

Formed in Christ: A Study of the Practices of Following Jesus

Week 5: *Fasting & Feasting*¹

REVIEW

“Grace is opposed to earning, not to effort” (Dallas Willard, *The Great Omission*).

“We must seek out ways to live and act in union with the flow of God’s Kingdom life that should come through our relationship with Jesus” (Dallas Willard, *The Great Omission*).

INTRODUCTION

I. FASTING

a. What is FASTING?

i. Definitions

“A fast is the self-denial of normal necessities in order to intentionally attend to God in prayer. Bringing attachments and cravings to the surface opens a place for prayer. This physical awareness of emptiness is the reminder to turn to Jesus who alone can satisfy” (Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook*, 218).

“In fasting, we abstain in some significant way from food and possibly from drink as well” (Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, 166).

“A biblical definition of fasting is a Christian’s voluntary abstinence from food for spiritual purposes” (Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*, 160).

ii. Biblical Examples

1. OT Examples

Fasting on Day of Atonement

“**29** And it shall be a statute to you forever that in the seventh month, on the tenth day of the month, you shall fast and shall do no work, either the native or the stranger who sojourns among you. **30** For on this day shall atonement be made for you to cleanse you. You shall be clean before the Lord from all your sins. **31** It is a Sabbath of solemn rest to you, and you shall afflict yourselves; it is a statute forever.” (Lev 16:29-31)

“**27** Now on the tenth day of this seventh month is the Day of Atonement. It shall be for you a time of holy convocation, and you shall fast and present a food offering to the Lord.” (Lev 23:27)

Fasting during national emergency

“**15** Blow the trumpet in Zion; consecrate a fast; call a solemn assembly;” (Joel 2:15)

“After this the Moabites and Ammonites, and with them some of the Meunites, came against Jehoshaphat for battle. **2** Some men came and told Jehoshaphat, “A great multitude is coming against you from Edom,

¹ Works consulted: Willard, *The Great Omission*; Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*; Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*; Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*; Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook*; Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart*; Capon, *The Supper of the Lamb*; Lewis, *Mere Christianity*.

from beyond the sea; and, behold, they are in Hazazon-tamar" (that is, Engedi). **3** Then Jehoshaphat was afraid and set his face to seek the Lord, and proclaimed a fast throughout all Judah. **4** And Judah assembled to seek help from the Lord; from all the cities of Judah they came to seek the Lord." (2 Chron 20:1-4).

Fasting while in exile in Babylon

"19 *"Thus says the Lord of hosts: The fast of the fourth month and the fast of the fifth and the fast of the seventh and the fast of the tenth shall be to the house of Judah seasons of joy and gladness and cheerful feasts. Therefore love truth and peace."* (Zech 8:19)

2. NT Examples

2 *And after fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry."* (Matthew 4:2)

"16 *"And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. **17** But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, **18** that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you."* (Matt 6:16-18)

"14 *Then the disciples of John came to him, saying, "Why do we and the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?" **15** And Jesus said to them, "Can the wedding guests mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them? The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast."* (Matt 9:14-15)

"2 *While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." **3** Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off."* (Acts 13:2-3)

iii. Other Examples

"It was not Christ's intention to reject or despise fasting...it was His intention to restore proper fasting." (Luther)

"The reading of the Scriptures with godly fear, the sound preaching and conscionable hearing of the Word, in obedience unto God, with understanding, faith, and reverence, singing of psalms with grace in the heart; as also, the due administration and worthy receiving of the sacraments instituted by Christ, are all parts of the ordinary religious worship of God: beside religious oaths, vows, **solemn fastings**, and thanksgivings upon special occasions, which are, in their several times and seasons, to be used in an holy and religious manner" (*Westminster Confession of Faith* 21.5).

b. What are the challenges, difficulties, dangers to FASTING?

i. Fasting apart from Christ or without a Godward focus.

"5 *"Say to all the people of the land and the priests, When you fasted and mourned in the fifth month and in the seventh, for these seventy years, was it for me that you fasted?"* (Zech 7:5)

“21 “Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch” 22 (referring to things that all perish as they are used)— according to human precepts and teachings? 23 These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh.” (Col 2:21-23)

ii. Fasting in order to be seen.

“16 “And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. 17 But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, 18 that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.” (Matt 6:16-18)

Pharisee in the parable of Pharisee and Tax Collector (Luke 18:9-14).

iii. Fasting while in blatant rebellion and sin.

“3 ‘Why have we fasted, and you see it not? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you take no knowledge of it?’ Behold, in the day of your fast you seek your own pleasure, and oppress all your workers. 4 Behold, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to hit with a wicked fist. Fasting like yours this day will not make your voice to be heard on high. 5 Is such the fast that I choose, a day for a person to humble himself? Is it to bow down his head like a reed, and to spread sackcloth and ashes under him? Will you call this a fast, and a day acceptable to the Lord? 6 “Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? 7 Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh?” (Isa 58:3-7)

c. Why should we FAST?

i. Fasting must be God-centered and God-focused.

“37 and then as a widow until she was eighty-four. She did not depart from the temple, worshiping with fasting and prayer night and day.” (Luke 2:37)

ii. Fasting strengthens prayer.

*“Whenever men are to pray to God concerning any great matter, it would be expedient to appoint fasting along with prayer” (Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.12.16)*

“The most important aspect of this Discipline is its influence on prayer. You’ll notice that in one way or another, all the other biblical purposes of fasting relate to prayer. Fasting is one of the best friends we can introduce to our prayer life” (Whitney 166).

*“But prayer will not be established in our lives as it must be for us to flourish, unless we are practicing other disciplines such as solitude and fasting. In many Protestant churches prayer and Bible study are held up as *the* activities that will make us spiritually rich. But very few people actually succeed in attaining spiritual richness through them and indeed often find them to be intolerably burdensome. The ‘open secret’ of many ‘Bible believing’ churches is that a vanishingly small percentage of those talking about prayer and Bible reading are actually doing what they are talking about. They have not been shown how to change their life as a whole, permeating it with appropriate disciplines, so that prayer and Bible reading will be spiritually successful” (Willard 186).*

iii. Fasting exposes our hearts, our false self, and our idols.

“19 Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things.” (Phil 3:19)

“More than any other Discipline, fasting reveals the things that control us” (Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 55).

“Fasting exposes how we try to keep empty hunger at bay and gain a sense of well-being by devouring creature comforts. Through self-denial we begin to recognize what controls us” (Calhoun 220).

“It will certainly prove humiliating to us, as it reveals to us how much our peace depends upon the pleasures of eating. It may also bring to mind how we are using food pleasure to assuage the discomforts caused in our bodies by faithless and unwise living and attitudes—lack of self-worth, meaningless work, purposeless existence, or lack of rest or exercise” (Willard 166).

iv. Fasting directly and obviously affects our desires.

v. Fasting takes our bodies seriously.

“What fasting is slowly teaching me is the simple lesson that I am not utterly subject to my bodily desires” (Lauren Winner, *Real Sex*, 127).

“Fasting is the practice that most obviously helps us learn to discipline our physical selves” (Winner 128).

vi. Fasting is an embodied act of trusting in God alone.

“Fasting confirms our utter dependence upon God by finding in him a source of sustenance beyond food. Through it we learn by experience the God’s word to us is a life substance, that is not food (“bread”) alone that gives life, but also the words that proceed from the mouth of God (Matt 4:4)” (Willard 166).

vii. Fasting teaches self-control, moderation, and restraint.

“Fasting teaches temperance or self-control and therefore teaches moderation and restraint with regard to *all* our fundamental drives. Since food has the pervasive place it does in our lives, the effects of fasting will be diffused throughout our personality. In the midst of all our needs and wants, we experience the contentment of the child that has been weaned from its mother’s breast (Ps 131:2)” (Willard 167-8).

“Self-indulgence is the enemy of gratitude, and self-discipline usually its friend and generator. That is why gluttony is a deadly sin. The early desert fathers believe that a person’s appetites are linked; full stomachs and jaded palates take the edge from our hunger and thirst for righteousness. They spoil the appetite for God.” (Cornelius Plantinga)

viii. Fasting teaches us how to suffer happily and feast on God.

“Fasting helps to express, to deepen, and to confirm the resolution that we are ready to sacrifice anything – to sacrifice ourselves – to attain what we seek for the kingdom of God.” (Andrew Murray)

ix. Fasting is where we meet Jesus. Fasting is feasting on the Lord.

“We learn that we too have meat to eat that the world does not know about (John 4:32, 34). Fasting unto our Lord is therefore feasting—feasting on him and on doing his will” (Willard 166).

d. How can we begin to FAST?²

- i. Check with your doctor if you have questions about your health.
- ii. Start with one meal.
- iii. Drink lots of water.
- iv. Anytime hunger arises take the opportunity to turn to Jesus and confess your complete dependence on him. Let thoughts of food prompt thoughts of God.
- v. Pray and meditate on Scripture during your meal times (e.g. Ps 63; Matt 4:4).
- vi. Try beginning a fast after dinner. Fast until dinner the next day.
- vii. Don't break your fast with a huge meal. Eat small portions of food. The longer the fast, the more you need to break the fast gently.
- viii. Attempt to practice it “well enough and often enough to become experienced in it” (Willard 168).
- ix. Don't call attention to yourself about it.

“The only ones who should know you are fasting are those who have to know. If you call attention to your fasting, people will be impressed and, as Jesus said, that will be your reward” (Foster 57-8).

- x. Don't beat yourself up if you fail to keep your fast. Let it remind you that you are a flawed, imperfect human being who is beloved by God and in need of his grace. And don't let failure keep you from pursuing and making progress toward your goal.

II. FEASTING

a. What is FEASTING?

i. Definitions

“(Celebration) is the completion of worship, for it dwells on the greatness of God as shown in his goodness *to us*. We engage in celebration when we enjoy ourselves, our life, our world, *in conjunction with* our faith and confidence in God's greatness, beauty, and goodness. We concentrate on *our* life and world as God's work and as God's gift to us” (Willard 179).

“Typically this means that we come together with others who know God to eat and drink, to sing and dance, and to relate stories of God's action for our lives and our people” (Willard 179).

“The Christian should be an alleluia from head to foot!” (Augustine).

ii. Biblical Passages

“**20** Then Miriam the prophetess, the sister of Aaron, took a tambourine in her hand, and all the women went out after her with tambourines and dancing.” (Exod 15:20)

² From Calhoun's *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook*, Whitney's *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*, Foster's *Celebration of Discipline*, and Christ Church's “Fasting for the Purpose of Godliness.”

2 Samuel 6:12-16

“22 “You shall tithe all the yield of your seed that comes from the field year by year. **23** And before the Lord your God, in the place that he will choose, to make his name dwell there, you shall eat the tithe of your grain, of your wine, and of your oil, and the firstborn of your herd and flock, that you may learn to fear the Lord your God always. **24** And if the way is too long for you, so that you are not able to carry the tithe, when the Lord your God blesses you, because the place is too far from you, which the Lord your God chooses, to set his name there, **25** then you shall turn it into money and bind up the money in your hand and go to the place that the Lord your God chooses **26** and **spend the money for whatever you desire—oxen or sheep or wine or strong drink, whatever your appetite craves. And you shall eat there before the Lord your God and rejoice, you and your household.** **27** And you shall not neglect the Levite who is within your towns, for he has no portion or inheritance with you.” (Deuteronomy 14:26-27)

“11 You have turned for me my mourning into dancing; you have loosed my sackcloth and clothed me with gladness, **12** that my glory may sing your praise and not be silent. O Lord my God, I will give thanks to you forever!” (Ps 30:11-12)

“104:1 Bless the Lord, O my soul! O Lord my God, you are very great!... **14** **You cause the grass to grow for the livestock and plants for man to cultivate, that he may bring forth food from the earth 15 and wine to gladden the heart of man, oil to make his face shine and bread to strengthen man's heart.**” (Ps 104:1, 14-15)

Jesus turning water to wine at the wedding at Cana (John 2).

“They shall come and sing aloud on the height of Zion, and they shall be radiant over the goodness of the Lord, over the grain, the wine, and the oil, and over the young of the flock and the herd; their life shall be like a watered garden, and they shall languish no more.” (Jeremiah 31:12)

“They shall return and dwell beneath my shadow; they shall flourish like the grain; they shall blossom like the vine; their fame shall be like the wine of Lebanon.” (Hosea 7:14)

“Behold, the days are coming,” declares the Lord, “when the plowman shall overtake the reaper and the treader of grapes him who sows the seed; the mountains shall drip sweet wine, and all the hills shall flow with it. **14 I will restore the fortunes of my people Israel, and they shall rebuild the ruined cities and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and drink their wine, and they shall make gardens and eat their fruit.”** (Amos 9:13-14)

“And the Lord of hosts will prepare a lavish banquet for all peoples on this mountain; a banquet of aged wine, choice pieces with marrow, and refined, aged wine” (Isaiah 25:6).

“Then I heard what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude, like the roar of many waters and like the sound of mighty peals of thunder, crying out, ‘Hallelujah! For the Lord our God the Almighty reigns. **7 Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his Bride has made herself ready; **8** it was granted her to clothe herself with fine linen, bright and pure”— for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints. **9** And the angel said to me, “Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb.” And he said to me, “These are the true words of God.” **10** Then I fell down at his feet to worship him, but he said to me, “You must not do that! I am a fellow servant with you and your brothers who hold to the testimony of Jesus. Worship God.” For the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy.”** (Rev 19:6-10)

b. Why is FEASTING difficult?

c. Why should we FEAST?

i. The practice of feasting acknowledges and praises God as the creator of pleasure and the giver of desire.

“God has established a created order full of excellent and good things, and it follows naturally that as we give our attention to those things we will be happy. That is God’s appointed way to joy. If we think we will have joy only by praying and singing psalms, we will be disillusioned. But if we fill our lives with simple good things and constantly thank God for them, we will be joyful, that is, full of joy” (Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 195).

“A deep enjoyment of food and its preparation is evidence of the love of the creativity of God that is both wildly expansive and precise” (Deborah Madison in Capon’s *The Supper of the Lamb*).

“There is a habit that plagues many so-called spiritual minds: they imagine that matter and spirit are somehow at odds with each other and that the right course for human life is to escape from the world of matter into some finer and purer (and undoubtedly duller) realm. To me, that is a crashing mistake—and it is, above all, a theological mistake. Because, in fact, it was God who invented dirt, onions and turnip greens; God who invented human beings, with their strange compulsion to cook food; God who, at the end of each day of creation, pronounced a resounding ‘Good!’ over his own concoctions. And it God’s unrelenting love of all the stuff of this world that keeps it in being at every moment. So, if we are fascinated, even intoxicated, by matter, it is no surprise: we are made in the image of the Ultimate Materialist. Food and cooking, therefore, are not low subjects. In fact there are no low subjects anywhere in the physical universe. Every real thing is a joy, if only you have eyes and ears to relish it, a nose and a tongue to taste it” (Robert Farrar Capon, *The Supper of the Lamb*, xxvi).

ii. The practice of feasting makes God’s goodness real to us in the midst of sorrow.

“**11** You have turned for me my mourning into dancing; you have loosed my sackcloth and clothed me with gladness, **12** that my glory may sing your praise and not be silent. O Lord my God, I will give thanks to you forever!” (Ps 30:11-12)

“We are an Easter people living in a Good Friday world” (Anne Lamott).

iii. The practice of feasting disavows us of our Gnostic tendencies.

iv. The practice of feasting enables and complements the practice of fasting (and other disciplines).

“Celebration is central to all the Spiritual Disciplines. Without a joyful spirit of festivity the Disciplines become dull, death-breathing tools in the hands of modern Pharisees. Every Discipline should be characterized by carefree gaiety and a sense of thanksgiving. Joy is part of the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22). Often I am inclined to think that joy is the motor, the thing that

keeps everything else going. Without joyous celebration to infuse the other Disciplines, we will sooner or later abandon them. Joy produces energy. Joy makes us strong” (Foster 191).

“Joy is the end result of the Spiritual Disciplines’ functioning in our lives” (Foster 193).

v. The practice of feasting on holidays enhances celebration and praise of God.

vi. The practice of feasting shows our children and our neighbors that life in Christ is one of abundant joy not of solemn drudgery.

vii. The practice of feasting prepares us for eternity in the New Creation.

“Every small experience of Jesus with us is a taste of the joy that is to come” (Calhoun 27).

“We are not simply users of creation; we are, all of us, called to be its offerers. The world will be lifted, as it was always meant to be, by our priestly love. We *can*, you see, take it with us. It will be precisely because we loved this Old Jerusalem of a world enough to bear it in our bones that its textures will ascend when we rise; it will be because our eyes have relished the earth that the colors of its countries will compel our hearts forever. The bread and pastry, the cheeses, the wines, and the songs go into the Supper of the Lamb because we do: it is our love that brings the City home” (Capon xxvii).

d. How can we begin FEASTING?

- i. Have friends into your home regularly to share good food and drink. Choose a night and build it into your schedule.
- ii. Praise God during and after celebrations with friends and family.
- iii. Consider how you can go all-out in your celebration of Christian holidays with friends and family.

Questions for Reflection

- When you feel empty or restless, what do you do to try to fill the emptiness? What does this tell you about your heart?
- What is your attitude toward fasting or self-denial?
- What has the experience of fasting been like for you?
- Is there a matter about which you need stronger, more intentional prayer? Consider fasting as a way to focus your prayer.
- Do you have any misgivings about feasting as a discipline? If so, why?
- How could feasting become a regular practice for you, your friends & family?

RECOMMENDED READING & RESOURCES

Donald Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*, ch. 9

“Fasting for the Purpose of Godliness,” Christ Church

(<http://christchurcheastbay.org/site/images/CMS/pdf/fastingideas.pdf>)

The Supper of the Lamb, Robert Farrar Capon