

A Spiritual Formation Experience for March

Fasting

The spiritual formation exercise of fasting has long been practiced by Christians seeking disciplines that might help root out the constant tyranny of our selfishness and self-referenced way of life. The practice of fasting gives us a rest from always living so compulsively in control. At its core, it is formational because it calls us to live like God is really alive and well and is, in fact, in control.

This might be a helpful definition of fasting:

Relinquishing control by choosing to engage in personal sacrifice as a means of experiencing dependence upon God alone as our true sustenance and source of hope. It reinforces the core truth of our souls: "God, You are enough."

There are a lot of passages in scripture that mention fasting and these help us to shape the basic concept of the Christian discipline of fasting. But there isn't a lot of prescriptive teaching. So there is freedom about how and why we might choose to engage in this practice.

In the Old Testament, the Israelites fasted during times of repentance and intentional humbling of themselves before God. And so up through the time of Jesus, the most pious Jewish believers fasted regularly to demonstrate to themselves and to God that they were submitting their will to the sovereign Lord. Unfortunately there was also a tone of self-righteousness that evidently crept into the way many practiced fasting. Thus, Jesus was compelled in his sermon on the mount (Matt. 6) to essentially tell them to stop showing off in the way they were fasting. Instead of engaging in the practice for the purpose of seeking God's presence and control in their lives, they were succumbing to the temptation to demonstrate to others how humble and spiritual they had become. Jesus said no bueno. That doesn't lead to the intended outcome and reward of intimacy with God.

In the rest of the New Testament fasting isn't emphasized as much as we might expect. When it is mentioned it is either referring to the Jewish pious act of humble repentance, or when the believers faced a particularly significant moment and desired to intentionally declare to themselves, to God, and to the whole spiritual realm that they longed for and needed God's will to be done. For example, the only time we know of Jesus fasting was when he was being tempted by Satan in the desert for 40 days. In the book of Acts we see the apostles fasting and praying as they commissioned workers to go out and share the good news as the church was being born.

Since the time of the apostles, Christians in every era of the history of the church have found the practice of fasting to be helpful in their spiritual transformation. There have been a plethora of church fathers and mothers who have inspired and informed our thinking about the various ways we might fast and experience its transforming effects.

The Impact of Fasting on our Spiritual Formation

1. It interrupts our (compulsive) activity in order to slow us down.
... So we can hear and connect to God.
 2. It interrupts our (compulsive) activity so we can exercise and grow in our belief that God is enough.
 - He brings life and life abundantly (John 10:10). We rehearse the truth, “God is what I need.”
 - He’s at work in my life and circumstances. We rehearse the truth, “I am not alone.”
 3. It interrupts our (compulsive) activity so that by these intentional acts of saying “no” we can reflect on what our “yeses” should be.
 - We give up our control so as to submit to his Lordship.
 - We give up our will so as to receive his leading.
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OUR HOMEWORK: Let’s try this 4 week experiment for the month of March

- Fasting Experiment

- Study fasting in the Bible and learn as much as you can about how and why God’s people fasted and benefited from it.
- Experiment with a fasting experience one time each week.
 - You can try going without anything that you know you will miss!
 - You can skip a meal (or two or three in a row.) Or go without social media for an afternoon. Or put your phone in a drawer for a night or two after you get home from work. Or give up wine, or TV, or dessert. Anything that will put you in touch with your “needs”...
 - ... because when you feel that yearning, replace that with seeking God for the deepest yearnings in your heart. Identify what it is that you are longing for with God. Is it healing? Restoration? Joy? Clearer purpose? Deeper intimacy? Replace what you are giving up with an expressed longing for God and his transforming work.
- Reflect in your journal about the experience. Was it easy or hard? Too easy or too hard? What did you learn about yourself? What thoughts did you have during your fast? Were you able to identify some deeper longings that have previously gone unexpressed? Did you identify any unhealthy or unholy coping mechanisms that you were unaware of? Was it easy or hard to engage with God during your fast? Why? What other thoughts do you have after this fast? Did you receive any messages that you think may be the Holy Spirit speaking to you?