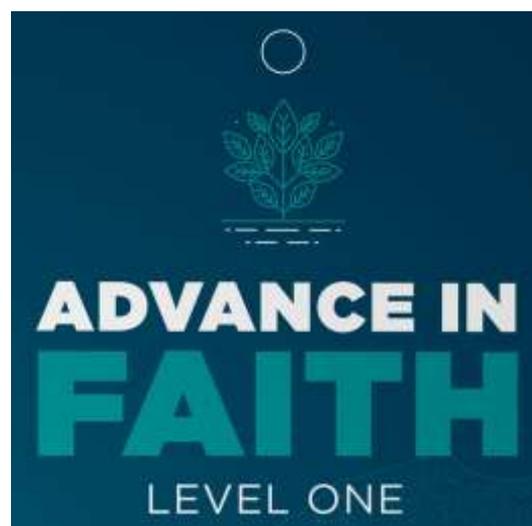


Growing Spiritually

Advance in Faith 1, Unit 6



Week 3 – Fasting and Meditation



Introduction

Remember that the practice of spiritual disciplines is not the end goal. Rather, the disciplines are the means to the goal; they are the pathways that God sets before us to pursue Him, to host His presence and allow His transformative work in us (from the inside out). God desires that we would all live and function as a royal priesthood and so He sets before us the delight of building healthy habits, of engaging the spiritual disciplines, as a means of being continually transformed into a royal priesthood.

1. FASTING

“Some have exalted religious fasting beyond all Scripture and reason; and others have utterly disregarded it” (John Wesley).¹

What Is Fasting?

“Abstinence from food and/or drink as an element of private or public religious devotion” (Eugene H. Merrill).²

Foundation For Understanding Fasting

There are two elements to the foundation that need to be highlighted in order to help us understand the importance of fasting as a spiritual discipline.

(1) THE BASIC FUNCTIONS NECESSARY FOR SURVIVAL

(2) GENESIS 3: THE FALL

¹ R. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1980), p. 41.

² E. H. Merrill, “Fast, Fasting,” in W. A. Elwell (ed.), *Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1996), p. 245.

Fasting In The Bible

In Jesus' day the Pharisees fasted twice a week (Luke 18:12). Some devout people, like Anna, fasted often (Luke 2:37). Paul fasted after his blinding vision (Acts 9:9), before his first missionary journey (Acts 13:2), for fourteen days during the storm (Acts 27:33). Some Jews took a vow to fast until they had killed Paul (Acts 23:12-14).

The OT opposes fasting that is purely formal and largely hypocritical (Isa 58:3-7; Jer 14:12; Zech 7:5) – when, for instance, men fasted but did not share their food with the hungry (Isa 58:1-7).

Jesus did not condemn fasting itself but denounced ostentatious fasting – Matthew 6:16-18; Luke 18:9-14.

Fasting provided marvellous opportunities for religious showmanship to gain a reputation for piety. One could adopt an air that was “sombre” (or “downcast,” Luke 24:17) and disfigure oneself, perhaps by not washing and shaving, by sprinkling ashes on one's head to signify deep contrition or self-abnegation, or by omitting normal use of oil to signify deep distress (cf. 2 Sam 14:2; Dan 10:3). The point is not that there was no genuine contrition but that these hypocrites were purposely drawing attention to themselves. They wanted the plaudits of men and got them but that's all they got.

Purpose Of Fasting

Both OT and NT describe personal or group fasts with a variety of purposes, especially to indicate and foster self-humility before God, often in connection with the following four things:

(1) THANKSGIVING AND REMEMBRANCE

Under Mosaic legislation, fasting was commanded only on the Day of Atonement (Lev 16:29-31; 23:27-32; Num 29:7); but during the Babylonian Exile regular fasts of remembrance were instituted (Zech 7:3-5; 8:19).

(2) CONFESSION OF SIN

(e.g., Neh 9:1-2; Ps 35:13; Isa 58:3, 5; Dan 9:2-20; 10:2-3; Jonah 3:5; Acts 9:9)

(3) MOURNING

(e.g. Matt 9:14-15) – when asked why his disciples did not fast, Jesus said that they would fast after the bridegroom was taken i.e. ascension. This seems to legitimate fasting for Christians without making it obligatory. Jesus himself fasted before his temptation (Matthew 4:2; Mark 1:13)

(4) SUPPLICATION

Sometimes out of anguish, danger, or desperation (Exod 24:18; Judges 20:26; 2 Sam 1:12; 2 Chronicles 20:3; Ezra 8:21-23; Esth 4:16; Matt 4:1-2; Acts 13:1-3; 14:23).

Summary

1. The primary purpose is to centre on God alone, to set aside the temporal earthly things to focus ourselves on God.
2. There are secondary purposes:
 - a. It reveals things that control us. We cover up what is inside with food and other good things, but in fasting these things surface. David said in Ps. 69:10, "I humbled my soul with fasting.
 - b. It reminds us that we are sustained "by every good word that proceeds from the mouth of God." (Matt. 4:4)
 - c. It helps us keep our life in balance. How easily we begin to allow the nonessentials to take precedence. How quickly we crave things we do not need until we are enslaved by them.

Side Note

Common sense must be used when considering a food fast. It is highly recommended not to fast from food when pregnant or suffering from a medical condition that might be worsened by this practice. Also consider whether it will be a fast from all food, or whether juices will be used during your fasting period.

When considering a prolonged food fast, seek to build up to it. If you have never fasted, fast from one meal to start with, then increase the time to a couple of meals into a day or two etc. It is also highly recommended to severely limit physical activity when engaging a prolonged food fast.

2. MEDITATION

Psalm 1:1-2 NIV

“Blessed is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked or stand in the way that sinners take or sit in the company of mockers, But his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night.”

What is Meditation?

Meditation is a spiritual discipline practised in various forms by all the major faiths of the world. It involves the quiet, reflective recital of prayers, scriptures or mantras with the intention of dispelling distractions and focussing the mind and the heart on the truth of the faith.

Some people will draw a distinction between “meditation” and “contemplation.” Meditation uses images as a means for focusing on God. Contemplation avoids or minimises the use of image in order to experience the presence of God directly. Others will simply use the terms “meditation” and “contemplation” as synonymous.

Augustine of Hippo uses the expression “holy leisure” to describe the contemplative/meditative life – but he always balances this with the need to fully engage in life.

“As to these three modes of life, the contemplative, the active, and the composite, although, so long as a man’s faith is preserved, he may choose any of them without detriment to his eternal interests, yet he must never overlook the claims of truth and duty. No man has a right to lead such a life of contemplation as to forget in his own ease the service due to his neighbour; nor has any man a right to be so immersed in active life as to neglect the contemplation of God ... And therefore holy leisure is longed for by the love of truth; but it is the necessity of love to undertake requisite business” (Augustine).³

Thomas Merton, a famous 20th Century monk furthers the point that the meditative life must be connected with the physical, natural life.

“Meditation has no point and no reality unless it is firmly rooted in *life*” (Thomas Merton).⁴

³ Augustine, *The City of God*, Book XIX, Chapter 19.

⁴ T. Merton, *Contemplative Prayer* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1973) as cited in R. Foster, *The Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1980), p. 17.

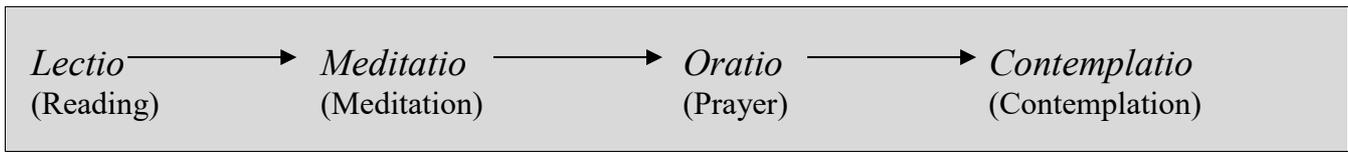
Dealing With Misconceptions

<u>Eastern Religious Meditation</u> (e.g. Buddhism, Hinduism, TM etc)	<u>Christian Meditation</u>
Empty the mind - emphasis on losing individuality - desire to merge with Cosmic Mind - desire for effortless bliss of Nirvana	Empty the mind to fill it with God
Human only experience	Human/Divine encounter
Focused on the human "self"	Focused on the divine "other"
Detach from the world	Detach from the world to re-engage with it

Practicing Meditation

- (i) *Finding a PLACE.*
- (ii) *Finding a PERIOD.*
- (iii) *Finding a POSTURE.*
- (iv) *Finding a PASSAGE.*

How The Disciplines Work Together



Each leads to the latter as a response to the former.

Conclusion

“Reading without meditation is sterile.
 Meditation without reading is prone to error.
 Prayer without meditation is lukewarm.
 Meditation without prayer is barren.
 Prayer with devotion achieves contemplation” (Guigo II).⁵

⁵ Cited in A. E. McGrath, *Christian Spirituality: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), p. 85.

Memory Work:**Psalm 1:1-2 (NIV)**

“Blessed is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked^[SEP] or stand in the way that sinners take or sit in the company of mockers but his delight is in the law of the LORD and on his law he meditates day and night”

Group Questions:

- Do you think that a “devotional” reading of scripture is adequate for spiritual formation? If so, elaborate on why you think this to be true. If not, explain why you think going beyond a devotional reading of scripture will grow you spiritually.
- Have you ever practiced Fasting as a Spiritual Discipline? Share your experiences with the group.
- How might you be able to tell when Fasting becomes more of a pious religious act rather than an attempt to focus on God?
- Have you ever tried Meditation? If so describe your experience to the Group.
- What passages of scripture, prayers or creeds would be useful for Meditation?

Take Home Exercise:

The recommended reading for this unit is *Richard Foster’s Celebration of Discipline*.