

Why is Fasting so Hard??

Of the disciplines for Christian living, many believers experience fasting as particularly difficult and unsatisfying. Even relatively successful attempts to practice it may not answer the question, “Why fast?” This is a very important question, but before answering it, I invite you to consider reasons why the practice is so difficult.

1. IT IS COUNTERINTUITIVE, EVEN ILLOGICAL. Our natural bodily response to feeling hungry is to eat, or when thirsty to drink. To deliberately deny ourselves when food and drink are readily available doesn’t make sense to our normal way of operating.

2. IT HURTS. When we fast we feel the pain physically which, in turn, puts stress on our mental and emotional state.

3. IT IS COUNTERCULTURAL. Consumer cultures by definition teach that more is better. Fasting by definition reduces consumption.

4. IT THREATENS EGO. Denying ourselves anything raises the specter of harming ourselves, making ourselves weak, leading us toward death. Instinctually, we want to not only survive, but thrive, ensuring our place in the world.

Perhaps you can already see why fasting is so important for a Christian, even though it is difficult and often not satisfying. The goal of the Christian life is to deepen our capacity to love God and neighbor and therefore must involve more than just attending to our own needs and desires. All of the Christian disciplines help move us beyond just living for ourselves, but fasting is particularly helpful because it challenges self-serving love at the most basic level of our bodily appetites. In short, it brings us back to God (Joel 2:12), moving us toward confession of our sin and the “repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret” (2 Corinthians 7:10).

To put it bluntly, “If we cannot control our appetites, it is unlikely that we can ever be strong enough to give up anything for the sake of another when it runs counter to one of our appetites. Loving our neighbor as ourselves will always be out of our reach.” I fast, therefore, so that by saying NO to something, I might have greater freedom to say YES to something even more important; for example, acting lovingly toward another. So here is a working definition: fasting is temporarily or

permanently saying NO to an appetite so that you might with more focus and energy say YES to the desire to love God and neighbor. As a means of grace, fasting yields the fruit of the Spirit named “self-control” (Galatians 5:23). Increased self-control enables the Holy Spirit to work in and through you more freely to do what is right (live righteously) for the sake of others.

When you fast you deny yourself something that is good. Refraining from murder is not fasting, nor is avoiding any other sin. Rather, fasting acknowledges the goodness of that which is denied—food, drink, sex, entertainment, information, power—and reinforces that goodness by refusing to serve it as a god. Fasting reaffirms God as the ultimate Good Creator and Provider. Everything that God made derives its goodness from God, including us. Fasting reminds us, as God’s creatures, of our proper relationships in the created order—lovingly trusting God as Heavenly Father and humbly caring for the rest of God’s creation.

Most fasting is a temporary self-denial. Fasting from food and drink—the most common form of fasting—must be or else one faces certain death. Other temporary forms of fasting, for example from certain media, from married sexual pleasures, or from purchases, serve the same purpose. Each in its own way helps Christians shape their natural appetites to serve their appetite for God.

Some Christians—the tradition calls them “ascetics”—are called to a unique form of fasting in which they covenant to permanently deny satisfying a particular appetite for the sake of forging a focused, lifelong path of devotion to God and the world God loves. Examples include celibates, vegetarians, and those living in voluntary poverty. As individuals and in community, ascetics have been important witnesses to the radical claims of the Gospel throughout the church’s history and continue to be so today. Not all Christians are called to be ascetics in this sense; nonetheless, all Christians are called to some temporary ascetic practices in order to be formed into the image of Christ. Classic and contemporary disciplines of fasting are a primary means to this end.