

Explorers in Prayer – Lesson Seven Handout

The Place of Suffering and Fasting in Prayer

One answer to the question, **What does spiritual maturity look like?** is Philippians 4: 12-13 “I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through him who gives me strength.”

"In order to be saints, you have to seriously want to be one. Saint Thomas Aquinas assures us that holiness 'is nothing else but a resolution made, the heroic act of a soul that surrenders to God.' And he adds: 'Spontaneously we love God, we run towards him, we get close to him, we possess him.' Our willingness is important because it changes us into the image of God and likens us to him! The decision to be holy is a very dear one. Renunciation, temptations, struggles, persecutions, and all kinds of sacrifices are what surround the soul that has opted for holiness."
Mother Teresa of Calcutta - *In My Own Words*

Saint Jerome “When the stomach is full, it is easy to talk of fasting.”

Fasting is not a means of getting what we want from God, but it is a part of our general calling from God to firstly humble ourselves. 1 Kings 21: 27 – 29

But this humbling of ourselves is not meant to stop there. Rather, it is a prelude to entering into the struggles of this world. Isaiah 58: 1-7

1) Pain and suffering plays its part in the maturing process. It seems to be the way God has made the world; that we need trials and difficulties, etc, in order to grow into maturity as spiritual human beings.

2) Whilst Jesus has little to say about fasting, he does seem to assume his followers will practice fasting once he has ascended to the Father. Fasting is not a means of getting what we want from God. Rather, it helps us answer our general calling from God to humble ourselves, which fits in with **Prayer Principle Three** - if we give God our **time** and **attention**, and approach him with **love** and **humility**, both we and our relationship with God will grow.

3) The humbling of ourselves is not meant to be an end in itself. Rather, it is a prelude to entering into the struggles of this world. Through prayer, or humbling ourselves through fasting, we become engaged in the struggle between good and evil, between light and darkness, between God and the devil, and we cannot separate this engagement through prayer from our engagement through actions.

4) **Prayer Principle Two** also applies with fasting - we develop our ability to fast slowly. We do not launch ourselves into long periods of fasting when we have no experience of it before. The spiritual benefits of fasting will only reveal themselves over a long period of time, so it is important that we fast as we can, and not in a way that we cannot maintain.

Individual Exercise: The homework this week is going to be an exercise in prayer and fasting. If you are happy to do so, you should do a fast of your own choosing for the week, but which doesn't include Sunday. One example might be to skip a meal each day in rotation, e.g. day 1 - breakfast, day 2 - lunch, day 3 - supper, etc. This week's 15 minute daily exercise should be used to reflect on the link between our fasting and how God might be calling us to reach out to the poor and needy. Is there something God is wanting you to do for someone in need?

If you are not fasting, spend the 15 minutes each day sitting with someone in your imagination who is suffering. Try to feel what they might be going through and lift them up to God in prayer.

Read chapters 19 & 4 of the course book.

Prayer Triplet Exercise: Your triplet should be supporting each other during this week of fasting. For your triplet exercise, use your imagination to sit with Jesus in the desert as he fasted. He would have probably sat in a cool cave, with the heat of the desert sun evident at the entrance to the cave. Imagine the other members of your triplet are also sat there with you. Watch Jesus, silent and motionless as the time goes by, and let what you see speak to your heart. Jesus is about to begin his own ministry.

Richard Foster's book **Celebration of Discipline** has a chapter on fasting which is well worth reading, particularly if you are considering doing a longer fast, for which he gives good practical advice. Here are some useful quotes from that chapter:

"The list of biblical personages who fasted becomes a 'Who's Who' of Scripture: Moses the lawgiver, David the king, Elijah the prophet, Esther the queen, Daniel the seer, Anna the prophetess, Paul the apostle, Jesus Christ the incarnate Son. Many of the great Christians throughout church history fasted and witnessed to its value; among them were Martin Luther, John Calvin, John Knox, John Wesley, Jonathan Edwards, David Brainerd, Charles Finney and Pastor Hsi of China."

"In Scripture the normal means of fasting involved abstaining from all food, solid or liquid, but not from water."

"It is well to know the process your body goes through in the course of a longer fast. The first three days are usually the most difficult in terms of physical discomfort and hunger pains. The body is beginning to rid itself of the toxic poisons that have built up over years of poor eating habits, and it is not a comfortable process. This is the reason for the coating on the tongue and bad breath. Do not be disturbed by these symptoms; rather be grateful for the increased health and well-being that will result. You may experience headaches during this time, especially if you are an avid coffee or tea drinker. Those are mild withdrawal symptoms which will pass, though they may be very unpleasant for a time.

By the fourth day the hunger pains are beginning to subside though you will have feelings of weakness and occasional dizziness. The dizziness is only temporary and caused by sudden changes in position. Move more slowly and you will have no difficulty. The weakness can come to the point where the simplest task takes great effort. Rest is the best remedy. Many find this the most difficult period of the fast.

By the sixth or seventh day you will begin to feel stronger and more alert. Hunger pains will continue to diminish until by the ninth or tenth day they are only a minor irritation. The body will have eliminated the bulk of toxic poisons and you will feel good. Your sense of concentration will be sharpened and you will feel as if you could continue fasting indefinitely. Physically this is the most enjoyable part of the fast.

Anywhere from twenty-one to forty days or longer, depending upon the individual, hunger pains will return. This is the first stage of starvation and signals that the body has used up all its excess reserves and is beginning to draw on the living tissue. The fast should be broken at this time."