

The Disciplines for service and ministry: Fasting, Simplicity and Solitude

To read: *Celebration of Discipline: the path to spiritual growth.* Richard Foster

Introduction:

A life of service – this is what we're called to because this is what Jesus did:

Matthew 20:28 even as the Son of Man came not to be **served** but to **serve**, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

There is a fundamental conflict between the desire to serve God and serve our own needs. The two cannot sit together. Jesus put it this way:

Matthew 6:24 No one can **serve** two masters (and that's as a slave not an employee), for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot **serve** God and money. (Greek *mammon*, a Semitic word for money or possessions)

There is a modern syndrome that says I have to satisfy every human appetite. If I'm feeling weary, I have to have a holiday. If I'm feeling sad I have the right to be happy. If I'm hungry I have to eat. And this is the case irrespective of anyone else's needs. But this makes us the god of our world where our needs, our desires must be fulfilled and if not then something dreadful is wrong.

IN stark contrast we hear the Words of Jesus echoing across the years –

Matthew 6:33 But **seek** first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.

And this comes after teaching on fasting, not worrying and not chasing after material things.

Matthew 16:24 Then Jesus told his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, let him **deny** himself and take up his cross and follow me.

Very challenging words that we find quite easy to ignore, but Jesus called us to a life of **SIMPLICITY**.

It's perhaps an interesting facet of change that in times gone by heroes were those who turned their back on wealth and position and instead chose to live simply – St Francis of Assisi for instance. Yet now our heroes are those who have accumulated fabulous trappings in life, especially if they've done that from nothing. Our modern heroes are footballers, singers, and models; rags to riches self-made people who have fame, money, and possessions. Look at the phenomenal sales of magazines focussed on celebrity.

But in a style that is utterly contrary to that, we need to **prepare** for these acts of simple service, and when we've given out we need to **recharge** the batteries and **refocus** ourselves. This is something we see over and again in the daily life of Jesus. We do these in part through the disciplines of **FASTING** and **SOLITUDE**. But it's part of a cycle that repeats itself focussed around service.

Pity the poor person who's come here today for the first time who's now inwardly groaning and you could have gone to the beach, stayed in bed, or even a different church. But no, you're here and I've just come out with this!

But this is not about how we can punish ourselves – a form of self-flagellation to make us feel better for being bad. This is about equipping ourselves for effective service – no really it is!

Religion is often viewed as a set of things we mustn't do, but this is about *doing* some stuff. Fasting is about doing something, not not doing something.

And it's not something that we *have* to do – it's that as Christians, we *get* to do something. There is a privilege given to us to participate in something pretty exciting and different, something world changing and mysterious.

But first we have to deal with something that gets in the way, and that's us or rather part of us. The Bible talks about it as 'the flesh' and it's the bit of us that's always pulling in the different direction, trying to go back to the old, comfortable but ultimately wrong way. Part of exercising spiritual disciplines is to deal with that wayward flesh and deny it what it wants so its cry gets smaller and weaker.

A word too about different types or personalities. Some will find parts of this naturally easier or more attractive than others. Some are contemplative loners who are by nature quite happy if they don't meet or talk to anyone else for hours, even days on end. Some are ascetics whose idea of fun is a cold bath, possibly with a celery stick on which to chew. Some are wonderfully gregarious and are never happier than when in the thick of doing things with other people. Some are activist do-ers who can't abide sitting still and can always see something that needs acting upon. It's not one or the other. There is value in all these things, but in order to experience and benefit from the whole range of human experiences that help us understand God and His ways and therefore become more like him, we need to step beyond our preferences. The do-er needs to stop and refocus on God, and the contemplator needs to put some of that contemplation into action. It's part of a round that fits together like horse and carriage, love and marriage, fish and bicycle (that last one is to see if you're really reading this).

Without service based in the context of preparation and recharging it's all just so much pointless self-indulgence.

Fasting

Fasting is referred to many times in both Old and New Testaments.

There are examples to follow from Jesus and many biblical heroes.

So there's something there that we ought to take note of and do something about.

Medieval and other religions use fasting as punishment to atone – that's not fasting

Legalism – a former colleague at my first school would sit down on a Friday at High Table with a plate groaning with food, cross himself ostentatiously and announce in a loud voice, 'I'm fasting today.' Let me tell you that's not fasting either. To start with that's not abstaining from food and even if it were he'd already received his reward because Jesus tells us we mustn't make anything of it to others.

Matthew 6:16 “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. I've had many occasions when I've been tempted not to fast because there's some event on at work or socially, but it's amazing how people just don't notice.

Think about the characteristics of Western society. We overeat, growing heavier by the day in most cases and that earlier and earlier in life so we're hardly wasting away – few are starving. We think if we don't eat three large meals a day with frequent snacks in between, we're on the verge of starvation – and that's definitely not fasting. In many ways your stomach is like a spoiled child, and spoiled children do not need indulgence, they need discipline. In cultures where food is scarce, being fat is another sign of wealth and people don't understand why you wouldn't stuff yourself if you could.

Yet when we suppress the screaming demands of the physical being we begin to hear the quiet voice of God.

So what is fasting? Going without food when you want it. It's not to get a slimmer body, it's not to exercise power over someone (in the style of hunger strikes). It's not because it's been forced on you through famine, or because you don't fancy it when you're feeling queasy. It's not switching to a diet of Shakes at 3 gazillion

calories a pop on the hour, every hour or taking a roast dinner and liquidising it so you can suck it through a straw. It's a choice you make to go without food when normally you would be eating. And Biblical fasting is always for spiritual purposes.

Various scriptural patterns – restricted diet but not total abstention (Daniel)

Total abstinence from food – either solid or liquid, but not from water (Jesus in the wilderness)

Total abstinence – nothing passes the lips (Esther and the Jews) – worth noting that this is extreme and you would really need to know God had called you to this for a short period of time. You'd be very quickly called home to glory after this one if you let it continue. Esther and her fellow Jews were already under sentence of death within a short time if something didn't change!

Why do we fast?

Because Jesus said so.

The Sermon on the Mount puts fasting with giving and praying – as far as we know the other two are still going strong so what about our response to fasting?

Mt 6:16 – '**when** you fast', not if.. assumption appears to be that people are fasting and what they need is instruction about how to do this properly. But then neither did he here say you must fast.

Mt 9:15 – Jesus' disciples are here contrasted with disciples of John the Baptist. A new day had dawned and there was no fasting for the time being, but there would be a time again when it would be necessary. This is a much stronger emphasis with Jesus expecting that his disciples will fast. When is that time of the Bridegroom's absence? Most obviously it would be the present church age, though some might argue the period of three days between the death and resurrection of Jesus. Revelation shows that we're still waiting for the Bridegroom to come and clearly the apostles were fasting post resurrection so that interpretation seems less likely.

When do we fast? Usually it's private between the individual and God but there are clearly times when it is a corporate thing too on a regular basis (Day of Atonement was one such event in the Jewish calendar) but also in response to times of specific crisis or need.

There is no biblical command to fast regularly on a particular day of the week, but practitioners will frequently extol its virtue. (Jesus' words with the epileptic boy and Baden Powell's motto – be prepared). However freedom in the gospels does not mean licence but opportunity.

What happens when we fast?

1. Worshipping the Lord – showing his worth, which is more than food and the desires of the flesh
2. humbling ourselves Ps 69:10 When you feel weak through lack of food it reminds you that we are totally reliant upon him.
3. Restore balance on what's important and what we're chasing after
4. Subduing the flesh
5. Effective prayer, guidance in decisions, breakthrough resulting from diligently seeking him.

Some Specifics:

Plan around work schedules, and think carefully about what's appropriate for children, pregnant or nursing mums, and those suffering from chronic illness (especially diabetes and heart disease)

Getting into fasting – training your body like preparing for a marathon

You will feel weak or feel the cold more – take it sensibly, sit down where necessary and wear more clothing!

You will need to make adjustments.

Outwardly performing regular duties of your day, inwardly in prayer and adoration. In a new way cause every task to be a sacred ministry to the Lord and make your duties a sacrament.

Some scriptures on fasting:

Ezra 8:21, 9:5

Nehemiah 1:4, 9:1

Esther 4:3

Psalm 69:10, 109:24

Isaiah 58

Jeremiah 36:6

Daniel 9

Joel

Zechariah 7+8

Matthew 6+9 (and also Mark and Luke)

Acts 13:2, 14:23,

To read: God's Chosen Fast. Arthur Wallis

Simplicity – fasting from things

It's an inward reality that results in an outward life-style, but both are essential.

It impacts on what we say, the lust for status and position, extravagance in possessions, home, holidays, and consumption of resources. We buy things we don't need in order to impress people we don't like. Designer labels, exotic foreign holidays, latest I.T. gizmo and cars, they're all part of the same problem. Covetousness we call ambition, hoarding we call prudence and greed we call industry. We grab resources we don't need and deprive others of what they do need, or a fair share of what's available. My mum was fond of saying 'It's disgusting!' about things that weren't, like 'It's disgusting that she didn't say "thank you"'. It's a disgrace that we buy far more food than we need then throw a lot of it away when others haven't even enough to live off. That's an offence and caused by our warped idea of what's necessary in our topsy-turvy lives.

At its heart is faith – the faith that says God knows my needs and will meet them as I seek first his kingdom. This is the heart of simplicity – not saving the environment or recycling though these might be a natural result. Many people are driven by fear to these things but biblical simplicity is different. Then we're content to live with what we have and neither worrying about tomorrow, nor chasing after security and cushions against what might happen. Biblical injunctions against accumulation of wealth and exploitation of the poor are clear and numerous. The Bible challenges every economic value of contemporary society. Study the principles of Jubilee and you'll see what I mean as God ordained that there should be a regular redistribution of resources to ensure all had enough and that his people should put themselves in a vulnerable position so that they learned to trust in his provision.

Jesus declared war on materialism saying, you can't serve two masters (that's as a slave not an employee) – God and mammon (wealth) it's a rival God!

where your treasure is....

Look at the story of the Rich young ruler in Matthew 19:16

If in a comparatively simple society Jesus would lay such strong emphasis upon the spiritual dangers of wealth, how much more should we who live in a highly affluent culture take seriously the economic question? It's a root of wars (including in our own time as we look at the battle for the control of oil supplies), it's a snare to leaders of churches particularly. Forced poverty is not good, but there is enough to go round and when one enjoys plenty and doesn't share with one who does not have enough then that's not right.

Asceticism vs simplicity: those who practise the former have no place for things, but those who practise the latter place them in a correct perspective and use, and it brings contentment, freedom from anxiety and joy of unconcern for possessions. Neither the greedy (I don't have enough) nor the miserly (I don't want to lose it)

know liberty. We cling to our possessions because we are anxious about tomorrow. Simplicity is an inward spirit of trust in God as my provider – Jehovah Jireh.

1. what we have is a gift from God
2. what we have is to be cared for by God
3. what we have is available for others

We work, but it is not our work that provides our daily bread.

We may face challenges but God will see us through them

We may see needs in others that we trust we can help meet.

Principles for outward expression of simplicity:

1. buy things for their usefulness rather than their status (especially clothes)
2. avoid things that are beginning to feel like an addiction
3. practise giving things away to loosen their grip on you
4. beware the lure of gadgets
5. enjoy things without feeling you have to own them
6. stay close to nature and enjoy it
7. avoid buy now pay later – it's a temptation to have what you can't afford
8. be honest and simple in your speech – let your 'yes' be 'yes'
9. reject anything that leads to oppression of others
10. shed anything that is a distraction from the main goal that you have.

Some scripture to ponder:

Proverbs 11:28

Matthew 6:21, 6:24, 6:25-33, 16:24, 20:28

Luke 6:30, 16:13

1 Tim 3:3, 3:8, 6:9

James 4:1-2

To read: The Irresistible Revolution. Shane Claibourne

Solitude

Fasting from people, crowds, hurry and worry. It's something you enjoy and benefit from because you've poured yourself out first.

It's not about loneliness and isolation – that's a curse that no-one wants. It is about making sure it's just you and God.

As a young Christian I was introduced to a little book by Leslie Weatherhead who had been a President of the Methodist Conference. It was called 'A Private House of Prayer' and in it he encouraged us to draw aside in the busy-ness of life into that secret place with God. The challenge is where's that place? Is it the shower first thing in the morning, or possibly the car on the drive to work. Perhaps you need to leave the car on the drive, set off a bit earlier and walk somewhere so you get that time away from everything else. Or washing up at the sink, or whilst ironing or Hoovering. But make the most of the moment. Switch off the technology, get away from people and plan it in. For me it's a long run. Whilst my body's busy doing the running my mind and spirit are free to be and I often get a new perspective and clarity on what God's asking of me.

3 main blockers:

1. other people
2. technology – especially email, tv and mobile phones
3. not planning for it

Some scriptures indicating where Jesus withdrew:

Matthew 4:12, 12:15, 14:13, 15:21

Mark 3:7

Luke 9:10, 22:41

John 6:15

To read: Sacred Pathways. Gary Thomas

Covers 9 distinct spiritual temperaments – their traits, strengths and pitfalls. In one or more you will see yourself and the ways you most naturally express your relationship with Jesus Christ.

Response? So where are the people today who will respond to the call of Christ? Will we settle for a lazy and ill-disciplined cheap grace with a laissez-faire attitude or will we respond with willing hearts to put selfish desires to death as we pursue his calling and lordship upon our lives?

For those who spend their time doing so much stuff, the challenge is to stop and seek God through intimacy of prayer with fasting and to recharge through solitude with Him. And for those who spend their days thinking, blogging and contemplating what others should do, now is the time to get up and start doing some things – remembering you're called to a life of service.

Let's spend a few moments in quiet reflection to respond.

What commitment is necessary to restore the balance?

What do I need to start or stop doing?

What needs to change in my life and can I pay the cost?