



## Spiritual Disciplines: Food, Feasting & Fasting

We live in age that is confused about food; a society where there is equal concern about obesity and anorexia; and a culture that views cooking as a spectator sport. In an attempt to convey the distortion of healthy sexual attraction that makes striptease an entertainment, CS Lewis compares the appetite for sex with the appetite for food. *“Now suppose you come to a country where you could fill a theatre simply by bringing a covered plate on to the stage and then slowly lifting the cover so as to let everyone see, just before the lights went out, that it contained a mutton chop or a bit of bacon, would you not think that in that country something had gone wrong with the appetite for food?”*

What would Lewis have thought of the TV schedules with *Masterchef*, *The Great British Bake-off* and other similar programmes? We watch food prepared and served with no prospect of tasting it. Indeed most of us would have no need of any more food in the day as we have already eaten our fill. We have succumbed to culinary striptease! Gluttony, once one of the so-called seven deadly sins, no longer seems to get a mention. And yet food is a gift from God: we need food simply to survive; it is one of life's most basic pleasures in itself; and eating together fulfills an important social function. What then should be our attitude to food? How can we discipline our appetite? How can awareness of this bring us closer to God?

### **Fasting**

Whilst only one fast is mandated in the Old Testament, on the Day of Atonement, a number of instances of fasting are recorded: Moses, Elijah, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Daniel, Ezra and Nehemiah all fasted. In the New Testament we read that John the Baptist and his disciples fasted (as did the Pharisees) and Christ began his ministry with a fast.

In the Greek Orthodox Tradition fasting remains part of the religious life, Wesley urged his followers to fast twice a week, but in the contemporary evangelical tradition fasting is uncommon. How is fasting of benefit in the believer's walk with God? From a biological perspective, recent research has shown that fasting can have potential health benefits. Even with alternate day modified fasting, where a normal diet is maintained on other days, reducing calorie intake to a quarter of normal on two non-consecutive days a week can result in a reduction in weight, cholesterol, and blood pressure. The appetite adapts, as do the body's cells, they recalibrate from exposure to excess.

Making a spiritual analogy, if we focus on curbing the body's cravings in this area it can help us learn discipline in other areas. We can recalibrate our hearts and minds to God. Fasting is often associated with prayer or meditation, but it does not need to be. Our hunger reminds us that we are creatures, dependent on our God who gives us our food, reminds us of those who will not have enough to eat that day and our need to be generous, reminds us to be grateful for what we have. Even partial fasting – missing a meal rather than a whole day without food, or denying ourselves rich foods as Daniel did – can be used. (At this point it is obligatory to state that those with medical conditions should consult their doctor before considering fasting.) In his *Freedom of Simplicity*, Richard Foster suggests that, rather than abstaining from food, we could instead try doing without television, the newspaper or the telephone.

## **Feasting**

But we are also told to celebrate. The kingdom of God is likened to a banquet. In the Old Testament there are a number of prescribed feasts – Passover, Harvest or Pentecost, the Feast of Tabernacles, the Feast of Trumpets, the Day of Atonement and, later, also Purim. These were times when God's good gifts were to be consumed with joy and gratitude in the company of the people of God. Our Sunday lunch or Christmas dinner should truly be a celebration meal!

## **God's Chosen Fast**

Food is a gift from God but like any gift it can be misused. Fasting can help us reset the balance and focus on God who gives us our daily bread. But, as with all the disciplines, we must keep in mind that the goal is to help us become the people God wants us to be, to live as he would have us live, to help us glorify and enjoy Him. Isaiah 58:6-9 reminds us of God's chosen fast: to fight injustice and oppression, share food with the hungry, and provide for the poor.

Michael Trimble

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