

Mortification of the Flesh a Scripture Duty

by J.H. Newman

The sermon emphasizes the biblical duty of mortification of the flesh through fasting and self-discipline as essential for serving God.

Scripture: Deuteronomy 9:9, 1 Kings 19:8, Daniel 9:3, Matthew 6:17, Matthew 11:18, Luke 2:37, Acts 10:30, Acts 14:23, 1 Corinthians 9:27

Topics: "Spiritual Discipline", "Fasting And Prayer"

Description

In this sermon by J.H. Newman, the importance of bodily privation and chastisement as a duty to serve God and prepare for His presence is highlighted through the examples of holy men in Scripture. The fasting practices of Moses, Elijah, and Daniel are discussed, showing how fasting was connected to divine contemplation, intercession for sinners, and seeking God through prayer and supplications. The sermon also addresses the misconception that fasting is only relevant to the Old Testament, emphasizing that moral acts, humiliation, prayer, and meditation are timeless disciplines. Furthermore, the New Testament illuminates the duty of fasting, with examples from St. John the Baptist, Jesus instructing His disciples to fast, and the austere character of Christian obedience.

Transcript

If we take the example of the Holy men of Scripture as our guide, certain bodily privation and chastisement area very essential duty to all who wish to serve GOD, and prepare themselves for his presence.

1. First we have the example of Moses. His recorded Fasts were miraculous; still they were Fasts, and the ordinance was to the notice of all believers afterwards, by the honour put upon it. "I abode in the mount forty days and nights; I neither did eat bread nor drink water." Again; "I fell down before the LORD, as at the first, forty days and forty nights; I did neither eat bread nor drink water, because of all your sins." Deut. ix. 9. 18. Fasting is in the former instance subservient to divine contemplation, in the latter to humiliation and intercession for sinners.

Elijah. "He said unto him, What manner of man was he which came up to meet you, and told you these words? And they answered him, He was an hairy man, and girt with a girdle of lather about his loins. And he said, It is Elijah the Tishbite." 2 Kings i. 7, 8. It is indeed needless to show the ascetic character of him who was in fact the chief and type of those who "wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins," "in deserts, and in mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth." He too fasted by the power of GOD for forty days and nights; "He arose and did eat and drink, and went in the strength of that meat forty days

and forty nights, unto Horeb the mount of GOD." 1 Kings xix. 8.

Daniel. "I set my face unto the LORD GOD, to seek by prayer and supplications, with fasting, and sackcloth, and ashes; and I unto the LORD my GOD, and made my confession." Dan. ix. 3, 4. It must be observed, that Daniel was not bound by any vow, as Samson and Samuel. Moreover it would appear the gift of prophecy was given him in reward for his self-chastisements, as the following passage shows. "In those days I Daniel was mourning three full weeks; I ate no pleasant bread, neither came flesh nor wine in my mouth; neither did I anoint myself at all, till three whole weeks were fulfilled. . . . And he said unto me, O Daniel, a man greatly beloved, understand the words that I speak unto thee, and stand upright; for unto thee am I now sent. . . . Fear not, Daniel; for from the first day that thou didst set thine heart to understand, and to chasten thyself before thy GOD, thy words were heard, and I am come for thy words." Dan. x. 2, 3, 11, 12. Vide also Luke ii. 37. Acts x. 30.

2. Now here it will be objected, perhaps, that these instances are taken from the Old Testament, and belong to the Law of Moses, which is not binding on Christians.

I answer;

(1.) That in the above passages Fasting is connected with moral acts, humiliation, prayer, meditation, which are equally binding on us as on the Jews. Man is now what he was then; and if affliction of the flesh was good then, it is now.

(2.) In matter of fact, private Fasting, such as instanced in the passages above quoted, was no special duty of the Mosaic Law. Public Fasting, indeed, was on one occasion enjoined by Moses himself, and on others by subsequent Rulers; but this was in part a ceremonial act, not a moral discipline, and was doubtless abolished with the other rites of the Law.

"Of Fasts," says Lewis, "there was no more than one appointed by the Law of Moses, called the Fast of Expiation. . . . The great day of Expiation was a most severe Fast, kept every year upon the tenth day of the month Tizri, which answers to our September. . . . This solemnity was observed with fasting and abstinence, not only from all meat and drink, but from all other pleasure whatsoever; insomuch that they did not wash their faces, much less anoint their heads, nor wear their shoes, . . . nor, (if their Doctors say true,) read any portion of the law which would give them delight. They refrained likewise not only from pleasure, but from labour, nothing being to be done upon this day, but confessing of sins and repentance."

Nay, it may rather be said, that the Jewish Law, as such, was rather opposed than otherwise to austerities. The Nazarites and Rechabites, being exceptions to the rule, are evidence of it. Vide, on the other band, Deut. xii. Eccles. v. 18.

Such then being the character of the Law in its formal letter, it tells just the contrary way to that which superficial reasoners might expect. For it is most remarkable, first, that the greatest prophets under it, such as Elijah and Daniel, were without express command singularly austere and self-afflicting men, in the midst of a people, who from the first went lusting after "the fish which they eat in Egypt freely; the cucumbers, and the melons, and the leeks, and the onions, and the garlick, and said, Who shall give us flesh to eat?" Next there is something of a very startling and admonitory nature in the miraculous fasts of Moses and Elijah, under this same imperfect dispensation. The miracle evidently was for some purpose; yet it did not sanction, in any direct way, any injunction of the Law. Was it not an admonition to the Israelites, that there was a more excellent way of obedience than which ALMIGHTY GOD as yet thought fit

to promulgate by solemn enactment? Is it not an intimation serviceable for Christian practice, as much as Moses announcement of the destined "Prophet like unto him" is intended for the comfort of Christian faith?

Surely the duty of bodily discipline might be rested on the answer to this plain question, Why did Daniel use austerities not enjoined by the Law?

3. Now turn to the New Testament, and observe what clear light is therein thrown upon the duty already recommended to us by the Old Testament Saints.

First, there is the instance of St. John the Baptist. "John came neither eating nor drinking," Matt. xi. 18: and his disciples fasted, Matt. ix. 14.

OUR SAVIOUR did not stately fast; but here also the exception proves the rule. He who did not fast stately was the only one born of woman who was untainted by sinful flesh; which seems to imply, that all who are natural descendants of guilty Adam ought to fast.

He bade His disciples to fast Consider his implied precept, is an express command to those who obey the Law of Liberty. "When thou fastest, anoint thy head, and wash thy face, that thou appear not unto men to fast." Matt. vi. 17, 18.

Consider, moreover, the general austere character of Christian obedience, as enjoined by our LORD;—a circumstance much to be on in an age like this, when what is really self-indulgence is thought to be a mere moderate and innocent use of this world's goods. I will but refer to a few, out of many texts, which I am persuaded are now forgotten by numbers of educated and amiable men who are fond of extolling what they call the mild, tolerant, enlightened spirit of the Gospel. Matt. v. 29, 30. vii. 13, 14. x. 37—39. Mark ix. 43—50. x. 25. Luke xiv. 12. 26—33.

And reflect, too, whether the spirit of texts such as the following will not move every true member of the Church Militant. "The ark, and Israel, and Judah abide in tents; and my lord Joab, and the servants of my lord, are encamped in the open fields; shall I then go into mine house, to eat and to drink? . . . as thou liveth, and as thy soul liveth, I will not do this thing. 2 Sam. xi. 11.

Now take the example of the Apostles. St. Peter was fasting, when he had the vision which sent him to Cornelius : Acts x. 10. The prophets and teachers at Antioch were fasting, when the HOLY GHOST revealed to them His purpose about Saul and Barnabas: Acts iii. 2, 3. Vide also Acts xiv. 23. 2 Cor. vi. 5. xi. 27.

Weigh well the following text, which I am persuaded many men would deny to be St. Paul's writing, had not a gracious Providence preserved to us the epistle containing it. "I keep under my body, and bring it into subjection; lest that by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be a cast-away." 1 Cor. ix. 27.

4. Lastly, Consider the practice of the Primitive Christians.

The following account of the early Christian Fasts, is from Bingham, Antiq. lib. xxi.

THE QUADRAGESIMAL OR LENT FAST.—"The Quadragesimal Fast before Easter," says Sozomen, "some observe six weeks, as the Illyrian and Western Churches, and all Libya, Egypt, and Palestine; others make it seven weeks, as the Constantinopolitans and neighbouring nations as far as Phœnicia;

others fast three only of those six or seven weeks, by intervals; others the three weeks next immediately before Easter."

The manner of observing Lent among those that were piously disposed to observe it, was to abstain from all food till evening. For anciently a change of diet Was not reckoned a fast; but it consisted in perfect abstinence from all sustenance for the whole day till evening.

THE FASTS OF THE FOUR SEASONS.â--The next Anniversary fasting days were those which were called Jejunia quatuor temporum, the Fasts of the Four Seasons of the YearThese were at first designed to beg a blessing of God upon the several seasons of the year, or to return thanks for the benefits received in each of them, or to exercise and purify both body and soul in a more particular manner, at the return of these certain terms of stricter discipline and more extraordinary devotion. [These afterwards became the Ember Fasts.]

MONTHLY FASTS.â--In some places they had also Monthly Fasts throughout the year excepting in the two months of July and August â..... because of the sickness of the season.

WEEKLY FASTS.â--Besides these they had their weekly Fasts on Wednesday and Friday, called the Stationary Days, and Half-Fasts, or Fasts of the Fourth and Sixth Days of the Week â...â..... These Fasts being of continual use every week throughout the Year, except in the Fifty Days between Easter and Pentecost, were not kept with that rigour and strictness which was observed in the time of Lent [but] ordinarily held no longer than 9 o'clock, i. e. 3 in the afternoon.

OXFORD.

The Feast of the Circumcision.

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