

Christian Fasting

Lesson 2

Christian fasting is “sanctifying a day to the Lord by a willing abstinence from food and drink, and from pleasures and trades, in order that the whole man may be more thoroughly humbled before God and more fervent in prayer” (Scudder).

Fasting is “the devotion of the whole man to a solemn, extraordinary attendance upon God, in a particular time separated for that end, for the removing of His displeasure and the seeking of His favor, joined with an abstinence from bodily food and delights and secular affairs” (Barker).

Fasting is “a season of special, earnest, elevated devotion; prompted by special feelings; consecrated to a special object; and accompanied by those special circumstances of humility which indicate a soul deeply abased before God and fervently engaged in pleading for His blessing;” and as such, *it’s* “a precious auxiliary to devotion” (Miller).

Fasting is “a special religious exercise in which a believer deprives himself for a day from all that invigorates the body, humbling himself in body and soul before God as a means to obtain what he desires” (à Brakel).

I. Fasting is *extra*-ordinary.

- A. Fasting’s not a part of our *ordinary* worship or weekly means of grace. It’s an *extra-ordinary* means of grace resorted to “upon special occasions,” WCF 21.5; Joel 2.12; Esther 4.13-16; Ezra 9.1-7; Neh 9.1-2; Dan 9.1-11. Thus, it’s included in our Directory of Public Worship in the Chapter entitled “Special Occasions of Public Worship.”
 1. W. Ames: “When God calls us by special judgment to more solemn fasting, such days are to be considered as extraordinary sabbaths.”
- B. It’s occasioned by the need for an *extraordinary* confession of sins, *extraordinary* humiliation for our sinfulness, rebellion, idolatries, and backslidings, and *extraordinary* prayers for forgiveness, mercy, assistance, deliverance, blessing, salvation, etc.
- C. Thus, *fasting is not* simply skipping a few meals and offering a few more prayers than usual. Rather, it’s an occasion for great humbling and calls for fervent *heart-work*. The fasting soul comes to God under great need and seeks great grace.
- D. And because it’s *great*, fasting can do *great things* (Dan 9.20-23), and has been employed by the saints on those great occasions when the ordinary seeking of God was not likely to prevail. Indeed, as Christ said of some devils, that *they could only be cast out by prayer and fasting*, so it may be said of some blessings, that *they can only be obtained by prayer and fasting*.
 1. Ames: “Fasting is *abstinence* from the helps and comforts of this life *in which* humility is shown in genuine confession and by which we are better equipped to make effectual prayers, 1Cor 7.5; Joel 1.14-16; Dan 9.2-3. *Thus*, fasting [i.e. abstinence] by itself is not a good work nor part of our obedience towards God, but it helps us make free, ardent, and more continued prayers.” Cf. Joel 2.12-13; Ezra 9.3-6; Neh 1.4; Dan 9.3-4

II. Reasons for fasting

- A. Scudder: “the fullness of bread makes both the body and the soul more disposed to vice and indisposed to religious duties.” By fasting, “the body will be brought into subjection to the soul and both body and soul to the will of God, more readily than otherwise.”
 1. A day of fasting is a great assistance to the prayerful soul, enabling it to better perform its duty, because it takes the mind off the thoughts, cares, and pleasures of the body, allowing it to be more intentional and earnest in seeking God.

- a) Ames: “Fasting is most religious when the whole mind is so attentive to seeking God that it’s called away from the thought and care of the things of this present life.”
 - 2. It’s not enough that the *body* be afflicted if the *soul’s* not afflicted as well. More than that, a fast that merely afflicts the body is a hypocritical fast condemned by God because it frustrates the chief end/purpose of the fast, which is *the affliction of the soul*, Isa 58.5; Joel 2.12-13
- B. Barker: special occasions which call for a religious fast.
- 1. The affliction and distress of the church, Esther 4.16; 2Chr 20.3; Joel 1.14. Sympathy and sorrow for the church’s suffering are properly expressed by a religious fast, Ezra 9; Neh 9; Dan 9; Joel 1-2
 - 2. The occasion of extraordinary sin, Ezra 9; Neh 9; Isa 37
 - 3. For the obtaining of some eminent mercy or for success in any great undertaking, 2Sam 12.14-16; 2Chr 20.1-4; Esther 4.16; Ezra 8.21-23; Acts 13.1-3; 14.23
 - 4. For victory over some strong sin or temptation, Mk 9.29 (“...and fasting.” KJV).
- C. Bayly: special occasions which call for a religious fast.
- 1. To humbly and earnestly seek God for the pardon of some gross sin.
 - 2. For the prevention of some sin to which a man feels Satan soliciting him.
 - 3. To obtain some special blessing from God’s grace.
 - 4. To avert some judgment which a man fears, or which is already fallen upon himself or others.
 - 5. To subdue the flesh to the Spirit, that a man may more cheerfully pour forth his soul to God in prayer.
- D. The distinction between *public* and *private* fasting
- 1. A fast is *public* or *corporate* when called by a General Assembly, Presbytery, or Session due to an extraordinary need in the church (e.g. persecution, sin or falsehood, calamity, the need for reformation, the calling of ministers or the election of officers, &c.).
 - a) *Directory of Public Worship, Chp. V: Special Occasions of Public Worship, A. Prayer & Fasting*
 - (1) “When great and notable calamities come upon or threaten the church, community, or nation, when judgment is deserved because of sin, when the people seek some special blessing from the Lord, or when a pastor is to be ordained or installed (Form of Government, Chapter XXIII, Section 7), it is fitting that the people of God engage in times of solemn prayer and fasting.
 - (2) “Prayer and fasting may be observed by private individuals and families at their discretion or by the Church at the discretion of the appropriate judicatory. If the civil authority calls for a time of prayer and fasting that the judicatories of the Church deem to be in harmony with the Scriptures, they should consider issuing such a call to their members.
 - (3) “Public notice is to be given before the time of prayer and fasting comes, to enable persons to order their temporal affairs so that they can participate.
 - (4) “It is especially appropriate on days of prayer and fasting called by the Church that the people of God gather for a time of prayer, the singing of psalms and hymns, and the reading and preaching of the Word of God. Let them lament their distress or unworthiness before the Lord, confess their sins, humbly implore the Lord for deliverance from the judgment present or imminent or for the blessing sought, and commit themselves anew to the faithful service of the Lord their God. It is fitting on such days that God’s people abstain from food and from such activities as may distract from their solemn engagement in prayer.”
 - b) à Brakel: “If a public fast is proclaimed, conduct yourself well in it. There are but few who fast well. It will be pleasing to God when He observes your standing in the

breach to turn away His anger from the land. Perhaps He would deliver the land upon *your* prayer. And even if the land were to be destroyed, the eye of the Lord and His mercy will be upon you and your loved ones. You will then have peace in your conscience wherever you go, knowing that you have endeavored to uphold the pillars of both church and country.”

2. A fast is *private* when friends agree to set a day apart, or a father institutes a day of fasting for the family, or an individual sets apart a day for himself.
 - a) Everyone has personal freedom in setting apart days for prayer and fasting for himself since the frequency and extent of a personal fast day is a private matter of conscience, Mt 6.17-18
 - b) Based upon Lev 23.26-32, the institution of the Day of Atonement as a religious fast (a day of humiliation of soul), and upon Isa 58.5, à Brakel suggests that a fast is by definition *one day*.
 - c) Andrew Bonar on Lev 23.27, “It is remarkable that the chief view of [this day of humiliation] is given as a time for “afflicting the soul.” We can perceive a propriety in this view. This *afflicting of the soul* withdrew the man from earthly joys; the world and its scenes faded away while he contemplated his guilt and the wrath of his God, and then the atonement provided by God. His afflicted soul is weaned from earth. In this manner, preparation is made for the holy joy of the Feast of Tabernacles.”

III. Benefits of fasting

- A. Scudder: “The benefits of fasting are motive enough to use it as often as occasions require.”
 1. Every true fast in Scripture obtained either the particular blessing sought or a better one, Jdg 20.26-35; 1Sam 7.6-10; Ezra 8.23; 2Chr 20.3-22; Jon 3.7-10
 2. Fasting puts the soul into such a good frame and habit of spiritual-mindedness (as when the house is deeply cleaned for special guests) that it can easily be kept clean with the “common sweeping” for a long time after, Isa 58.5-6
 3. *Note*: those instances of fasting in Scripture for which God had no regard are those in which the people fasted “not to God” (Zech 7.5-12). They only sought themselves. There was no putting away of sin, no loosing the bonds of wickedness, no mortification of sin, no repentance, no renewing of the covenant with God, Isa 58.3-5
- B. Miller: “A duty so manifestly founded upon the divine will and attended with so many important benefits, cannot be disregarded without both sin and loss.”
 1. Fasting is a natural and significant expression of our penitence for sin. “Fasting is a proper expression of penitence because it carries with it an implied confession that *all* our comforts, *even* down to a morsel of bread, are forfeited by sin; and that we might justly be deprived of them all, if a holy God dealt with us according to our iniquities.”
 2. By denying the body’s appetite, we bring the body into subjection to the spirit, 1Cor 9.27. The tendency of our flesh to gain the mastery over our soul’s desires for God (producing not simply gluttony, but idleness, laziness, and a total incapacity and indisposition toward spiritual duties) is the great standing evidence of our depravity.
 - a) “The dominion of the flesh is broken when grace enters the heart; but the flesh still has too much influence, even in the most godly; and the great object of our spiritual warfare is to subdue and mortify it all our days.
 - b) “When a Christian indulges the flesh and pampers the appetite over a full table from day to day, it gives strength to the flesh and increases its power over the soul. “Indeed, it’ll always be found that habitual luxury, in direct proportion to the degree in which it’s indulged, is unfavorable to deep spirituality. They were probably never found united in any individual since the world began.”

- c) “Accordingly, it’ll be found that, in all ages, those Christians who have been the most distinguished for mortifying the flesh and bringing it into subjection and setting their affections on things above, have been no less remarkable for the frequency and seriousness of their seasons of religious fasting.”
 - 3. It renders the mind more active, clear, and vigorous. This is what makes fasting *a precious auxiliary to devotion*, because it frees the mind from being dissipated by the body’s appetite so it can focus intently and sharply on the soul’s cries after God.
- C. à Brakel:
- 1. God has commanded His people to fast and the church and the saints of all ages have done so. Therefore, as obedient children of God, and as followers of the saints, fast frequently. Do not allow this practice to die out.... And when you make work of having solitary days of fasting, you will experience that the promise is true and will be fulfilled for you: “Your Father...shall reward you” (Mt 6.18). The Lord will manifest that this is pleasing to Him. He will increase your light, and strengthen your heart in faith; you will be nearer to God in your walk, and lead a life which is more sober and thoughtful; and your conscience will be more tender. You will have more strength against sin, and receive more comfort from the Lord. He who has exercised himself in this has never regretted that he has done so, and we wish to recommend it as an exceptional means of spiritual growth.

IV. What to aim at in fasting

- A. Bayly. The true ends of fasting are:
- 1. The subjection of our flesh to the Spirit, 1Cor 9.27; Isa 58.5
 - 2. That by serious humiliation and judging of ourselves, we may escape the judgment of the Lord (Joel 2.17-19; 1Cor 11.31)—not for the merit of our fasting, but for the mercy of God, who’s promised to remove His judgments from us when we sincerely humble ourselves before Him, 1Sam 7.6; Jonah 3.5-10; 2Chr 12.5-7; 2Chr 33.11-13, 18-19
 - 3. That we may more devoutly contemplate God’s will and fervently pour out our souls to Him in prayer, Joel 2.17; Lk 2.37
 - 4. In sum:
 - a) The rending of the heart in humility, Joel 2.12-13
 - b) To break of the bonds of wickedness and strengthen the bonds of obedience, Isa 58.6-7; Dan 9.16-19
 - c) Help from the Lord in the day of trouble, Ezra 8.21; Ps 35.23-14; *2Sam 12.15-23
- B. Scudder
- 1. Resolve with yourself, to the utmost of your power, that you’ll keep a religious fast unto God, according to His will, Isa 58.5. And to secure this, add into your prayers serious petitions to God for His grace to assist you in it, because there’e no subduing and overcoming of the flesh but by the power and grace of the Spirit who alone can master it.
- C. à Brakel
- 1. If you find yourself averse to a day of prayer and fasting, confess your aversion as a sin before the Lord and ask Him for the grace to humble yourself before Him in a day of prayer and fasting, according to His commandment.