

Reasons we don't fast

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March 14, 2011

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus enjoins his disciples, "when you fast, do not do as the hypocrites do. . . ." So I guess it's possible that many people take this so seriously that I just do not know what they are fasting from. Perhaps many people's piety does not allow them to talk about what they have given up for Lent. Maybe we ARE fasting, intensely and quietly.

But I kinda doubt it.

I suspect that [G. Jeffrey MacDonald](#) is right when we wrote this week that most American Christians just don't take Lent seriously anymore -- certainly not the fasting part. Yes, there are exceptions, but compared to our Muslim counterparts, who are very clear about what they are to do during Ramadan, our "have-it-your-own-way" faith consists of very little self-sacrifice at all.

MacDonald lays the blame at the feet of the consumer economy, which relies on keeping our desires stoked in all seasons, every day. We are so used to being pleased, being the customer who is always right, that we really can't imagine living another way for forty days. "The church," he argues, has become "the handmaiden of desire," giving people what they want rather than holding up a higher vision of what God knows we need.

But there's another reason MacDonald has overlooked which is very much connected to our consumer culture, but a little less evil-looking than self-indulgence: we are afraid to stop. For the flip side of constant consumerism is the need to "be your best" at every moment. As a recreational runner, I've learned that food is fuel; pick up any women's magazine, and you'll read about foods that provide energy; our

health plans urge us to eat "right" and exercise every single day.

The message is clear: in this economy, you have to perform, and if you don't -- because you have low blood-sugar from fasting, or your prayer life is making you question the very premise of your business-- you are "less."

I suspect that this temptation -- not self-indulgence but the myth that I can please everyone at all times -- is especially hard for successful middle-class Christians to face. We know about sacrifice, whether it's for our jobs our our families. We know about missing meals and hours of sleep -- but we do so "accidentally," in the service of chasing the approval of everyone around us. it seems more benign than mere gluttony, but it is just as dangerous to the soul.

Truth be told, if we take Lent seriously, more than rich foods will be given up: we will "lose" some time which might otherwise be spent being efficient producers of "added value." We might spend some time assisting others that would otherwise be helping our children win the rat race. We might be distracted from the best business strategy by our hollow stomachs. We might have to contend with our bodies in a way that no one rewards like they do a successful 10K or a few pounds lost.

It's been my experience that Lent can be freeing, but it can also bring me face-to-face with the least pleasant parts of my personality. Quite honestly, I don't want to inflict them on others if I can avoid it. I'd rather be my "best self." Jesus was right. In the short term, fasting can cause a kind of self-obsession that can be the very definition of hypocrisy.

But my worst self shows up regularly when I'm not fasting too. I can be distracted even when I'm not trying to pray, irritable when I'm not hungry, and stingy even when there is no practice to remind me of the poor. Perhaps the intentional disciplines of these forty days -- especially when they are shared with others -- give me an opportunity to take that worst self out and turn her over to God.

Originally posted at [Living Word by Word](#).