

A Lenten Journey of the Soul

Fasting from Negativity

An age-old and often misunderstood spiritual practice is *fasting*. In the early days of the church Christians believed that by refraining from or limiting what they ate they would feed the soul by denying the body (referred to as “mortification of the flesh”). This represented a “death” to the many human appetites that often led to self-absorption and sin. In more recent times Christians are encouraged to abstain from eating certain foods on designated days of the week and during different liturgical seasons, such as Lent.

However, Jesus, in response to questions about the lack of fasting among his disciples, addresses the heart of the matter in Matthew 15:11, saying,

“It is not what enters one’s mouth that defiles that person; but what comes out of the mouth is what defiles one.”

Jesus understood that there are more important forms of fasting. Some forms of fasting require a greater level of “letting go” than others. During Lent, instead of giving up chocolate, or that nightly glass of wine, or whatever else we try to white-knuckle through Lent in order to demonstrate our willpower and righteousness (and often, lose a few unwanted pounds in the process). Instead, fast from what Jesus refers to as “what proceeds out of the mouth” – what we can call the **negative relational behaviors**. When we’re snarky, chippy, demanding, complaining, or outright confrontational we create an atmosphere of tension, resentment, and negativity that initiates an ongoing cycle of hurt. These negative relational behaviors are all rooted in the ego self (the false self) and tend to be our unintentional, automatic response when we’re threatened. Think about it: we don’t plan ways to lash out at those we love and care for – it’s reactive rather than proactive behavior. We don’t have to “practice the negative behaviors” – they just seem to happen. It’s so emotionally driven by any threat to the ego that we aren’t able to consider the consequences. When we’re tired or depleted, self-absorbed with worry and anxiety, or suffering physically, emotionally, mentally, or spiritually, our level of defensiveness and irritability can skyrocket. The result is that, in varying degrees, we hurt everyone who crosses our path. And those nearest and dearest are generally the bull’s eye on the target.

Behaviors that are hurtful to others – when we are being:

- Preoccupied
- Emotionally Withdrawn
- Indifferent
- Negative
- Rejecting
- Abusive
- Critical
- Ungrateful
- Demanding
- Self-Absorbed
- Resistant
- Uncooperative
- Gossiping
- Insensitive
- Punitive
- Judgmental
- Discouraging
- Sarcastic
- Unforgiving
- Prejudiced
- Dishonest
- Controlling
- Dismissive
- Vindictive

When we fail (as we surely will), get up, make amends, and begin the fast again. Then, when Easter arrives, we can reflect on what has changed, not only in ourselves, but in those we live, love, and work with.