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F A S T I N G

by
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THE PROTESTANT FAITH

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I have been asked by a listener if I would speak on the subject of fasting. I expect the reason is because some Christian denominations designate the forty week days that precede Easter Day as days of fasting and abstinence and know it as the season of Lent. Other Christian denominations do not have any rules or directions on the subject, and this reminds us that the use of fasting as a religious exercise is a matter of Christian liberty. Since fasting is not enjoined on Christians in the Bible it cannot be enjoined on the consciences of Christians as something that they must do if they are to please God. Only God's Word binds the conscience of a Christian; other suggestions may be helpful but they must be left to the liberty of the Christian himself as to whether he uses them in his worship and service of God. Fasting belongs to this class of things, which in themselves are matters of

indifference, to be used or not according to whether they are found helpful.

As I say, the New Testament has no injunction or commandment for Christians to fast, nor is there any New Testament passage which commends fasting. (A comparison of the Revised Version with the Authorised Version will show that some passages in the Authorised Version which speak of fasting do not really belong to the original text.) Nevertheless it is plain from the New Testament that some at least of the early Christians used fasting to enable them to pray with less distraction; and, of course, we have the example of Jesus who when His mind was intensely occupied with preparation for His ministry immediately after His baptism, fasted in the deserts East of Jordan, doubtless giving Himself to prayer and meditation. But apparently He did not fast during the rest of His ministry because one of the complaints of His enemies was that His

disciples did not observe the set ecclesiastical fasts of that time.

In His teaching Jesus laid down two principles for those who use fasting. The first is that fasting should be a real expression of the feeling of the heart and not an artificial set exercise. His enemies had complained that His disciples did not observe the regular fast days which the religious authorities had instituted; He replied that it was impossible to fast when your heart was full of joy. While He who was the Messiah was with them, it would have been unreal for His disciples to fast, but when He was crucified then it would be natural for them to mourn and fast (Mt. 9:14,15). From this teaching we see that fasting is to be the natural expression of our feelings, so that when perhaps some catastrophe brings to our mind our sins and God's judgment, then fasting is a natural accompaniment of the prayer that goes out to God for

mercy. To feast in such circumstances would show a shallowness of feeling.

The other principle which Jesus laid down for those who fast is that fasting is not to be known to others but rather it is to express our attitude towards God and to be seen only by Him. In our Lord's day people sought credit by the regularity of their religious exercises and to draw attention to their fasting they would dress in a dishevelled way. But Jesus said that when a person fasted, he should do it in a way known only to God (Mt. 6:16-18). Thus though our Lord neither commended nor forbade fasting He made it clear that if we used this exercise it must be the real and natural outcome of our feelings and must be exercised towards God.

If we turn to the Old Testament we again come across the interesting fact that fasting is never enjoined; nevertheless it is plain that

people of the Old Testament used fasting. For example, in Joel 1:14 and 2:15 the prophet calls upon the people to fast and pray in view of the imminent judgment of God that was about to overwhelm them. A sense of the seriousness of the national situation drove the prophet to call the people to prayer, and fasting was a natural accompaniment of an apprehension of the danger and the need to call on God for mercy. It was no time for feasting or carrying on one's ordinary work.

In the Old Testament, the Day of Atonement was observed once a year as a day for repentance for sin. Doubtless the Jews fasted on that day, but there is no instruction in the Old Testament that it should be observed with fasting. In fact there are only two passages in the Old Testament which speak in detail about fasting, and interestingly enough, both of them deprecate fasting as a means of pleasing God. The first

passage is in Zechar 1 chapter 7 where the prophet told the people that their fasting was worthless because they substituted it for obedience to the will of God. The true way to please God, said the prophet, was not to fast but to "execute judgment and show mercy and compassion every man to his brother: and oppress not the widow, nor the fatherless, the stranger, nor the poor; and let none of you imagine evil against his brother in your heart". This is the true form of self-denial which pleases God, namely, not to imagine evil against your brother in your heart, and to show mercy and compassion.

The second Old Testament passage which deals with fasting is in Isaiah 58, and the message is exactly the same. The self-denial that God looks for is not the going without food on stated days, but self denial in accepting inconvenience in order to care for other people. The prophet speaks in God's name: "Have I

chosen this sort of fast, for
a man to bow down his head as
a rush, and to spread sackcloth
and ashes under him? do you
call this a fast, and an
acceptable day to the Lord?
Is not this the fast that I
have chosen? to loose the
bonds of wickedness, to undo
the bands of the yoke, and to
let the oppressed go free? ...
Is it not to deal your bread
to the hungry, and that you
bring the poor that are cast
out into your house? that when
you see the naked that you
cover him; and that you hide
not yourself from your own
flesh. Then shalt thou call
and the Lord shall answer;
thou shalt cry, and He shall
say, Here I am. If you take
away from the midst of you the
yoke, the putting forth of the
finger, and the speaking
wickedly; and if you draw out
your soul to the hungry, and
satisfy the afflicted soul;
then shall your light rise in
darkness, and the Lord shall
guide you continually, and
satisfy your soul ... and make
strong your bones", and so on.

The prophet deliberately rejected the set fasting days which had become customary and substituted, as the true form of self-denial, obedience to the will of God which may be summed up under the words "Love your neighbour". This is a year long exercise, not merely confined to certain days and it is a very penetrating form of self denial, to put yourself out in love to meet other people's needs.

In England after the Reformation, during the reign of Queen Elizabeth, parliament required the country to continue to observe the medieval rule of eating fish on Fridays, but it was careful to explain that this was required not so much as a religious duty as a way to maintain the merchant navy at full strength, which you will remember was an important consideration at that time when the safety of the country depended on its sailors as the battle of the Armada was to make clear. However, the Roman Catholic church

continues to require its members to fast as a religious activity, and has drawn up complicated rules governing the matter. The Roman Catholic Moral and Pastoral Theology by H. Davis p.429-440 lists these rules. Thus we learn that three meals a day are allowed to those who are fasting. The main meal must not last for more than two hours of solid eating though it may last for longer if interrupted. Davis goes on "Besides the one full meal, some food at breakfast and at an evening meal is allowed .. the evening meal may consist of about eight ounces of solid food, not flesh meat ...It appears that eight ounces (i.e. $\frac{1}{2}$ -lb) of dry oatmeal may be taken, though when cooked its weight would be very considerable. The addition of the water does not change the nature of the uncooked meal. ...Some authors make a subtle distinction, to the disadvantage of fasters, between dipping bread into water or wine and cooking bread in water or wine so as to make a pulse.

They maintain that in the second case the food is not merely bread and water (or wine) and that it is very much more satisfying. The distinction may we believe be dismissed, as repletion is not a deciding factor in the law of fasting".

This extraordinary position where repletion and satiety is said to be consistent with fasting is the result of drawing up rules on the matter and making them into a binding law, because Roman Catholic theology affirms that to deliberately ignore these rules on fasting destines the offender to eternal destruction. But God is not like that.

It is important to reaffirm that God leaves these things free to our own judgment. The Bible lays down absolutely no rules of this sort and what God has left free it is impossible for the church to bind on the conscience under pain of mortal sin.

To sum up then, the Scriptures do not enjoin fasting, nor do they condemn it. In certain circumstances it may be helpful as a natural expression of sorrow as we turn to God in intensified prayer, and consequently we find both the Jews and early Christians using fasting, but it still remains a matter of Christian liberty. If we use it, it must be expressive of our feelings - otherwise it is hypocrisy. The denomination to which we belong may suggest certain times for fasting, but cannot bind our consciences in the matter. Only God's Word can do this, and He has left free the question of what we eat and when we eat, so long as whatever we do we do for God's glory. But His Word does bind us in what the Bible calls "the fast that God has chosen", namely, to act righteously and lovingly towards our neighbour on every occasion as we see his need. This will mean the denial of ourselves, just as our Lord denied Himself when He laid down His life for us.

We are all called to a life-long imitation of this life of self-denial for the sake of others, following the example of Jesus. If we suffer with Him, we will also reign with Him.

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