

### Transformative Power of Fasting (w/c 3 March 2019)

Richard Foster opens his chapter on fasting in *Celebration of Discipline* by quoting John Wesley:

*“Some have exalted religious fasting beyond all scripture and reason; and others have utterly disregarded it.”*

How could we seek a path between these two extremes?

In seeking to answer the question, “What does the Bible say about fasting?”, I found a useful piece<sup>1</sup> on bible.org which concludes that:

*“Fasting then is a legitimate response to dangers, trials, heartaches, or sorrows. That which seems to characterize Christian fasting in the New Testament was abstinence during crisis experiences... if there is no felt need of a serious nature, fasting does not seem to be required of believers.”*

Is fasting just about food? How does the concept and practice fit with Jesus’ wider command to “deny yourself” (Luke 9:23) as his follower? What other things might we consider giving up – or doing – in response to this? How can we make positive use of self-denial to grow both spiritually ourselves and in relationship with each other? How do one-off activities like fasting fit with the command for us to “walk humbly” with God (Micah 6:8) all the time?

#### Read Matthew 6: 16-18 and Luke 5:33-39

The Old Testament law required fasting on a small number of fixed days – see for example Leviticus 16:29 and as a response to national disasters and the like, such as the events recorded in 2 Samuel 1:12. Later practice – especially that of the Pharisees – introduced more frequent fast days often twice each week.

Luke 5 makes it clear that Jesus and his disciples broke decisively with the practice of fasting in the society of his day. He says that his disciples will fast when “when the bridegroom will be taken from them”. What does this say about the need for fasting post-resurrection (or at least, post-Pentecost), given his later promise that – “And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” (Matthew 28:20)?

It is important to note that fasting is not mentioned at all in the Epistles. Indeed, in the view of some writers, fasting does not seem to have featured much in the practices of the first churches but to have been reintroduced into the early church through later Jewish and Greek influences. In what ways is this significant for us?

In what ways do *Dry January*, the *5:2 diet*, and the like, mean that society around us might be more aware than the church of the value of fasting? How could we persuade others that if we fast we’re doing anything other than a variant of such diets?

As a final thought, what does Isaiah 58:6-7 say about God’s view of fasting?

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://bible.org/question/what-does-bible-say-about-fasting>