

Practice Makes Permanent

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Joel 2:1-2, 12-17

Psalms 51:1-17

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

A Service Including Imposition of Ashes

Ash Wednesday

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Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church

New York, NY

Fred told me this week about an organist who every morning would practice his scales while reading the New York Times. Andrew Henderson remembered reaching to turn the page for another organist during a Bach concert, and discovering a hot rod magazine instead of sheet music. My favorite basketball player is famous for dribbling two balls while playing dodgeball or jumping rope while wearing weights.ⁱ These people like all elite performers, practice regular, scheduled, methodical exercises every single day until the basic rhythms become instinctual and habitually faithful responses to any situation.

Regular, scheduled, methodical practice is even more important to our faithful lives.ⁱⁱ The Christian disciplines of penitence, prayer, scripture, fasting, and alms are our practice methods. They are our scales, our free throws, our vocal stretches, and even our wind sprints. We repeat them regularly, even systematically, so that when life comes at us too fast to think, our instincts will be faithful. We practice not because practice makes perfect. If you practice wrong you'll perform wrong, but if you practice well you perform well, because practice makes permanent. **PRACTICE MAKES PERMANENT.**ⁱⁱⁱ

Lent is a time for practice. In fact, Lent was invented as spiritual Spring Training leading up to Easter, because we need intense periods of practice to remind our spiritual muscles what to do.^{iv} Lent is when we practice extra; when we try to practice too much. Lent is when you schedule 3 practices a day just so that you will have the spiritual endurance and muscle memory to get through the rest of the year regardless if it brings a raise or a pink slip, a surprise conception or a surprise diagnosis.

Of these Lenten practices, Fasting is the most localized to Lent, making the two almost culturally synonymous.^v Fasting is an ancient Biblical practice^{vi}, commanded by Joel^{vii}, assumed by Jesus^{viii}, and yet more often than not, misunderstood or neglected.

So while the air buzzes with "I'm giving up such and such for Lent," it is important to remember WHAT FASTING IS NOT. WHAT FASTING IS. And HOW WE MIGHT TRY IT.

First: What it is not.

Number 1. Fasting is not a hunger strike.^{ix} A hunger strike is designed to draw attention to a person or a cause. In contrast, Jesus teaches his followers to fast in secret, because if I am trying to command others attention, instead of focusing my own attention on God, I am not fasting.

Number 2. Fasting is not a diet. It is not a way to lose weight ahead of bikini season and spring break.^x Being healthy is a good thing, even a godly thing, but that doesn't make it fasting. We don't fast to harm or enhance the body. Rather, fasting

submits the body to the soul, and uses the body as a catalyst for consistent repentance, prayer and dependence.

Number 3. Fasting is not self-prescribed punishment. Jesus already accepted all our deserved punishment including its shame and so any attempt to punish myself is a rejection of Jesus' saving death. Instead, fasting is an act of remembrance, penance, and acceptance.

Number 4. Fasting is not about giving up bad things. You cannot fast from adultery, lying, drunkenness, or gossip. That is called penance and it is the right starting point, but it is not yet fasting.

And Number 5. Fasting is not just about giving something up. Fasting is not about subtraction; it is about substitution. Fasting does not and cannot exist apart from prayer, scripture meditation, and caring for the poor.^{xi} *Even if you are not eating, if you are not praying, then you are not fasting. You are starving.*

Just to be clear, in the Bible, fasting always refers to food. Fasting is not just about giving up chocolate or coke or even Facebook. Still, giving up such things is an excellent way to remind us that Jesus is better than life, and that reading the Good News is more important than the day's news. While not fasting, abstaining from certain delicacies or luxuries IS the spiritual discipline of simplicity. Simplicity is about living and eating in moderation to focus on Jesus and to save money for giving to the poor.

Finally fasting like all spiritual disciplines is NOT a way we earn God's Love. It is a way we enjoy it.

So that's what fasting is not, but what is Fasting?

Well, fasting is a practice. Actually, it is a concentrated form of all the other spiritual practices. Fasting is the Crossfit of spiritual disciplines. It uses my physical body and physical needs to unveil spiritual truth and spiritual desperations. **Fasting is simply abstaining from food in order to better focus on God through penance, prayer, scripture, and alms.**

Fasting reminds us that we do not live by bread alone, but by every word from God's mouth.^{xii} So fasting is not starving. **"Fasting is Feasting."**^{xiii} Fasting is about eating my fill of the Bread of Life in Scripture.^{xiv} Traditionally, fasting Christians replace meals with devotions, and most come away more satisfied from an hour in meditation than from a hour of mastication.

To that point, one day John brought Jesus lunch and Jesus turned it down saying, "I have food you know nothing about."^{xv} Friends, do you know that food? Do you know the food that Jesus enjoyed in the desert? Well, Fasting is the only possible way to enjoy that food Jesus offers you.

There are three main reasons people fast – to mourn sin, to feel mortality, and to hear from God.^{xvi} In the Old Testament, the Hebrew people fasted for the Day of Atonement to acknowledge and mourn their sins.^{xvii} It reminded them and us that the first recorded rebellion involved eating.^{xviii}

As fasting recounts our sin, it also reminds us that we will die. Apart from the Spirit of God, you are two handfuls of dust. While fasting we feel the weight of sin and taste our

impending death, but also remember God's love. Because as we "suffer" for 24 hours, we remember the Jesus suffered in our place to save us. We fast, not to punish ourselves, but to remember the punishment of Jesus, to celebrate his resurrection, and to commune with his Spirit.

And that is the final reason we fast, to increase our sensitivity to the voice of God. In the Old Testament Moses^{xix}, Elijah^{xx}, Nehemiah^{xxi}, Zechariah^{xxii}, Esther^{xxiii} and Daniel^{xxiv} all fasted for days before hearing from the Lord. Jesus fasted 40 days before beginning his public ministry.^{xxv} Later the Church fasted and worshipped to discern God's chosen leaders.^{xxvi} Worship combined with Fasting is a proven way to increase our ability to hear from a God. It is not automatic. Fasting is not a tool I use to manipulate God. It is a tool God uses to mold me. Not a speaker button, but a hearing aid. As we fast, pray, and meditate methodically, practice makes permanent and we begin to more easily hear God's voice outside of designated prayer times and spaces.

The practicalities of Fasting are simple. Pick a day of the week and go 24 hours without eating. Replace your meal times with times of prayer and scripture. Respond to your hunger with more prayers for strength and revelation. Go from lunch one day to lunch the next, or dinner to dinner. Maybe start by skipping lunch. As Jesus said, don't advertise your fast. Don't complain. Don't focus on hunger but on Jesus. Don't draw other's attention to you; draw your attention to Jesus. And for Christ's sake, don't abstain from food and indulge in sin. Finally, keep track of the money you would have spent on meals, and give all that money to the poor on the streets. That is the practice of alms.^{xxvii}

Sisters and brothers, as we enter Lent, we enter spring training. Now is the time to practice those things we want to be spontaneous and instinctual throughout our lives, because Practice makes permanent. Now is the time to design a spiritual workout plan with the spiritual disciplines. While not sheek or vogue, fasting is one of the most intense ways to practice penance, prayer, scripture, and alms. If you are not pregnant, sick, or anorexic, try it and as you over practice during Lent through regular, methodical exercises, I promise you will find more spontaneous repentance and dependence in your daily life throughout the year. May God make it so, for God's glory and Christ's fame.^{xxviii}

ⁱ The player is Stephen Curry and to read about his practice regiments see Stu Woo, "Two Thing Stephen Curry Does Better Than You," *Wall Street Journal*, May 7, 2013.

ⁱⁱ I acknowledge that practice can be either beneficial or detrimental to our conscious relationship with God by the Holy Spirit. The distinguishing characteristic is thoughtfulness or intentionality. If habits devolve into "parrot-talk" they actually prevent our engagement with the one speaking to us, but if they are undertaken intentionally, they augment our sensitivity. See C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters: With, Screwtape Proposes a Toast* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2001), Letter 4.

ⁱⁱⁱ "Practice makes Permanent" was taught to me by my high school wrestling coach, Matt Lynch. He taught me as much about life as any man save my father.

^{iv} Lent was invented. It does not appear in the Bible, though it intentionally echoes the 40 days Moses and Elijah spent on the mount, the 40 years the Israelites spent wandering, and the 40 days Jesus spent in the desert. It began as separate traditions of fasting, penitence, and catechesis. Through out the church it varied from a few days to 6 weeks to 7 weeks, but was regularized by Pope Gregory, who set the exact number and format of the 40 days by creating "Ash Wednesday." cf. *Supplemental Worship Resources*, vol. 8, *From Ashes to Fire: Services of Worship for the Seasons of Lent and Easter with Introduction and Commentary* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1979). Nicholas V. Russo, "The Early History of Lent,"

(Waco: The Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University, 2013), available at <http://www.baylor.edu/content/services/document.php/193181.pdf>. Fr. William Saunders, "History of Lent," *Arlington Catholic Herald*, available at <http://www.catholiceducation.org/articles/religion/re0527.html>.

^v This synonymy is generally expressed as "Giving up something for Lent," which even unbelievers sometimes practice for much different reasons.

^{vi} Dating all the way to the Law of Moses: Lev 23:26-32.

^{vii} Joel 2:12,15

^{viii} Matt 6:16-18; Matt 9:15ff. – Jesus did not explicitly command fasting for his followers, but that is a "semantic technicality." He clearly upheld the discipline and anticipated that his followers would practice it after he was gone. This assumption gives it the weight of a command.

^{ix} **Richard J. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: the Path to Spiritual Growth*, 20th ed. (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998), 48-49. Do yourself a favor and go buy and read this book.**

^x This was by far the most common assumption at my High School and College.

^{xi} Isaiah 58:1-12.

^{xii} Deut 8:3; Matt 4:4.

^{xiii} Foster, 55.

^{xiv} John 6:35.

^{xv} John 4:31-32.

^{xvi} Cf. Belm, "νήστεις" *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 4:927-929,934.

^{xvii} Lev 23:26.

^{xviii} Gen 3:1-7.

^{xix} Ex 34.

^{xx} 1 Kings 19.

^{xxi} Nehemiah 1.

^{xxii} Zechariah 7-8.

^{xxiii} Esther 4:16.

^{xxiv} Daniel 10:3.

^{xxv} Matt 4:2.

^{xxvi} Acts 13:3; 14:23.

^{xxvii} For extended advice on starting the discipline of fasting, see Foster, 56-61. Richard Foster talks through the practicalities of beginning the discipline and growing in the discipline all the way up to extended fasts of 20 to 40 days.

^{xxviii} Other works consulted include: (a) Anchor Bible Dictionary. (New York: Doubleday, 1992), s.v. "Fasting." (b) John Calvin, *Commentary On Matthew, Mark, Luke - Volume 1 - Enhanced Version (Calvin's Commentaries)*, 1.1 ed. (Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 2009), 271-276, 290. (c) Thomas Aquinas, *Catena Aurea - Gospel of Matthew - Enhanced Version*, 1.1 ed. (Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 2010), 177-186, 200-204. (d) Peter E. Fink SJ, ed., *The New Dictionary of Sacramental Worship* (Collegeville, MN: Michael Glazier, 1991), "Lent".