

Fasting

Matt. 6: 16-18.

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It remains for us to weigh our Lord's words on fasting, as the third part of His teaching on "righteousness" (not "alms") in the first verse of the chapter. Prayer holds the intermediate place between alms and fasting, the pious and holy basis to guard the other two, binding them up with faith against formality.

"And when ye fast, be not gloomy-faced as the hypocrites; for they disguise their faces, so that they may appear to men fasting. Verily, I say to you, They have their reward. But thou while fasting anoint thy head, and wash thy face, so that thou mayest not appear to men fasting, but to thy Father that [is] in secret; and thy Father that seeth in secret will recompense thee."

The Lord does not so much enjoin fasting as bring it like prayer under the Christian principle of having to do with our Father in secret. It falls under the individual life of faith. Yet He undoubtedly sanctions and approves of it when so practised; and this independently of the more open and united aim, such as we find in Acts 13: 2, 3, Acts 14: 23. He also intimates its value for spiritual power. Pious men have ever felt and must feel its appropriateness in chastening the soul before God, where public or private need called for humiliation. But even in Mark 9: 29 it is well to note that the two most ancient copies ignore "and fasting," as they with other authorities also the entire verse 21 of Matt. 17, nor is there a word corresponding in Luke 9. The apostle however who more than others was given to stand for liberty in Christ speaks (in 2 Cor. 6: 5, 2 Cor. 11: 27) simply and piously of "fastings" and "fastings often" in his service, to the rebuke of that levity which the Corinthian assembly betrayed, and which characterises modern Christianity, save where superstition and self-righteousness give it an artificial moment in very different eyes.

In Matt. 9: 14, etc. the Lord shows its true place and time in answer to the disciples of John saying, "Why do we and the Pharisees often fast, but Thy disciples fast not? And Jesus said to them, Can the sons of the bride-chamber mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them; but days shall come when the bridegroom shall be taken away from them, and then will they fast." Neither those who were only disciples of John had any real appreciation of the Bridegroom's presence, nor still less the Pharisees filled with forms and self-righteousness. It was joy to the believing disciples of Jesus. Feeble as they were, they had left their all for Him, and they Lasted a divine bliss in Him wholly unknown to the others, who were wholly unprepared for the awful purport to them and the Jews of His being taken away, little as the true disciples as yet comprehended that solemn approaching fact with its immense consequence. The joy of Messiah's presence made fasting altogether inappropriate. Those who tasted none of it were blind to Him whom God's grace had given and sent. Greater still would be their darkness, when the Bridegroom should be taken away. Then would those that believed and loved Him fast, both spiritually and literally.

It might not be like Jews accompanied by rending of garments or with sackcloth and ashes, but deeper communion with God's mind than could be known before the Holy Spirit came to make it good. And fasting among Christians is all the more striking because of the peace, joy, and boundless delight they have in the love of Christ, and fellowship with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ. Still if loyal to Christ we cannot but have the constant sense of His rejection, and of the judgment ever

impending and certain to fall on the guilty world, and all the more because it pays Him the hollowest of lip homage. Yes, days are come when the Bridegroom thus ignominiously taken away is still absent, and fasting lends itself to mourners, whatever their even enhanced joy in being united to Him as members of His body, a privilege never dreamt of before, and the joy of grace in the revelation and active working of a Saviour God to lost sinners, Gentile no less than Jew.

But Christendom perverted fasting, through vain philosophy, into a reflection on the creative glory of God. And abstinence from meats, which He created for thanksgiving, was early turned into human merit, and the lie of inherent evil in matter. Grace and truth through Jesus Christ were thus denied; and days of fasting were imposed, as ecclesiastical history records, first by custom, and afterward by legal sanction. In the second century, if not in the first, the fatal error also drawn from philosophy was in full swing not for their life and complete cleansing by His blood, but of a twofold rule, the one for the despised flock of God, the other for the spiritual superior; the one the Precepts for all sorts, the other the Counsels of Perfection for those who aspired to a higher life, which issued in asceticism and grew into monasticism. Who can wonder that God poured contempt on these unbelieving efforts to improve the first man, by letting the flesh with all this inflation break out into the grossest immorality on one side, and legendary falsehood against God on the other? But this too was just what was found with older Platonists and Pythagoreans, who taught that it was not only lawful but commendable to deceive and lie, for the sake of truth and piety. Hence, even in those early days the large harvest of forgeries which are coming to light in our days, the witness of the rapid departure from the Christianity taught by the inspired apostles, long before the papal system systematised it and enforced it on pain of death.