

Prayer, Meditation and Fasting: The Pursuit of Communion with God

by Alex Chediak

“A selfish person is unable to enjoy the gospel; a Christian is someone who has begun to deny himself, and is in the continuous process of denying himself. Jesus said “If any man will come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me.” Self-denial is not limited to one particular kind of giving; it embraces all personal disciplines. Fasting is only one discipline; nevertheless, it is a self-denial. This does not mean that to fast is to embrace legalism; it is gospel liberty which encourages us to deny ourselves.”

--Fasting: A Neglected Discipline (Fort Washington, PA: Christian Literature Crusade, 1954), p. 17.

Practical Theology

Pastor/Teacher: Dr. John Piper

Executive Pastoral Assistant: Mr. David Mathis

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Pastor Steve and I are asking you to embark with us on an adventure that for many of us will be a first: Living for an entire week on just one or, at the most, two meals a day. Now we recognize that some of you have medical conditions that will make joining us impossible. And we don't want you to endanger yourself (or an unborn or nursing baby). But for the vast majority of you, this is attainable, even if it seems out of reach. For those of you who have never fasted before, we're recommending you skip one meal a day. For those of you who have had some practice with this discipline, we're suggesting you stretch yourself by living on just one meal a day. For those who, for medical reasons, cannot fast, we're asking you to give up something else. You decide what. Our purpose is to corporately pursue all the fullness of God. Oh, that God might choose to bless our church with a greater hunger for all that He is for us in Christ, that we might know more deeply that His lovingkindness is better than life. We want to have hearts that are so satisfied in God that the world sees Him to be genuinely dearer to us than comfort, prestige, friendships and money are to them. May God be pleased to use our faith-filled lives as a means to save them.

I want to briefly lay out for you the biblical rationale for this corporate fast. Jesus *assumes* that His disciples would fast after He is taken away from them:

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. 9:15)

He is referring to the period of time between his ascension and His Second Coming. In Matt. 6:16-18, Jesus spoke of individual, secret fasts, saying, "*When* you fast...." not "*If* you fast...". We fast because we long for Jesus to come wrap up human history, and deliver the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power. (I Cor. 15:24)

We recognize that Christ's kingdom has broken into this world via His death, burial and resurrection, but we long for all the fullness of His kingdom to be enjoyed, when He comes to be marveled at among all who have believed. And we recognize the truth of Matthew 24:14: that the gospel of Christ's kingdom needs to be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to the nations, *and then* the end will come. In Revelation 6, the martyrs are told to wait for vindication until the full number of Christians yet to be killed in like manner has been completed. May God raise up the remaining missionaries and martyrs in our day! So we fast in order to intensify our prayer that He send forth laborers into His harvest, so that the great work of calling men and women from every tribe, nation, kindred and people can go forth, until all those who have been given to the Son hear His voice in the gospel proclamation, believe, and find eternal happiness in Him.

Let's push a little deeper into that last point: fasting as an intensification of prayer. Our lives should regularly display meeting God through Christ-exalting prayer complemented with the enjoyment of food as the occasion for worship (because of a thankful recognition that God is the Giver). But it is helpful to occasionally refrain from the gift of food, while affirming its goodness, in order to intensify an explicitly focused season of prayer. For example, Joel 2:15-16 called God's people to a corporate fast focused on national repentance. Jesus fasted in preparation for His temptations in Matt. 4:2. Ezra held a fast to accompany his mourning for the unfaithfulness of the exiles in Ezra 10:6. In Acts 13:1-3 we see that at least the prophets and teachers of the church at Antioch were fasting and worshipping when the Holy Spirit set apart Barnabas and Saul to undertake a missionary journey. We're not sure, but perhaps they were specifically seeking the Lord's direction regarding evangelism and missions.

On a practical level, fasting assists prayer by freeing time: Pray through your skipped meals this next week and you'll have 5-10 extra hours for prayer. And fasting assists prayer by enhancing its intensity as you transfer your thoughts of food and efforts to prepare or obtain it into the pursuit of God and His will. One blessing will be a deeper level of communion with him, along with an enhanced awareness of God's priorities and how our energies should be aligned with His global causes. Start with yourself, then move outward in concentric circles to your spouse, your children, your relatives, your small group, this church, your personal mission field at work or in the neighborhood, and then our country and the nations.

But why a *corporate* fast? And why *now*? The beginning of the year is an exciting time when we're throwing a lot of energy into programs and ministries, some of which are new. It would be very easy for us to think and act as if the success of this church were dependent on our efforts, our creativity, and our resourcefulness. But we know from Psalm 127:1 that unless the Lord builds the house, we labor in vain. God gets glory from prayer and fasting because it demonstrates faith. It is a very real reminder that He is a big God who works for those who wait for Him, and that we need His blessing even more than our (necessary) food. As we begin 2008, we want to take just one week to intensely seek God's face through prayer and fasting. We desperately need the Lord to bless our worship services, so that all God's people are regularly blessed by engaging worship and Christ-saturated sermons. We desperately need the Lord to bless our small groups, so that one-another ministries pervade our congregation, and nobody feels like a stranger. We desperately need the Lord to bless our adult education courses, so that many are built up in the grace and knowledge of God. We desperately need the Lord to bless our marriages, so that they are beautiful reflections of the Christ-church dynamic to a lost world. And we could go on and on.

So what do you do when the hunger pangs strike? Thank God for the goodness of food, and tell God that you want Him more than food. Even if we don't feel that way at the moment, God honors the prayer, "I believe, help my unbelief!" Ask Him to do a deeper work of sanctification in your life and the life of this church, helping you to see spiritual realities and to recognize that life is war. Ask Him to satisfy you with His steadfast love, so that you are more focused on what you are gaining (Him) than what you are giving up (food).

Lastly, consider one other blessing: By choosing to deny the legitimate pleasure of eating, we grow in the ability to curb the appetites of our flesh, which can be a legitimate form of "buffeting our bodies." Like the Apostle Paul, we can employ fasting and other forms of deliberate self-denial not as ends in themselves, but as weapons in the fight of faith. We say no to an immediate, real pleasure (eating) in order to say yes in a more intense way to the surpassing, eternally real pleasure of fellowship with God. This is the same attitude Jesus displayed when, for the joy set before Him, he despised the shame of the cross. Yes, there is the danger of spiritual pride. But that danger lurks behind all the spiritual disciplines (Bible reading, prayer, evangelism, service). So let's ask for grace and humble dependence on Him and go for it.

May God meet us in a special way this next week, and may He pervade our church with faith-filled prayer throughout the whole year, so that all can see that God is our strength and our portion – both now and forever . Amen.