

Sermon on the Mount, 7

by John Wesley

Fasting is a means of humbling oneself before God, seeking his mercy and blessings, and avoiding sin.

Scripture: Matthew 6:16

Topics: "Fasting", "Spiritual Growth"

Description

John Wesley emphasizes the significance of fasting as a means of spiritual growth and connection with God, warning against the hypocrisy of outward displays of piety. He explains that true fasting should be done in secret, focusing on the inward transformation rather than seeking the approval of others. Wesley addresses common misconceptions about fasting, asserting that it is not an end in itself but a valuable tool for prayer and humility before God. He encourages believers to combine fasting with prayer and acts of mercy, highlighting that genuine fasting leads to a deeper relationship with God and the fulfillment of His promises. Ultimately, Wesley calls for a balanced approach to fasting, recognizing its importance while avoiding extremes.

Transcript

"Moreover when ye fast, be not, as the hypocrites, of a sad countenance. For they disfigure their faces, that they may appear unto men to fast. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward. But thou, when thou fastest, anoint thine head, and wash thy face; That thou appear not unto men to fast, but unto thy Father which is in secret: And thy Father, which seeth in secret, shall reward thee openly." Matthew 6:16-18.

1. It has been the endeavour of Satan, from the beginning of the world, to put asunder what God hath joined together; to separate inward from outward religion; to set one of these at variance with the other. And herein he has met with no small success among those who were "ignorant of his devices."

Many, in all ages, having a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge, have been strictly attached to the "righteousness of the law," the performance of outward duties, but in the mean time wholly regardless of inward righteousness, "the righteousness which is of God by faith." And many have run into the opposite extreme, disregarding all outward duties, perhaps even "speaking evil of the law, and judging the law," so far as it enjoins the performance of them.

2. It is by this very device of Satan, that faith and works have been so often set at variance with each other. And many who had a real zeal for God have, for a time, fallen into the snare on either hand. Some have magnified faith to the utter exclusion of good works, not only from being the cause of our justification,

(for we know that man is justified freely by the redemption which is in Jesus,) but from being the necessary fruit of it, yea, from having any place in the religion of Jesus Christ. Others, eager to avoid this dangerous mistake, have run as much too far the contrary way; and either maintained that good works were the cause, at least the previous condition, of justification, -- or spoken of them as if they were all in all, the whole religion of Jesus Christ.

3. In the same manner have the end and the means of religion been set at variance with each other. Some well-meaning men have seemed to place all religion in attending the Prayers of the Church, in receiving the Lord's supper, in hearing sermons, and reading books of piety; neglecting, mean time, the end of all these, the love of God and their neighbour. And this very thing has confirmed others in the neglect, if not contempt, of the ordinances of God, -- so wretchedly abused to undermine and overthrow the very end they were designed to establish.

4. But of all the means of grace there is scarce any concerning which men have run into greater extremes, than that of which our Lord speaks in the above-mentioned words, I mean religious fasting. How have some exalted this beyond all Scripture and reason; -- and others utterly disregarded it; as it were revenging themselves by undervaluing as much as the former had overvalued it! Those have spoken of it, as if it were all in all; if not the end itself, yet infallibly connected with it: These, as if it were just nothing, as if it were a fruitless labour, which had no relation at all thereto. Whereas it is certain the truth lies between them both. It is not all, nor yet is it nothing. It is not the end, but it is a precious means thereto; a means which God himself has ordained, and in which therefore, when it is duly used, he will surely give us his blessing.

In order to set this in the clearest light, I shall endeavour to show, First, what is the nature of fasting, and what the several sorts and degrees thereof: Secondly, what are the reasons, grounds, and ends of it: Thirdly, how we may answer the most plausible objections against it: And Fourthly, in what manner it should be performed.

I. 1. I shall endeavour to show, First, what is the nature of fasting, and what the several sorts and degrees thereof. As to the nature of it, all the inspired writers, both in the Old Testament and the New, take the word to fast in one single sense, for not to eat, to abstain from food. This is so clear, that it would be labour lost to quote the words of David, Nehemiah, Isaiah, and the Prophets which followed, or of our Lord and his Apostles; all agreeing in this, that to fast, is, not to eat for a time prescribed.

2. To this, other circumstances were usually joined by them of old, which had no necessary connexion with it. Such were the neglect of their apparel; the laying aside those ornaments which they were accustomed to wear; the putting on mourning; the strewing ashes upon their head; or wearing sackcloth next their skin. But we find little mention made in the New Testament of any of these indifferent circumstances. Nor does it appear, that any stress was laid upon them by the Christians of the purer ages; however some penitents might voluntarily use them, as outward signs of inward humiliation. Much less did the Apostles, or the Christians contemporary with them, beat or tear their own flesh: Such discipline as this was not unbecoming the priests or worshippers of Baal. The gods of the Heathens were but devils; and it was doubtless acceptable to their devil-god, when his priests (1 Kings 18:28) "cried aloud, and cut themselves after their manner, till the blood gushed out upon them:" But it cannot be pleasing to Him, nor become His followers, who "came not to destroy men's lives, but to save them."

3. As to the degrees or measures of fasting, we have instances of some who have fasted several days together. So Moses, Elijah, and our blessed Lord, being endued with supernatural strength for that purpose, are recorded to have fasted, without intermission, "forty days and forty nights." But the time of fasting, more frequently mentioned in Scripture, is one day, from morning till evening. And this was the fast commonly observed among the ancient Christians. But beside these, they had also their half-fasts (Semijejunia, as Tertullian styles them) on the fourth and sixth days of the week, (Wednesday and Friday,) throughout the year; on which they took no sustenance till three in the afternoon, the time when they returned from the public service.

4. Nearly related to this, is what our Church seems peculiarly to mean by the term abstinence; which may be used when we cannot fast entirely, by reason of sickness or bodily weakness. This is the eating little; the abstaining in part; the taking a smaller quantity of food than usual. I do not remember any scriptural instance of this. But neither can I condemn it; for the Scripture does not. It may have its use, and receive a blessing from God.

5. The lowest kind of fasting, if it can be called by that name, is the abstaining from pleasant food. Of this, we have several instances in Scripture, besides that of Daniel and his brethren, who from a peculiar consideration, namely, that they might "not defile themselves with the portion of the King's meat, nor with the wine which he drank," (a daily provision of which the King had appointed for them,) requested and obtained, of the prince of the eunuchs, pulse to eat and water to drink. (Daniel 1:8, &c.) Perhaps from a mistaken imitation of this might spring the very ancient custom of abstaining from flesh and wine during such times as were set apart for fasting and abstinence; -- if it did not rather arise from a supposition that these were the most pleasant food, and a belief that it was proper to use what was least pleasing at those times of solemn approach to God.

6. In the Jewish church there were some stated fasts. Such was the fast of the seventh month, appointed by God himself to be observed by all Israel under the severest penalty. "The Lord spake unto Moses, saying, On the tenth day of this seventh month, there shall be a day of atonement: And ye shall afflict your souls, -- to make an atonement for you before the Lord your God. For whatsoever soul it be that shall not be afflicted in that same day, he shall be cut off from among his people." (Lev. 23:26, &c.) In after-ages, several other stated fasts were added to these. So mention is made, by the Prophet Zechariah, of the fast not only "of the seventh, but also of the fourth, of the fifth, and of the tenth month." (Zech. 8:19)

In the ancient Christian Church, there were likewise stated fasts, and those both annual and weekly. Of the former sort was that before Easter; observed by some for eight-and-forty hours; by others, for an entire week; by many, for two weeks; taking no sustenance till the evening of each day: Of the latter, those of the fourth and sixth days of the week, observed (as Epiphanius writes, remarking it as an undeniable fact) en holEi tEi oikoumenEi, -- in the whole habitable earth; at least in every place where any Christians made their abode. The annual fasts in our Church are, "the forty days of Lent, the Ember days at the four seasons, the Rogation days, and the Vigils or Eves of several solemn festivals; -- the weekly, all Fridays in the year, except Christmas-day."

But beside those which were fixed, in every nation fearing God there have always been occasional fasts, appointed from time to time, as the particular circumstances and occasions of each required. So when "the children of Moab, and the children of Ammon, came against Jehoshaphat to battle, Jehoshaphat set himself to seek the Lord, and proclaimed a fast throughout all Judah." (2 Chron. 20:1, 3) And so, "in the fifth year of Jehoiakim the son of Josiah, in the ninth month," when they were afraid of the King of Babylon,

the Princes of "Judah proclaimed a fast before the Lord, to all the people of Jerusalem." (Jer. 36:9)

And, in like manner, particular persons, who take heed unto their ways, and desire to walk humbly and closely with God, will find frequent occasion for private seasons of thus afflicting their souls before their Father which is in secret. And it is to this kind of fasting that the directions here given do chiefly and primarily refer.

II. 1. I proceed to show, in the Second place, what are the grounds, the reasons, and ends of fasting.

And, First, men who are under strong emotions of mind, who are affected with any vehement passion, such as sorrow or fear, are often swallowed up therein, and even forget to eat their bread. At such seasons they have little regard for food, not even what is needful to sustain nature, much less for any delicacy or variety; being taken up with quite different thoughts. Thus when Saul said, "I am sore distressed; for the Philistines make war against me, and God is departed from me;" it is recorded, "He had eaten no bread all the day, nor all the night." (1 Sam. 28:15, 20.) Thus those who were in the ship with St. Paul, "when no small tempest lay upon them, and all hope that they should be saved was taken away," "continued fasting, having taken nothing," no regular meal, for fourteen days together. (Acts 27:33.) And thus David, and all the men that were with him, when they heard that the people were fled from the battle, and that many of the people were fallen and dead, and Saul and Jonathan his son were dead also, "mourned, and wept, and fasted until even, for Saul and Jonathan, and for the house of Israel." (2 Sam. 1:12.)

Nay, many times they whose minds are deeply engaged are impatient of any interruption, and even loathe their needful food, as diverting their thoughts from what they desire should engross their whole attention: Even as Saul, when, on the occasion mentioned before, he had "fallen all along upon the earth, and there was no strength in him," yet said, "I will not eat," till "his servants, together with the woman, compelled him."

2. Here, then, is the natural ground of fasting. One who is under deep affliction, overwhelmed with sorrow for sin, and a strong apprehension of the wrath of God, would, without any rule, without knowing or considering whether it were a command of God or not, "forget to eat his bread," abstain not only from pleasant but even from needful food; -- like St. Paul, who, after he was led into Damascus, "was three days without sight, and did neither eat nor drink." (Acts 9:9.)

Yea, when the storm rose high; "when an horrible dread overwhelmed" one who had been without God in the world, his soul would "loathe all manner of meat;" it would be unpleasing and irksome to him; he would be impatient of anything that should interrupt his ceaseless cry, "Lord, save or I perish."

How strongly is this expressed by our Church in the first part of the Homily on Fasting! -- "When men feel in themselves the heavy burden of sin, see damnation to be the reward of it, and behold, with the eye of their mind, the horror of hell, they tremble, they quake, and are inwardly touched with sorrowfulness of heart, and cannot but accuse themselves, and open their grief unto Almighty God, and call unto him for mercy. This being done seriously, their mind is so occupied, [taken up,] partly with sorrow and heaviness, partly with an earnest desire to be delivered from this danger of hell and damnation, that all desire of meat and drink is laid apart, and loathsomeness [or loathing] of all worldly things and pleasure cometh in place. So that nothing then liketh them more than to weep, to lament, to mourn, and both with words and behaviour of body to show themselves weary of life."

3. Another reason or ground of fasting is this: Many of those who now fear God are deeply sensible how often they have sinned against him, by the abuse of these lawful things. They know how much they have sinned by excess of food; how long they have transgressed the holy law of God, with regard to temperance, if not sobriety too; how they have indulged their sensual appetites, perhaps to the impairing even their bodily health, -- certainly to the no small hurt of their soul. For hereby they continually fed and increased that sprightly folly, that airiness of mind, that levity of temper, that gay inattention to things of the deepest concern, that giddiness and carelessness of spirit, which were no other than drunkenness of soul, which stupefied all their noblest faculties, no less than excess of wine or strong drink. To remove, therefore, the effect, they remove the cause. They keep at a distance from all excess. They abstain, as far as is possible, from what had well nigh plunged them in everlasting perdition. They often wholly refrain; always take care to be sparing and temperate in all things.

4. They likewise well remember how fulness of bread increased not only carelessness and levity of spirit, but also foolish and unholy desires, yea, unclean and vile affections. And this experience puts beyond all doubt. Even a genteel, regular sensuality is continually sensualizing the soul, and sinking it into a level with the beasts that perish. It cannot be expressed what an effect variety and delicacy of food have on the mind as well as the body; making it just ripe for every pleasure of sense, as soon as opportunity shall invite. Therefore, on this ground also, every wise man will refrain his soul, and keep it low; will wean it more and more from all those indulgences of the inferior appetites, which naturally tend to chain it down to earth, and to pollute as well as debase it. Here is another perpetual reason for fasting; to remove the food of lust and sensuality, to withdraw the incentives of foolish and hurtful desires, of vile and vain affections.

5. Perhaps we need not altogether omit (although I know not if we should do well to lay any great stress upon it) another reason for fasting, which some good men have largely insisted on; namely, the punishing themselves for having abused the good gifts of God, by sometimes wholly refraining from them; thus exercising a kind of holy revenge upon themselves, for their past folly and ingratitude, in turning the things which should have been for their health into an occasion of falling. They suppose David to have had an eye to this, when he said, "I wept and chastened," or punished, "my soul with fasting;" and St. Paul, when he mentions "what revenge" godly sorrow occasioned in the Corinthians.

6. A Fifth and more weighty reason for fasting is, that it is an help to prayer; particularly when we set apart larger portions of time for private prayer. Then especially it is that God is often pleased to lift up the souls of his servants above all the things of earth, and sometimes to rap them up, as it were, into the third heavens. And it is chiefly, as it is an help to prayer, that it has so frequently been found a means, in the hand of God, of confirming and increasing, not one virtue, not chastity only, (as some have idly imagined, without any ground either from Scripture, reason, or experience,) but also seriousness of spirit, earnestness, sensibility and tenderness of conscience, deadness to the world, and consequently the love of God, and every holy and heavenly affection.

7. Not that there is any natural or necessary connexion between fasting, and the blessings God conveys thereby. But he will have mercy as he will have mercy; he will convey whatsoever seemeth him good by whatsoever means he is pleased to appoint. And he hath, in all ages, appointed this to be a means of averting his wrath, and obtaining whatever blessings we, from time to time, stand in need of.

How powerful a means this is to avert the wrath of God, we may learn from the remarkable instance of Ahab. "There was none like him who did sell himself" -- wholly give himself up, like a slave bought with money -- "to work wickedness." Yet when he "rent his clothes, and put sackcloth upon his flesh, and

fasted, and went softly, the word of the Lord came to Elijah, saying, Seest thou how Ahab humbleth himself before me? Because he humbleth himself before me, I will not bring the evil in his days."

It was for this end, to avert the wrath of God, that Daniel sought God "with fasting, and sackcloth, and ashes." This appears from the whole tenor of his prayer, particularly from the solemn conclusion of it: "O Lord, according to all thy righteousness," or mercies, "let thy anger be turned away from thy holy mountain. -- Hear the prayer of thy servant, and cause thy face to shine upon thy sanctuary that is desolate. -- O Lord, hear; O Lord, forgive; O Lord, hearken and do, for thine own sake." (Dan. 9:3, 16, &c.)

8. But it is not only from the people of God that we learn, when his anger is moved, to seek him by fasting and prayer; but even from the Heathens. When Jonah had declared, "Yet forty days and Nineveh shall be overthrown," the people of Nineveh proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them unto the least. "For the King of Nineveh arose from his throne, and laid his robe from him, and covered him with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. And he caused it to be proclaimed and published through Nineveh, Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything: Let them not feed, nor drink water:" (Not that the beast had sinned, or could repent; but that, by their example, man might be admonished, considering that, for his sin, the anger of God was hanging over all creatures:) "Who can tell if God will turn and repent, and turn away from his fierce anger, that we perish not?" And their labour was not in vain. The fierce anger of God was turned away from them. "God saw their works;" (the fruits of that repentance and faith which he had wrought in them by his Prophet;) "and God repented of the evil that he had said he would do unto them; and he did it not." (Jonah 3:4, &c.)

9. And it is a means not only of turning away the wrath of God, but also of obtaining whatever blessings we stand in need of. So, when the other tribes were smitten before the Benjamites, "all the children of Israel went up unto the house of God, and wept, and fasted that day until even;" and then the Lord said, "Go up" again; "for to-morrow I will deliver them into thine hand." (Judges 20:26, &c.) So Samuel gathered all Israel together, when they were in bondage to the Philistines, "and they fasted on that day" before the Lord: And when "the Philistines drew near to battle against Israel, the Lord thundered" upon them "with a great thunder, and discomfited them; and they were smitten before Israel." (1 Sam. 7:6.) So Ezra: "I proclaimed a fast at the river Ahava, that we might afflict ourselves before our God, to seek of him a right way for us, and for our little ones; and he was entreated of us." (Ezra 8:21.) So Nehemiah: I fasted and prayed before the God of heaven, and said, Prosper, I pray thee, thy servant this day, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man:" And God granted him mercy in the sight of the king. (Neh. 1:4-11)

10. In like manner, the apostles always joined fasting with prayer when they desired the blessing of God on any important undertaking. Thus we read, (Acts 13.,) "There were in the church that was at Antioch certain Prophets and Teachers: As they ministered to the Lord and fasted," doubtless for direction in this very affair, "the Holy Ghost said, Separate me Barnabas and Saul, for the work whereunto I have called them. And when they had" a second time "fasted and prayed, and laid their hands on them, they sent them away." (Acts 13:1-3.)

Thus also Paul and Barnabas themselves, as we read in the following chapter, when they "returned again to Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch, confirming the souls of the disciples, and when they had ordained them Elders in every Church, and had prayed with fasting, commended them to the Lord." (Acts 14:23.)

Yea, that blessings are to be obtained in the use of this means, which are no otherwise attainable, our Lord expressly declares in his answer to his disciples, asking, "Why could not we cast him out? Jesus said

unto them, Because of your unbelief: For verily I say unto you, If ye have faith as a grain of mustard-seed, ye shall say unto this mountain, Remove hence to yonder place; and it shall remove; and nothing shall be impossible unto you. Howbeit, this kind" of devils "goeth not out but by prayer and fasting:" (Matt. 17:19, &c. :) -- These being the appointed means of attaining that faith whereby the very devils are subject unto you.

11. These were the appointed means: For it was not merely by the light of reason, or of natural conscience, as it is called, that the people of God have been, in all ages, directed to use fasting as a means to these ends; but they have been, from time to time, taught it of God himself, by clear and open revelations of his will. Such is that remarkable one by the Prophet Joel: "Therefore saith the Lord, Turn you to me with all your heart, and with fasting, and with weeping, and with mourning: -- Who knoweth if he will return and repent, and leave a blessing behind him? Blow the trumpet in Zion, sanctify a fast, call a solemn assembly: -- Then will the Lord be jealous over his land, and will pity his people. Yea, I will send you corn, and wine, and oil: -- I will no more make you a reproach among the Heathen." (Joel 2.12. &c.)

Nor are they only temporal blessings which God directs his people to expect in the use of these means. For, at the same time that he promised to those who should seek him with fasting, and weeping, and mourning, "I will restore you the years which locust hath eaten, the canker-worm, and the caterpillar, and the palmer-worm, my great army;" he subjoins, "So shall ye eat and be satisfied, and praise the name of the Lord your God. -- Ye shall also know that I am in the midst of Israel, and that I am the Lord your God." And then immediately follows the great gospel promise: "I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh; and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions: And also upon the servants and upon the handmaids in those days will I pour out my Spirit." [Joel 2:28-29]

12. Now whatsoever reasons there were to quicken those of old, in the zealous and constant discharge of this duty, they are of equal force still to quicken us. But above all these, we have a peculiar reason for being "in fastings often;" namely, the command of Him by whose name we are called. He does not, indeed, in this place expressly enjoin either fasting, giving of alms, or prayer; but his directions how to fast, to give alms, and to pray, are of the same force with such injunctions. For the commanding us to do anything thus, is an unquestionable command to do that thing; seeing it is impossible to perform it thus, if it be not performed at all. Consequently, the saying, "Give alms, pray, fast" in such a manner, is a clear command to perform all those duties; as well as to perform them in that manner which shall in nowise lose its reward.

And this is a still farther motive and encouragement to the performance of this duty; even the promise which our Lord has graciously annexed to the due discharge of it: "Thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly." Such are the plain grounds, reasons, and ends of fasting; such our encouragement to persevere therein, notwithstanding abundance of objections which men, wiser than their Lord, have been continually raising against it.

III. 1. The most plausible of these I come now to consider. And, First, it has been frequently said, "Let a Christian fast from sin, and not from food: This is what God requires at his hands." So he does; but he requires the other also. Therefore this ought to be done, and that not left undone.

View your argument in its full dimensions; and you will easily judge of the strength of it: --

If a Christian ought to abstain from sin, then he ought not to abstain from food:

But a Christian ought to abstain from sin.

Therefore he ought not to abstain from food.

That a Christian ought to abstain from sin, is most true; but how does it follow from hence that he ought not to abstain from food? Yea, let him do both the one and the other. Let him, by the grace of God, always abstain from sin; and let him often abstain from food, for such reasons and ends as experience and Scripture plainly show to be answered thereby.

2. "But is it not better" (as it has, Secondly, been objected) "to abstain from pride and vanity, from foolish and hurtful desires, from peevishness, and anger, and discontent, than from food?" Without question, it is. But here again we have need to remind you of our Lord's words: "These things ought ye to have done, and not to leave the other undone." And, indeed, the latter is only in order to the former; it is a means to that great end. We abstain from food with this view, -- that, by the grace of God conveyed into our souls through this outward means, in conjunction with all the other channels of his grace which he hath appointed, we may be enabled to abstain from every passion and temper which is not pleasing in his sight. We refrain from the one, that, being endued with power from on high, we may be able to refrain from the other. So that your argument proves just the contrary to what you designed. It proves that we ought to fast. For if we ought to abstain from evil tempers and desires, then we ought thus to abstain from food; since these little instances of self-denial are the ways God hath chose, wherein to bestow that great salvation.

3. "But we do not find it so in fact:" (This is a Third objection:) "We have fasted much and often; but what did it avail? We were not a whit better; we found no blessing therein. Nay, we have found it an hinderance rather than an help. Instead of preventing anger, for instance, or fretfulness, it has been a means of increasing them to such a height, that we could neither bear others nor ourselves." This may very possibly be the case. It is possible either to fast or pray in such a manner as to make you much worse than before; more unhappy, and more unholy. Yet the fault does not lie in the means itself, but in the manner of using it. Use it still, but use it in a different manner. Do what God commands as he commands it; and then, doubtless, his promise shall not fail: His blessings shall be withheld no longer; but, when thou fastest in secret, "He that seeth in secret shall reward thee openly."

4. "But is it not mere superstition," (so it has been, Fourthly, objected,) "to imagine that God regards such little things as these?" If you say it is, you condemn all the generations of God's children. But will you say, These were all weak, superstitious men? Can you be so hardy as to affirm this, both of Moses and Joshua, of Samuel and David, of Jehosaphat, Ezra, Nehemiah, and all the prophets? yea, of a greater than all, -- the Son of God himself? It is certain, both our Master, and all these his servants, did imagine that fasting is not a little thing, and that He who is higher than the highest doth regard it. Of the same judgment, it is plain, were all his Apostles, after they were "filled with the Holy Ghost, and with wisdom." When they had the "unction of the Holy One, teaching them all things," they still approved themselves the Ministers of God, "by fastings," as well as "by the armour of righteousness on the right hand and on the left." After "the bridegroom was taken from them, then did they fast in those days." Nor would they attempt anything (as we have seen above) wherein the glory of God was nearly concerned, such as the sending forth labourers into the harvest, without solemn fasting as well as prayer.

5. "But if fasting be indeed of so great importance, and attended with such a blessing, is it not best," say some, Fifthly, "to fast always? not to do it now and then, but to keep a continual fast? to use as much abstinence, at all times, as our bodily strength will bear?" Let none be discouraged from doing this. By all

means use as little and plain food, exercise as much self-denial herein, at all times, as your bodily strength will bear. And this may conduce, by the blessing of God, to several of the great ends above-mentioned. It may be a considerable help, not only to chastity, but also to heavenly-mindedness; to the weaning your affections from things below, and setting them on things above. But this is not fasting, scriptural fasting; it is never termed so in all the Bible. It, in some measure, answers some of the ends thereof; but still it is another thing. Practise it by all means; but not so as thereby to set aside a command of God, and an instituted means of averting his judgments, and obtaining the blessings of his children.

6. Use continually then as much abstinence as you please; which, taken thus, is no other than Christian temperance; but this need not at all interfere with your observing solemn times of fasting and prayer. For instance: Your habitual abstinence or temperance would not prevent your fasting in secret, if you were suddenly overwhelmed with huge sorrow and remorse, and with horrible fear and dismay. Such a situation of mind would almost constrain you to fast; you would loathe your daily food; you would scarce endure even to take such supplies as were needful for the body, till God "lifted you up out of the horrible pit, and set your feet upon a rock, and ordered your goings." The same would be the case if you were in agony of desire, vehemently wrestling with God for his blessing. You would need none to instruct you not to eat bread till you had obtained the request of your lips.

7. Again, had you been at Nineveh when it was proclaimed throughout the city, "Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything: Let them not feed or drink water, but let them cry mightily unto God;" -- would your continual fast have been any reason for not bearing part in that general humiliation? Doubtless it would not. You would have been as much concerned as any other not to taste food on that day.

No more would abstinence, or the observing a continual fast, have excused any of the children of Israel from fasting on the tenth day of the seventh month, that shall not be afflicted," shall not fast, "in that day, he shall be cut off from among his people."

Lastly. Had you been with the brethren in Antioch, at the time when they fasted and prayed, before the sending forth of Barnabas and Saul, can you possibly imagine that your temperance or abstinence would have been a sufficient cause for not joining therein? Without doubt, if you had not, you would soon have been cut off from the Christian community. You would have deservedly been cast out from among them ,as bringing confusion into the Church of God.

IV. 1. I am, in the Last place, to show in what manner we are to fast, that it may be an acceptable service unto the Lord. And, First, let it be done unto the Lord, with our eye singly fixed on Him. Let our intention herein be this, and this alone, to glorify our Father which is in heaven; to express our sorrow and shame for our manifold transgressions of his holy law; to wait for an increase of purifying grace, drawing our affections to things above; to add seriousness and earnestness to our prayers; to avert the wrath of God, and to obtain all the great and precious promises which he hath made to us in Jesus Christ.

Let us beware of mocking God, of turning our fast, as well as our prayers, into an abomination unto the Lord, by the mixture of any temporal view, particularly by seeking the praise of men. Against this our blessed Lord more peculiarly guards us in the words of the text. "Moreover when ye fast, be ye not as the hypocrites:" -- Such were too many who were called the people of God; "of a sad countenance;" sour, affectedly sad, putting their looks into a peculiar form. "For they disfigure their faces," not only by unnatural distortions, but also by covering them with dust and ashes; "that they may appear unto men to fast;" this is their chief, if not only design. "Verily, I say unto you, They have their reward;" even the admiration and

praise of men. "But thou, when thou fastest, anoint thy head, and wash thy face:" Do as thou art accustomed to do at other times; "that thou appear not unto men to fast;" -- let this be no part of thy intention; if they know it without any desire of thine, it matters not, thou art neither the better nor the worse; -- "but unto thy Father which is in secret: And thy Father, which seeth in secret, shall reward thee openly."

2. But, if we desire this reward, let us beware, Secondly of fancying we merit anything of God by our fasting. We cannot be too often warned of this; inasmuch as a desire to "establish our own righteousness," to procure salvation of debt and not of grace, is so deeply rooted in all our hearts. Fasting is only a way which God hath ordained, wherein we wait for his unmerited mercy; and wherein, without any desert of ours, he hath promised freely to give us his blessing.

3. Not that we are to imagine, the performing the bare outward act will receive any blessing from God. "Is it such a fast that I have chosen, saith the Lord; a day for a man to afflict his soul? Is it to bow down his head as a bulrush, and to spread sackcloth and ashes under him?" Are these outward acts, however strictly performed, all that is meant by a man's "afflicting his soul?" -- "Wilt thou call this a fast, and an acceptable day to the Lord?" No, surely: If it be a mere external service, it is all but lost labour. Such a performance may possibly afflict the body; but as to the soul, it profiteth nothing.

4. Yea, the body may sometimes be afflicted too much, so as to be unfit for the works of our calling. This also we are diligently to guard against; for we ought to preserve our health, as a good gift of God. Therefore care is to be taken, whenever we fast, to proportion the fast to our strength. For we may not offer God murder for sacrifice, or destroy our bodies to help our souls.

But at these solemn seasons, we may, even in great weakness of body, avoid that other extreme, for which God condemns those who of old expostulated with him for not accepting their fasts. "Wherefore have we fasted, say they, and thou seest not? -- Behold, in the day of your fast you find pleasure, saith the Lord." If we cannot wholly abstain from food, we may, at least, abstain from pleasant food; and then we shall not seek his face in vain.

5. But let us take care to afflict our souls as well as our bodies. Let every season, either of public or private fasting, be a season of exercising all those holy affections which are implied in a broken and contrite heart. Let it be a season of devout mourning, of godly sorrow for sin; such a sorrow as that of the Corinthians, concerning which the Apostle saith, "I rejoice, not that ye were made sorry, but that ye sorrowed to repentance. For ye were made sorry after a godly manner, that ye might receive damage by us in nothing. For godly sorrow" -- hE kata Theon lypE, -- the sorrow which is according to God, which is a precious gift of his Spirit, lifting the soul to God from whom it flows -- "worketh repentance to salvation, not to be repented of." Yea, and let our sorrowing after a godly sort work in us the same inward and outward repentance; the same entire change of heart, renewed after the image of God, in righteousness and true holiness; and the same change of life, till we are holy as He is holy, in all manner of conversation. Let it work in us the same carefulness to be found in him, without spot and blameless; the same clearing of ourselves, by our lives rather than words, by our abstaining from all appearance of evil; the same indignation, vehement abhorrence of every sin; the same fear of our own deceitful hearts; the same desire to be in all things conformed to the holy and acceptable will of God; the same zeal for whatever may be a means of his glory, and of our growth in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ; and the same revenge against Satan and all his works, against all filthiness both of flesh and Spirit. (2 Cor. 7:9, &c.)

6. And with fasting let us always join fervent prayer, pouring out our whole souls before God, confessing our sins with all their aggravations, humbling ourselves under his mighty hand, laying open before him all our wants, all our guiltiness and helplessness. This is a season for enlarging our prayers, both in behalf of ourselves and of our brethren. Let us now bewail the sins of our people; and cry aloud for the city of our God, that the Lord may build up Zion, and cause his face to shine on her desolations. Thus, we may observe, the men of God, in ancient times always joined prayer and fasting together; thus the Apostles, in all the instances cited above; and thus our Lord joins them in the discourse before us.

7. It remains only, in order to our observing such a fast as is acceptable to the Lord, that we add alms thereto; works of mercy, after our power, both to the bodies and souls of men: "With such sacrifices" also "God is well pleased." Thus the angel declares to Cornelius, fasting and praying in his house, "Thy prayers and thine alms are come up for a memorial before God." (Acts 10:4, &c.) And this God himself expressly and largely declares: "Is not this the fast that I have chosen? to loose the bands of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, to let the oppressed go free, and that ye break every yoke? Is it not to deal thy bread to the hungry, and that thou bring the poor that are cast out to thy house? when thou seest the naked, that thou cover him; and that thou hide not thyself from thy own flesh? Then shall thy light break forth as the morning, and thine health shall spring forth speedily; and thy righteousness shall go before thee; the glory of the Lord shall be thy reward. Then shalt thou call, and the Lord shall answer: Thou shalt cry, and he shall say, Here I am. -- If, "when thou fastest, "thou draw out thy soul to the hungry, and satisfy the afflicted soul; then shall thy light rise in obscurity, and thy darkness be as the noon-day. And the Lord shall guide thee continually, and satisfy thy soul in drought, and make fat thy bones: And thou shalt be like a watered garden, and like a spring of water, whose waters fail not." (Isa. 58:6, &c.)

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