

# Fasting

"Why do we fast, and you do not see it? afflict ourselves, and you take no note of it?" Lo, on your fast day you carry out your own pursuits, and drive all your laborers. Yes, your fast ends in quarreling and fighting, striking with wicked claw. Would that today you might fast so as to make your voice heard on high! Is this the manner of asking I wish, of keeping a day of penance: That a man bow his head like a reed, and lie in sackcloth and ashes? Do you call this a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord? This, rather, is the fasting that I wish: releasing those bound unjustly, untying the thongs of the yoke; Setting free the oppressed, breaking every yoke; Sharing your bread with the hungry, sheltering the oppressed and the homeless; Clothing the naked when you see them, and not turning your back on your own. Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your wound shall quickly be healed; Your vindication shall go before you, and the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard. Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer, you shall cry for help, and he will say: Here I am!

--Isaiah 58:3-9

Fasting has a long tradition in all religions. In many ways, fasting has made its way into secular culture as well (such as dieting), although such efforts are for different reasons (and generally fail). Yet despite this practice being such a universal aspect of the human experience, I wonder how many people have much interest in what it actually is? It appears to me that most people look at fasting as a chore at best (such as Catholics observing the Lenten season), or, at worst, as the lesser of two evils (starving oneself versus risking diabetes and heart problems). While these aspects certainly are present in religious fasting, such perspectives completely miss the point when considering the more important benefits. Fasting is first and foremost a way to maintain and strengthen a connection with God. Of almost equal importance, fasting is also a means of re-establishing and building up a severed connection with God if lost or weakened.

According to Wikipedia, "fasting is the abstention from eating and sometimes drinking." It goes on to say that it can also refer to the physiological status of the body when unbroken down food is no longer in the body (such as when sleeping). No doubt this is the most widely accepted definition, and it is even what is meant when one reads of fasting in the Bible. However, for the purposes of this paper, I will be expanding this definition to include anything we choose to live without in an effort to build or repair our relationship with God. Interestingly enough, a healthy fasting for God invariably builds or repairs our bodies as well. The two are interconnected.

We need to fast, if for no other reason, because it was the second commandment God gave mankind: "The Lord God gave man this order: 'You are free to eat from any of the trees of the garden except the tree of knowledge of good and bad. From that tree you shall not eat; the moment you eat from it you are surely doomed to die.'" (Genesis 2:16-17). We see in this commandment all the classical elements of a fast -- man and woman are specifically not allowed to eat some food, and their health is threatened to the point of death for violating this fast. But we also see a tie in with my own definition, as verse 3:8 says "The man and his wife hid themselves from the Lord God among the trees of the garden." after they broke the fast. Not only were man and woman doomed to die for breaking the fast, but they actively severed

their relationship with God as well. But I would like to bring the gentle reader's attention back to the command God gave them. Clearly, had they been obedient, they would have continued this fast. But I would also posit that obedience itself is a form of fasting. They were not abstaining from *eating* during the fast, only from eating certain things. The key element of the fast God commanded them was obedience -- it wasn't that they couldn't eat, but they had to control what it was they ate.

We already saw how a lack of fasting destroyed the connection between man and God, and we see many times elsewhere in the Bible where God wants us to obey legitimate authority as well. For example, Exodus 20:12 and Deuteronomy 5:16 call for children to obey their parents, with rewards for doing so. Fast forwarding to the teachings of Jesus, we are told "[They] have taken their seat on the chair of Moses. Therefore, do and observe all things whatsoever they tell you, but do not follow their example. For they preach but they do not practice." (Matthew 23:2-3). We also have Saint Paul calling for obedience many times in his letters. To act against the will of legitimate authority is to go against the will of God. And to go against the will of God is to risk damnation. Consider John 3:36 -- "Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever *disobeys* the Son will not see life, but the wrath of God remains upon him" (italics mine). And here is where we often make the same mistake first man and woman made.

It is easy to be obedient when the reasons to do so are obvious. If we approach a busy intersection, we will stop at a stop sign because we can see how dangerous the situation is if we don't. But when it's late at night, and one can see that there is no traffic for more than a quarter mile in all directions, we are likely to disobey because the danger is not obvious, and saving the few seconds of time seems *desirable*. Compare this with, "The woman saw that the tree was good for food, pleasing to the eyes, and *desirable* for gaining wisdom," in Genesis 3:6 (italics mine). While eating from the tree of knowledge and running a stop sign are obviously different activities, we nonetheless see the reason for doing both is the same -- the apparent pleasure was decided to be more valuable than the consequences of breaking the fast. And we clearly see from both that the destructive side of not fasting is ultimately a bad thing for us. All this was a convoluted means to describe what is going on with many people when they are told to fast for a given period. Swearing off cigarettes after reading the latest medical report on the effects of cancer, or perhaps after losing a loved one to tobacco products, is based on the fear of the destructive aspect of smoking. And this is just one example of many. But whether one is swearing off smoking or some other vice, the destructive aspect rarely concerns us for long. Fear is an emotion, and emotions change. When the fear is gone, and the promise of pleasure comes along, the fast is likely to break sooner or later. In contrast, I propose that knowing the positive aspects of fasting will help when fear fails. Factual reasons to maintain a fast will not change over time.

From this point on, I will differentiate a "fast" from "abstinence" by defining abstinence as a *permanent* avoidance of something, whereas fasting is a temporary one (even if by temporary one means "indefinite"). With that being said, I would like to look at some of the biblical aspects of fasting.

One such aspect is that fasting is a form of penance. Perhaps the most famous example in the Bible comes from King David after his affair with Bathsheba and the murder of Uriah. "David besought God for the child. *He kept a fast*, retiring for the night to lie on the ground clothed in sackcloth." (2 Samuel 12:16, italics mine) We know that "fast" here included not eating, as verse 17 tells us "nor would he take food." But note how this fasting was not merely limited to avoiding food, as verse 16 explicitly mentions. He forsook comfortable clothes and bedding as well. We see a similar example taking place for an entire city in the book of Jonah. The King of Nineveh "proclaimed throughout Nineveh, by decree of the King and his nobles 'Neither man nor beast, neither cattle nor sheep, shall taste anything; they shall not eat, nor shall they drink water.'" (Jonah 3:7) Again, we see sackcloth used in tandem with avoiding food. Fasting in the sense of penance is a recognition of sin (a moving away from God). It is a humbling of

oneself before God. This humbling is *not* an act of self-hate; it is a recognition of how small one is before God.

Fasting is also a means of atonement for the sin. I am sure some of my Protestant brethren will object to this last observation. As they will likely point out, the sinner can never fully pay the price of sin by himself, any more than a child can pay to replace a window he broke while playing baseball in his front yard. The child's father will, of course, pay for the window, yet he may still withhold allowance or make the child perform some extra labor without pay. Fasting is a token of payment towards fixing the damage done by the sin. What is happening with atonement is one accepting ownership of what one did by participating in the fix. Such ownership can *only* take place by being part of the healing process, as opposed to letting others "clean up the mess."

But there is another purpose of fasting which is related to, but substantially different from, penance. As the first man and woman broke the grace they were created with, we, their progeny, are unable to receive grace from them. We simply cannot inherit what our parents do not have to give us. While the implications of Original Sin are many, among the most important is what is described by the Catholic Church as "disordered appetites" (appetite is defined here as a desire for anything that brings one pleasure). It is not that our appetites are by necessity a bad thing, but rather our inclination, due to the loss of grace by the first parents, to abuse them. When we abuse an appetite, it becomes disordered.

The pathology of abusing an appetite is always the same. The more the appetite is abused, the more likely the pleasure will be harder to come by next time. Not only that, but the pleasure will grow less intense over time as well. Eventually, the pleasure will be gone, and all that is left is a terrible hunger to perform the act for the sake of temporarily sating the pangs. In short, disordered appetites become addictions (as pointed out by C.S. Lewis). We don't always look at pleasure as addictive, but that is because many pleasures may take years or even decades before the harm becomes obvious. Like all addictive substances, the time and severity one experiences depend on many factors: how often it is indulged in, how susceptible the individual is to the action, etc. But in the end, all abused pleasures will become an obvious and harmful addiction. And the most disordered appetite humans have is for sex, which is why Christianity has so many safeguards concerning it. It is not that the Church wishes for its members to abstain from sex, but rather to ensure that sex will remain pleasurable for a lifetime as intended.

But while disordered appetites is a common ailment of mankind, fasting is the Jewish and Christian therapy for it. Indeed, many pagan cultures and philosophical schools agree with this as well, although they lack the degree of understanding that the Jews and Christians have of the problem. For those who have not reached the addictive stage of the disordered appetite, fasting can safeguard against the progression of the disorder. As with sex, Christian prohibitions against certain activities, and limits on others, are not "killjoys," but rather a means to find pleasure that will last a lifetime.

For those who have started down the ugly path to addiction, fasting can actually heal a lot of damage, sometimes even the point of "resetting" the appetite to where it was before it was abused. Sadly, there are those who have reached a point where recovery is not possible in this world. But even so, fasting can still protect against further harm. For one, man is spiritual as well as physical. Indeed, the spiritual is closely related to the psychological. One can always grow healthy spiritually, even if it is too late for the body. When one is struggling with addiction, even one beyond physical repair, abstinence is the best therapy for it. But when the inevitable relapse takes place (especially early in the attempted recovery), one has clearly failed the abstinence. I daresay that, in the long term, the feeling of failure is worse than the actual relapse. I believe this is, at least in part, what Jesus meant when He

said, "When an unclean spirit goes out of someone ... upon returning ... brings back seven other spirits more wicked than itself who move in and dwell there." (Luke 11:24-26) It's not that one simply committed the sin again, but that one is now open to committing even worse sin through the shame and embarrassment that comes from failure. Furthermore, the idea of having to start all over brings even more discouragement.

In contrast, one doesn't fail a fast, although one may end it sooner than planned. Ending a fast prematurely may very well bring disappointment and perhaps more than a little guilt. But the sense of utter failure and hopelessness associated with abstinence is rarely felt with ending a fast sooner than planned. Furthermore, one can actually challenge oneself in the next fast to exceed the most recent one. This is a very reasonable expectation no matter how well or poorly the previous fast went. Of course, when one has indeed met his fasting goal, he can freely choose to extend it as well. One can measure one's progress over the addiction by how hard or easy it is to extend the fast longer than originally planned.

I realize that some critics may say that I'm simply playing word games, that I'm trying to motivate someone by using "positive" words instead of "negative" words. And I agree 100% with them on this matter. I sincerely hope that I can motivate one to improve themselves, and I am obviously being careful on how I am defining my words. One's outlook on life is more important than all the knowledge one can have, because one's outlook determines how one *uses* the knowledge one has. The whole premise of this paper was to change one's outlook from looking at fasting as something one had to do (if done at all) out of obedience, to looking at fasting as something that can actually help make their lives more enjoyable, or at least less difficult. What I have proposed is actually used by the various addiction "anonymous" groups, although they word things differently. In essence, they emphasize taking life one day at a time, knowing that they will never beat the addiction in the literal sense. However, they *can* beat it for one day. They are promoting a day long fast each time one wakes up. Coins and/or other tokens of success are given in celebration when members reach certain goals. They are not rewarding perfection, but rather perseverance.

Before I finish, I want to address any potential criticisms that skeptics might raise. While they are not opposed to fasting as a principle, they generally seem to only concern themselves with fasting once damage is already noticeable. If they do look to fasting as a preventative measure, then it is limited to well known and documented situations (such as with tobacco and sugar). For areas where the connection is not so obvious, it seems to me that skeptics assume that religious people fast excessively, out of fear of the gods. I do not feel they really appreciate the depth of the wisdom that Christian fasting encompasses.

Although fasting and other acts of self-denial have been practiced by every religion in the world, it is wrong to suggest that religions are insecure by comparing themselves to supernatural entities. This view of skeptics assumes that man first invented gods, and then felt a need to debase himself before those gods. The atheism of the last 200 or so years has proven that the need for man to debase himself remains even when the gods are removed (Friedrich Nietzsche and Jean-Paul Satre are particularly well known for their works on this phenomenon). The natural desire for man to debase himself begs the question of who or what does man compare himself to? The fact that there are real and observable benefits to fasting means this need for debasement is not a psychosis, but rather part of a healthy process that ought to be observed. No one would deny that one ought to hydrate oneself when one is thirsty, or to provide nourishment to oneself when one is starving. But both drinking and eating can be harmful if taken to excess. Fasting is a need man has in order to ensure his other needs remain healthy.

But while all religions would look at self-denial as a way to grow strong, none of the pagan religions account for the healing aspect of fasting. Only in Christianity do we see fasting holistically. All religions will see fasting as a way of humbling themselves before their gods. Likewise, all look at fasting as a form of penance to appease angry gods. The Jews, through divine revelation, advanced this understanding and learned that man, by his very nature, is incapable of truly pleasing God. This did not change fasting in a meaningful way, but "set the stage" for the Christian understanding of fasting. It was Christianity where the hope of being fully restored to God was revealed, and it is here that fasting gains its healing aspect. It is in Christianity that fasting is a pro-active lifestyle instead of a reactive cure. It is in Christianity that fasting is an expression of hope, not regret. It is in Christianity that fasting brings healing, not harm. As Christians, it is a privilege and a joy to fast, not an inconvenient obligation or setback.

Then the disciples of John approached him and said, "Why do we and the Pharisees fast [much], but your disciples do not fast?" Jesus answered them, "Can the wedding guests mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them? The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast."

Matthew 9:14-15

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