

Freedom through Fasting (Part 4 of 9 in *Simple Summer* series)

Ezra 8:21-23, Mark 2:13-22

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A commercial has been playing very frequently on the TV channels I watch most often, and despite some controversy, seems to have been a great marketing success. In the ad, a slender young woman is staring into a refrigerator, where an enticing cheesecake sits, covered with fresh raspberries, already sliced into and ready to be eaten. The woman's internal dialogue is heard above her head as she tries to rationalize eating a slice of this delicious-looking dessert, and how many celery sticks and how much time at the gym would be required to make up for it. She goes through multiple scenarios before an equally young and fit colleague comes in and grabs her low-fat raspberry cheesecake-flavored yogurt, artificially sweetened and under 100 calories. The first woman comments to the second that she looks like she's lost weight with her chemically-sweetened treat before grabbing a similar one herself. Internal crisis resolved. Whew!

It's this kind of duplicitous message: indulge and deny, satisfy your craving but deny yourself the actual deliciousness you're after, that has our culture enslaved to food. We think about and talk about food all the time: what we should eat, what we shouldn't eat, what we will eat, how we will prepare it, how many calories or fat grams or mg of sodium each serving has, and how large a serving really should be. The diet industry in America is a \$35 billion a year business, only surpassed by the \$130 billion we spend each year on fast food. It's a constant tug: indulge in what you want, get more for your money, super-size it, satisfy yourself immediately; but get to the gym, work off the calories, diet, diet, diet, to look like you haven't eaten anything.

In the midst of all of this, the discipline of fasting may seem like just one more thing: but fasting can actually free us from the forces that make us think and talk and go back and forth about food, free us even from slavery to our bodily desires. Fasting offers us a new way to live, a chance to connect with God and focus on what really matters. Fasting is a way to teach ourselves that we *have been set free*, and are not slaves to what the media says we should have or eat or do, nor even to what our minds or bodies encourage us to eat. Fasting helps us empty ourselves so we can become hungry for the things that really matter: hungry for God.

In the Bible, people fasted for many reasons, but primarily for mourning, repentance, and direction. Ezra and his people fasted to get focused on God before a big battle. The Ninevites in Jonah's story fasted for repentance. Job fasted in mourning. King David famously fasted to focus on prayer and try to save the son that he fathered with Uriah's wife, Bathsheba. But most Biblical fasts had negative themes – in fact, Jews were required to fast on the Day of Atonement, when they repented for their sins, and encouraged to fast whenever they needed repentance.

Jesus modified those requirements, as is clear in our gospel lesson for today. He discouraged his disciples from fasting while they were with him, using the analogy of a wedding feast – Jesus is the bridegroom, making all of us the bride. And to fast during a wedding banquet would imply that you disapprove of the union – it would be incredibly insulting to the host. So Jesus says, "I'm here now – you don't need to fast to get close to me or to focus on me – do it when I've gone." And we are there in what's called the "between times," when Jesus has come and gone and has not yet come again, and so we are called to fast.

Fasting has many purposes now; and while it is not the most popular spiritual discipline in mainline denominations in America, it is still a very powerful practice engaged by Christians all over the world. Fasting now is not just about repentance and mourning, but is primarily about prayer.

When we fast, we free up time and space to focus on God, and we free up our minds to pray. There are numerous stories of folks who have needed guidance or direction, and have fasted to really focus on God's voice, and they have heard what they needed loud and clear. Fasting helps us listen so we will know how to pray. It creates an oasis of time and space for God's truth and grace to surround us and remind us of who we really are.

But fasting is important for other reasons, as well. For one, it reminds us of the integration of our minds, bodies, and spirits. Often, we think of spirituality as something that just happens in our hearts or minds, but God calls us to live as disciples as our whole selves, bodies included, and our bodies have a huge part to play in our growth as Christians. When we fast, we engage our physical nature as well as our spiritual, reminding ourselves that our bodies are holy and belong to God, too.

For centuries, fasting has also been closely linked to almsgiving: people give up a meal (or more recently, an activity), and give the money they would have spent on it to the poor. They feel more in solidarity with the poor when they eat more simply or refrain from food altogether. Many communities engage in fasts together to raise money and awareness for those who don't have choices about whether or when or what to eat.

Fasting can also help us rely more fully on God. In a culture where personal strength is so emphasized, it can be easy to tell ourselves that we don't need God, or that we only need God in certain situations, and otherwise we're doing alright on our own. When we fast, we *must* rely on God's strength as we intentionally give ourselves over to God. This is an act of worship, and one that is pleasing to God, as every reliance on God brings us closer and closer in relationship with the One who longs to be close to us. Fasting is a declaration that God is so important to us that we're willing to set aside everything else in our everyday lives to focus on our spiritual growth.

Of course, there are many reasons *not* to fast: primarily, fasting only counts as fasting if it is spiritually motivated: if we are called to fast, if it feels like God is urging us to fast, if we are looking for ways to connect with God more deeply, then fasting is a good idea. If we are hoping to cut calories to fit into a certain outfit before vacation, it is a diet, not a fast. If we are hoping to enact some political change, it is a hunger strike, not a fast. If we are hoping to get physically healthier, it's called a detox, not a fast.

And of course, there are people who should not fast from food: women who are pregnant or nursing, diabetics, many elderly, all children and most youth. And because food causes all kinds of emotional turmoil in our culture, we all have to be very honest with ourselves when it comes to the subject of fasting and be very careful about engaging in fasts from food if we have ever had trouble with an eating disorder or body image anxiety. Many medications require that we eat regularly, and many illnesses require it. So food-fasting is not for everyone. But if you feel God calling you toward a food fast, there are several options: first, you can give up a certain food or food group. Orthodox Christians fast one day a week and do not eat meat, dairy, oil, or fish. Other groups add refined sugar to the list. Or perhaps there's a certain kind of food that you use for comfort when you should be going to God in prayer. Every time you catch yourself reaching for one of those foods during your fast, remind yourself that God is more precious to you than anything else. It reminds you to pray. Many people fast using a very simple diet of primarily fruits and vegetables, or only raw foods. And then others abstain from food but drink juice or broth. And others abstain from all food and drink only water. But this is a very intense fast that must not be taken on without preparation and practice (and without consulting your physician).

And of course there are other ways to fast, now, too: fasting does not have to be about food, as food is not the only thing that has control over our lives. We can fast from television, from technology, from shopping, from the internet, or talking on the phone. One story I read about fasting

was about a woman who always listened to loud music while she was driving, but felt called to a new fast; so for one day, she drove in silence everywhere she went, and used that time to pray for a friend who was going through a difficult time. It was tough for her not to turn on the radio, but she did it, and was amazed at how powerful that time of prayer was. We may be called to fast from other people, in solitude; or from conversation, in silence. Anything that has a tendency to control us can be the focus of a fast. Without that usual comfort, we have to turn to God, and we can experience new levels of simplicity, humility, and peace.

Of course, the thing all of these fasts have in common, in addition to being ways to connect with God, is that they last only for a season. Fasts can be one meal, one day, one week, or even forty days. But a fast does not last forever. Fasting is a way to identify what controls us and yield our dependence to God, but it is always just for a period of time, and it always concludes with feasting. This may not look like the feast that we have in mind before the fast begins – I've known several youth leaders who have led weekend fasts and then tried to order pizzas the next day, and the kids all went home with bellyaches. So a feast might look a lot different after a fast than before. But the rhythm of fasting and feasting, discipline and delight, is something that God desires for us. Our culture encourages us to feast all the time, to never be hungry, to satiate every desire. But fasting can help us to become hungry for what really matters.

What activities in your life are crowding out prayer? What is becoming more important to you than God? What is taking up more space than you want it to? What is siphoning off time, money, and energy in a way that isn't helpful, even if it isn't necessarily sinful? Perhaps you're being called to fast. Fasting gives us freedom from all the worldly things that would control us, and helps us instead delight in the gifts of God and focus on God's vision for our lives.