

## What does The United Methodist Church say about fasting?

(From umc.com)

Fasting has been a part of Methodism from its early beginnings. John Wesley considered fasting an important part of a Christian's life and he personally fasted weekly. To Wesley, fasting was an important way to express sorrow for sin and penitence for overindulgence in eating and drinking. He believed it benefited prayer life by allowing more time for prayer. He also felt fasting was more meaningful if combined with giving to the poor. Wesley did advise caution against extreme fasting and against fasting for those in fragile health.

The penitential season of Lent is a season of the Church year which commemorates the forty days Jesus fasted and prayed in the wilderness before he began his public ministry. Although fasting usually refers to any practice of restricting food, there is a distinction, in the Church, between fasting (limiting food to one full meal a day, with two smaller meals allowed) and abstinence (abstaining from eating meat.) Abstinence from meat one day a week is a universal act of penitence. Visit the Upper Room's [Ask Julian](#) Web site for more information. It is important that you check with your physician before attempting a total fast (no food, water only) for more than 24 hrs.

Lent is a very personal time for individuals, so the United Methodist Church does not have official guidelines on how individuals should observe Lent. For example, the church does not say everyone has to fast. We may choose other ways of observing acts of penance, but we are not to neglect it, either - the value of self-denial can be learned early in a person's life. Lent provides an excellent opportunity to teach children the necessity of self-denial in our permissive society. A spirit of fasting can include restriction of luxuries such as television watching, shopping and going out with friends. We can give away clothing or possessions to those in need or we can give time to the Lord by volunteering our services or special prayers and devotions. Whenever possible we can pray more often alone or with family members. The article "[Connecting Worship and Daily Living in Lent](#)" by Rev. Dan Benedict offers many suggestions for personal Lenten practices.

### Spiritual Disciplines: Works of Piety

John Wesley believed that Jesus is God's means of grace. For him, the "means of grace" were also "works of piety" (spiritual disciplines) and "[works of mercy](#)" (doing good to others). He said that means of grace are: "...outward signs, words, or actions, ordained of God, and appointed for this end, to be the ordinary channels whereby he might convey to men, preventing, [justifying](#), or [sanctifying grace](#)."

Wesley talked about a variety of works of piety: The chief of these means are [prayer](#), whether in secret or with the great congregation; [searching the Scriptures](#); (which implies reading, hearing, and meditating thereon;) and receiving the Lord's Supper, eating bread and drinking wine in remembrance of Him: And these we believe to be ordained of God,

as the ordinary channels of conveying his grace to the souls of men. He also emphasized the importance of fasting and participating in Christian community.

## Prayer

John Wesley considered prayer an essential part of Christian living, calling it, in many of his writings, the most important means of grace. Christians were to pray constantly, without ceasing (1 Thessalonians 5:17). He wrote in *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*:

Whether we think of; or speak to, God, whether we act or suffer for him, all is prayer, when we have no other object than his love, and the desire of pleasing him.

All that a Christian does, even in eating and sleeping, is prayer, when it is done in simplicity, according to the order of God, without either adding to or diminishing from it by his own choice.

How have you experienced prayer in your own life? Do you agree with Wesley that it is the most important means of grace, more important than the Bible?

## Bible Study

John Wesley read the Bible every day, usually early in the day or late in the evening. A scholar, he could read the scriptures in their original languages and wrote commentaries on the Bible. His *Explanatory Notes on the New Testament* and his sermons are a part of the Doctrinal Standards of The United Methodist Church. John Wesley gave Methodists advice on how to read the Bible. Read Wesley's advice and try it. Is his approach helpful to you? What is your method of searching the scriptures?

## Fasting

The spiritual reasons for fasting have been pretty much lost on today's society, particularly in Protestantism. Many United Methodists are surprised to learn that John Wesley fasted two days a week, Wednesdays and Fridays, in his younger days. Later he fasted on Fridays. Charles Yrigoyen, Jr., in *John Wesley: Holiness of Heart and Life* writes:

*Wesley was convinced that fasting, abstaining from food or drink, was a practice firmly grounded in the Bible. People in Old Testament times fasted (Ezra 8:23). So did Jesus and his followers (Matthew 4:2; Acts 13:3), and Wesley saw no reason why modern Christians should not follow the same pattern. His plan of fasting sometimes allowed for limited eating and drinking. He found that fasting advanced holiness.*

*John Wesley: Holiness of Heart and Life* copyright © 1996 Charles Yrigoyen, Jr., p. 33.

## **Occasions of prayer and fasting in the Bible:**

Praying for health: "David pleaded with God for the child. He fasted and went into his house and spent the nights lying on the ground" (2 Samuel 12:16)

Praying for safety: "There, by the Ahava Canal, I [Ezra] proclaimed a fast, so that we might humble ourselves before our God and ask him for a safe journey for us and our children, with all our possessions" (Ezra 8:21).

As an act of repentance: "When they had assembled at Mizpah, they drew water and poured it out before the LORD. On that day they fasted and there they confessed, "We have sinned against the LORD." And Samuel was leader of Israel at Mizpah" (1 Samuel 7:6).

As a sign of mourning: "They mourned and wept and fasted till evening for Saul and his son Jonathan, and for the army of the LORD and the house of Israel, because they had fallen by the sword" (2 Samuel 1:12).

Before making an important decision: "While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, 'Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.' So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off....Paul and Barnabas appointed elders for them in each church and, with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord, in whom they had put their trust " (Acts 13:2-3; 14:23).

## **Teachings on prayer and fasting in the Bible:**

Fasting is a personal event: "When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to men that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you" (Matthew 6:16-18).

Fasting can be from things besides food: "The husband should fulfill his marital duty to his wife, and likewise the wife to her husband. The wife's body does not belong to her alone but also to her husband. In the same way, the husband's body does not belong to him alone but also to his wife. Do not deprive each other except by mutual consent and for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer. Then come together again so that Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of self-control" (1 Corinthians 7:3-5).

Jesus did not require fasting as a part of Christianity: "They [Pharisees] said to him, 'John's disciples often fast and pray, and so do the disciples of the Pharisees, but yours go on eating and drinking.' Jesus answered, 'Can you make the guests of the bridegroom fast while he is with them? But the time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them; in those days they will fast.'

## Why Fast?

Christian fasting is more than just skipping a few meals. It is giving up eating for a period of time to focus more completely on God. There are a number of possible reasons for fasting:

- To humble yourself before God in confession and repentance (Jonah 3:5, 10; Neh. 1:4-7)
- For spiritual renewal
- To seek guidance about a major decision (Judges 20:26-28; Acts 13:1-3)
- To focus on prayer for a particular need (Ezra 8:21)
- To develop discipline and learn to deny physical cravings (1 Cor. 9:27)
- When engaged in spiritual warfare

### What Christian fasting is not

Not a way to “pay” for your sins or “earn” God’s love

Not a way to “force” God to do something

Not a way to show off or prove your spirituality

Not a way to lose weight or improve your health

## How to Fast

### When you fast

- Drink plenty of fluids
- Be prepared to be a little more tired or feel cold
- On a longer fast you might need more rest than usual
- If you normally consume caffeine you will probably have a headache
- Those who have health problems that may be affected by fasting should check with their doctor first before fasting more than one day

### What to do when you fast

- Dedicate the time/money you would normally spend on eating to God
- Set aside extra time for prayer and meditation (otherwise you are just skipping meals)

### Types of fasts

- Partial fast: give up some, but not all foods (e.g. give up meat, sweets, etc.)
- Complete fast: give up all food, and take only water and juice
- Non-food fasts: give up TV, computer games, etc.

### How to end a fast

Generally, you should take the same amount of time as you spend fasting to ease back into regular eating. This is especially important for fasts longer than 1-2 days. (See web link below for further information.)

## **Biblical examples and commands concerning fasting**

Judges 20:26—Israel fasted for victory in war.

1 Sam. 1:6-7—Hannah fasted for a son

1 Sam. 7:6—Israel fasted in repentance

1 Sam. 31:13—Men of Jabeshgilead fasted in mourning for Saul

2 Sam. 1:12—David and his men fasted in mourning for Saul, Jonathan, and the fallen of Israel

2 Sam. 12—David fasted for mercy upon his child

1 Kings 21:27—Ahab fasted for mercy

2 Chron. 20:3—Jehoshaphat and Israel fasted for help and protection

Ezra 8:21-23—Ezra and the people fasted for help and protection

Nehemiah 1:4—Nehemiah fasted in mourning and for help upon Jerusalem

Nehemiah 9:1,2—Israel fasting in mourning and repentance

Esther 4:16—Esther and friends fasted for victory

Esther 9:3—Fasting is mentioned as having had a role in the victory

Psalms 35:13,14—Fasting in prayer and mourning

Psalms 69: 10,11—Fasting in prayer and mourning

Isaiah 58:6-8—The fast which pleases God

Jeremiah 36:9—Israel fasted for mercy

Joel 1:14; 2:12,15—God commanded fasting and repentance

Jonah 3:5—The Ninevites fasted in repentance for mercy

Daniel 9:3—Daniel fasted for wisdom

Matthew 4:2—Jesus fasted when tempted in the wilderness

Matthew 6:17-18—Jesus promised that the Father would bless fasting

Matthew 9:14-15—Jesus said his disciples would fast

Luke 2:37—Fasting was part of Anna's service to God

Acts 13:2—Fasting was part of the ministry of the workers at Antioch

Acts 13:3—Ordination was accompanied by fasting

Acts 14:23—Ordination was accompanied by fasting