

Fasting: Lost Treasure?

Some would say that Christians in general have lost all sense of the why, the when, and the how of fasting. Would you agree? Even if they're only partially right, a review of the forgotten fundamentals might be beneficial.

There are three major themes in the history and practice of Christian fasting: Mystical longing for fulfillment, liberation through discipline, and the relationship of fasting to works of charity and justice.

Mystical longing for fulfillment

When asked a question as to why his disciples don't fast like those of John the Baptist, Jesus replied:

The wedding guests cannot mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them, can they? The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast (Mt 9:15).

Jesus' words to his followers indicate that the way in which the reign of God is rushing into the world through his presence and ministry leaves only room for joy and thanksgiving while he is with them. He has come as the Bridegroom to establish a mystical marriage with God's people. Before his death it was a time of celebrating the nuptial promises, a time for announcing the "good news": "The Kingdom of God is among you" (Lk 17:21).

But "the days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast." Fasting will then be a recognition of something new that is already set in motion, though not yet completed: the Reign of God in our midst. During this time, his faithful, in mystical union with their Lord, wait with quiet joy and busy hands, in vigilant preparation and deep longing for his return and the fulfillment of his Reign.

Liberation through Discipline

This is where the penitential motif—most people's first association with fasting—enters in. But as any confessor will tell you, penitence is always oriented towards freedom and liberation.

The tendency is to think that God will love us if we change, but God loves us so that we *can* change. Penitential practices and disciplines enable us to appropriate and make real in our lives the freedom given through grace. They help readjust priorities and remind where real treasure lies.

St. Paul's great theme is freedom: "For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters, only do not use your freedom for self-indulgence but through love become servants to one another" (Gal. 5:13). While Paul witnesses to fasts of his own (2 Cor. 6:4,5; 11:27), it is his desire that Jesus' followers benefit from the practices of the spiritual life as *means* without becoming enslaved to them.

The entire tradition of monasticism bears witness that union with God in the highest state of consciousness usually presupposes a life of self-discipline rather than a life of self-indulgence. Everything comes with a price tag on it; a strong love is willing to pay the price. The normal path is that pointed out by Jesus: “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me” (Mt. 16:24).

The primary reason for self-denial is the call to liberating transcendence of the thousand little threads of our attachments that make a rope and bind us.

Work of Charity and Justice

Jesus remained entirely faithful to the traditional triad of practices that were his Jewish heritage: prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. So much so, that a whole section of his Sermon on the Mount (Mt. 6:1-18) is structured according to that schema.

The relationship between fasting and almsgiving is a prominent theme in the writings of the early church fathers. One work entitled *The Shepherd of Hermas* reads: “In the day on which you fast you will taste nothing but bread and water; and having reckoned up the price of the dishes of that day which you intended to have eaten, you will give it to a widow, or an orphan, or to some person in want.”

The preaching of the Church Fathers clearly understands that whatever savings is realized through one’s fasting belongs to the poor. Thus Gregory the Great preached, “The one who does not give to the poor what he has saved but keeps it for later to satisfy his own appetite, does not fast for God.”

Origen blessed those who fasted in order “to nourish the poor.” For Augustine, in order to elevate the soul, fasting had to have two wings: prayer and works of mercy.

One might justifiably ask, if prayer, fasting, and works of justice form the core of Christian life and are inextricably linked, how can any one of them be quarantined to just one season of the liturgical year? They are all essential elements of Christian living *throughout* the year.

Good point. And the season of Lent is given to us for spiritual tune-up, to bring us more fully to life. So if we’ve allowed a valuable practice to drop from our spiritual tool box, now’s the time to restore it.

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