

PRAYER AND FASTING

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THE PROTESTANT FAITH

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This is the last week of Lent. Fasting has for many centuries been associated with Lent and some denominations, particularly the Roman Catholic, have quite elaborate rules about fasting while in other denominations it does not figure prominently at all.

The first thing to note about fasting is that there is no direct command in the Old Testament or in the New, that God's people should fast. Consequently, fasting cannot be regarded as a spiritual activity in its own right, or as something which brings spiritual benefits in itself for if fasting had this character, God's Word would not have omitted to have enjoined fasting by direct command to Christian people. For example, there are many commands in the Bible that we should pray and pray earnestly, there are many commands that we should be generous, there are commands to celebrate the Lord's Supper and come to church as well as commands to do what is right, like the 10 commandments. All these things are good in themselves. But, there is no direct command that Christians should fast, therefore we must conclude that fasting as an activity in itself has no spiritual benefit.

Secondly, we may note that there were no set fasts in the Old Testament. It is true that once a year on the Day of Atonement the Israelites were called upon to afflict their souls, as the Bible put it, and we need not doubt but that fasting would play its part in this. But the purpose of the Day was that the Israelite should recollect his sinfulness in order to repent. Weeping and fasting would doubtless be natural concomitants of this reflection and repentance. Many centuries later, during the captivity in Babylon, regular set fast days became customary amongst the Israelites but these set fasts are not endorsed in the Old Testament; and in the New Testament Jesus and His disciples disregarded them. You will remember that the religious leaders criticised the behaviour of our Lord's disciples because they did not observe the customary fast days, but Jesus defended them.

There are two passages in the Old Testament which mention these fast days which had become customary although not enjoined, and both passages make clear that what God requires is not a self-denial of going without food as though that was some virtue in itself but the self-denial that obedience to God's will entails.

The first passage is Isaiah 58 where the prophet says, in God's name, "Is not this what I require of you as a fast, to loose the fetters of injustice, to untie the knots of the yoke and set free those who have been crushed. Is it not sharing your food

with the hungry, taking the homeless poor into your house, clothing the naked when you meet them and never avoiding a duty to your kinsfolk." (Isaiah 58:6-7). In other words, God looks for the self-denial and self-discipline which is involved in doing what is right in our circumstances; for example, not avoiding our duty to our kinsfolk, the being generous when we come upon other people's need and the setting wrong right, the standing up against injustices being imposed on other people. If we do these things, it will call for real self-denial, the acceptance of inconvenience, the intercepting of our plans, and perhaps positive suffering, but these things are positive in contrast to the negative self-denial of merely going without food. It is not surprising that God's word does not enjoin fasting.

The second Old Testament passage which deals with fasting is Zechariah chapter 7 where the prophet says that the fast that God looks for is obedience to the Word of God.

We should, however, note that although fasting as an activity in itself is not commanded in either the Old or New Testaments it was widely practiced as an accompaniment to prayer both in the Old Testament and in the New and in this it receives the approval of God's Word. Joel calls on the nation to proclaim a fast in order to pray in repentance to God. King David, we read, fasted as he prayed for the life of his infant son. Jesus fasted in the 40 days when he wrestled with the devil in the wilderness, before he began his life's ministry. In all these circumstances, the forgoing of food is a natural result of the intensity of the spirit as we seek God's face in prayer. Jesus foretold that his disciples would fast on the day when He was taken away from them. Here it would be a sign of sorrow. Fasting is the natural consequence of intensity of spiritual feeling. We find fasting associated with prayer in the New Testament. In Acts 13 we read that the leaders of the Church at Antioch fasted and prayed as they served God. And fasting is associated with prayer in other passages in Scripture.

Now prayer is the pressing duty of every Christian and especially of Christian ministers. You may remember how the 12 apostles in Acts 6 told their fellow Christians that their ministry of prayer and preaching the Word was so important that they felt that they had not got the time for ordinary administrative work, even such humanitarian administration as sharing out to the poor the gifts of their fellow Christians. Others must do this administrative work, said the apostles, while they devote themselves to prayer and ministry of the word. Prayer is a pressing duty and obligation on all of us and is a very real thing. By prayer we come with our spirit into the presence of God Himself, that is, we come to the very centre of reality, and we call upon

God for blessing not only in our lives and circle , but blessing for others and for our whole community or we call upon God for mercy as we feel the burden of our repentance. Scripture abounds with commands and the encouragement for prayer. Real prayer cannot be undertaken unless we make room for it in our programme; and if we are intense in the needs which we are praying for, if they are really burdening our hearts as we call upon God, we will find that fasting, for the time being, is a natural accompaniment. But more probably in our day and generation, we will need to abstain not, perhaps, from food but from sleep or from some other activity in order that we might make time for prayer. We have, of course, our Lord's example. He lived a busy life, People pressed on Him to hear His teaching and to be healed of their sicknesses. He found it necessary to get up well before dawn, to leave the house where he was staying and go out into a more solitary place, in order to pray to God. He could not have carried out His ministry without prayer and He could not have prayed unless he abstained from some other activity, in this case from sleep.

Prayer must come first if it is to be real and effective. For praying is entering God's presence. In I Corinthians 7 St. Paul suggests that married couples may feel the need of abstinence for a time in order to devote themselves more earnestly to prayer. And, as I say, fasting - the abstinence of food - is on more than one occasion mentioned in the New Testament, as accompanying the prayers of Christians.

Fasting as an activity in itself, with set rules and so on is never enjoined in the Bible because it has, in itself, no value. If we want to train ourselves in self-denial, then be positive. Put ourselves out for others, and in the disposal of our time put first things first. Prayer is of immense importance, most powerful in its consequences, and we are called on to make it a high priority in our timetable. Effective prayer will not be able to be undertaken without restricting our activities in some other respect, whether eating or sleeping or whatever it may be. Prayer is a high privilege, through it we come into God's presence with the needs which His Spirit lays on our hearts. We honour Him through our prayer, it is the great instrument for overthrowing Satan and all his works in our own lives, our own homes and family, in our church and in our community.

So the message of Lent is that we should give ourselves more earnestly to prayer, make time for it, rise up early from time to time and see that nothing stands in its way for its effective exercise.

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