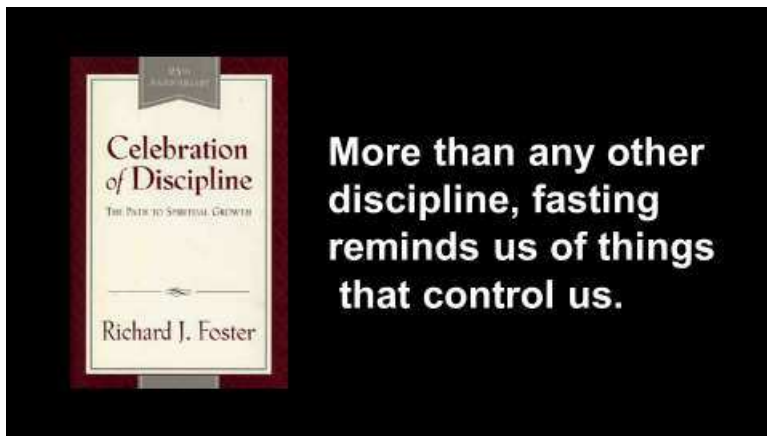
People in Scripture fast for any number of reasons. David fasts for the health of his gravely ill son (2 Samuel 12:16). Esther fasts before taking her bold request to the king (Esther 4:16). Paul and Barnabas fast over the choice of elders for churches in Asia Minor (Acts 14:23). And let's not forget that Jesus fasts in preparation for his messianic mission (Matthew 4:2).

Jews were expected to practice three primary acts of devotion back in the day. Jesus addresses all three in his sermon. In the first four verses of chapter 6, he talks about almsgiving or charity. In verses 5-15, he takes up prayer, the subject of last Sunday's sermon. And here, in verses 16-18, he speaks about fasting. I can understand how prayer and charity hold such privileged position, but fasting? Really?

Wait a minute. Food is ubiquitous; essential, for sure. But food can also assume exaggerated importance in our lives. Sometimes we medicate pain with food. Our language of "comfort food" is telling. We can become too attached to food.

Fasting is one way to detach from our preoccupation with food. When Jesus emerged from his 40 day fast and the devil tempted him to turn stones into bread, Jesus response is

classic: “Man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God” (Matthew 4:4).



Richard Foster writes in his book, *The Celebration of Discipline*: “More than any other discipline, fasting reminds us of things that control us.” Our bodily appetites can

exercise mastery over us. Fasting helps us bring these appetites under control. If the thought of skipping your next meal leaves you on-edge, it may indicate the level of control food has over us.

Let me add a qualifier here for those who suffer from eating disorders such as anorexia or bulimia. If you already suffer from an excessive desire to control your food intake, then fasting is not for you. You need, rather, to go all the way back to Genesis and feast on God’s goodness. The opening chapter of Scripture tells us that God gave us every plant and fruit tree for our enjoyment (1:29-30).

We have a major disconnect between our souls and bodies. We have come to believe that our souls matter to God and our bodies are rather immaterial. Maybe this explains why so many Christians are reckless about issues like food consumption and sexual addictions.

The predominant heresy that looms behind the writing of the New Testament is something called Gnosticism. Gnostics believed the soul was vastly superior to the body, so it really didn’t matter what you did with your body. Gnosticism is still a heresy in our day. We are not disembodied souls. We are souls in bodies.

Anthony Bourdain is a well-known chef and author who has hosted several TV series, such as “Parts Unknown.” His quote from his book *Kitchen Confidential* intrigues me: “Your life is not a temple, it’s an amusement park. Enjoy the ride.”

Bourdain has paid a heavy price for his amusement ride philosophy—everything from overeating and binge drinking to his addiction to drugs like heroin. This is a guy who partied hard and has paid the price. He would do well to treat his body more like a temple than an amusement park.

Paul writes in 1st Corinthians, “Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit?” (1 Corinthians 6:19). A temple is a place where God dwells. God dwells in our bodies through the Holy Spirit, God’s presence living in us. Our bodies are not immaterial to God. We do spirituality in a body. That’s why Paul concludes with the words, “Therefore, honor God with your bodies” (6:20).

Fasting is one way to engage and connect more deeply with God. Fasting is not meant to induce God to do things our way. It’s not a last-ditch effort to get through to God.

Fasting heightens our spiritual sensitivities so God can get through to us.



So what difference does this sermon on fasting mean in my life? Perhaps I have piqued your interest to engage in fasting as a spiritual practice. Okay, where to start? I would recommend starting small. Fast for one meal and redirect the energy you would expend on food preparation and consump-

3 recommendations:

- 1. Start small**
- 2. Redirect to a spiritual purpose**
- 3. Don't draw attention to yourself**

tion to a spiritual purpose. Develop a plan ahead of time about how you will spend this time. Let me take you back to last Sunday's sermon. Take a prayer walk to talk with God about

matters that concern you. Pray a Psalm. Use our devotional to reconnect with God.

Find a time for fasting that does not draw undue attention to what you are doing. If you are responsible for preparing meals for your family, pick an occasion when you are off duty. Tell only the people who need to know, per Jesus' instruction.

I'm not a veteran when it comes to fasting. I like my meals, so the thought of going without food challenges me to the core. I become irritable when I am hungry. One of the things this sermon has shown me is how attached I am to food. That said, I can testify to one tangible result of fasting in my life. Ordinary meals taste so much better after a fast. It helps me not to take simple, necessary things for granted.

There are occasions in Scripture where people fasted together to seek God's direction. The church in Antioch fasted to seek God's leading about their future mission. God led this church to set apart Paul and Barnabas for their mission that is described for us in the book of Acts (13:2-3). The greatest missionary expansion the church has ever known is the culmination of prayer and fasting.

God has a greater mission in store for us. In this season of renewal, why would we not come together in prayer and fasting to discern the mission God wants us to accomplish?

Maybe you are not yet persuaded about fasting from food. We can also fast from things other than food. Back in the 4th century, St. Augustine proposed a fast from quarreling. Maybe you can resolve not to argue with someone with whom you are feuding for a week or two.

Let me take you back to Youth Sunday last month. One senior, in his sermonette, spoke about fasting, of all things. He talked about his addiction to his cell phone and all the things that come with it—Facebook, texting, you know the drill. He decided to fast from social media for a few days. He was refreshed by the chance to unplug.



We need, periodically, to fast from our consumer culture. Why not fast from TV or your computer? If the mere suggestion makes you jumpy, it may be the ideal time for you to unplug.

Our VPC server crashed last week, so we've been without email for the last nine days. I couldn't read emails and there was nothing I could do about it. You know something? It was rather pleasurable to be unplugged. I rather enjoyed it.

How about fasting from complaining? This could be huge since some of us are notorious complainers. How about resolving, with God's help, not to complain about anything: traffic, weather, slow internet speed—nothing for the next week.

How about a fast from gossip? Consider this counsel from St. John Chrysostom, a 4th century pastor: "Let your ears fast

by not listening to evil talk and gossip. For what good is it if we abstain from birds and fishes, but bite and devour our brothers and sisters.”

How about a fast from bitterness or holding a grudge against someone? How about fasting from anger? How about fasting from self-pity? There’s no end to things to detach from so we can become reconnected to God.

Fast from quarreling; feast on harmony. Fast from complaining; feast on giving compliments. Fast from gossip; feast on appreciation. Fast from bitterness; feast on forgiveness. Fast from anger; feast on patience. Fast from self-pity; feast on compassion. Fast from food; feast on God.

