

## Fasting and Prayer

Richard F. Melka, Ph.D.

*"Would that today you might fast so as to make your voice heard on high!"*  
(Is 48:4)

The discipline of fasting, a traditional form of penance, is closely associated with Lent and the Judeo-Christian tradition. Our first experiences with fasting are the usual ones, revolving around such days as Ash Wednesday and Good Friday or fasting on Fridays for a particular intention such as peace. The Church describes fasting as eating only one full meal a day with abstention from meat while health advocates consider a fast without any solid food and only water, while others use only liquids such as fresh juices, broths, and herbal teas.

A truly meaningful fast must begin with our relationship to God and neighbor as we seek grace and proper intention. Approach the whole idea with humility and give the intention of fasting serious attention before beginning. The prophet Isaiah gives us a starting point:

*This rather, is the fasting that I wish: releasing those bound unjustly, untying the thongs of the yoke; Setting free the oppressed, breaking every yoke; Sharing your bread with the hungry, sheltering the oppressed and the homeless; Clothing the naked when you see them, and not turning your back on your own. (Isaiah 58:6-7)*

So even before we bodily fast, we can examine our activities in social ministry. Jesus himself noted that the great commandment was twofold (Matt 22:34-40) as he directs us to God the Father and to neighbor and Isaiah does the same. We are told to give freedom and help to the oppressed, develop a greater sensitivity to those in need, be more generous in sharing what we have.

In Longfellow's Song of Hiawatha the intention of Hiawatha's fasting is recognized by the messenger from the Master of Life:

All your prayers are heard in heaven,  
For you pray not like the others;  
Not for greater skill in hunting,  
Not for greater craft in fishing,  
Not for triumph in battle,  
Nor renown among the warriors,  
But for profit of the people,  
For advantage of the nations.

Therefore, the first intention of fasting is to make us more attuned to the needs of others. The personal benefits of fasting are described by the prophet (Isaiah 48:8-12)

### **Enlightenment**

..then your light shall break forth like the dawn  
....then light shall rise for you in darkness

### **Healing**

....and your wound shall be quickly healed

### **Protection**

....your vindication shall go before you, and the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard

### **Answered Prayers**

....then you shall call, and the Lord will answer, you shall cry for help, and he will say:  
"Here I am!"

### **Guidance**

....then the Lord will guide you always

### **Renewal**

He will renew your strength

### **Restoration**

....they will call you, "Restorer of ruined homesteads"

Another important intention concerns cultivating a special attitude towards Sundays. Give extra thought during fasting about cultivating Sundays as special days of physical rest and spiritual revitalization.

....hold back..... from following your own pursuits on my holy day  
....call the **Sabbath** a delight  
....honor it  
....Then you will delight the Lord  
... for the mouth of the Lord has spoken. (Is 48:13-14)

The consequences of fast pleasing to the Lord can be seen to be significant, and yet, there is more. Jesus himself noted that some healings will only take place through the combination of prayer and fasting (Matt 17:21). The message is simple: fasting coupled with prayer is a most powerful combination and can help others dramatically. As a matter of fact a side benefit is that it is considered the oldest and most effective and safest personal healing method known to man.

First of all fasting does not imply starvation since it is merely an abstention from solid food for a relatively short period of time. I am advocating a special kind of fast, one that involves using fresh fruit and vegetable juices which have a rich vitamin, mineral, enzyme, and trace element content. Some advocates of fasting use water, but the juice approach (and I specifically mean fresh homemade juices) has been found to be superior in that one maintains strength for normal routines and the release of accumulated body toxins is better handled with juices. It is amazing that even after numerous days of fasting this way you never experience a hunger pain.

**A word of caution.** If a person is suffering from disease or sickness the juice fast should not be initiated without proper medical supervision.

I like to add a clear homemade vegetable (high in potassium) broth to my menu. Several potatoes, some celery, a beet, onion, and whatever vegetable leftovers I have are added to the crockpot at bedtime and in the morning the broth only is refrigerated for future use. I warm up a cupful upon rising and another at bedtime. Now one can conveniently find organic vegetable broth readily available in small containers. (Wegmans carries a variety)

The raw juices which can be used include: celery, carrot, celery-carrot-apple, cucumber, green pepper, beet, apple, and apple-strawberry. (When you have a juice machine many recipes are made available.) In each case I dilute the juice with equal parts of purified water as many of the juices are strongly flavored. Another ready-made aid is SIMPLiFAST, made exclusively for fasting. ([www.simplifast.com](http://www.simplifast.com))

The third addition to the menu consists of herbal teas such as green tea, ginger, ginseng, comfrey, peppermint, and rose hip. Coffee or regular tea is best avoided during the fast. Water, however, may be freely taken at any time.

Here is a sample schedule:

Morning: Warm vegetable broth upon rising.  
Fresh fruit juice (diluted with water) for breakfast  
Herbal tea later in the morning.

Afternoon: Walk or mild exercise.  
Fresh vegetable juice (diluted with water)  
Later in the afternoon, herbal tea.

Evening      Mild exercise or a walk.  
Fresh vegetable juice (diluted with water).  
Warm vegetable broth before retiring.

Most people will feel comfortable with a short fast of three days. To cleanse and rejuvenate the body a fast of 7 to 10 days, once or twice a year is best. If you want to go longer it is best to be under the supervision of a health specialist. Expect a new sense of well being but if by chance you are one the rare cases experiencing erratic heart beat or difficulty in breathing break the fast immediately.

A most important part of the fast concerns readying the body for regular eating after the fast is completed. One needs approximately one day of recovery for each three days of fasting. If this is not done correctly, the healing effect of the fast may be lost. Here is a general guide to use for a 10 day fast (adjust it accordingly):

Day 1: Add an apple or orange to your breakfast menu  
Add a small raw salad (no dressings) to your lunch

Day 2: Keep the orange or apple in your breakfast menu.  
Slightly larger salad for lunch  
Add two apples in between the regular juices  
Add vegetable soup for supper.

Day 3: Add plain yogurt to your breakfast orange.  
Increase your luncheon salad  
Add a slice of whole wheat bread and a piece of cheese to the vegetable soup.

Day 4: Resume your eating.

Remember that during fasting the eliminative organs are freed from the usual task of digesting foods and eliminating waste products; hence your body will concentrate on the cleansing of old accumulated wastes and toxins from the body. People suffering from allergies, hemorrhoids, or arthritis will often experience dramatic relief during fasts.

One obvious way to keep fasting a regular part of our schedule is to practice it regularly one day a week. It is interesting that the Old Testament records one day a week for rest, and even one year in seven is to have the land at complete rest and lay untilled (Exodus 23 and Lev 25). To use one day a week for juice fasting while abstaining from solid food also makes much physical sense in that it gives the digestive tract a

much needed rest.

Another benefit relates to the immune system. In her book, *Lick the Sugar Habit*, Nancy Appleton, a nutritionist, reports on a study that examined the phagocytic index (the rate at which white blood cells of the immune system destroy foreign matter) and notes that it increases from 17 to 60 hours after beginning a fast.

These health benefits are a bonus to the spiritual discipline of fasting. We advocate spiritual intentions first and foremost. Worthwhile intentions include using the day to petition God for peace or for specific healings or even for needed graces that will benefit our communities.

Don't be discouraged if you are unable to successfully bring yourself to regular fasting. Keep praying about it and seek to find a support group as this makes it easier to start.

*Yet even now, says the Lord, return to me with whole heart,  
with fasting, and weeping, and mourning;  
Rend your hearts, not your garments, and return to the Lord your God. (Joel 2:12-13)*