

Ancient Practice of Fasting Is Re-Examined as Lent Starts

By LOUIS CASSELS
 United Press International
 In the Bible, prayer and fasting are mentioned repeatedly in the same phrase, as if they were twin features of a devout life.

This Biblical habit of speech has a quaint ring to many modern Christians. They recognize the importance of prayer. But they look upon fasting as an outworn custom.

With Lent under way, this is an appropriate time to re-examine the ancient practice of fasting. What is it? What does the Bible say about it? What are its benefits—and pitfalls?

Fasting is defined in Webster's unabridged dictionary as "voluntary abstinence from food, or from certain types of food, for a space of time as a spiritual discipline."

The most rigorous kind of fasting is to take no nourishment whatever. But the per-

son who "gives up candy for Lent" is also fasting, after a fashion. From a religious viewpoint, the significant thing about any act is that it is a voluntary act of self-denial.

Old Testament References
 There are many references to fasting in the Old Testament. From the time of Moses, Jews fasted on special occasions as an expression of humility, repentance or sorrow.

At the start of the New Testament era, fasting had become a prescribed ritual, bound up like other religious duties in an intricate system of laws. The Pharisees fasted every Monday and Thursday, and made sure that everyone knew it.

Many Christians today seem to have the impression that Jesus criticized the Pharisees for fasting. But this is a serious misreading of the Scripture. His criticism

was aimed at the ostentatious way in which the Pharisees paraded the piety.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus told His disciples:

"When you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by men . . . but anoint your head and wash your face, that your fasting may not be seen by men but by your Father who is in heaven . . ."

Expects Disciples To Fast
 These words clearly imply that Jesus expected His disciples to fast. They also seem to say that fasting, when done as a secret act of devotion is pleasing to God.

The New Testament records that Jesus Himself fasted, at the start of His ministry, when He was wrestling with the temptation to win men to His side the easy way. The early Christian church

followed His example. Passages in the Book of Acts and St. Paul's Letters indicate that fasts were observed especially in times of crisis, when the apostles felt a particular need of divine guidance.

No one could be more articulate than Paul in asserting that Christian living is a matter of responding to God's love, rather than merely keeping the law. But it was also Paul who insisted on the need for "bringing the body under subjection" by deliberate acts of self-discipline, such as fasting.

The apostle warned that men and women who are slaves to their own appetites are not free to hear and obey the voice of God.

Has Pitfalls
 Fasting has its pitfalls. The main one, as Jesus pointed out, is pride. It can take the crude form of bragging about what you've given up for Lent. Or it can take the sub-

ter and more dangerous form of secretly feeling superior to those who aren't fasting.

But non-fasting can equally be an occasion of spiritual pride. The person who says that he doesn't need to fast during a special period like Lent because "I practice Christian self-denial all year-round" is not far from the Pharisees.


Fasting can also do more spiritual harm than good if it is undertaken in the belief that its main purpose is to "strengthen will power." This may indeed be a by-product of fasting, but the person who makes it his chief objective is apt to forget that Christians rely not on their own strength, but on the grace of God.

To God's Control
 "The purpose of Lent is not self-control," says Peter Day, editor of the Living Church Magazine, "but the giving over to the control of God."

"Fasting is not so much for the growth of strength of character as it is a getting out of the way of those things which though good in themselves, obscure the leading of the Holy Spirit in our lives." Each person must decide for himself which bodily appetites and pleasures have gained a hold on him that they "obscure the leading of the Holy Spirit." Saints who

have already surrendered all worldly affections perhaps have no need to fast.

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