

When you look at today's reading, you might be thinking, *I am good with prayer, giving and serving, but I don't know about that fasting thing.* You might also be thinking, *Why fast?* Let me first say that fasting is a way. It is a discipline of abstaining from food (and potentially other habits) while praying for specific things. Fasting never stands by itself. If it is a biblical fast it always includes prayer and the Word of God. It is also a discipline to help enable one to become an overcomer, to increase one's faith, and to accomplish great things in the lives of others. It is not mandatory for followers of Jesus to fast, but it is definitely a discipline that helps one grow spiritually and to help one overcome barriers in their Christian walk, so they can live in freedom.

Reasons to fast:

- We are in need of spiritual growth and freedom
- We desire for the Lord to revive us
- There are those in spiritual bondage who need released
- We need strength to stand against sin
- We need the Lord's protection
- We need to stay focused
- We need wisdom through a period of transition

How to fast safely. As you begin your fast, you may hear from concerned loved ones and friends who urge you to protect your health. And they are right. You should protect your health. But be assured that if done properly, fasting will not only prove to be a spiritual blessing, but physical blessing as well.

By all means, consult your doctor before you begin your fast. But, be aware that many doctors have not been trained in this area and so their understanding is limited. Even so, it would be wise to ask your doctor for a physical exam to make sure you are in good health. You may have a physical problem that would make fasting unwise or dangerous. Also, if you are under any type of medication, make sure you talk to your doctor before changing your regime. Prudence and caution are in order.

When you are assured that you are in good health, you are ready to begin your fast.

In spite of the absolute safety and benefits of fasting, there are certain persons who should **NEVER** fast without professional supervision. For example:

- Persons who are physically too thin or emaciated
- Persons who are prone to anorexia, bulimia, or other behavioral disorders
- Those who suffer weakness or anemia
- Persons who have tumors, bleeding ulcers, cancer, blood diseases, or who have heart disease
- Those who suffer chronic problems with kidneys, liver, lungs, heart, or other important organs
- Individuals who take insulin for diabetes, or suffer any other blood sugar problem such as hyperglycemia
- Women who are pregnant or nursing

How to maintain nutritional balance and health from beginning to end.

We know that the prospect of going without food for an extended period of time may be of concern to some. But there are ways to ensure that your body is getting the nutrients it needs so you can remain safe and healthy during your fast.

For an extended fast, we recommend plenty of water along with fruit and vegetable juices. The natural sugars in juices provide energy, and the taste and strength are motivational to continue your fast. Try to drink fresh juices, if possible. Off-the-shelf juice products are acceptable, as long as they are **100% juice** with no sugar or other additives, this is important to maintaining the integrity of your fast.

If you are beginning a juice fast, there are certain juices you may wish to avoid and certain ones that are especially beneficial. Because of their acid content, most nutritionists do not advise orange or tomato juice (these are better tolerated if mixed with equal portions of water). The best juices are fresh carrot, grape, celery, apple, cabbage, or beet. They also recommend "green drinks" made from green leafy vegetables because they are excellent "de-toxifiers."

Fruit juices are "cleansers" and are best taken in the morning. Since vegetable juices are "restorers" and "builders," they are best taken in the afternoon.

If you are attempting an extended fast of the 5, 10, 20 or 40 day variety the following special liquid formula is a popular method used by Dr. Bill Bright of Campus Crusade for Christ Ministries, which may be very beneficial to you.

The following are a few daily recipes and comments by Dr. Bill Bright to aide you in extended fasting:

Daily Intake of Liquids and Herbs

One gallon distilled water
1-1/2 cup lemon juice
3/4-cup pure maple syrup
1/4-teaspoon cayenne pepper.

The lemon juice adds flavor and vitamin C, the maple syrup provides energy, and the cayenne pepper-an herb-acts to open small blood vessels which, I believe, helps the body as it cleanses itself of stored toxins. (A word of caution: although I use this formula with no ill effects, cayenne pepper could cause severe physical reactions in persons with a specific allergy to this herb.)

One popular juice is a mixture of 100% pure white grape juice and peach juice. The juice is available in frozen cans under the Welch label. Most knowledgeable nutritionists recommend:

- Watermelon - just put it in the blender without adding water.
- Fresh apple juice
- Green juice-blend celery, romaine lettuce, and carrots in equal proportions. (Vegetable juices like this one are important, for they supply the electrolytes necessary for proper heart function!)

Some nutritionists recommend warm broth, especially if you live in a colder climate. You may find their recipes helpful:

Boil sliced potatoes, carrots, and celery in water. Do not add salt
After about a half-hour, drain off the water and drink.

Gently boil three carrots, two stalks of celery, one turnip, two beats, a half head of cabbage, a quarter of a bunch of parsley, a quarter of an onion, and a half clove of garlic
Drain off the broth and drink up to two or three times daily.

It is suggested that you do not drink milk because it is a pure food and therefore a violation of the fast. Any product containing protein or fat, such as milk or soy-based drinks, should be avoided. These products will restart the digestion cycle and you will again feel hunger pangs. Also, for health reasons, stay away from caffeinated beverages such as coffee, tea, or cola. Because caffeine is a stimulant, it has a more powerful effect on your nervous system when you abstain from food. This works both against the physical and spiritual aspects of the fast.

Note: Abstaining from caffeinated beverages and sugar products may cause headaches and feelings of displeasure. You may want to gradually cut back on your caffeine intake over the period of a week until you drink only a few ounces a day (morning) and find these headaches/discomforts resolved.

Another key factor in maintaining optimum health during a fast is to limit your physical activity. Exercise only moderately, and rest as much as your schedule will permit (this especially applies to extended fasts). Short naps are helpful as well. Walking a mile or two each day at a moderate pace is acceptable for a person in good health, and on a juice fast. However, no one on a water fast should exercise without the supervision of a fasting specialist.

You may find the following daily schedule helpful during your fast. We recommend you print it and keep it handy throughout your fast.

- 5:00 a.m. - 8:00 a.m.
Fruit juices, preferably freshly squeezed or blended, diluted in 50 percent distilled water if the fruit is acid. Orange, apple, pear, grapefruit, papaya, grape, peach or other fruits are good.
- 10:30 a.m. - noon
Green vegetable juice made from lettuce, celery, and carrots in three equal parts.
- 2:30 p.m. - 4:00 p.m.
Herb tea with a drop of honey. Make sure that it is not black tea or tea with a stimulant.
- 6:00 p.m. - 8:30 p.m.
Broth from boiled potatoes, celery, and carrots (no salt).

How to prepare yourself spiritually and physically. Spiritual and physical preparations are vital in sustaining a fast, no matter how long it may be.

Spiritual preparation

In preparation for this special time with God, we strongly urge you to examine your heart, and detect any un-confessed sin in your life. Scripture records that God always requires His people to repent of their sins before He will hear their prayers. King David said:

Come and hear, all of you who reverence the Lord, and I will tell you what He did for me: For I cried to Him for help, with praises ready on my tongue. He would not have listened if I had not confessed my sins. But he listened! He heard my prayer! He paid attention to it!

Blessed be God who didn't turn away when I was praying, and didn't refuse me His kindness and love. (Psalm 66:16-20)

In your prayers, confess not only obvious sins, but less obvious ones as well. The sins of omission (neglecting to do what is right) as well as the sins of commission (doing that which is wrong) experiences. These may be experiences leaving your first love for our Lord: worldly-mindedness, self-centeredness, spiritual indifference, and unwillingness to share your faith in Christ with others, not spending sufficient time in God's Word and in prayer, a poor relationship with your spouse, your children, a pastor at your church, or other members of your church.

Another helpful way to prepare for your fast is to practice what is called *Spiritual Breathing*. The concept is simple, but it has changed the lives of many believers.

Like physical breathing, *Spiritual Breathing* is a process of exhaling the impure and inhaling the pure. If you knowingly sin, breathe spiritually to restore the fullness of God's Holy Spirit in your life. You exhale by confessing your sins immediately when you become aware of them, and you inhale by inviting the Holy Spirit to re-take control of your life. As an act of faith, trust Him to empower you. During the fast, spiritual breathing-constant reliance on the Holy Spirit-will enable you to resist temptation, not only to sin but to abandon your fast.

Physical preparation

Although fasting is primarily a spiritual discipline, it begins in the physical realm. You should not fast without specific physical preparation.

If you plan on fasting for several days, you will find it helpful to begin by eating smaller meals before you abstain altogether. Resist the urge to have that "last big feast" before the fast. Cutting down on your meals a few days before you begin the fast will signal your mind, stomach, and appetite that less food is acceptable.

How long and what type of fast is right for you. If you have never fasted before, praise be to God for your present interest! Fasting has been a major emphasis in the lives of many of the great spiritual leaders throughout history. John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist denomination, fasted every Wednesday and Friday and required all of his clergy to do the same. Effective ministers of God from the apostle Paul to Martin Luther to John Calvin made it a continual part of their walks with God.

None of those men had a "formula fast" that was the only "right" way. Fasting is about the condition of the heart, not the number of days. Each time you fast for an extended period of time may it be because you feel impressed by God to do so.

The Bible recounts primarily two types of fasts. A partial fast is described in the book of Daniel. Although the water fast seemed to be the custom of the prophet, there was a three-week period in which he only abstained from "delicacies," meat, and wine (Daniel 10:3).

The two primary types mentioned in the Bible are the "absolute" and "supernatural absolute" fasts. These are total fasts-no food (solid or liquid) and no water. Paul went on an absolute fast for three days following his encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:9). Moses and Elijah engaged in what must be considered a supernatural absolute fast of forty days (Deuteronomy 9:9; I Kings 19:8).

So, we still strongly advise you to drink plenty of liquids. Obviously, if God leads you to undertake an absolute fast, you should obey. If so, be certain, without doubt, that God is leading you.

Water-only fasts that last for more than several days need to be undertaken with complete rest and under medical supervision because of the extreme danger of over-toxification, breakdown of vital body tissues, and loss of electrolytes.

It is highly recommend that you practice water and juice fasting, especially if you are going to fast for an extended period of time. This type of fast will provide you with more energy than absolute or water-only fasts and still lead you into the humbling experience of denying your desire for solid food that you can chew.

When it comes to making your final decision about what type of fast is right for you, the best advise one can offer is to follow the leading of the Holy Spirit. He will guide your heart and mind as to what is best for you. Remember, the most important consideration in fasting is your motive. **Why are you fasting? To seek something personally from God's hand or to seek His face in worship, praise and thanksgiving?**

(Resources: Bill Bright at www.campuscrusade.org and Fasting for Spiritual Break Through by Elmer L. Towns.)