

PRAYER AND FASTING

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Introduction

Since other articles in this special issue will be focusing on the nature and necessity of prayer we will be focusing in this article on the relation between fasting and prayer. But because fasting is such a universally neglected Christian duty we will have to show briefly the Biblical warrant for fasting and the Biblical information concerning fasting. We, then, echo Calvin in his *Institutes* who says:

Let me say something about fasting: because many, for want of knowing its usefulness undervalue its necessity, and some reject it as altogether superfluous; while on the other hand, where the use of it is not well understood, it easily degenerates into superstition.

Fasting

Many Christians are under the false impression that fasting is an Old Testament practice that has no place in the lives of New Testament Christians. Few are aware that it is an important spiritual duty and fewer practice it. Nevertheless, the Scripture has a great deal to say about it by way of recommending it to our use.

It is mentioned as a New Testament practice some 15 times. Jesus fasted (Matt. 4:2), the apostles fasted (Acts 10:30; 14:23; II Cor. 6:5; 11:27), and so did the early church (Acts 13:2, 3). It is spoken of both as a individual and private duty (Matt. 6:16-18; I Cor. 7:5) and as something that can be done by some or all of the members of the church together (Acts 13:2, 3; 14:23).

Established as a legitimate New Testament practice, therefore, there is much that can be learned about it from the Old Testament. The difference between the Old and New Testament, is

only that in the New Testament there are no set times for fasting (cf. Zech 8:19), but that does not mean that there is no place at all for fasting in our lives. It has or ought to have an important place. Jesus takes it for granted in Matthew 6:16-18 that we do fast with the words “When ye fast....”

We should note that in Matthew 6:16-18, Jesus is not condemning fasting but the practice of the Pharisees who fasted for the wrong reasons and who made a proud public show of fasting by gloomy faces and dust on their heads. Indeed in Matthew 6 fasting is listed with prayer and alms as the three great spiritual duties of the citizens of the kingdom of heaven: alms in relation to others, prayer in relation to God and fasting in relation to ourselves.

Matthew 9:14, 15 might also be taken as speaking against fasting, but Jesus is not denying the practice altogether, only saying that there was no reason for His disciples to fast while He, the Bridegroom, was with them. In fact, the plain statement of Jesus is that when He was gone there would be reason and occasion for His disciples to fast.

In describing fasting Scripture speaks of shorter and longer fasts and of partial and full fasts. Many passages speak of fasting for a day (Judg. 20:26; I Sam. 7:6; II Sam. 1:12); others of longer fasts. Daniel fasted for three weeks (Dan. 10:2, 3), though his fast was only what might be called a partial fast in which he ate no “pleasant bread” nor flesh, nor drank any wine. A full fast, in contrast would involve complete abstinence from food.

Perhaps it should be added that fasting may never be used in such a way that one’s health is damaged, since then our practice would conflict with the Sixth Commandment’s requirement “that I hurt not myself, nor wilfully expose myself to any danger” (Heid. Cat., XL, 105).

The Purpose of Fasting

In order to understand the relationship between fasting and prayer it is necessary to understand the purpose of fasting. It has no merit in itself and apart from its purpose has no more

spiritual value than dieting. That purpose is not as sometimes suggested, to coerce or persuade God into doing what we want and ask by abstaining from food. Nor is the purpose of fasting, as liberalism has it, to express unity with those who are impoverished and starving. Fasting has a deeply spiritual purpose. When one fasts it must to God (Zech. 7:5). It is this spiritual aspect of fasting that is emphasized in Isaiah 58:3-7. Without that spiritual purpose, fasting, like every other religious duty is an abomination to God (Is. 1:13, 14).

The purpose of fasting is seen in such passages as Isaiah 58:3 and Psalm 35:13 which speak of afflicting one's soul, and of chastening or humbling one's soul. For this reason fasting is especially appropriate in Scripture in times of repentance, of mourning and of great need. Joshua and the elders of Israel fasted after the defeat at Ai (Josh. 7:6), David when praying for his infant son (II Sam. 12:21-23), David and his men when mourning for Saul and Jonathan (II Sam. 1:12), Daniel when confessing Israel's sins and praying for their deliverance from Babylon (Dan. 9:3), Nehemiah when praying for Jerusalem (Neh. 1:4), Ezra when in need of travelling mercies (Ez. 8:23) and the officebearers in the early church in connection with the ordination of missionaries and elders in the church (Acts 13:2, 3; 14:23). Joel speaks of fasting in connection with repentance (1:14; 2:15) and Jonah also (Jon. 3:5). Jesus speaks of fasting as part of our battle against Satan and his wiles (Matt. 17:21).

The duty of fasting, therefore, is part of self-denial and of the struggle against the flesh. It is an expression of our sorrow for sin, part of "keeping under the body and bringing it into subjection" (I Cor. 9:27), and a help in making sure that our belly is not our God (Phil. 3:19). It is for this reason that the prophet Isaiah recommends that other outward actions of self-denial and charity accompany fasting (Is. 58:6, 7). Fasting is of use in the battle against the flesh and for spiritual things both because it is itself an act of self-denial and because the hunger which fasting

brings on serves as a constant reminder of the need for things more important than earthly bread. Abstaining from our earthly bread we learn that man does not live by bread alone (Deut. 8:3). Indeed, God forced Israel to fast in the wilderness, “suffered them to hunger,” that they might learn this important spiritual principle. We can learn in the same principle in the same way.

Calvin says in his Commentary on Matthew 6, after reminding us that prayer is our most important duty:

It pleases Him up to a point, as long as it is directed to an end beyond itself, namely to prompt us to abstinence, to subject the lasciviousness of the flesh, to incense us in a desire for prayer, to testify to our repentance, whenever we are moved by the judgment of God.

Fasting would be appropriate, therefore, for individuals in connection with preparation for the Lord’s Supper, when struggling against sin and temptation, when repenting sin, and in the face of death. It would appropriate for the church when she is experiencing God’s judgments, in times of apostasy, or when there is important work to be done in the church.

The Relation between Prayer and Fasting

That is the purpose of fasting, but fasting, in light of that purpose, ought always to be accompanied by prayer. The majority of passages which speak of fasting, therefore, speak also of prayer (II Sam. 12:16; Ez. 8:23; Neh. 1:4; Jer. 14:12; Dan. 9:23; Joel 1:14; Matt. 17:21; Mk. 9:29; Lk. 2:37; Acts 10:30; 13:3; 14:23; I Cor. 7:5). These many passages demand an answer to the question: “What is the relationship between these two necessary and important spiritual duties?”

Fasting should ordinarily be accompanied by prayer, first, in order to insure that it does not become a mere outward ritual that is done for unspiritual reasons and without profit. There is a great danger that an outward activity like fasting becomes an end in itself. Prayer insures that repentance, a sense of need and the mortifying of the flesh are part of fasting. Also, in prayer the real purpose

of fasting is reached, for it is not enough merely to mortify the flesh; the things of the kingdom must also be desired and sought and that is done through prayer.

On the other hand, prayer without fasting can easily become a carnal and unspiritual activity. Fasting with prayer helps to insure that prayer does not become a mere expression of carnal desires, a kind of spiritual shopping list. It helps to insure that the flesh, which is always present, does not gain the upper hand in prayer and that we do not think only of ourselves in prayer, forgetting in prayer God's name, kingdom and will. It assists us in seeking the kingdom and kingdom righteousness and in trusting that all other things will be added to us (Matt. 6:33).

Prayer, when accompanied by fasting, is powerful, not in the sense that the abstinence from food forces God to hear and answer, but in that it helps us to pray the kind of prayer that is acceptable to God, prayer which is truly spiritual and in which we ask according to His will and from the heart, desiring above all else living fellowship with Him and the blessings of His grace. It is powerful in that it helps us to be spiritual minded before God.

This is the emphasis in Matthew 17 where Jesus talks about casting out devils through prayer and fasting. While there is no clear evidence that demon possession continued after the time of Christ and the apostles, and while the church does not practice exorcism anymore, the long warfare against Satan continues in the heart and life of every child of God. That warfare is fought principally through prayer, but as Jesus indicates, the faith which has the victory over Satan in prayer is often very weak and is not able to drive him away. Fasting, then, is a help, for it strengthens faith and makes it the kind of faith which moves mountains, though not because abstinence from food itself strengthens faith, but only because fasting mortifies Satan's ally, the flesh.

Prayer and fasting go together, therefore, prayer as the principle duty, and fasting, when properly used, as a help to prayer. Arthur Pink sums this all up nicely when he says:

Though there is no express commandment in either the Law or the Gospel binding us thereto, yet it is plain both from precept and practice in the Old and New Testaments alike that there are occasions when fasting is both needful and helpful. Though there is nothing meritorious in it, fasting is both an appropriate sign and a valuable means. It should be the outward sign of an inward mortification. It is the opposite of feasting, which expresses joy and merriment. It is a voluntary denying ourselves of those creature comforts to which we are ordinarily accustomed. Rightly engaged in, it should be a valuable adjunct to prayer, particularly for afflicting our souls when expressing sorrow for sin.