

Tough Topics: A Biblical Theology on Fasting

NB: This study was put together by Rev. Dr. Scott Bruzek (St. John Lutheran, Wheaton, Ill.). I have adapted it for our use.

With graceful certainty, much joy and sometimes a bit of discipline, we are being pulled toward Christ, the Center of our lives. As He draws all things to Himself (John 12:32), gently tugging us into his orbit, Jesus gives us a pattern. Together let's discover that pattern, learning from Scripture and our forerunners in the Church, so that we live a life in His image, a life together that is pleasing to our Heavenly Father and energized by His Holy Spirit, a merciful life that is a winsome witness to a suffering world.

No food; stepping over sins; tithing; no drink; reading Scripture; no anger; praying; don't give offense, don't take offense; giving alms; holding your tongue; giving time; walking away; saying the kind thing; embracing an icon; giving up alcohol; weekly Eucharist; empathy with mercy

1. Moses, Elijah, David, Daniel, Jesus and Paul all fasted—and Jesus presumes that his disciples will too (Mark 2:20)

- Yet fasting seems to be wholly lost on us—so now what?
- Let's have a run at this and see if it might do us some good, starting here...

2. Fasting is a gift and blessing

- To get the Gospel right, fasting can't be a *this for that* – a trade or a deal done with God—but rather it is God's divine gift and a blessing to us
- Fasting belongs to sanctification, not justification; it is living forgiven, not being forgiven
 - *[Our teachers] also teach that everybody is under obligation to conduct himself, with reference to such bodily exercise as fasting and other discipline, so that he does not give occasion to sin, but not as if he earned grace by such works.*
Augsburg Confession 26:33
- “The tendency is to think that God will love us if we change, but God loves us so that we *can* change. Penitential practices and disciplines enable us to appropriate and make real in our lives the freedom given through grace.”
Fr Thomas Ryan, *The Sacred Art of Fasting*, 40
- Adalbert de Vogue, “Fasting was no longer a constraint and penance for me, but a joy and need of body and soul. I practiced it spontaneously because I loved it.”
To Love Fasting, cited in *Fasting*, Scot McKnight, xix
- So—what do we know about fasting?

3. Fasting engages the whole person

- It activates body + soul, or body + mind + soul, or body + mind + soul + spirit – or however many parts we think we might have—it engages all that we are as one lump, the whole of us
- Responding with our bodies in fasting is no different than responding with our bodies to stained glass, candles, hymns, and so on—fasting is a physical expression of embodied Christology; it is work that is fleshly, tangible, concrete and sacramental
- “[in *Man and Woman He Created Them*,] John Paul II essentially argued that our bodies reflect the giving and receiving life of the Trinity. Our bodies and what we do with our bodies visibly demonstrate the very core of what we are made to do: love God and love others.” McKnight, 10
- So—fasting is *physical*, but not uncoupled from mind, soul and spirit—it is completely bound to them
- And—it is done as a gift and blessing to the whole person...

4. For us, fasting is a response, not a tool

- “...fasting is the natural response of a unified [body + soul / whole-body] person to a sacred moment.” McKnight, 6
- Again—fasting is a sanctified response to a sacred moment, be it grievous or joyous
- Fasting is not a tool so that we get what we want, it is a gift and blessing so that our LORD gets what He wants
- That means we need to get fasting Law and Gospel right, distinguishing what we *get* to do from what we’ve *got* to do

5. Sometimes our LORD responds to our response

- It’s true—sometimes there is a divine response to our human response; sometimes God chooses to act as or after we fast
- It goes like this: something divine happens (grievous or joyous)—and in response, we fast—and then something more *may* happen, as a divine gift is added to the gift of fasting
- Again, tend the pattern: (1) sacred stuff—(2) we respond to sacred stuff—and (3) maybe God responds to our response

- However, it does not happen as cause and effect. Fasting is not manipulation to obtain a tangible reward; it is not a work, tool, instrument, amulet or incantation earning guaranteed results. Cf. McKnight, xxi-xxiii
6. Still, the pragmatic among us might ask: *If it's not a matter of cause and effect, why do it?*
- "...those who are most moved by sacred moments find themselves fasting and, *because they are in tune with what God is doing in this world in those grievous sacred moments*, they may discover desired results. But such person did not fast to get results; they fasted *in response* to sacred moments." McKnight, xxiii
 - So—why do it? There are a range of reasons, actually, for example...
 - Fasting helps us *see things from God's point of view*
 - Or how about this—we *do it because it's good for us—this how we learn, grow and flourish*
 - Or this—*breaking the fast would shatter or profane the sacred or somber character of the moment*
 - And always remember—*When we pray [fast?], God gives us what we ask or something better*. Bernard of Clairvaux
 - We will do more on this later, but for now...
 - What is a fast, and what is a sacred moment?
7. Fasting and Abstaining
- Not all fasts are the same
 - We don't always know exactly what folks were doing in Scripture or in the early Church, but we know enough, so let's try working out some definitions so that we can speak and think clearly about all this
 - Fasting come in a couple of forms
 - Fasting: not eating, but still drinking—this is also called a liquid fast
 - Absolute fasting: no eating *or* drinking
 - Fasting can last for different periods of time
 - Until receiving the Morning Eucharist

- Until noon or 3 p.m.
 - Eating only at meal times—nothing more
 - 12 hours—sunup to sundown (Vespers)
 - 24 hours—sundown to sundown—this is rare in Scripture
 - Note that the early Christians never fasted on the Sabbath (Saturday), except for the Great Sabbath/Holy Saturday when Jesus was resting, or the Lord's Day (Sunday), as that was out of sync with the joyful sacred moment of the resurrection, McKnight, 89
 - ✓ “If anyone, under pretense of asceticism, shall fast on Sunday, let him be anathema.” Council of Gangra (4th c.)
- Abstinence is technically different than fasting
- Abstinence: not indulging in a particular food, drink or action—this is sometimes called a partial fast
 - The most common forms of abstinence are avoiding meat, eggs, oil, dairy, alcohol, TV, deserts, soda, savories, and so on
- Feasting is the opposite of fasting and abstinence
- Feasting is celebrating—think: church potluck, bbq, Oktoberfest, etc.
 - Fasting is un-celebrating
 - *For feasts there must be fasts, and for fasts there must be feasts*—the high reveals the low, and the low reveals the high—this goes with keeping time, and keeping life, but we will come to that another day

8. Sacred Moments

- Sacred moments are obvious and perhaps even intuitive times of joy or sorrow that beg for sacred response—name some, please...
- Sin, death, disaster, injustice, hatred, war, Lent, birth, marriage, Eucharist, prayer, retreat, pilgrimage, great blessing, Incarnation

9. Incarnation is a joyous sacred moment

- Think of all you know about Christmas and the baby Jesus, and then about Epiphany and why he came, knowing Lent is on the way, and that Lent is a traditional time of fasting

- Then think of this: Mark 2:18-22
- “The Pharisees fasted on Mondays and Thursdays as an act of repentance in order to win God’s grace and hasten the coming of the Messiah.”

John Kleinig, *Course Book for Lutheran Spirituality*, C.2.d.5.c.(1), 56

- For joy, the disciples could not fast with the Heavenly Bridegroom was with them
 - His fleshly, physical, tangible, Christological, sacramental presence among them begged them to celebrate physically, tangibly and sacramentally, joyously!
 - In a very real sense, when Jesus was there with them on earth, they were already celebrating the Messianic feast of heaven—and right now, every one of your liturgical and Eucharistic bells should be going off: ...*with angels and archangels and all the company of heaven...*
 - After his death, they would fast as they waited to be reunited with their bridegroom, Mark 2:20
 - With this, Jesus creates a new custom of *festive fasting*, to prepare his disciples for eternal life and the perfect intimacy they will experience with him in heaven, Mark 2:21-22; Kleinig, C.2.d.5.c.(4), 57
 - This festive fasting is really a hidden celebration of grace, preparing us for the Messianic feast in the new age, Zechariah 8:18-19, Kleinig, C.2.d.5.c.(4), 57

10. Yom Kippur/Day of Atonement is a grievous sacred moment

- This is the ultimate day of repentance for Israel, Leviticus 16; 23:26-32; 25:9
- By definition, repentance is turning or turning around, turning away from sin and back to God
- Fasting *physically* expresses this turning
- To *deny yourself* or *humble yourself* literally means to *afflict yourself*—and the self-abasement expresses remorse for sin and a plea for grace
- This was an obligatory day of fasting—not to observe what it means to be cut off from Israel—but also note that it is a day of rest, a Sabbath, and so it is beneficial to them, Kleinig, *Leviticus*, 500
- It is from “evening to evening,” not dawn to dusk as with many other fast days, but dusk to dusk, a 24-hour fast—this is a very big deal, 23:32

11. Next, some practicalities as we engage sacred moments

- Recall that sacred moments are obvious and perhaps even intuitive times of joy or sorrow that beg for sacred response
- Remember some examples: sin, death, disaster, betrayal, injustice, hatred, war, Lent, birth, marriage, Eucharist, prayer, retreat, pilgrimage, great blessing, the Incarnation

12. Getting started—here are some very minimalistic rubrics for fasting

- Start with a manageable fast
 - It is better to do less and succeed than to do more and fail, so perhaps start with fasting until the morning Eucharist, or not eating between meals, or fasting until mid-day, and then build gradually from there
- Ease into it
 - If you choose a more rigorous fast, perhaps follow it just one day each week, tending yourself to see what happens—and you might start on a day off, as it may be much more difficult for you to fast on a workday than you might think
- Ease out of it
 - It's probably not best to break a fast by supersizing it
- Don't force it on your kids—they already have enough reasons to hate the Church, so why give them one more?
- I'm not an M.D., so I offer no advice on health issues
 - I am not primarily interested in what your liver is saying to your pancreas during the fast—it is your soul for which I care

13. What could possibly go wrong?

- Are you kidding? This is the Church! We can ding and dent most anything!
 - Cheating—and then guilt
 - Failing—I'm really bad at this!
 - Pride—I'm really good at this! And better than you!
 - Legalism—everybody must!
 - Hypocrisy—I do this, but the rest of my life is a spiritual mess
 - Judging others—that's my spiritual gift! (Judging, not fasting!)
 - Merit—turning a gift into a trade, a divine blessing into a deal

- Extremism/asceticism—hypertrophy, distortion, misuse, ouch
- Health—I didn't learn to take blood pressure at pastor school
- Issues of body image—be careful here...
- Eating disorders—very, very careful here
- And whatever else we can dream up to bring chaos to Eden!

➤ However—*misuse doesn't constitute disuse*, so...

14. Imagine all the things that could go right with a good fast—and here are just a few

➤ Remembering

- You've got to do something with all that extra time when you aren't eating, so how about counting your blessings?
- Recall your divine gifts (Baptism, Absolution, Eucharist, gifts of the Spirit, divine virtues) and all the good our Lord has done you (run through the 10 Words for a clue of what to think on and be thankful for), while knowing that in Scripture, *remembering* is a synonym for *faith*

➤ Rhythm

- Like Jesus—sometimes we are feasting and sometimes fasting
- Feasting and fasting provide a rhythm—a calendar—for the Church, and so for our lives
- Stationary fasting, for example, has a long tradition in the Church
 - ✓ These stations are observed the same days of each week—say, Wednesday and Friday—as a communal commitment not to eat
 - ✓ As stations, observed by the whole Church, these become a group fast until noon, 3 p.m., or dusk of the designated day
- Luther, who commended fasting during 3 seasons—before Christmas, Easter, and Pentecost—as a way to keep track of the Church year, also said, “I would be willing to condone fasts on every Friday evening throughout the year.” Martin Luther, *The Sermon on the Mount*, AE 21:159; see McKnight, 98

➤ Justice

- Isaiah 58:2-7
- This not only responds to the sacred moment of injustice—poor folks are oppressed, homeless, hungry and naked

- It also helps us see the world from God's point of view
 - ✓ "Fasting embodies God's disposition to the poor." McKnight, 101
- As we watch God's response and mimic it, justice is done through us too
- In this is holiness—and by holy I mean this: a good work is a forgiven work, and a holy thing is a thing redeemed
- From this comes the long tradition in the church of extending its fast into charity
- *"Fasting chastens yourself; it does not refresh others. Your distress will profit you if you afford comfort to others...How many poor can be filled by the breakfast we have this day given up?"*
 St Augustine, *Expositions on the Book of Psalms*, 43:7
- *"The greatest advantage of riches isn't using them for an individual's specific pleasure, but for the welfare of many people. They aren't for one's immediate enjoyment, but for the righteousness that never passes away. Therefore, by all means, we must not hope to receive something in return for showing mercy. We must expect the reward for such duty to come from God alone. If you expect it from others, then what you did wasn't kindness but lending something at interest. Those who act for themselves and not for the sake of others don't deserve to be rewarded. Yet, whenever people give to others without seeking their own advantage, they really give to themselves because God will reward them."*
 Lactantius, *Divine Institutes* 6.12
- "There is a world of difference between a private devotional gesture, the action of the specially pious, and the prophetic witness of the whole community – the matter-of-fact witness, repeated week by week, that to be Christian is to stand among the needy."

Eamon Duffy, "To Fast Again," *First Things* 151 (2005): 5

➤ Repentance/Holiness/Forgiveness

- Isaiah 58:9-12
- "...for the honor of fasting consists not in abstinence from food, but in withdrawing from sinful practices....If you see a poor man, take pity on him! If you see an enemy, be reconciled to him! If you see a friend gaining honor, do not envy him....What advantage is it, if we have gone through the fast devoid of works? If another says, 'I have fasted the whole of Lent,' you should say, 'I had an enemy, but I was reconciled; I had a custom of evil-

speaking, but I put a stop to it; I had a custom of swearing, but I have broken through this evil practice.”

St John Chrysostom

Concerning the Statues, 3.11-2; 16.13, in McKnight, 109

➤ Discipline

- “It is sometimes necessary to check the delight of the flesh in respect to licit pleasures in order to keep it from yielding to illicit joys.” St. Augustine, “The Usefulness of Fasting,” in McKnight, xvii
- 1 Corinthians 9:24-27—fasting is one way to bring our bodies into subjection – fasting leads to weakness which can at once reveal and diminish desire in many directions
- “More than any other discipline, fasting reveals the things that control us” Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 55

➤ New Habits

- “But as Israel, when going up to Jerusalem, was first purified in the wilderness, *being trained to forget the customs of Egypt*, the Word by this typifying to us the holy fast of forty days, let us first be purified and freed from defilement, so that when we depart hence, having been careful of fasting, we may be able to ascend to the upper chamber with the Lord, to sup with Him; and may be partakers of the joy which is in heaven. In no other manner is it possible to go up to Jerusalem, and to eat the Passover, except by observing the fast of forty days.”

St Athanasius, *Easter Letter* (AD 334), in McKnight, 93

➤ Space and time for our LORD

- Moses—Exodus 34
- Fasting can support or extoll our yearning or questing for God—which itself is a sacred moment

➤ Demons flee/Prayers are answered

- Mark 9:29—this kind of demon only comes out by prayer and fasting (in some manuscripts)

➤ Attentiveness/Eschatological Life/Hope/Festive Fasting

- “*Fasting is one of the ways the servants [of Jesus] keep themselves alert in this future-oriented waiting until the bridegroom returns.*”

To what could you liken their discreet, mysterious joy as they wait?

You could say it is like the quiet humming or whistling of a choir member earlier in the day of a concert. It's like a mother and father cleaning the house and making up the beds in anticipation of the kids' coming home at Thanksgiving or Christmas. It's like standing in the airport terminal or train station, waiting for your loved one to appear.

It's like a fiancée patiently addressing the wedding invitations: The long-awaited event is not here yet, but it will come, and this is necessary preparation.

In each case the energy is upbeat, forward-looking, and marked by the quiet joy of anticipation." Ryan, 39

16. So much to say, so little time—perhaps it can all be summed this way: *If fasting helps you love God and serve your neighbor, you've got it right, and if not, it's gone wrong*