

2022 ... A Year of Discipleship

Fasting

If anyone wants to inflict fear into the heart of another, talk about fasting. Fasting, however, is a powerful spiritual discipline. Through fasting the Holy Spirit works in our lives to lead us closer in our walk with Jesus and strengthens us to follow Him.

For many, though, fasting isn't a discipline frequently – or ever – practiced, unless prescribed by a doctor. Most of us have fasted prior to a blood test or, possibly, some types of gastronomical tests. Anyone who has had surgery, even the removal of wisdom teeth, has had to fast. There are, also, medical benefits to fasting.

Yet, for many fasting is a foreign spiritual discipline. By definition, fasting is to abstain from all or some food or drink for a set period of time. When we fast – even when prescribed medically – we are to seek to glorify God. Fasting is not a way to have an emotional experience or attain personal happiness.

Fasting was an expected spiritual discipline in both the Old and New Testaments. Moses fasted at least twice for 40 days (see Exodus 34:28 and Deuteronomy 9:18-19). Jesus fasted 40 days immediately following His baptism and prior to the beginning of His earthly ministry (see Matthew 4:1-2).

Why Fasting ...

1. Read Matthew 6:16-18 and Matthew 9:15. What does Jesus say about fasting?

Jesus isn't saying anything new. Fasting was common among God's people. Look at the following passages:

- 2 Chronicles 20:1-4
- Esther 4:10-16
- Joel 2:12-17

How do God's people view fasting?

2. Fasting can seem "too Catholic," but it is part of our Lutheran doctrine and practice. Read Luke 21:34-36 (fasting from sleep) and 1 Corinthians 9:27 (fasting as a means for self-control). What is said here about the value of fasting?

Consider also these words from the Augsburg Confession, Article XXVI (Distinction of Meats):

Our adversaries object by accusing our teachers of being against discipline and the subduing of the flesh. Just the opposite is true, as can be learned from our teachers' writings. They have always taught that Christians are to bear the cross by enduring

afflictions. This is genuine and sincere subduing of the flesh, to be crucified with Christ through various afflictions. Furthermore, they teach that every Christian ought to train and subdue himself with bodily restraints, or bodily exercises and labors. Then neither over-indulgence nor laziness may tempt him to sin. But they do not teach that we may merit grace or make satisfaction for sins by such exercises. Such outward discipline out to be taught at all times, not only on a few set days. Christ commands, "Watch yourselves lest our hearts be weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness." Also in Matthew 17:21, "This kind never comes out except by prayer and fasting," Paul also says, "I discipline my body and keep it under control." Here he clearly shows that he was keeping his body under control, not to merit forgiveness of sins by that discipline, but to keep his body in subjection and prepared for spiritual things, for carrying out the duties of his calling. Therefore, we do not condemn fasting in itself, but the traditions that require certain days and certain meats, with peril of conscience, as though such works were a necessary service. (Augsburg Confession, XXVI, 30-39)

Fasting is important for all Christians, not for a select group of believers.

3. Fasting is good for us spiritually, but it doesn't forgive sins. Read Luke 18:11-12. What does Jesus say about fasting for show? Read also Matthew 16:24-26. What does Jesus say about fasting here?

While fasting doesn't earn us forgiveness of sin, nor does it earn us spiritual blessings before God. However, fasting is helpful for us in our struggle over sin. It is difficult to deny ourselves and carry the cross. Fasting is a blessing because it reminds us to hunger and thirst for God.

4. Read 1 Corinthians 6:20 and Matthew 4:3-4. What does fasting mean in the Christian life?

Though we contribute nothing to our salvation – we are saved by grace through faith in Christ – fasting keeps us focused on our Lord. Luther considered fasting fine outward training, especially prior to receiving the Lord's Supper, but faith in Christ is what is most valuable.

How to Fast

- It's safer to fast until a specific time or skipping a specific meal. It's also more sustainable than a complete fast.
- If doing a food fast, consider fasting from a specific type of food (ex. candy, sugars, carbs) instead of all food, especially if you want to fast for a long period of time (such as during Lent)
- A complete fast should be very short, no longer than a few days

- Do not abstain from drinking water for long periods of time and do so only under a doctor's supervision. The effects of dehydration are serious, and your body may begin to experience them more quickly than the effects of hunger
- If fasting from food or drink isn't a good option for you, fasting is still possible. Consider, instead, to fast from TV, social media, or some other activity which consumes a large portion of your time
- Begin fasting slowly. A full fast right away isn't the best option
- Remember, it's OK to break a fast. Breaking a fast is not a sin. If you're a guest in someone's home, eat what's before you. If you have no "fast-friendly" foods at home, eat what you have. Instead of feeling guilty about breaking a fast; give thanks to God for your food and start your fast over the next day (as applicable).

Who Should Not Fast

Fasting, especially abstaining from food and/or drink, isn't for everyone. For some, fasting can either be physically dangerous and for others it can be spiritually dangerous. Those who may be endangered physically by fasting are

- Children under age 10
- Pregnant or nursing mothers
- Those already on a restricted diet
- Those with serious health conditions
- Those advanced in age

Fasting can be spiritually dangerous if undertaken too quickly, rigorously, or without accountability. Pride in one's fasting is a distinct possibility or one may believe that fasting brings about more salvation or a better standing with God.

For more information about fasting you can check out the following video on Lutherans and Fasting at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wKNAnX_HvIA