

“Fasting as Feasting”

John Ortberg

"When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show others they are fasting. Truly I tell you, 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 others 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."

These are the words of Jesus. Fasting. What a weird idea. Why in the world would anybody want to do that? Why would you be hungry and not eat right away? Why would you have an appetite and not immediately satisfy it? Who would ever deliberately deny themselves something? Isn't the road to the good life making sure any time you have a craving for anything you find a way to get it with the shortest delay possible?

If you've ever been a parent, you know the number one rule of parenting is, "Make sure your kid always gets whatever they want the moment they want it." You know, if you're looking for a good potential spouse or a good potential employee, the number one quality is look for somebody who demands the immediate gratification of their every desire.

So fasting is really weird. I'm not going to try to talk anybody into giving it a shot. You're not going to want to do it. I know. It a strange, ancient practice that has no place in our enlightened world. It is for little, emaciated monks in loincloths who just enjoy being miserable. But Jesus did cover it in the Sermon on the Mount, so we have to talk about it.

In fact, it's not just Jesus. If you look at people in the Bible who fasted, it's kind of like a "Who's Who" of Scripture. Moses fasted. So did King David, Elijah, Ezra the priest, and prophets like Zechariah, Jeremiah, Amos. Isaiah called for a great fast that would be connected to social justice and care for the hungry and the poor. When Esther had to risk her life by protesting to the king of Persia, she first went with her friends to spend three days in fasting and prayer and called every Israelite to do the same. On Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, all of Israel would fast in repentance for their sin.

Then in the New Testament, an old woman named Anna was actually prepared to recognize the baby Jesus by a lifetime of prayer and fasting. John the Baptist fasted. Jesus himself began his ministry with 40 days of fasting and prayer. I know. *You* don't need to fast; I just have to tell you what's in the Bible. When the apostle Paul met Jesus, he fasted for three days. Then later, the early church worshiped with fasting and prayer when the Holy Spirit told them to commission Paul for ministry. Then later Paul would fast and pray to identify elders for the churches he began.

Fasting is associated in the Bible with repentance from sin. Fasting is associated in the Bible with great breakthroughs in prayer and life. Fasting in the Bible is often a part of worship, often accompanies

requests for guidance. I'll tell you how highly fasting was regarded in this weird world of the Bible. You might remember this story.

Jonah went to preach at Nineveh. He didn't want to go. He tried to run away, got swallowed by a whale and regurgitated. He preached in Nineveh the worst sermon in history. "Forty days, and Nineveh will be overthrown." That was his whole sermon. There was nothing about God, grace, or what to do, but look at the response. *"The Ninevites believed God. A fast was proclaimed, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth."*

This is a pagan city. On their first day of faith, they are fasting. Not just that, the king of Nineveh issued a proclamation: *"Do not let people or animals, herds or flocks, taste anything; do not let them eat or drink. But let people and animals be covered with sackcloth. Let everyone call urgently on God."* It was not just the pagan foreigners. Their animals are fasting! The animals are probably not happy about this, but they're fasting.

About the only characters in the book of Jonah who *don't* fast are Jonah and the whale. Actually, the whale does kind of a reverse fast when he gets rid of Jonah, so really it's only Jonah. I know, I know, I know. You do *not* need to do this, but just out of curiosity, why was fasting such a big deal in the ancient world? In fact, it wasn't even invented in the Bible. It was practiced by sages like Confucius. In ancient Greece, Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle all fasted. It was considered a helpful practice for human flourishing.

In the Bible and then particularly with Jesus, it becomes a way to experience and depend on the reality of the kingdom, the presence, and power of God in ways we'll see. Fasting is simply the practice of abstaining from food, possibly drink, possibly other things, for a period of time. You could decide how long that period is. It has to involve a long enough time to experience some hunger. Like the time between breakfast and lunch does not count as a fast.

Now I first began to fast about 30 years ago when I began to see how much the Bible has to say about it, but I did not want to do this. I'll say a word about this, because some of you may have the same thoughts. I love food! I love butter. I love chocolate, spaghetti, hamburgers, cheesecake, crème brûlée. I love peanut butter, hot cinnamon rolls, barbecue spare ribs. I love freshly baked bread. I love Krispy Kreme, In-N-Out, and Armadillo Willy's. I love Orville Redenbacher, Betty Crocker, Colonel Sanders, Mrs. Butterworth, Chef Boyardee, and the Pillsbury Doughboy. These are some of my heroes!

Now fasting doesn't mean it's wrong to love food. Food is good. Food is God's idea. Jesus tells us in the Sermon on the Mount to pray, *"Give us today our daily bread."* But our desires need to be disciplined, or they become our gods. The first thing I noticed the first time I fasted was I got really hungry. I realized how much my body insists on having its way. I began to learn about the kind of grip food has on my life.

I discovered how I might use food, drink, or some other substance to try to comfort my flesh, to avoid having to face boredom, the fear of something, a lack of self-worth, inner emptiness, or a feeling that my work does not have value. I began to learn this when I fast. Then there is this. In fasting, I began to discover it's possible to have an unsatisfied appetite and still survive. Wow!

Eventually, I *can* learn it's possible to have an unsatisfied appetite and thrive! I can learn in small ways the art of suffering happily. I know. You don't need this. I know. But it's very interesting. A few blocks

from where I'm speaking right now, at Bing Nursery School, one of the famous research studies of the twentieth century got conducted. It's now called the "Marshmallow Test."

Researchers would give a marshmallow to a 5-year-old then tell them if they could resist the temptation to eat it for a period of time they would get *two* marshmallows. It was something like Genesis 3 for kindergartners. "You must not eat of the marshmallow of good and evil." Then we watched the ancient human struggle between appetite and self-control. Take a look.

[Video]

Female: Okay, sit in that chair. All right. Here's the deal. Here's a marshmallow for you. You can either wait, and I'll give you another one if you wait, or you can eat it now. When I come back I'll give you another one, so then you'll have two. Stay in here, and stay in the chair till I come back. Okay?

Boy: Okay.

[multiple boys and girls are shown trying to decide whether to eat or to wait]

Female: All right.

All right. So I'm going to leave, and then I'll come back. Okay? So you can either eat it right now or you can wait. Either way, okay?

Girl: Okay.

[girl eats the marshmallow right away]

[video cuts back to the original boy]

Female: How'd you do? Did you do good? You did?

Boy: Yeah.

Female: You *wanted* to eat it, didn't you? Yeah. Did I tell you I'd give you another one? Okay. Now you can have both. You can eat them.

[boy happily shoves both marshmallows in his mouth]

[End of video]

I love that video! I don't know what your marshmallow is. Maybe it's pride. Maybe it's a wrong relationship. Maybe it's gossip. Maybe it's money. Maybe it's being judgmental. We'll talk about that in a few weeks. Maybe it's indulging resentment. I know what temptation does is it whispers, "You're entitled.

You have been working so hard. You have already resisted so much. Your spouse doesn't understand you. You're entitled to be happy. What you want is not that bad. What you want will feel so good."

See, the children in this study were learning to do a tiny little 15-minute fast. What's remarkable is the children who at the age of 5 were able to say no to the marshmallow grew up to have healthier bodies, they did better at school, they were more successful in their work, they had more stable relationships, and they had fewer problems with substance abuse.

Fasting is a little practice God gives that can help you be in charge of your body instead of the other way around. This is a great time to talk about the role of spiritual disciplines in the life of a disciple. Paul wrote once about athletes trying to win a great contest. He said, "**Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it** [that is, go into strict training] **to get a crown that will not last, but we do it...**" We do...what? We go into strict training **"...to get a crown that will last forever."**

Now here's a concept that was tremendously helpful to me. There is a huge difference between *trying* to do something versus *training* to do something. This weekend, there is a big game. Hundreds of millions of people will watch it and gorge themselves. Who will be the only people not sitting and eating junk food? Well, that would be the 22 guys on the field. To do what they want to do requires training. What they eat, how they exercise...

It's not just them. I'll make this a question for all of us. Think about your own life. Every campus, show of hands on this one. How many of you could go out right now today and run (not walk, *run*) every step of a marathon? I'll put it a second way. How many of you could go out right now and run (not walk) every step of a marathon today if you tried really, really hard? Not many more.

Now my guess is a lot of us, maybe most of us, could eventually run a marathon if we did one thing, and that is to train. What does it mean to train? To train means I arrange my life around those activities that enable me to do what I cannot now do by direct effort. We tend to *overestimate* what we can do by trying really hard and *underestimate* what we can do by training. As a general rule (this is just wisdom about the human condition), transformation involves *training*, not just *trying*.

This is true in athletics. It's true of music or intellectual life. It is no less true of character formation or spiritual life. This is why Paul says, **"...train yourself to godliness."** This is why Jesus says, **"The student is not above the teacher, but everyone who is fully trained will be like their teacher."** So now the spiritual disciplines are practices or activities that train us or give us power to live in the goodness of the kingdom.

I know. Words like *discipline* or *training* are awful words. They just sound really unattractive. Who wants to do that? This is really key. Spiritual disciplines are not necessarily unpleasant. What discipline you need to practice depends on for what you're training. If you're training for a race, you will need to practice running. If you were training for a pie-eating contest, what would you need to do? You would need to practice eating a lot of pie. If you eat a lot of pie every day, a year from now, you'll be able to eat much more pie than you could today by trying really hard.

In the Bible, for instance, one of the great commandments is rejoice. Joy is listed second in the fruit of the Spirit. Often people hear that and think, "I have to try harder to be more joyful." No, it kills people when they think spiritual life is just about trying really hard. It is no better than trying really hard to run a marathon today. You can become a more joyful person if you train for joy.

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Now this will involve what is sometimes called the *discipline of celebration*, and you'll notice the Bible has a lot to say about feasts, holidays, music, and expressions of praise and gratitude. So if you struggle with joylessness, I'll often say to people, "Take one day a week to train for joy." Have a day of celebration. Wear what you love to wear. Eat what you love to eat. That's marshmallow day. Listen to music you love to hear.

Be with people who fill you with joy. There will be other people who drain you of joy, who are black holes of joy. Tell them, "I cannot be with you today. This is my joy day. I'll be with you tomorrow." See, the purpose of spiritual disciplines is always freedom. The reason a pianist practices scales is so they're free to play great music without worrying or it being effortful. This is true of a great athlete.

The purpose of disciplines, including spiritual disciplines, is to be able to do what you need to do when you need to do it. Spiritual disciplines are a means to an end, and which ones will help you depend partly on with what you struggle. If you wrestle with gossip, the practice of silence will probably help you with that. If you tend to isolation, the practice of fellowship will probably help you with that. If you wrestle with hurry, then to deliberately practice slowing (on purpose, drive in the slow lane of the freeway for a month) will help you.

Now fasting, see, is a means to an end. If you never struggle with impulse control, if all of your desires have learned to quietly wait their turn, if your appetites for food, sex, money, pleasure, power consistently say, "No, no. Don't gratify us when it might conflict with the greater value," if you don't need to fast, then don't fast.

Or it may be that you struggle with an eating disorder. Just listening to this message has been painful to you. The topic of food is painful for you. I want to say if that's you, I'm so glad you're here. This is a place where nobody is perfect. We're all just train wrecks apart from God, and God wants to flood your life and your body with mercy and grace.

It may be for that reason or for medical reasons fasting would actually be an unhelpful practice. Then don't fast, and by all means, don't feel guilty about the topic. See, our quest is to live in the kingdom immersed in the love and power of God, not to see how many disciplines we can practice. That's that wrong kind of righteousness.

But for some of us whose bodies are particularly stubborn about having their own way, fasting can be a helpful practice. Now the most important dynamic about any spiritual discipline is I have to practice it in a spirit of humility, freedom, surrender, and grace. It's so interesting. The psalmist said, "*I humbled myself with fasting.*" There's a great problem in the spiritual life. You can get proud about how humble you are.

Jesus told a story one time about a religious leader called a Pharisee who was really proud and actually prayed out loud, "*God, I thank you that I am not like other people... I fast twice a week...*" Pharisees often had a custom in Jesus' day of fasting on Mondays and Thursdays, which, as it happens, were market day when they would have the biggest possible audience.

If you walk around saying, "Look at me! I'm fasting! I can do it for days. I love God so much, I make myself miserable, and I can make you miserable too," you end up worse than if you'd never fasted at all. That's why Jesus describes another spiritual discipline in Matthew 6 that really helps with humility, because you can't become humble by trying really hard to be humble.

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He says, "Now if you wrestle with this, try secrecy. Do something good like fasting. Only don't tell anybody about it." You'll learn you can live without the gratification of impressing people. In his day when people fasted, they would often wear sackcloth. They would often put ashes in their hair, and they would sometimes end up being proud of their humble, miserable devotion.

Unless spiritual disciplines are practiced in humility and grace for the purpose of freedom, they can leave you worse off than if you'd never done them. But in the extremely unlikely event that anybody here would actually want to really try this fasting deal, I'll give you two formats for fasting that you might attempt maybe even this week. The first one is...

1. *Fasting as feasting on God.* The time frame I first used when I began to fast was a 24-hour fast. I would begin at the end of dinner in the evening, then skip breakfast and lunch the next day, and eat again at dinner. Now when I fast, I'm not just avoiding food. I'm making space to be nourished by God. Jesus makes a fascinating statement to help us with this. He fasts at the beginning of his ministry, you might know.

Matthew says, "*After fasting forty days and forty nights, [Jesus] was hungry.*" I sometimes think this may be the single most unnecessary sentence in the Bible. Really? You had to tell us that? But the writer wants us to know Jesus was a real human being just like us, and he knew the pain of hunger. Now the Tempter comes and whispers to Jesus, "*If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread.*" "Eat the marshmallow. You're entitled. You're the Son of God. You don't have to deliberately suffer."

"Jesus answered, 'It is written: 'Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'" Now Jesus means this literally. This again is not just a pretty saying. See, food literally becomes a part of my body. I digest it and dissimilate it. Then let's think about a word. A word comes from a parent to a child. "Don't be afraid. I'm with you." That word from that parent literally connects neural pathways in the child's brain. It causes synapses to form that allow the child to regulate themselves, to comfort themselves, to encourage themselves.

A word literally becomes a part of your body. Your body is literally physiologically, neurologically nourished by words, by the meaning and reality words express. We live in a kingdom of words. In John 4, Jesus and his disciples were on a journey. They had gone into a town to get food because everybody was hungry. The disciples came back to find Jesus engaged in a spiritual conversation with a Samaritan woman.

"Meanwhile his disciples urged him, 'Rabbi, eat something.' But he said to them, 'I have food to eat that you know nothing about.'" People will often look at a statement like this and think it's just another pretty saying, but Jesus was not a pretty-saying kind of guy. Remember, we've been learning this together. Jesus says what is most real is God and his kingdom in our midst. Jesus was feasting on the presence, love, and meaning of his Father.

It's so interesting. In the marshmallow experiment, the key to the outcome is what researchers call the *strategic allocation of attention*. In other words, if you think about the marshmallow, you're going to eat the marshmallow. If you think about *not* eating that delicious marshmallow, you'll eat the marshmallow. If you think about a song you love, then you won't.

In fasting, I strategically allocate my attention on to God. Gang, you can do that right now. Take the Word of God into your soul. *"The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want. [...] Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; For You are with me."* What can separate me from the love of God? *"I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."* I allow my body's hunger to remind me I'm not in control. Somebody else is, and that's really good. Fasting is feasting on God, literally.

2. *Fasting as caring.* One of the most powerful passages in the Bible is the fifty-eighth chapter of the prophet Isaiah. The people are complaining to God. They keep humbling themselves, fasting, praying, and crying out, and God doesn't seem to notice. He doesn't give them what they want. So God tells them the problem.

"Yet on the day of your fasting, you do as you please and exploit all your workers. Your fasting ends in quarreling and strife... [...] Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter...?"

The rest of that chapter is such a powerful connection between the power of fasting rightly practiced and passionate justice for the poor, the hungry, and the oppressed that it has inspired movements of social justice for over 2,000 years. See, fasting, when it is done to the Lord, is the opposite of self-centered preoccupation with, "Look how pious I am!"

When I'm hungry, my normal response in the flesh is to think, "How can I satisfy my hunger?" I know the term *the flesh* can sound like a religious cliché. So when you come across it in the Bible, you might think of this character. Cookie Monster has a simple philosophy: "See cookie. Want cookie. Eat cookie." The Cookie Monster is not big on self-regulation.

Gang, do you understand we live in a day where, for all our vaunted pride, education, and technology, many of the smartest people in our culture spend their lives trying to convince you that you are nothing more than a collection of appetites to be gratified? That's all you are. When I do an Isaiah 58 fast, I learn not to be so obsessed with my own appetite, which is a glorious truth.

When I do this kind of fast, when my body is hungry, I remember my brothers and sisters who are hungry but have no bread and have no money to buy bread. The temporary and very small pain in my body speaks to me of the ongoing and very large pain in theirs. God begins to grow compassion in me. I train for compassion. I remember I have money, and I could be generous with it.

Now maybe God is calling you to give up something besides food. I have a friend who prayed about this. "God, what might I fast from during Lent?" The thought that popped into her mind was (this was the first thought), "You could fast from coffee." The next thought was, "No! Not coffee! Anything but coffee!" The next thought was, "Well, God is calling me to give it up because it has a grip on me that it would be good to be free of." Maybe it's coffee. Maybe it's alcohol. Maybe it's social media. Maybe it's whatever the thought is that, when it comes to you, you say, "No, not that!" Ask God to guide you.

Wednesday, February 14, some of you know, is called Ash Wednesday. It's the beginning of Lent. It's also Valentine's Day, so this will be a very romantic Ash Wednesday. For centuries, followers of Jesus have marked Lent (that period that leads up to Easter) by practicing a fast of different kinds. It's a 40-day period like that 40-day period for Jesus.

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Maybe you'll want to fast once a week during Lent and use the money you would have spent on food to deliver people from hunger. What if during the season of Lent our whole church began to get free from the clutches of appetite, the insatiable desire for more, the weakness of the Cookie Monster flesh? What if we got more compassionate about the hunger, need, poverty, and desperate plight of our world? What if in the weeks leading up to Easter we feasted on the Word of God? So take that little marshmallow with you and ask, "God, how do you want to free me to live in your kingdom?" Let's pray.

God, you know what the marshmallow is in the life of everybody here. Thank you that you make it possible for us to grow into the reality and power of your kingdom. Lead every one of us in this great adventure. We pray in Jesus' name, amen.