

Free From... Free To...

Reflections on Forty Days of Prayer and Fasting

February 22 through April 8

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During the forty days leading to Easter (excluding Sundays), First Church of God in Alma will join hundreds of other congregations of the Church of God as we embrace a call to renewal through the powerful practices of prayer and fasting. For thousands of years, God's people have surrendered to the love and power of God with the aid of these disciplines. During this forty-day journey, we will seek to cooperate with the presence and action of God upon and through us.

What is Fasting?

Simply stated, fasting is the practice of temporarily giving up something good for a high and worthy purpose. Although the fast from food is the most common, and will be the primary focus in this writing, choosing to abstain temporarily from any good thing constitutes a fast. (See the section below, "How Will This Work?" for a description of other kinds of fasts.)

Why Fasting?

Most Christians are well acquainted with the importance of prayer to the life of faith. But why are we encouraging the practice of prayer *and fasting*? We should note, first of all, that there is a clear and strong witness to the value of fasting in the pages of Scripture. In both Old Testament and New, fasting is practiced on many occasions and in a variety of circumstances. Moses fasted as part of his efforts to discern God's leadership. The people of Israel fasted in times of crisis or calamity to gain direction. Individuals such as King David fasted as part of their repentance when they had failed. Sometimes fasting was embraced on special days of worship, such as on the Day of Atonement. Jesus fasted in preparation for his public ministry, and he taught his followers that when they fast (not *if*, but *when*), they should not be like the hypocrites who do it outwardly as a show of piety, but they should do it secretly before their father in heaven. The Apostle Paul fasted following his first encounter with the risen Lord. The Book of Acts declares that the early church fasted, often in times when they sought guidance.

This very casual summary is enough to show that there is a strong witness to the importance of fasting in the Bible. In fact, in light of that witness, one may wonder why its practice has waned in much of the contemporary church.

Secondly, we embrace the voluntary practice of fasting in the hope that we might become more sensitive to those in our world for whom hunger is a grinding, *involuntary* reality. A passage that will be central to our forty day journey is these words from Isaiah 58:

Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—when you see the naked, to clothe him, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?

It is clear in this text that the fast that God inspires is one that raises our awareness of those children of God who are marginalized by poverty and hunger. There's nothing like the grumbling of the stomach and the temporary weakness that sometimes accompanies the voluntary fast to raise one's awareness of those whom Jesus called, "the least of these, my brothers."

Thirdly, we embrace fasting as an avenue of freedom. It is noteworthy that in the passage just cited, Isaiah speaks of the fast that "looses the chains" of oppression. There can be little doubt that he was speaking of the liberation of those who are oppressed by hunger, but fasting can also be a means of freedom for those of us who choose to practice the fast. As Richard Foster has noted, fasting, more than any other discipline, reveals that which controls us. While fasting, we may become aware of the degree to which we rely upon food to relieve our anxieties, calm our loneliness and tranquilize our pain. The practice of fasting invites us to open our hearts and minds to the love of God, the fount of all peace, love and comfort. This is precisely why fasting and prayer, practiced together, can be such a dynamic duo. We begin to realize why Jesus said, "My food is to do the will of my Father."

How Will This Work?

I cannot emphasize too strongly that legalism is the great enemy of spiritual practice of any kind. There is no right or wrong way to practice this fast. What follows are simply suggestions for the practice.¹ There will be as much variety in the ways members of our congregation practice the fast as there are people—and that is a thing to be celebrated. That said, allow me to propose the following suggestions.

First, *for those who are able*, I propose a one-day fast from food each week during the forty days leading to Easter. If you are new to fasting, or if you haven't done it for a considerable time, I suggest that you begin with a 24 hour fast, meaning that you will miss two meals. For example, you might eat dinner the first day, fast from breakfast and lunch the second day, and break the fast that evening with dinner. After you have done this two or three times, some may wish to fast from all three meals.

Second, I encourage *those who are able* to practice their fasts on Wednesdays, beginning February 29, up to and including April 4. Again, let's not get bogged down in legalism here. If there's a better day for you to fast, do it! However, a shared day gives us the opportunity to emphasize the corporate nature of this fast. We are seeking to become more open to God as individuals and as a congregation. A shared day will be a meaningful way of expressing the corporate side of this commitment.

¹ I am indebted to Richard Foster for several of these suggestions. His chapter on the Discipline of Fasting is still the most balanced, fair and helpful material I have read about the spiritual fast. See his book *Celebration of Discipline*, chapter four.

Third, in as much as it is possible, devote yourself to prayer during the times when you would normally be eating. Our goal here in this forty day journey is to consent to the will and work of God in and through us. It will accomplish little if we simply replace our times of eating with more busyness. Meal times can be occasions for a walk and conversational prayer, or times of silent prayer in a secluded place, or an opportunity for praying with others. This is an invitation to learn to be calm, silent and centered in God's presence. (We will be opening the church on Wednesdays during the lunch hour. Those who wish to pray in the sanctuary will have that opportunity.)

Some people should not fast from food. Persons who are diabetic, hyper or hypoglycemic, those with any kind of heart trouble and expectant mothers should not practice a food fast. If you have any reason to suspect that fasting from food may not be healthy for you, please consult your physician.

If a food fast is not for you for any reason, consider abstaining from something else. Perhaps you might wish to consider fasting from the television or the computer. You might wish to consider refraining from the use of electronic devices such as your iPod or your cell phone. (These devices are notorious for making us slaves to the 'tyranny of the urgent.') Consider fasting from talk radio or the newspaper. The point is, be creative. There are hundreds of meaningful ways to practice a fast.

A Personal Note

Fasting is costly. I personally find it so. In fact, of all of the disciplines of the Christian life, this is the one I would most like to avoid. I am persuaded, however, that it is a *timely* discipline. In our fast-paced, consumer-driven culture, we so easily become addicted to comfort while we remain aliens and strangers to the deeper life of the Spirit. I know *I* easily fall prey to that seduction. The call to fasting and prayer challenges me to set aside comfort for a higher good. It invites me to slow down during these weeks leading to Easter and pay attention to what God is doing. It invites me to become present to the suffering love of God for God's world. It is a costly, intentional discipline that leads to a better way. We are ***free from*** the tyrannical claims of comfort and ***free to*** be joined to the love of God for the world!

There are, of course, pretentious and destructive ways of practicing a fast. If I make it a means of self-justification, for example, it loses its vitality and only serves to make me more self-righteous. Or, if I observe the fast as a way of coercing God to embrace *my* agendas, it is, of course, utter nonsense. If, on the other hand, I embrace fasting and prayer with the intention of becoming more sensitive to the will of God, if *we* embrace fasting and prayer together with the goal of becoming a more authentic Christian community, if we embrace the call to fast and pray with the hope of becoming more surrendered to God's love for us and for the world, it may have lasting, transformative impact.

I know that I will need your encouragement through these weeks, and perhaps you will need mine as well. It will be difficult, but, I trust, it will lead us further along the way of Jesus Christ. May God give us the courage to be uncomfortable, the willingness to be sensitive to his guidance and the power to be surrendered to his purposes. May we discover that we are, indeed, ***free from*** our attachments to comfort and ***free to*** love God.

A Brief Summary

1. As part of our theme, “Free From... Free To...” First Church of God is embracing a call to prayer and fasting for the forty days (excluding Sundays) beginning Wednesday, February leading to Easter, Wednesday, February 22, and concluding Easter Sunday, April 8. We will be joining hundreds of other like-minded congregations of the Church of God who are also embracing this challenge.
2. We are encouraging *those who are able* to fast from food on one day of each week during this forty day period. We invite *those who are able* to designate Wednesday as their fast day.
3. Some are not able to fast from food. Expectant mothers, persons with hyper or hypoglycemia, those with heart troubles of any kind and diabetics should avoid the food fast. We invite those who, for any reason, cannot fast from food, to identify something else from which they will be willing to abstain.
4. Our goal is to embrace fasting *and prayer*. We encourage all participants to renew their prayer practice during these weeks.
5. On the Sundays leading up to Easter, we will be considering St Paul’s letter to the Galatians and its beautiful testimony to the freedom of Christians.
6. The church will be open during the lunch hour every Wednesday for those who wish to pray in the sanctuary.

Resources

See Richard Foster’s excellent book *Celebration of Discipline*. I highly recommend the entire book. Chapter four is dedicated to the discipline of fasting.

Here are a few resources you can find on the web:

Church of God Ministries, a leadership team of congregations of the Church of God around the world, has put together a variety of resources to guide the church through this forty day journey. You will find them at this link:

<http://www.chog.org/AboutUs/Our5StrategicValues/Focus40/tabid/365/Default.aspx>

A Conversation With Richard Foster:

http://www.csec.org/csec/sermon/foster_3114.htm

The Reading Room @ the Water’s Edge:

http://www.watersedge.tv/disciplines_fastingfrugality.htm

From Campus Crusade for Christ:

<http://www.ccci.org/training-and-growth/devotional-life/personal-guide-to-fasting/index.htm>