

“Declare a holy fast...” (Joel 2:15)

February 26 & March 26, 2010



Dear People of God,

As part of our observance of Lent this year, I am encouraging our parish to engage in fasting. The dates I have chosen are Friday, February 26 & Friday, March 26.

Fasting is a traditional and biblical way of totally praying: body, mind, and spirit. That is, in a fast, it is not just our lips and mouths that prays...it is our *whole body* that engages in prayer. If you join me in this fast, I believe you and I will take a giant step toward the spiritual renovation of the heart that Lent is designed to achieve.¹

Let me quickly add that some people should *not* fast for health or age reasons. You should check with your doctor if you have health or medical issues to consider. Also, some people want to fast, but may not be able to because of special prior arrangements (luncheons, scheduled dinners, etc.). Please choose an alternate date and join us in fasting 'in spirit' on the 26th of February and March...and then take your day of fasting when you are able.

In Christ,
Fr. David Roseberry

What is fasting?

Fasting is the giving up of something physical in order to show God that you care more about spiritual help than physical needs or desires. A person can fast from solid food, food and water, television, sex, or a number of things. Typically, fasting is from food, however, if a person feels that food is not enough and that they need to get away from TV in order to focus on God than they should do both. However, if you fast during lunch, that time needs to be spent in the Word and prayer. It is not enough to just skip a meal. That's a diet. Fasting focuses on God.

We fast because our hearts are hungry for him alone and because we know that food, while a good thing in God's sight, can become an idol (cf. Matt 5:6; 1 Cor 6:12-13; Phil 3:19; 1 Tim 4:4-5), or hindrance to experiencing the Christ-centered life. Thus people do not need to wait until a crisis to fast – though proper fasting at these times is very important – we can and ought to fast as often as we want to and feel we need to. *In short, when we fast (food or whatever), we are fasting with our hearts directed toward him because we love him, we want to hear his voice more clearly (cf. Dan 9:9-14; John 10:4-5), experience his power more intimately (cf. Phil 3:10-11), walk with him in greater obedience, and see our prayers for personal, family and societal change answered (cf. 2 Chron 7:14).*

¹ A good book on fasting is: *Fasting for Spiritual Breakthrough* by Elmer Towns, Regal Books. See also, "*Spirit of the Disciplines*" by Dallas Willard and *Celebration of Discipline* by Richard Foster. Check out Dallas Willard's amazing web site: www.dwillard.org.

Why Should We Fast?

Jesus assumed we would fast. (Matthew 6:16-18). For Jesus, it would be the norm for His followers to fast. He also said it was to be done with true motives: Matthew 6:16 “When you fast, do not look sullen like the hypocrites, for they make their faces unattractive so that people will see them fasting. I tell you the truth, they have their reward. 6:17 When you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, 6:18 so that it will not be obvious to others when you are fasting, but only to your Father who is in secret. And your Father, who sees in secret, will reward you.” See also Isaiah 58 which warns of being presumptuous, using fasting as a “good luck charm” or to “use” God.

Fasting is a sign of true repentance, and a concrete example of our dependence upon God. As we become weak through fasting we learn how to depend on God more deeply. There are medical benefits to fasting, such as clearing out toxins in the body, and improved thinking through the change in blood flow, but these are not the foci in Scripture.

- John Wesley called all Methodists to fast on Wednesdays and Fridays. He refused to license any preachers who would not do so.
- Hudson Taylor was in the habit of conducting a weekly 24-hour fast during his mission work in China.
- Andrew Murray said, “Fasting helps to express, to deepen, and to confirm the resolution that we are ready to sacrifice anything - to sacrifice ourselves - to attain what we seek for the kingdom of God.”

1. We should fast to intensify our prayers regarding:

- guidance (Nehemiah 1:4; Daniel 9)
- protection (2 Chronicles 20:3)
- healing (2 Samuel 12:15-16, 22-23; Acts 9:9, 17-19)
- and success in the Lord’s work (Esther 4:16)
- during special assignments from the Lord (Exodus 34:28; Matthew 4:1-11)
- while preparing for ministry (Acts 13:2-3; 14:23)
- to repent personally or as a nation in a solemn assembly (Joel 1:14; 2:15; Ninevites in Jonah 3; 1 Sam. 7). In Neh. 9 – fasting was accompanied with about 6 hours of Bible reading and 6 hours of prayer/confession and worship.
- while worshipping (Acts 13:2)

2. Weaken the Flesh and Humble Ourselves

Fasting, from both food and other pleasures in life, can bring us in touch with our frailty and neediness as creatures before God. Insofar as this is our experience, we can realize a greater nearness to the Lord in prayer and worship. This is, in part, the purpose for fasting; it weakens the flesh and its power over our wills. True fasting ultimately leads to a deeper intimacy with Christ and a consciousness of dependence on him for any spiritual good in our lives (cf. John 15:5). Many people report feeling closer to God, and having power from the Spirit through this “dying” of the flesh. As Gal. 5 says, the flesh and the Spirit are at odds with one another.

- 1 Kings 21:27-29 “...Do you see how Ahab has humbled himself before Me? Because he has humbled himself before Me, I will not bring the evil in his days...” (he fasted two verses before)
- Psalms 35:13 “... I humbled myself with fasting ...”
- Psalms 69:10 “When I wept in my soul with fasting, it became my reproach.”

3. To Focus Our Prayer Life

Again, to the degree that fasting softens our heart and does not elevate in arrogance (cf. Luke 18:11-12), it helps to focus our awareness on the presence of the Lord when we pray. This can lead to an incredible

sense of the Spirit's presence and power. This, of course, ought to be translated into prayer and praise, obedience to Christ, and gracious ministry to others, lest fasting become an end in itself. The final occasion for fasting is for special insight or wisdom. Exceptional insights from God were sometimes given to the prophets and others during periods of fasting. Daniel sought God with fasting to ask God to fulfill His promise to restore Jerusalem (see Daniel 9:9,18 and compare with Jeremiah 29:10-13). He received through the angel Gabriel a wonderful unfolding of God's plan for Israel. If we have sought God in vain for the fulfillment of some promise, it could be that He is waiting for us to humble ourselves by fasting and seek Him as Daniel did. Other examples of prophetic revelation during times of fasting are found in Exodus 34:28; Deuteronomy 9:9,18; and Daniel 10:1-3. God decided to speak to these men while they were in the midst of a fast. For those seeking prophetic guidance or revelation today, God may also use the occasion of fasting to speak to them in a very unique way.

4. To Awaken True Guilt for Sin

Unconfessed sin has a deadening effect on our conscience, mind, will, emotions, and spiritual vitality; it separates us from intimate fellowship with our God and it seriously impairs our God-given mandate to minister grace, truth and love to those within the Christian community and those outside. Sincere, scripturally informed, and Spirit-led fasting should usher in a confession of all known sin, repentance from it, and a desire to live righteously and with justice and mercy in the world. In this sense true fasting quickens true guilt for unconfessed sin and when directed by the Spirit leads to deeper love for Christ, his people, and his purposes in the world.

How long should we fast?

A "normal fast" lasted for about one day. In addition to the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 23:32) you can see examples of one day fasts in Judges 20:26; 1 Samuel 14:24; 2 Samuel 1:12; and 2 Samuel 3:35. The Jewish day was counted from sunset to sunset, so this meant that the fast would be broken (that is, food could be eaten) after sundown. However, some fasts were longer. The fast of Esther continued 3 days, both day and night. At the burial of Saul the fast was seven days (1 Samuel 31:13) and David also fasted seven days when his child was ill (2 Samuel 12:16-18). The longest fasts we find in the Bible are for forty days: Moses (3 times - Deuteronomy 9:9,18; Exodus 34:28), Elijah (once - 1 Kings 19:8), and Jesus (once - Matthew 4:2). The Biblical principle here is that the length of time you fast is determined by your own desires and the occasion or purpose of the fast. The duration can be that which the individual or group feels led to set. There is a great deal of freedom in the Lord here. However, the more common practice of a "normal fast" appears to be one day.

Practical Steps to Fasting

Step 1: Know the Goals of Your Fast

Richard Foster says, “Fasting must forever center on God.... Physical benefits, success in prayer, the enduing with power, spiritual insights – these must never replace God as the center of our fasting.”

Step 2: Determine the Type of Fast

Will you conduct

- An absolute fast – Ezra 10:6 – no food or water, see also Acts 9:9, Deut. 9:9
- regular fast (you can have water only) – Dan. 10:3
- partial fast (water and juice only), or a
- “Daniel” fast (vegetables and liquids only – abstaining from “rich” foods)?

1 Cor. 7 states that some couples “fasted” from sex in order to pray but must come back together after a time lest Satan tempts them. For those who cannot abstain from food due to medical reasons, you can abstain from rich foods, television, telephone, people (discipline of solitude), or speech (discipline of silence). One of these types should fit most people. It is recommended that you not chew gum or drink beverages with caffeine during your fast.

Step 3: Ask the Medical Questions

It is highly recommended that you consult your physician before conducting a fast. There are some people who should never fast: expectant or nursing mothers, diabetics, and those on certain medications. Almost everyone will be able to participate on at least one level.

Step 4: Schedule Your Fast

Pick your starting point and stopping point. If you are conducting a 24-hour fast, then you are committing to miss 2 meals. So, for example, you would eat dinner one night, and then not eat again until dinner the next night, thus missing your breakfast and lunch. Other would say that a full 24-hour fast would include 3 meals.

Step 5: Schedule Your Prayer

Since we do not fast just for the sake of fasting but to glorify God and to intensify our prayers, it makes sense to schedule extra slots of time for prayer. Two obvious time slots would be the meal times that you are missing. In the above example, you could dedicate the time you would have spent eating breakfast and lunch to prayer. As your schedule permits, set aside some additional periods of time for the Word and prayer. Some people will be able to dedicate the entire day to a prayer retreat. Others will only be able to come up with 2 time slots. Praying and reading God’s Word is what counts.

Step 6: Eat Healthily Before and After

Smaller meals with low-fat and low-sugar prior to beginning the fast and breaking the fast with juices and raw vegetables will make your experience easier. Some people say that it helps to end a fast with soup or something light. Do not eat a big meal after the fast.

Step 7: Begin With Confession, Dedication and Prayer

Begin your fast with confession and repentance. Pray some of the Psalms which speak of repentance (i.e. Psalm 51). Repent of specific sins in your life. Claim 1 John 1:9 and 2 Chronicles 7:14. Ask God to fill you with the Holy Spirit and to lead you during this time.

Dedicate your fast to God’s glory and to your desire to love Jesus with the same love and passion that the Father Himself loves His Own Son. Also dedicate your fast to the prayer for healthy stewardship: for your own life, ministry, and for the whole church. Also spend significant time just praising and communing with God. Your objective is not to manipulate God into answering your stated requests, but rather to grow closer and become more intimate with Him.