

Pastor's Corner – 12/07/2019 – Feasting and Fasting

We have entered into the time of year where our dinner plates are laden with delicious, abundant, and fattening foods. We exchange pies, cookies, treats, and goodies while celebrating holidays like Thanksgiving and Christmas. For most of us, the end of the year is a time of celebration and feasting.

There's nothing inherently wrong with feasting. Those who are a bit more ascetic might frown on such excess and frivolity, but feasting was a regular part of the religious life of people in the Bible. Most of the religious festivals mentioned in the Old Testament were also feasts. Special occasions were marked by slaughtering the fatted calf to be served at a feast. Passover is associated with eating the lamb and the feast of unleavened bread. So, feasts aren't bad. They are a time to celebrate, praise God, and enjoy the company of those we love. Feasting is good, we should do it.

The thing we need to keep in mind about feasting, however, is that it's probably good to offset it with times of fasting. Our waistlines can get into trouble when we always feast but never fast. On average, Americans gain 1 to 2 pounds per year. What's interesting is that over half of that weight is typically gained during the months of November and December. That makes sense since these are the months where food is emphasized, and we consume it to excess. Most of us intuitively know this to be true. That's why new year's resolutions often involve plans to diet and exercise – we know we need to lose the holiday pounds.

It's interesting to me that the Bible talks about both feasting and fasting. As with most things in scripture, these are given spiritual and religious significance. Ancient people weren't necessarily health crusaders but they were very religious. Perhaps God included health principles couched in religion so that people would take them seriously. In any case, the Bible promotes both fasts and feasts.

Feasts were associated with celebrations, joy, and recognizing God's goodness. Fasts were associated with solemn assembly, prayer, and repentance. While spiritual feasting and fasting can still be practiced today (and I'm sure they produce spiritual effects) I think we should consider them (fasting in particular) from a health perspective.

Fasting can have several positive impacts on our health and in a culture with excess food (and waistlines) it might be just what the doctor ordered. Consider some of the following positive effects of fasting.

Fasting gives your digestive system a rest. If you follow the standard 3 meals a day plus snacks eating protocol, then there are very few hours in a day when your digestive system isn't active. By constantly eating we constantly cram more food into our system which requires processing, utilization, and elimination. Give your gut a rest by putting down the fork and drinking a glass of water instead.

Fasting also allows insulin levels to subside. Most foods trigger an insulin response. Sugars and processed carbohydrates result in a high insulin response, but protein and unprocessed carbs raise it too. By eating all the time, we ensure that our insulin stays elevated which, over time, can lead to insulin resistance. Once our cells start to become resistant to insulin our pancreas has to produce even more insulin to get the same job done. This, in turn, increases resistance and the cycle repeats. If resistance continues to build you eventually end up with diabetes.

Want to know how to get off that not-so-merry-go-round? Stop eating. It's an amazing concept really. If you don't eat, you don't raise your insulin. If you don't raise your insulin your body can start to regain insulin sensitivity. The concept here is no different from what rehab centers practice with their clients. Get someone off of a drug that they had built up a tolerance too for long enough and they regain sensitivity to that drug. Insulin is just a drug that your body makes naturally so the same principle applies. Fasting allows your insulin to drop and can improve insulin sensitivity.

Another benefit of fasting is that it lowers your daily calorie consumption. Studies have been done that show that after a fast people do tend to eat slightly more at the meal immediately following a

fast. However, the greater calorie consumption at that meal doesn't come close to what was burned during the fast. A fast of 18 to 42 hours is a great way to decrease how many calories you consume and fight against an expanding waistline. A fast of that length allows your body to start burning up that extra piece of pumpkin pie you enjoyed at Thanksgiving.

Fasting can also help you learn more about your body and what it really needs to survive. If you start fasting regularly you will be surprised to discover that a) it gets easier over time, and b) you don't need to eat nearly as often as you thought you did. Fasting is also a great way to uncover any emotional eating habits you may have developed.

There's more I could say here about the benefits of fasting, but space doesn't really permit it. Let me just conclude by saying that fasting should not just be done for religious reasons, but also for some very good health ones. It's easier to do than you might think, and it can really help you rewind that holiday weight gain.

Fasting is perfectly healthy for almost everybody. Pregnant or nursing mothers probably shouldn't fast, neither should those who are underweight. If you are on medications related to insulin or blood glucose you should check with your doctor before trying an extended fast. For everyone else, fasting is perfectly healthy, normal, and natural. Our bodies were designed to withstand periods without food (think of all the famines mentioned in the Bible). The whole reason our bodies store excess fat is so that we have energy available in case of a food shortage. Our problem today is that we have an over-abundance of food. We are always feasting (by historical standards) and never fasting. We keep making deposits in our fat deposits but we never make withdrawals. While that might be good for your bank account, it's not good for your health.

In conclusion, enjoy the holidays and this time of seasonal feasting. Eat the Christmas cookies and don't feel guilty. Celebrate with family, friends, and co-workers. There's nothing wrong with that. But at the end of the holiday season, why not conclude the feasting with a bit of fasting? Your metabolism and waistline will thank you.

Happy Sabbath
Pastor Tyler