

Growing in Christ

What classic spiritual discipline needs the most renewal among American Christians?

FASTING

Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove is a pastor, cofounder of the Rutba House, and author of *The Awakening of Hope: Why We Practice a Common Faith*.

In learning the spiritual disciplines practiced by ancient leaders of the faith, we also learn discernment. We need different disciplines at different times. Like apprentices in the master's workshop, we must learn what work is most needed and what tool can best do the job. One tool particularly useful to us today is the discipline of fasting.

Christians in America often express two deep desires. We long for a community where we know we belong. Stretched by fast-paced work, a high-tech social life, and a constant flood of information, Americans feel fragmented and alone. We ache for home.

At the same time, our hearts also cry out for justice. We who have experienced God's love know that this same love connects us to child soldiers in Africa, sex slaves in Asia, and the stranger on our block. More than any time since the late 1800s, justice has become a rallying cry, especially among young evangelicals.

But even as we long for our true home and the justice that makes for peace, we struggle to act each moment on our truest desires. We are often consumed by anxiety about image, fear about the future, and desires for cheap comfort and instant gratification. A thousand forces conspire to distract us from our truest desires every day.

For this reason, I'm convinced that fasting is the spiritual discipline we most need to renew today. In his most famous sermon, Jesus talks about fasting immediately after his introduction of the Lord's Prayer, suggesting that the former should be as common as the latter. Before Jesus began his public ministry, the Gospels tell us, he fasted for 40 days in the wilderness.

In the early church, if anyone in the fellowship was hungry, it was common practice in some places for the whole community to go without until they could supply their brother or sister's need.

Today we who are used to grabbing a snack when we feel the slightest pang of hunger are not sure how to receive the blessing that belongs to "those who hunger and thirst for righteousness" (Matt. 5:6). Self-denial seems so puritanical. Why not just go ahead and take care of our own needs so we can love and serve others to the best of our ability?

The practice of fasting helps us get in touch with our truest desires. It is not mere self-denial, but rather an earnest preparation for the feast of beloved community. The Baptist radical Clarence Jordan

used to say, "[F]asting is the opposite of slowing"; it is a "speeding up toward the kingdom." Just as an Olympic swimmer shaves to reduce drag in the water, followers of Jesus strip themselves of excess baggage and forgo meals now and again for the sake of rushing ahead toward the new creation that God is giving us even now.

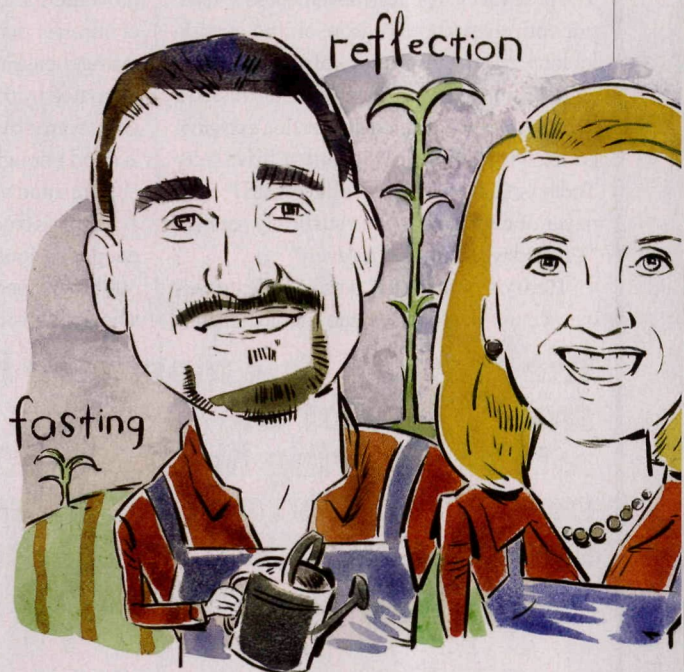
Fasting also reminds us that a true feast is made not by plentiful food, but by plentiful fellowship. As Dorothy Day used to say, "Heaven is a banquet and life is a banquet, too, even with a crust, where there is companionship." Those who learn to hunger and thirst for righteousness are blessed because they will be filled—not with the cheap comfort of the passing moment, but with the true Bread that satisfies.

LISTENING TO JESUS

Anne Graham Lotz is an evangelist, author of *Just Give Me Jesus*, and daughter of Billy Graham.

The pressures of day-to-day responsibility, the news of crises in our world, and the problems I face within my family or ministry can unsettle me. My spirit gets overwhelmed; I can feel burdened and oppressed.

I draw encouragement from the fact that Jesus' disciples also experienced problems, pressures, and unwelcome news. In Mark 6,



they face an emotional roller coaster when they learn of John the Baptist's brutal beheading, they experience the power of God, and they have no time to even eat. Jesus invited them to come away. His solution for the disciples of old—"spend time with me"—is the same solution he offers disciples today.

The catch? We have to have time to spend time. And if you are like me, you have none to spare. I spend a few moments in prayer and in God's Word daily, but it's not enough. So at least once a week I draw aside for an extended time with him.

I begin the time with prayer, acknowledging his presence and asking him to meet with me and speak to my heart in a personal way. Then I open my Bible and read just a few verses—not an entire chapter. My goal is to hear his voice speaking to me through his Word. I might read a verse such as Mark 9:2: "After six days Jesus took Peter, James and John with him and led them up a high mountain, where they were all alone. There he was transfigured before them."

After reading the text, I look for lessons to be learned from what's taking place or being said. From Mark 9:2, I learn several things. "After six days" might imply a weekly retreat.

"Jesus took" shows he wants to spend time with me as much as I want to spend time with him.

"Led them up a high mountain": It can be difficult and challenging to draw aside from the beaten path of daily responsibilities.

"All alone": He wants me to give him undivided attention.

"There he was transfigured before them": He will reveal himself to me in fresh ways when I make the time and effort to draw aside with him by myself.

Once I have drawn out the lessons, I reword each as a question to myself. For example, when was the last time I went on a personal retreat with Jesus?

As I ask myself those questions, I listen for his voice to speak to me.

The Mark passage has another lesson about time with Jesus. When Jesus, James, John, and Peter returned from their retreat, they found that the disciples who had stayed behind were frustrated and

powerless to help others. Could it be that one reason the church today has not had more of an impact on our culture is that disciples are not spending time with Jesus? It's time to "come with me by yourselves"—now.

SILENCE

Dallas Willard is author of *The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives* and philosophy professor at the University of Southern California.

Silence is a crucial spiritual discipline for American Christians today. Contemporary life also makes it one of the most difficult to practice.

Silence is, in every time and place, an essential way of breaking free from the grip of a world turned away from God and his kingdom—a world that neglects the soul. In our time in particular, the ever-present noise of modern existence and the overwhelming barrage of relentless "communications" militate against living in divine presence.

Silence has two closely related dimensions. One involves evading noise or intrusive sounds. These reach deeply into our body and keep it (and us) at a constant low level of alarm. The other has to do with avoiding talk, which, without the spiritual depth of love, proves to be little more than another type of intrusive sound (1 Cor. 13:1).

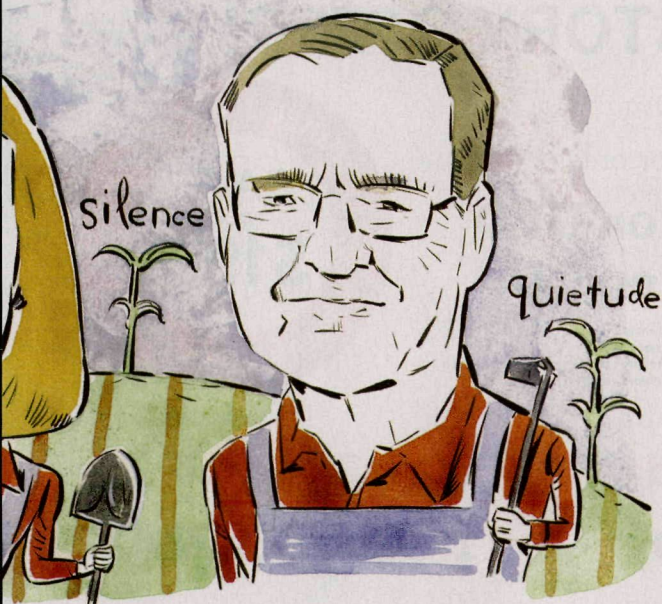
The discipline of silence consists in the practice of abstaining, for significant periods of time, from noise and from talking. We step aside from them to allow development of attitudes and habits that can constantly hold us, with thankful hearts, in the loving presence of God.

Silence can be cultivated in many ways. For the novice, it is helpful to experience a retreat center, where the practice of silence is understood and accommodated. Then, families blessed with similar inclinations may practice silence in community at home. Silence must never be imposed, but practicing it together in a loving atmosphere is incredibly enriching and rewarding. As we progress in our habits and understanding of how silence works, the exercise of this discipline will depend less and less on circumstances. We will always need to return periodically to concentrated forms of the practice such as we have in a retreat center or other special arrangement. Even in a retreat or escape, though, the aim is to establish silence in the soul, a nourishing and sustaining reality.

Silence well practiced opens a living space in which we can be effectively attentive to God, to our own souls, and to the genuine needs of those around us. The apostle Paul directs us, "Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such a word as is good for edification according to the need of the moment, so that it will give grace to those who hear" (Eph. 4:29, NASB). James says, "If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man" (3:2). One cannot be like that by trying.

However, one can become the kind of person who is like that. A wise and seasoned practice of silence does much to bring it about.

It is up to us to choose silence and other practices of spiritual discipline that enable us to "grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" (2 Pet. 3:18). The discipline of silence has substantially advanced multitudes in that "grace and knowledge."



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