

How come no one fasts anymore?

Recently, I had a conversation with a family member about fasting. He was saying that fasting had become a “thing of the past”, observing that this was the case not only in his life, but in most churches. He's right. But here's the question. Should it be a thing of the past, or is there a place, a rightful place for fasting in the 21st century Church of Jesus Christ?

My nephew was honest enough to tell me that he personally, had become so accustomed (perhaps a bit spoiled) by our relatively opulent lifestyle as to doubt whether or not he *could* fast were he led to!

I told him that I had an article on fasting, which article I found to be the best contemporary treatment of the subject that I'd seen. He asked if it was up on my website. After my initial and momentary embarrassment, I said, “No, but I'll fix that right away.”

So here I share with you, a downloaded (with permission) article by David Feddes of the *Back to God Hour* radio ministry. It is entitled, “Hungry for God”.

The article exists in three parts. Following is part 1. Keep your eyes open for parts two and three, which we will post in the next two consecutive weeks. This will give you time to read each one several times before moving on to the next; digesting it, so to speak. ☺

Obviously, I recommend it! Enjoy.

HUNGRY FOR GOD

O God, you are my God, earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you, my body longs for you. Psalm 63:1

What New Year's resolution is more common than any other? Quite a few people resolve to stop smoking, and some resolve to be kinder or to improve their character, but the number one New Year's resolution is to go on a diet.

Dieting is number one in resolutions made--and in resolutions broken!

Millions of people resolved to diet, but only a few resolve to fast. Dieting and fasting both involve saying no to food, but the goals are different. A diet restricts food for physical reasons; a fast restricts food for spiritual reasons.

Why do so many people resolve to diet and so few resolve to fast? It seems we care more about the physical than about the spiritual.

Millions of us diet because we are concerned about our health or our

appearance or both. We want to live longer and healthier. We want to look better. And that's fine. In a society where two thirds of the people are overweight and one third are classified as obese, it's not a bad idea to change our eating habits and get our weight under control. If you want to lose weight in order to be physically fit, that's a good goal.

But it's not the best goal. The best goal is godliness: to know God better and better, to find forgiveness and freedom from sin, to thrive in your spirit through God's life in you, to become more like God in your character, and to advance God's agenda more effectively. Fasting is an important way to grow in all these aspects of godliness. Physical fitness "is of some value," says the Bible, "but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come" (1 Timothy 4:8). Because godliness is the highest goal we can have, and because fasting is a powerful aid to godliness, a resolution to engage in fasting is much more valuable than a resolution to start dieting. What is fasting? It's going without food for a period of time, or going without some other good thing for a period of time, in order to seek God. How can fasting help godliness? How can skipping meals now and then help you taste more of God? We might not be able to figure out exactly how it works, but the Bible leaves no doubt about the value of fasting.

Key People, Key Moments

The list of God's people who fasted is a Who's Who of greatness and godliness. Moses fasted. The prophet Elijah fasted. Daniel fasted. Queen Esther fasted. Anna the prophetess fasted. Jesus fasted. The apostles and members of the early church fasted. Christians of later centuries fasted. Francis of Assisi fasted. John Calvin, Martin Luther, John Wesley, and Jonathan Edwards fasted and encouraged personal and communal fasting. The list of men and women of God who fasted goes on and on. Even if it's not clear to us

exactly how fasting can aid godliness, this much is clear: fasting figured in the lives of many giants of godliness.

Fasting has been important to key people, and fasting has been prominent at key moments. Moses was fasting when he met God on Mount Sinai and received the Ten Commandments. The prophet Elijah was fasting when God spoke to him in a still, small voice after Elijah had almost given up on life. King Jehoshaphat and the people of Judah were fasting when the Lord caused the massive military forces that were invading their land to turn on each other and self-destruct. The city of Nineveh was fasting after the prophet Jonah said the city would be destroyed for its evil, and God decided to spare the city. Queen Esther and her people were fasting when she took action to stop a plot against the Jewish people. Anna was fasting when God gave her the opportunity to see the baby Jesus. Jesus was fasting when the Holy Spirit sent him into the wilderness for a showdown with Satan, and Jesus decisively defeated the tempter. Jesus' followers were fasting when the Holy Spirit directed them to send Paul and Barnabas as missionaries.

To look at it another way, here are a few “what ifs.” What if, the Ten Commandments had never been received by Moses? We would not know God's charter for human conduct. What if Jesus had not resisted Satan and overcome the tempter? All of humanity would have been lost. What if Paul and the other apostles had not taken the gospel of Christ to the wider world? Most nations would not know Jesus and the way of salvation in him. But these “what ifs” didn't happen. Instead, God's will was accomplished, and it happened in connection with fasting.

If fasting was practiced by such key people at such key moments, can we afford to neglect fasting? If the Son of God himself chose to fast when he confronted the tempter, can we afford to ignore fasting? If the apostles of Jesus

fasted when they wanted to get closer to God in worship and when they needed to find out the next step in God's mission strategy, can we afford to ignore fasting?

Fasting helps people get closer to God and to do great things for God. Receiving the Commandments, hearing God's quiet voice, surviving enemy attacks, being pardoned for terrible sins, defeating Satan, getting the Holy Spirit's guidance for advancing God's mission and changing the world—this is what God has done among people who fasted, and what God will still do through people who seek his face by fasting.

Please don't misunderstand. Fasting is not magic. The real power is not in fasting itself but in God. In fact, not all fasting is right or helpful. There are wrong ways of fasting, just as there are wrong ways of praying and wrong ways of giving to good causes and wrong ways of doing almost anything. But this doesn't change the fact that fasting, done properly and in the right spirit, is a powerful aid to godliness.

Fasting is so important and so neglected that we're going to spend six programs on what the Bible says about fasting. On today's program, we're going to see that the main point of fasting, on which all else depends, is to be hungry for God. In later programs, we'll see how people who are hungry for God may also fast when they are hungry for mercy after they have sinned, when they are hungry for holiness as they long to be more like Jesus, when they are hungry for help in the face of overwhelming challenges, when they are hungry for guidance to find out the next step in God's plan for them, and when they are hungry for justice and want people to treat each other fairly. All these are purposes and benefits of fasting, but the first and most basic is to be hungry for God.

Our Emptiness, God's Fullness

Fasting is where our emptiness meets God's fullness. Every one of us is made in such a way that nothing can fully satisfy our hearts except God himself. If you've tasted even a little of God and his love, you prize the Lord more than anything else, and you hunger for even more of him. Psalm 63 puts this longing for God into words: "O God, you are my God, earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you, my body longs for you... Because your love is better than life, my lips will glorify you... My soul will be satisfied as with the riches of foods; with singing lips my mouth will praise you" (Psalm 63:1-5). Fasting expresses a longing for God so strong that even the body pines for him. When God feeds this longing with his nearness and goodness, it's better than the finest feast.

Fasting is not just a self-improvement project or a way to impress others. Real fasting is turning attention away from self and from others and paying attention to God. The moment fasting loses its God-ward focus, fasting loses its value. Jesus affirmed fasting, but he warned against doing it for show. In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said,

"When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to men that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

Notice that Jesus doesn't say "If you fast..." He says, "When you fast." Jesus assumes his followers will fast. He warns against doing it in the wrong way and for the wrong motives, but he does not do away with fasting altogether. He takes it for granted that his followers will fast, and he directs us to focus our fasting on God.

In Jesus' time, some people had turned fasting into a religious showcase, a way of impressing others. The Pharisees usually fasted two days a week, on Mondays and Thursdays. Those days served the Pharisees' purpose well. Mondays and Thursdays were market days, and that meant bigger crowds to notice them and to admire the holiness and uprightness of their fasting. The Pharisees timed their fasting to be noticed by as many people as possible, and they made sure everybody would know they were fasting by looking as hungry and miserable as possible.

Religion can be a terrible thing. Even the best of things can be corrupted. Fasting can be corrupted. Prayer can be corrupted. Giving money for good causes can be corrupted. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus warns not only against fasting to impress others but also against praying for show and against making donations in order to get recognition. Giving, praying, and fasting are all excellent, but the more excellent something is, the worse it becomes when sin and Satan turn it away from God toward self-centeredness. C. S. Lewis pictures the senior demon Screw tape telling fellow tempters, "All said and done, my friends, it will be an ill day for us if what most humans mean by 'religion' ever vanishes from the Earth. It can still send us the truly delicious sins. The fine flower of un-holiness can grow only in the close neighborhood of the Holy. Nowhere do we tempt so successfully as on the very steps of the altar."

The Pharisees made at least three huge mistakes in their approach to fasting.

Their first mistake was that they cared more about impressing the people around them than about their relationship with God. They succeeded in getting people to admire their piety, but in the process they offended God.

Their second mistake was that when they did think of God in connection with fasting, they saw fasting as a way to score points with God (Luke 18:12). They

thought they could earn God's acceptance by their own efforts, rather than admitting their sinfulness and trusting in God's mercy as an undeserved gift. Their third mistake was that they treated fasting as an exercise in misery. Not only did they look as hungry and sad as possible in order to impress others with their fasting, not only did they think that their hunger pangs would put God in their debt, but they treated the whole enterprise of relating to God as a sorrow to endure rather than a delight to savor. When Jesus warned against looking miserable when we fast, when he told us to look well-groomed, healthy, and happy instead, he wanted to prevent fasting as a way of showing off, but he also wanted to prevent us from viewing fasting as misery in the first place. The main point of fasting is not for the body to hunger but for the soul to feast.

Fasting Is Feasting

Richard Foster says in his book *Celebration of Discipline*, "We are told not to act miserable when fasting because, in point of fact, we are not miserable... In experiences of fasting we are no so much abstaining from food as we are feasting on the word of God. Fasting is feasting!" Fasting is all about seeking and finding satisfaction in God. Fasting is a way to experience the fact that "man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God" (Matthew 4:4). Fasting gives up certain pleasures for a time but only in order to enjoy greater pleasures of communion with God.

I love to eat, but even my love of eating teaches me the value of fasting. Let me explain. Sometimes my love of eating prevents me from eating one thing so that I can eat something else that I enjoy even more. For example, I like salads and potatoes, but I'm crazy about barbecued ribs. If I'm at a meal with lots of barbecued ribs available, I might skip the salad and take fewer potatoes so that I have more room in my stomach to eat lots of barbecued ribs. Or if I'm eating a meal that I like okay but know that a delicious dessert is coming, I might eat

less of the main course and save room for a big piece of dessert. Now, when I take less of one food in order to enjoy more of a food I prefer, should I put on a sad face or act like I'm making a huge sacrifice? Of course not! I'm just limiting a lesser pleasure to enjoy more of a greater pleasure.

Limiting a lesser pleasure to enjoy more of a greater pleasure—that's a basic principle of fasting. If you decide to fast and skip some meals in order to seek closer communion with God, you are giving up a lesser pleasure to enjoy a greater pleasure. In fasting, you skip some physical food to make room for more spiritual food, much as you skip one part of a meal to make more room for your favorite part. During a period of fasting, the point is not merely to put yourself through anguish but to expand your capacity to enjoy God. The pleasures of the stomach are lessened to savor the pleasures of the soul. Fasting redirects your appetite from food to God, in the confidence that God is more enjoyable than eating. The Bible speaks of people "whose god is their stomach" (Philippians 3:19). If your god is your stomach, if your physical appetites rule your life, you can't imagine anything better than good food, good sex, good movies, good games, and whatever else you enjoy doing. But if your God is the Lord revealed in Jesus, you see things differently. You see food, sex, fun, and games as good gifts from him, but you know God as the supreme good. You are willing to limit lesser goods to enjoy the greatest good. You'd rather enjoy growing fellowship with God than unlimited physical pleasure and prosperity. As King David once prayed, "You have filled my heart with greater joy than when their grain and new wine abound" (Psalm 4:7). Fasting is a way to seek that "greater joy," to be hungrier for God than for anything else, to delight yourself in the Lord and receive the desires of your heart (Psalm 37:4).

Fasting is feasting on the delights of God.

Fasting is a physical expression of spiritual desire. When you fast, you say to

God, “I want you with my whole being—spirit and body.” You echo Psalm 63:1, “O God, you are my God, earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you, my body longs for you.” Fasting says to God, “You are my everything—the joy of my spirit, the health and happiness of my body. I enjoy your gift of food, but I enjoy the Giver even more, and for this little while, I abstain from the gift to seek the Giver.”

Never fast for the sake of fasting; fast for the sake of God. When you’re not fasting, enjoy your food to the full as a reason to delight in the heavenly Father who gave you that food. Don’t feel guilty about an extra helping now and then or a scrumptious hot fudge brownie. Enjoy those God-given pleasures with a clear conscience, but keep your focus on the Giver. Godly fasting helps to make food and other pleasures all the more enjoyable when you’re not fasting, because you are better able to enjoy not only the pleasure itself but the additional pleasure of experiencing it as a special gift from God’s loving hand and as another reason to delight in God.

One thing I dislike about modern dieting is the way it treats many delicious foods more as enemies than as delightful gifts from a good God. Another thing I dislike is that much of the appeal of dieting springs from a view that being thin is one of life’s highest goals. Thinness is not next to godliness. You’d be better off knowing how to fast and how to feast, even if you gained a few extra pounds. In most cases, a rigid diet will do less for your relationship with God than simply being able to relax and relish God’s gift of food, and then to take a break from food for a special time to savor nothing but God himself. Dieting may be okay in some circumstances, but many of us might be better off if we simply ignored the diet programs and learned more about feasting and about fasting.

Getting Started

On upcoming programs we're going to talk about special fasting for special occasions with particular goals in mind, but for now let's think about a basic pattern of fasting with the overall goal of drawing closer to God.

A good place to start is with a 24-hour fast once a week. This isn't a legal requirement. It's just a simple, doable way to begin fasting regularly. It's a way to express your ongoing hunger for God and to seek satisfaction in him.

In a 24-hour fast, eat no food after the evening meal of one day until the evening meal of the next day. In other words, skip breakfast and lunch and any snacks, and take in nothing but water in the 24 hours between those evening meals. Use the time you would have spent on breakfast and lunch as special times of prayer, scriptural meditation, and fellowship with God.

Commit yourself to making this a part of your weekly pattern for the next month, or the next three months, and see what happens. It will be hard at times, but if you stick with it, you'll taste enough blessings that you won't want to give it up.

For most people, a 24-hour fast on a weekly basis won't hurt your health and may even help it a bit. But here's a note of caution: if you have a medical condition such as diabetes or hypoglycemia or ulcers or heart trouble, or if you are pregnant and are eating for two people, you probably should not fast—certainly not without your doctor's approval. Also, if you've had an eating disorder such as anorexia, fasting is not a good idea for you—at least not fasting from food.

But even if you can't fast in the ordinary way by abstaining from food, there are other ways to fast. Some people abstain from television, radio, and music for a period of time as their form of fasting and seeking God. God may lead you to fast by giving up some other legitimate pleasure for a time, such as golfing or something else you enjoy. Use the time you would have otherwise

spent on that activity to focus on God. Let your time of abstaining from the gift remind you that the Giver is more precious than any of his gifts.

Fasting helps to break through complacency. It sharpens your senses and appetites. It gets you out of a drowsy rut and makes you more alert to God. Fasting is not a discipline that stands on its own. Fasting is a special aid to the more basic spiritual disciplines of prayer, Bible reading, solitude, and meditation.

Prayer is important every day and at all times, not just when you're fasting. But combining prayer with fasting can enhance your prayers. Prayerful communion with God becomes all the better as fasting helps your spirit becomes more attuned to the Spirit of God directing your prayers.

Reading the Bible must be part of your everyday pattern of walking with God. Listen faithfully to God's instruction each day, not just on days when you're fasting. But combining fasting with Bible reading on certain days can open your mind to biblical insights that you didn't see when you weren't fasting.

Solitude and meditation—just turning off all the noise, leaving behind all activity, and focusing in silence on God—this is important for revitalizing your soul in a noisy, over-stimulated society, and this should be done more frequently than you fast. A quiet time every day is ideal. You shouldn't fast every day, but on some days fasting can be an excellent aid to solitude. As quiet solitude blocks out the usual sounds and sights that surround you, fasting blocks out smells and tastes that are part of your usual routine. This focuses you even more exclusively on God.

As fasting makes you more receptive to God, it also makes you more aware of yourself and of things that might be blocking you from God. Sometimes fasting can be very uncomfortable and bring out things in you that you don't like. But even such unpleasant discoveries serve your greater joy by identifying things

that you can seek God's help in changing.

So while many people are making and breaking resolutions to diet, how about making a resolution to fast? Join Jesus and other heroes of faith in seeking God's face by fasting. Get hungry for God.

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