

Fasting: Building Spiritual Muscle

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Some people may find it hard to believe—or even remotely consider—that fasting is a dynamic, vital exercise to put spiritual meat on the bones. Paradoxically, it is exactly that. Though fasting deprives the physical body of nutrition and strength, a proper, biblical fast adds conviction and depth to the inner, spiritual man.

In Ephesians 3:16-17, the apostle Paul desires "that He would grant you, according to riches of His glory, to be *strengthened* with might through His Spirit in the inner man, that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith." Strengthening the inner man requires some intense effort on our part. Many professing Christians would recoil in horror at the mere suggestion that God requires anything like work to enhance spiritual strength. However, God states plainly that He created us "for good works" (Ephesians 2:10), and that He will judge us "according to our works" (I Peter 1:17). Obviously, though our works cannot save us (Ephesians 2:8-9), they play an important part in our salvation. James explains that works justify us, that is, prove and exhibit our faith (James 2:14-26). We will see that works help to strengthen us too.

We cannot consider spiritual exercise passive—a no-effort, no-struggle, no-hassle situation. Exercise is meaningless without the expenditure of effort. Our Elder Brother Jesus Christ and the apostles Paul, James, and Peter all insist that struggle and effort are vital parts of the conversion and maturity process. Jesus goes so far as to say that only the violent—suggesting those who are willing to strive fiercely—will "take [the kingdom] by force" (Matthew 11:12).

Continuous Struggle

In Galatians 5:22, the last fruit of the Holy Spirit mentioned is that of self-control, yet we have discovered complete self-control as undoubtedly the most difficult spiritual characteristic to attain. The apostle Paul graphically describes the life-and-death struggle in Romans 7:14-24, which he sums up in verse 23: "But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members."

In this continual struggle with the pulls of the flesh, God Almighty is absolutely exonerated of any participation in tempting us. Jesus' brother, James, reminds us that "God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He Himself tempt anyone. But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by *his own desires* and enticed" (James 1:13-14).

God has designed us with the capability of sinning; we, because of our fleshly human nature, are subject to intense downward pulls. Though He did not create carnal human nature (Romans 8:7), God has allowed us to be like this deliberately. Paul writes in Romans 8:20 that "the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it in hope." God knew that man's continuous struggle against corruption would mature and perfect the character needed to be in God's Family. Because we possess the capacity to sin, when it is coupled with the determination to resist temptation to sin, the resultant effort becomes a spiritual exercise. Like a man training with dumbbells, the repeated resistance builds strength over time.

Dr. Viktor Frankl, psychologist and survivor of Auschwitz, cautions that it is a dangerous misconception to believe that man needs a continuous equilibrium or a tensionless state. He insists, "What man actually needs is not a tensionless state, but rather the striving and struggling for some goal worthy of him." The stress of attaining to a high standard or achieving a seemingly impossible quest betters a person. The bland, satisfied life means little, accomplishes little and is remembered little.

It never was God's intention that we drift along in a blissful, tensionless state. Built into God's plan to reproduce Himself is the element of personal choice and effort (Deuteronomy 30:15-20). Herbert Armstrong repeatedly said that God will never save anyone He cannot rule. It is equally important to realize that God will not give His Holy Spirit to anyone who does not desire it. Thus, when He calls, we must respond by beginning to obey Him (Acts 5:32).

God Almighty has given man the power to make choices regarding his ultimate destiny. As a free moral agent, man has the awesome responsibility to choose between a hapless, physio-chemical existence with a dead end or a rich and rewarding eternity as a member of God's Family. Though the choice appears easy, the challenging road to the Kingdom of God dismays many because they are unwilling to undergo the rigors of the journey.

God has set before us the choice to obey or disobey, hoping we will choose obedience and giving us reasons and promises that persuade us to that end, but He wants us to make sure that it is our intention, without coercion or brainwashing on His part. It takes a free moral agent, making the right choices, to create the mind of Christ in us. Though He has a good idea how we will choose, God ultimately does not know what we will decide when given the choice. He will do all He can—short of rescinding our freedom to choose—to convince us to choose Him.

Spiritual Exercise

We should regard fasting as a vigorous spiritual exercise in which we personally fight and combat the Devil's most intense temptations. As previously stated, God Almighty is exonerated of tempting us (James 1:14), but Satan the Devil is not. He is the Tempter (Matthew 4:3; I Thessalonians 3:5). Satan is aware of our tissue needs—of hunger, thirst, sleep, sex, etc.—all he has to do is amplify these desires. He knows that our appetites dictate to us, that we serve our cravings. Of ourselves, we seem not to have control over certain pulls of the flesh, but this lack of self-control is only apparent, not real, especially when we have the gift of God's Spirit to give us strength and motivation to overcome them (Galatians 5:16-25).

We are not truly free until we can fight off these carnal pulls of the flesh and begin to imitate Christ in our daily life. We are in a hot war against carnality, and this war includes a constant struggle against Satan the Devil and his minions (Ephesians 6:11-12). No wonder Jesus speaks of violence!

Fasting provides active affirmation, through our refusal to yield to the fleshly appetites, that we are doing our part in exercising spiritual control. By it, we actively affirm to God Almighty that we indeed opt for a spiritual future over a physio-chemical, dead-end existence. We are choosing life over death.

Fasting brings us face to face with our carnality, and we feel compelled to cry out for both physical and spiritual energy—the physical, to endure the privation, and the spiritual, to endure the temptations to satisfy our desires. The psalmist writes in Psalm 138:3: "In the day when I cried out,

You answered me, and made me bold with strength in my soul." Fasting forces us to cry out to the only real Source of strength, and He promises to give us what we need to overcome the temptation (I Corinthians 10:13).

Building Muscle

Like the building of physical muscle, godly character (the strength of the inner man) strengthens by counteracting or resisting the downward pulls human nature makes on us. As in the aforementioned example of a man working with dumbbells, the resistance of the weights provides the necessary force against which the muscles of the arm strain. Over time and with repetition, the muscle fibers bulge and build up strength.

The process of building physical muscle, however, begins with tearing down existing muscle tissue. Fasting depicts a process of tearing down old, familiar habit patterns that have enslaved us, as we read in Isaiah 58:6: "To loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, . . . and that you should break every yoke." Before building the good, we must destroy the evil.

When we tear muscle down, we must wait patiently for the new muscle to form during a resting or refractory period. Paradoxically, muscle regenerates when we rest. Likewise, spiritual muscle regenerates or forms when we have totally submitted to God—after we have done our part in tearing the old tissue down. Through fasting, we become a full partner with God in building and developing our spirituality.

Fasting requires us to do something, while God also promises to do something in our behalf. When we fast, we not only take a firm stand against our own fleshly pulls, but also against the one who amplifies these pulls, Satan the Devil. James 4:7 gives us the instruction: "Submit to God, resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God and He will draw near to you." Notice the two sides of this process, ours and God's.

Fasting demonstrates to God our acknowledgment of our helplessness, dependency, and vulnerability. We, at this point, admit to God that we do not have the wherewithal to overcome, but at the same time, we acknowledge that we choose to follow Him. God then replaces the torn-down carnal pulls with a fresh reserve of His Holy Spirit. God's Spirit combined with our will to control ourselves according to God's law then begins to build holy character in us. As long as this process continues, strength in character grows.

In Matthew 4:2, our Elder Brother Jesus Christ received strength for His confrontation with Satan the Devil through a 40-day period of fasting. In verse 4, Jesus puts "the god of this [present, evil] age" (II Corinthians 4:4) on notice that He has no intention of letting His fleshly appetites rule over Him as our first parents in Eden did. We must follow this example in fighting our lesser temptations. Fasting is a tool we must use on occasion to put us in the proper frame of mind to resist evil and do good.

Jesus warns us that, in our spiritual wrestling match against familiar spirits, certain kinds do not leave "except by prayer and fasting" (Matthew 17:21). In our life-and-death spiritual struggle, if we really desire to defeat "the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience" (Ephesians 2:2), we will find it necessary to draw close to God in a regular program of fasting and prayer. It will give us the strength necessary to resist Satan's way as well as to grow in God's image.