

# Chapter 19

## Fasting

February 9, 1997

We are considering “helps” or “aids” to prayer. Last Lord’s Day evening we considered the posture of the body. Tonight we take up fasting.

Not infrequently in the Bible prayer is linked with fasting. Like the posture of the body, fasting is an accompaniment of prayer, something that helps it to be more truly prayer.

Now fasting is not a practice nearly so common today as it has been in past days. That may be true for many reasons, but surely one of them is that we are, as a generation of Christians, more self-indulgent and self-regarding. Fasting is difficult, painful, an act of self-denial. It does not comport with the modern spirit. What is more, fasting has not been widely taught in the modern era and public fasting has largely dropped out of the practice of the church, making it less likely that private fasting would retain its place in private piety.

Our Confession of Faith (XXI) includes “solemn fastings” as among those special acts of worship which are “in their several times and seasons, to be used in a holy and religious manner,” so fasting is surely a practice recommended by our fathers.

And no wonder, for fasting is clearly part of the practice of the Christian life as taught in Holy Scripture, and especially as a feature of the life of prayer.

### **I. In the Old Testament**

1. We read of Ezra proclaiming a fast for all those he was about to lead back to the promised land from captivity in Babylon. They fasted, we read in 8:21, and prayed to God for a safe journey.
2. When Nehemiah heard of the troubles being faced by those who had returned to Jerusalem, he sat down and wept. For some days, he “mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven” (1:4).
3. The Lord, through the prophet Joel, commanded the people of Israel: “Blow the trumpet in Zion, declare a holy fast, call a sacred assembly. . . to pray that the Lord might spare Israel from the punishment which her sins deserve” (2:15).

In many other places in the OT we read of people fasting: Ahab as a pretext for getting Naboth in a public setting where he might be falsely accused; David as he waited the outcome of his prayers for the life of his illegitimate son; Israel at Mizpah as Samuel prayed for their forgiveness (1 Sam. 7:6), etc.

## **II. But the practice is found frequently mentioned in the NT also.**

1. In Matt. 6:16-18 the Lord corrects certain false ideas about fasting and lays stress on the proper motive in fasting, but, in doing so, he seems to assume that fasting remains a part of the life of God’s people.
2. In Matthew 9:14-15, when the disciples of John the Baptist ask the Lord why they were fasting but his disciples were not, he replied, “How can the guests of the bridegroom mourn while he is with them? The time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them; *then they will fast.*”
3. Paul tells us in 2 Cor. 11:27 that he often fasted. The NIV renders the word “fasting” with “gone without food.” But the word indicates that this is a voluntary going without, a fast.
4. And fasting was found in the Gentile churches as well, not just those that grew out of the Jewish church. In Acts 13:1-2 we learn that it was during a fast that it was revealed to the church in Antioch that Paul and Barnabas were to be set apart for missionary work among the Gentiles. In Acts 14:23 we read that it was the custom of Paul

and Barnabas, when appointing elders in the new churches they had formed, to commit them to the Lord with prayer and fasting.

The impression we get from these texts is that fasting was a regular and important part of the religious worship and prayer of the early church and this is confirmed by many references to fasting in the church fathers.

So, the practice is plainly and emphatically biblical and, in particular, as an accompaniment to prayer.

### **III. Before going further, we should be careful to define our term.**

Fasting is, of course, abstinence from food. It is not necessarily abstinence from all food. In Dan. 10:2-3 we read of a three week fast of Daniel's in which he abstained from "choice food" that is, meat and wine. Typically in the Bible, total fasts were short and partial fasts are longer. (For example, I know folk who go without certain drinks of choice in Lent — not counting the Sabbath.) But, in either case, total or partial abstinence, to be a fast it must be a voluntary act of self-denial, or self-affliction. Sometimes in the OT it is called exactly that: self-affliction. [*e.g. Lev. 16:29,31; 23:27,32 in reference to a purification rite in which fasting played a part (NIV renders it "deny yourselves"); Isa. 58:3; Ps. 35:13 where NIV has "humbled ourselves"; the MT has in each case, "to afflict or humble oneself."*] Fasting is thus self-denial with respect to food *for a religious purpose*. It is not fasting in this sense if your purpose is losing weight or lowering your cholesterol.

The Scripture reminds us of several things in connection with this fasting.

1. There is no intrinsic merit to the practice; like everything else in the Christian life, motive, intention, sincerity, humility, and faith are all required to make the practice useful to us and pleasing to God.

The Pharisees fasted so as to be noticed and in order to built merit with God. Jesus repudiated that theory of fasting altogether when he spoke of the Pharisee who prayed next to a tax-collector in the Temple: "God, I thank you that I am not like all other men. . . . I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get." But he went home with his prayer unheard.

Luther, before his conversion, on several occasions fasted for three days without so much as a bite of food, thinking that such a good work must

please God. It must be an act of faith and love or it is nothing, worse than nothing, even if joined to prayer: So Jeremiah 14:12: “Although they fast, I will not listen to their cry. . .”

2. It cannot be substituted for other acts of righteousness.

This too was a frequent misunderstanding addressed in the Bible. In Isa. 58 the Lord said to Israel that he was unimpressed by her fasting, which accompanied her prayer, (idolatrous Israel was always still serious about serving God!) because

“on the day of your fasting, you do as your please and exploit all your workers. Your fasting ends in quarreling and strife, and in striking each other with wicked fists. You cannot fast as you do today and expect your voice to be heard on high.”  
(58:3-4)

[The recent article by a Christian missionary in a Muslim country on Ramadan and the greater amount of quarreling, domestic violence, fisticuffs requiring police attention during the fast. People are more irritable because hungry!]

Fasting is meaningful in the context of a faithful and obedient life, but it is no substitute for such a life. Prayer to be heard, even if accompanied by fasting, must be prayed “in the name of Christ” and “sincerely.” The early church understood this very well. In an early Christian work entitled “The Shepherd of Hermas” we read:

“Fasting is very good, provided that the commandments of the Lord be observed. Observe as follows the fasting you intend to keep. First of all, refrain both from speaking and hearing what is wrong; and cleanse thy heart from all pollutions, from all revengeful feelings, and from all covetousness; and reckon up what thy meal on this day would have cost thee, and give the amount to some widow, or orphan, or to the poor. . .”

3. Third, a fast must be not only an outward abstinence but as well the work of the heart.

The church has often gone wrong here through the ages. The Lord called upon Israel in Joel 2, when he called them to fast, to rend their hearts, not merely their garments. Mere form tends to replace the worship of the heart whenever the simplicity of the Bible is overlaid with human regulation. The Jews in Jesus' day had done this, turning a pure and simple act of devotion into a highly regulated observance of ceremonies. The early church had soon made the same mistake. No longer is fasting the spontaneous, free, and unregulated impulse of an earnest heart, seeking a more powerful prayer, but the cause of disputes as to whether fasting ought to be required on the Friday and Saturday before Easter or only on the Friday, and the like.

Fasting takes its significance not from its form, which the Bible rarely specifies and never specifies when urging fasting upon us, but from the spirit and the motive from which it springs.

4. In the fourth place, fasting is an adjunct to Christian piety in the Bible not a central feature.

It is important, I believe, but certainly not as important as prayer itself or the mastery of the Word of God, or obedience to the great commandments of the law, and so on.

Clement of Alexandria wrote in his day (c. A.D. 200) concerning an over-estimation of the importance of fasting that was abroad in that time:

“The kingdom of God is not meat and drink, therefore neither abstinence from wine and flesh, but righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit.” [In Schaff, vol. II, p. 380]

5. Fifth, and finally, fasting is not commended to us in the Bible as a permanent way of life.

This was frequently taught in certain early Christian sects, especially heretical ones that held that matter, such as food and drink and the human body, was inherently evil and that the path to salvation was to deny the body as much as possible in order to free the Spirit for spiritual life.

This was, in another way, the view of monasticism. How many good men there were, like Bernard of Clairvaux, who entered monasteries

as young men, and broke their health for the rest of their lives by denying themselves of anything but the poorest food and the least bit of food that would sustain life. We admire the zeal but it was not zeal according to knowledge. The Lord made our bodies and he made food and made food to be delicious as well as nutritious. He himself enjoyed food and wine when he lived among us, so much so that he was accused by his enemies of being a glutton and a drunkard. He did not, plainly, practice the virtues of those of his contemporaries who embraced an ascetic lifestyle and made fasting a condition of daily life.

#### **IV. But, now, what is fasting for, for what purposes is it to be done?**

Well, clearly there are several distinct purposes for this religious practice. But all of the purposes have a single uniform basis, I suggest: in each case fasting serves to intensify something, to add strength to something.

1. Very often in the Bible, fasting is a synonym for mourning, as is thus used to express humiliation, penitence, or sorrow before God.

The Psalm writers speak of humbling their souls with fasting or of weeping in their souls with fasting. Esther mourned with fasting. The Lord Jesus, in explaining to John's disciples why his disciples did not fast, said that the friends of the bridegroom could hardly mourn while the bridegroom is present, linking fasting and mourning once more. Fasting is, along with tearing of garments, wearing of sackcloth and ashes, a token of inner sorrow.

It makes sense, surely. If one really feels woe, for one's sin or for some other reason, he cannot go along with life as usual. He cannot eat and drink as if all were well. What is more, the affliction of the body, in this way, is a punishment we inflict upon ourselves in sympathy with the righteous judgments of the Lord.

McCheyne has an entry in his Diary which reads as follows:

“The subject of fasting was spoken upon. Felt exceedingly in my own spirit how little we feel real grief on account of sin before God, or we would often lose our appetite for food. When parents lose a child, they often do not taste a bit of

food from morning to night, out of pure grief. She we not mourn as for an only child?" [Memoir and Remains, p. 130]

That is the idea. Under conviction of sin, say, I come to God without food in my stomach, refusing to enjoy the pleasure of good food and drink, having denied myself the ordinary pleasures of life until I have humbled myself before God, confessed and repented of my sin before Him, and received his forgiveness.

In this way fasting can either be the natural result of a God given conviction of sin — we having lost our appetite for food — or a means by which conviction, humility, and repentance can be fostered, a means by which we can bear witness to our desire that we take our sins as seriously before our holy God as we ought to take them.

2. Second, fasting is used as a means of breaking the sinful will, of strengthening the holy will and of promoting spiritual discipline.

When an athlete wants to perform better — run faster or farther, jump higher, lift more, he trains, he exercises, and he does this by placing greater and greater demands upon his body. The body grows in its powers by being forced to do more and more. And you know that the Bible often likens the Christian to the athlete. We too must master our flesh, the desires of our sinful nature, and bring them into submission to our will.

We have all sorts of desires that are contrary to the interests of God's holiness in our lives: to sleep instead of to remain awake to read God's Word or pray; to please ourselves in various ways instead of giving our service to God; to fulfill our lusts instead of offering God our purity and chastity.

Every experienced Christian will say that his chief problem in life is the strength of the desires that run contrary to God's will. If his holy desires were always stronger than his unholy one's this Christian life would be considerably easier and we would all do much better than we do!

It was with this in mind that Paul wrote, in 1 Cor. 9:24ff.,

“Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the

prize. Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. Therefore I do not run like a man running aimlessly; I do not fight like a man beating the air. No, I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize.”

That is what Paul did. He beat his body. But, he didn't do that literally as do the practitioners of some eastern faiths. He did it by depriving his body of what it craved, by saying no to his body when it was demanding things of him. And no doubt he did this especially by fasting — by denying food to a body that wanted food. He mastered the desires of his body, he gained control over its lusts, by periodically refusing to satisfy them, by saying “No” until he could say it whenever he wanted to. By saying “No” to perfectly permissible desires, he gained the ability to say “No” to sinful desires as well.

As Henry Scougal puts it in his spiritual classic, The Life of God in the Soul of Man (pp. 106-107): by “restraining natural inclinations” . . . “we may weaken the forces of nature, and teach our appetites to obey.” “We must do with ourselves as prudent parents do with their children, who cross their wills in many little indifferent things, to make them manageable and submissive in more considerable instances.” “Thus, I say, we may bind up our natural inclinations, and make our appetites more moderate in their cravings, by accustoming them to frequent refusals. . . .”

And, as Alexander Whyte goes on, “And a victory really won over a sensual sin is already a challenge sounded to our most spiritual sin. And it is this discovery that has given to fasting the place it ha held in all the original, resolute, and aggressive ages of the church.” [Bunyan Characters vol. 3, pp. 252-254.] We read in the journal of Thomas Shepard this entry: “I kept a private fast for the conquest of my pride.” There are sins that only go our with prayer and fasting, and thought that text is not actually in the Bible (at Matt. 17:21) is meaning is altogether biblical. We will never drive those sins out until we achieve a higher degree of mastery over the desires of our flesh — and we gain that mastery by practice! practice! practice!

In this way, fasting is an intensifier of mortification.

3. Finally, fasting is especially and primarily in the Bible an intensification of petitionary prayer.

Fasting in prayer is a token, a sign of our seriousness, of the sincerity, the seriousness, the fervor with which we pray, the intensity of our desire to be heard and also to help cultivate in us that proper intensity in prayer we know we ought to have if we do not.

Calvin suggested this as a chief purpose of fasting.

“. . . to render [us] more eager and unencumbered for prayer. Surely we experience this: with a full stomach our mind is not so lifted up to God that it can be drawn to prayer with a serious and ardent affection and persevere in it.” [IV, xii, 16]

But, even more, I think, fasting is a sign to God rather than a help to us, a witness born to *our* seriousness. That is what we see in the Bible. When prayers were especially important or desperate, they would be accompanied by fasting as a way of intensifying them. And not only prayers for forgiveness and such heavy petitions. Philip Henry made the day before his wedding a day of prayer and fasting, he added the fasting to the prayer because of the great importance he attached to those particular prayers!

Now you see what fasting is and why it is appointed for our use as Christians. Fasting is the acknowledgement that the Christian life is a serious matter, that Christians are to be in deadly earnest about living holy lives for God. It is an acknowledgement that the enemies of that holiness, within our own hearts and outside are powerful and cannot be rooted out with half-measures. It is an acknowledgement that the goals for which we are striving as Christians are worth sacrificing to obtain.

Surely, if our Savior and his great Apostle, if Ezra and Nehemiah thought it important to fast from time to time, it must be important for you and for me to fast as well. I will make no rules. The entire matter is left, in Holy Scripture, to every man's conscience in the sight of God. The great issue is *the end, the purpose, the motive we have whenever we fast; and the strength*

*of that motive will determine the frequency as well.* I will only commend the practice to you. And conclude with this from Alexander Whyte:

“Well, then, let it be frankly said that there is nothing holy, nothing saintly, nothing at all meritorious in fasting from our proper food. It is the motive alone that sanctifies the means. It is the end alone that sanctifies the exercise. If I fast to chastise myself for my sin; if I fast to reduce the fuel of my sin; if I fast to keep my flesh low; if I fast to make me more free for my best books, for my most inward, spiritual, mystical books. . . if I fast for the ends of meditation and prayer; if I fast out of sympathy with my Bible, and my Saviour, and my latter end, and my Father’s house in heaven — then, no doubt, my fasting will be acceptable with God, as it will certainly be an immediate means of grace to my sinful soul. For who that knows anything at all about himself, about his own soul, and about the hindrances and helps to its salvation from sin; who that ever read a page of Scripture properly, or spent half an hour in that life which is hidden in God — who of such will deny or doubt that fasting is superseded or neglected to the sure loss of the spiritual life, to the sensible lowering of the religious tone and temper, and to the increase both of the lusts of the flesh and of the mind? . . . The short is this. The one real substance and true essence of all fasting is self-denial. And we can never get past either the supreme and absolute duty of that, or the daily and hourly call to that, as long as we continue to read the New Testament, to live in this life, and to listen to the voice of conscience, and to the voice of God speaking to us in the voice of conscience.” [Bunyan Characters, vol. 3, pp. 252-254]