

## The Fast That God Chooses

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When Jesus is asked which commandment is the greatest, his response is most telling. Had he said only, “Love the Lord your God...” no one would have been surprised, familiar as his listeners were with both the Ten Commandments and Deuteronomy 6:5. But to continue as he did, not only saying “Love your neighbor as yourself,” but also clearly equating this with loving God, means that our ways of praying to God are to be squarely met by our acts of justice. While there are a number of good reasons to fast, for political purposes or health benefits, fasting out of faith is an entirely different matter. Spiritual practice and acts of righteousness are two sides of the same coin, or to paraphrase the sixteenth century religious leader Francis de Sales, “Spiritual practice and social justice differ no more from one another than does the flame from the fire. Our prayer is spiritual fire, and when it bursts into flames, it is called justice.”

Considered in this light, how might we understand the relationship between the spiritual discipline of fasting, and the call to do justice? As Presbyterians, we are always well served by turning to the works of John Calvin. It is worth observing that Calvin regularly fasted, joining such notables as Martin Luther, and John Wesley. Calvin writes at length in his *Institutes on the Christian Religion* (IV.12.14-21) on the subject of fasting, and his words are quite helpful in considering the relationship between this particular spiritual discipline and acts of justice. Interestingly enough, this fourth book of the *Institutes* concerns the institution of the church, while the twelfth chapter concerns discipline, both reminders that the spiritual practice of fasting may be personal, but it is not individualistic. This may mean that the fast is undertaken with others, for the sake of others, in confession over acts committed against others, or with the support of others, but never is it undertaken alone.

Fasting can serve the cause of justice as it enables a discernment process necessary to identify means, action, or goal more clearly. In the ancient Jewish tradition of fasting, one of its purposes was to a spiritual preparation in the hope of receiving the grace and strength needed to fulfill God’s mission of faithful service. It is true that at first fasting will likely lead to a preoccupation with food, or the lack of it. But with time fasting will likely lead to a new clarity, as what once seemed so important gives way to what is really important. Through fasting one may hear the answer to God’s question in Isaiah 58:5, “Is this the fast that I choose?”

Our very hunger can make a significant contribution to the cause of justice as it reminds us of those whom we seek to serve. It is easy to get so caught up in the activity of service that we forget why and for whom we are acting in the first place. But the pangs felt in the midst of fasting, and our attentiveness to the times when others eat, all prompt us to remember the hungry, the poor, the disenfranchised. This is what compassion means, to “suffer with.” We may also be provoked to consider the ways in which we have wasted food and other valuable resources, as well as the times when we have neglected those in need.

This recognition of our own failings, brought to mind through fasting, offers another significant contribution to executing justice. A second component to the ancient Jewish tradition of fasting is the need for national or personal repentance for sin, a theme picked up by Calvin. The humility associated with fasting is imperative for those who wish to serve God justly. The temptation is great, in seeking to support those in some way oppressed, to demonize the oppressors. But just as fasting promotes a new kind of honesty about our motives and ourselves when it comes to discernment, it makes a noteworthy impact on our critique and judgment of others. Micah suggests this in his famous injunction, that we are to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God (6:8). Perhaps this is why Calvin made a point of recommending fasting not only as a discipline in its own right, but as a preparation for all types of prayer, recognizing abstinence from food as a healthy corrective for all of our acts in the name of God.

Through the prophet Isaiah, we learn that the fast chosen by God is not meant to gain attention, but to demonstrate the *intention* for justice and mercy. As we hunger and thirst, may it ultimately be for righteousness’ sake, that all will be filled.