

God's Chosen Fast
Isaiah 58:3-9
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Let us pray

Lord, speak to us. Let us hear your Word for us today. Amen.

Fasting can be very beneficial for our physical health. Intermittent fasting is the latest health trend and is purported to help people lose weight and improve overall health. That's good. But it isn't as good as the benefits of God's chosen fast. God's fast is more about growing us spiritually as disciples of Jesus.

We are in the Christian season called Lent. This is the forty days, not counting Sundays, leading up to Easter. It is a time of taking stock of our spiritual life and consider any cleansing our hearts might need. It is a time of reaffirming the covenant we've made with Jesus as we prepare for the Easter celebration of our risen Lord.

Every year I hear people say they've given up various things for Lent. Some give up chocolate or sweets in general. Some give up social media. Others give up a bad habit. I had one friend who gave up complaining for Lent. She said she hadn't realized how often she complained until that fast. She found she could hardly speak at all!

I heard of a child who gave up liver. When challenged that he hated liver anyway, he responded, "So my mom can't make me eat it during Lent." Funny, yes, but he, like many, missed the point of the fast.

We need to understand God's chosen fast. What God is looking for in a fast may be very different from what you are practicing in your fast.

Fasting certain foods or whole meals can be very good for the health of your body. Fasting a meal a couple of times a week can increase human growth hormone, help with weight loss and muscle gain, improve insulin levels, repair cells, improve heart health and even help the body fight cancer. Of course, I need to put my disclaimer in here, you should always check with your doctor before beginning any fast.

But while fasting can be beneficial to your health, it really isn't the point of a biblical fast. It is a positive result, but not the main goal. The purpose behind biblical fasting is focusing on our spiritual condition and attending to the needs of those around us. Fasting is prescribed throughout scripture as a means of seeking God's best for us and for the world.

In the Bible we find examples of fasting in times of grief (1 Samuel 31:13), during periods of repentance (1 Samuel 7:6), and fasting to be delivered from enemies (2 Chronicles 10:3-4) to name a few. Jesus fasted 40 days while seeking

God's guidance and fighting temptation before beginning his public ministry (Matthew 4:1-11). Biblical fasting is about seeking God's presence and a relationship.

If intermittent fasting is about the conditioning of the body, biblical fasting is about conditioning the soul to seek after God more.

It is helpful to first identify what is NOT God's chosen fast. In the first part of today's scripture reading, God critiqued the fasting practice of the people. Just as with any Christian practice, it can become an empty rote observance without purpose, or it can be done with the wrong reasons or goals.

God noted the confusion of the people, **“Why have we fasted,’ they say, ‘and you have not seen it? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you have not noticed?’”** (Isaiah 58:3) The people were frustrated because it didn't seem like God was noticing their so-called pious act. They were fasting. That should have been enough, they thought. So why wasn't God responding to their idea of faithfulness?

The people were going through the motions without understanding God's intended purpose in the fast. They were fasting with no change of heart or behavior. In another example, Jesus called people hypocrites who fasted for show, looking miserable and disfiguring themselves so all would know they were fasting. At the same time, they continued to rebel against God. Jesus made it clear their fasting

should be done in secret, focused on getting right with God, not for show in public (Matthew 6:16-18).

Likewise, through Isaiah, God noted, **“Yet on the day of your fasting, you do as you please and exploit all your workers. Your fasting ends in quarreling and strife, and in striking each other with wicked fists. You cannot fast as you do today and expect your voice to be heard on high.”** (Isaiah 58:3b-4)

Biblical fasting is coupled with prayer lifted to God. Prayer and fasting go together. If the people wanted God to *hear* them, they needed to be more authentic in their fast. Their fast was empty of any purpose and their behaviors showed they weren't attending to God and God's code of behavior. They put on a front of fasting only to continue in the very behaviors that distanced them from God.

The people appeared to humble themselves by bowing their heads, dressing in sackcloth, and wearing ashes. But their attitude and actions revealed they were not humble at all. In fact, they elevated themselves over others by exploiting them and quarrelling and fighting.

Real fasting is about seeking God's best purposes. In verses six and seven, God gives examples of the actions that are in line with humble, authentic fasting. We are to be the voice of those treated unjustly and free the oppressed (v. 6). We are called to share out of our abundance and provide

food, not just abstain from food, and provide shelter and clothing for those in need (v.7).

How might you participate in humble fasting, seeking God through prayer and through care for others? How might you apply this during the weeks leading up to Easter?

Let's say you decide to fast from computer games. What will you do with the time you free up? How about visiting church members who can't make it to worship? How about calling someone you know is sick or lonely and talk for a bit on the phone? How about writing cards of encouragement? And don't forget to pray for those you minister to.

Maybe you choose to fast a meal a few days a week. How might you turn that into doing for others? How about serving with Kids Café during these next Mondays insuring that children have at least one meal a day? Or, how about taking the money you save on the meals you skip, and purchase food for St. Mary's food bank? Be sure to pray a blessing over the food and those who will receive it.

Perhaps you'll choose not to eat any meals in restaurants during Lent. What will you do with the dollars saved? How about making a trip to the store and looking for sales on clothing for our Operation Christmas Child boxes and pray for those who will receive the clothes?

Let's say you decide to fast from sweets. Perhaps you'll commit to pray every time you feel

the urge to eat a dessert. Maybe your prayer can focus on those who don't have even the basics to eat, let alone the abundance of dessert? And don't forget to pray prayers of Thanksgiving for your stocked pantry.

Perhaps you'll decide to drink water only with your meals. Give thanks that you have clean water readily available. Take the dollars you've saved on beverages and give to our upcoming 6K water walk so we can help fund another clean water well for those who don't have access to clean safe water.

Maybe you'll fast from a few favorite activities and decide to use the time saved to clean out your excess accumulated abundance of clothing, kitchen wares, etc. What organization might you donate these too? Pray for those who depend on the cast offs of others to furnish their homes, stock their kitchen supplies, and dress for school or work, etc.

You might choose to fast from arguing and focus on kinder ways of speaking with your loved ones. When you catch yourself about to be sarcastic or mean, stop, pray, adjust the pitch and tone of your voice and rephrase your thoughts. This will be a blessing both to you and all those in your home – and certainly honoring to God.

A great benefit of fasting is that it not only helps others, it also frees us. In our consumer culture, we tend to be held hostage by the things we consume, from food to material things and entertainment. We

begin to believe we can't do without them. When we learn to be more generous with our food, our hospitality, and our time, it is freeing. Isaiah wrote, **“Then your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear; then your righteousness will go before you, and the glory of the LORD will be your rear guard.”** (Isaiah 58:8) Fasting reminds us that healing and wholeness is from God.

Fasting, while good for us, is also good for God's kingdom. When we catch the vision of fasting not as deprivation, or show, or an empty ritual, the whole world benefits. The focus is taken off ourselves and turned outward. We discover a wonderful thing. *We can exercise self-control over our choices* when we do so for God. We really can stop ourselves from making that purchase or eating that pastry. It is empowering to realize you are in control of what you eat, watch, and do.

The fasting God chooses is an invitation not only to audit our patterns of eating and patterns of consumption, it also gives us a new viewpoint of how we use our food, money, time, and energy. It's about aligning our spiritual walk with God's call. This is a practice worth adopting for life.

If you haven't chosen a fast for Lent, I encourage you to pray about doing so. And let God reveal himself to you through the fast. If you have

begun a fast, check your motives and your practice. Ask yourself if it fits God's chosen fast.

“Then you will call, and the LORD will answer; you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I.” (Isaiah 38:9)

Let us pray

Lord, encourage and guide us as we try out new spiritual disciplines like fasting as an effort to grow as your disciples. We know that with your Spirit, we can honor you. Thank you, Lord. Amen.