

## **Fasting: A Spiritually and Socially Transforming Practice**

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Fasting is a spiritual practice embraced by many faith traditions. People of faith may be familiar with fasting at Ramadan within the Muslim community or fasting undertaken during Lent in the Christian community. Fasting has an ancient history and is part of scriptural texts that inspire faith.

In Jonah we find that the people and animals of Ninevah illustrate their desire to repent and live rightly by putting on sackcloth and ashes and observing a fast (Jonah 3:5-10). The prophet Isaiah warns that fasting must be connected to the seeking of justice, else it is a hypocritical action to which God will not respond (Isaiah 58:1-14). Though Jesus did not proscribe fasting, he presumed that his followers engaged in the practice of fasting, giving instructions to limit prideful exhibitions (Matthew 6:16). In Islam, *siyam* (fasting) means abstinence from doing something. Principles of fasting are set in the Koran (Surah II: The Cow, Verses 177-187) so that practitioners may learn self-restraint and hence refrain from wrongdoing. Fasting demonstrates submission to *Allah*.

There are a variety of “purposes” for fasting, but a central purpose is that of reconciliation – to God and to one’s neighbor. From the practice of fasting we should be able to see God’s vision for our world more clearly and become determined to live with integrity. Fasting helps us identify the grave injustices around us, acknowledge and take responsibility for our participation and complicity in such injustice, and prepares us to act with God to transform ourselves and our world.

Prayer is an important complement to fasting and focuses our confessions and intercessions. Practitioners of fasting often report an intensity to their prayer lives – as if the shedding of food for a period makes space in the mind, heart, body, and soul for God. While fasting heightens the believer’s spiritual awareness, it also brings lasting insights into the physical needs of the body and the daily struggles of those who are hungry and poor. When we fast, we physically experience in a small way the evil of hunger that daily deprives millions of our sisters and brothers of health and life.

Renowned leaders such as Mahatma Gandhi, Cesar Chavez, and Martin Luther King Jr. fasted. Gandhi was a Hindu whose fasts were acts of *satyagraha* (or non-violent resistance). The fasts were directed toward those who had said they cared about him in an effort to encourage them to realize their mistakes and correct themselves. He regarded the process of fasting as one of purification. While rejecting the practice of fasting in order to convince another of one’s ideals, Gandhi believed that hunger strikes were called for when inhumanity was practiced. Gandhi expected those who were engaging in civil disobedience to prepare themselves to “love their enemy” through fasting prior to engagement. While such fasting may have the consequence of changing the mind of others, the fast deepens the commitment and clarity of the practitioner to non-violent approaches to resolving injustice and conflict.

Cesar Chavez, organizer and leader of the United Farm Workers, was inspired by Mahatma Gandhi’s teaching and practice. Cesar was a Catholic believer who fasted, and encouraged others to fast, as a way of drawing attention to the injustices faced by the migrant workers who were seeking to organize and as a way to demonstrate to his own people the power and possibility of non-violence. Such fasting was an extension of the grape boycott, another non-violent means of seeking change.

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. also regularly fasted. Though he and Cesar Chavez never met, Martin sent Cesar a telegram during his 25 day fast in Delano which read, "As brothers in the fight for equality, I extend the hand of fellowship and good will and wish continuing success to you and your members...You and your valiant fellow workers have demonstrated your commitment to righting grievous wrongs forced upon exploited people. We are together with you in spirit and in determination that our dreams for a better tomorrow will be realized." Dr. King once preached, "What does it profit a man to be able to eat at an integrated lunch counter if he doesn't have enough money to buy a hamburger?" He knew that genuine equality was impossible in a climate of dramatic economic inequality.

May this fast be a time of purification for you, as you seek truth and clarity. May it be a time of divine encounter, when you experience the presence and power of God. May it be a time of community, as we work together to end hunger and stand in solidarity with those in need. May it be a time of re-orientation that you may name the patterns of injustice and commit anew to their transformation. Together, may we be the change we wish to see in the world.