

Sabbath School

Topic: Religious Fasting (Lev. 23.27-32; Isa. 58.1-12; Joel 2.12-16)

Date: 2/9/20

§.1 Introduction

Our Session has called for a Day of Fasting, this Saturday, Feb. 15th. In light of this it seemed good to Pastor Chris and I to do a study on Fasting in lieu of our Westminster Confession study. This is rather impromptu, however; until 4PM yesterday after I was planning on continuing the study on the WCF. I simply happened to be reading on Fasting, and had the idea to study it in Sabbath School as I was reading. We are to pray with understanding, and fasting (being a kind of prayer) ought also to be done with understanding. Therefore we need to know what fasting is, and what the Scriptures say about it, in order to fast.

§2. What is Religious Fasting?

The Origin of the Word 'Fasting'

The Italian Reformer Peter Martyr Vermigli on the origin of the term 'fasting' says in Hebrew, the term for fasting signifies thirst, and originates from a similar term meaning 'to afflict.' He cites Medieval Jewish Bible commentator, Aben-Ezra who says "Wheresoever in the Holy Scripture is found 'affliction of soul', there fasting is understood." Vermigli says that the Greek term originally signified strength and firmness, "because a man that is fasting, is very firm and constant, so that he had rather suffer pain, than go from his purpose."¹

Several Kinds of Fasting

There are several kinds of fasting, but only one which pertains to us as an act of worship. The first kind is *Natural Fasting* which is done for the sake of health or recovery. There is another called *Civil Fasting* which is done when men are so resolved in the carrying out of their business, or for the accomplishment of some task, that they will not be disturbed by anything until they have done it, not even eating and drink. Examples of this civil fasting in Scripture are when Saul forbade the people from eating before evening until he had exacted revenge upon the Philistines (1Sam. 14.24) and when the Jews vowed not to eat or drink anything until they had killed Paul (Act. 23.12). There is *Daily Fasting*, which is a general disposition of moderation and temperance in use of food and drink, which ought to be the norm for all Christians. There is *Miraculous Fasting* wherein a man is upheld by the supernatural power of God above what human nature can bear. Such were the 40 day fasts of Moses, Elijah, and Jesus. These fasts served to confirm these men true Prophets of God, and are not to be imitated by us. Lastly, there is *Religious Fasting*, which is our topic of study today.

¹ Pietro Martire Vermigli, *The Common Places* (London: In Pater noster Rovve, [by Henry Denham and Henry Middleton] at the costs and charges of Henrie Denham, Thomas Chard, VWilliam Broome, and Andrew Maunsell, 1583), p. 247.

Religious Fasting Defined

Religious Fasting can be defined as follows: Religious fasting is an extraordinary abstinence from food and drink (as much as strength and health will permit), as well as from all other things which please and nourish the body, done with a repentant mind, and with true faith, for the purpose of pleading with God in prayer for mercies, because of afflictions which are either upon us, or are near at hand, or for some urgent need.

Vermigli: “The efficient cause is faith, and repentance for sins committed against God. The end is, that by prayers we crave the mercy of God, and either to turn away, or diminish calamities.”²

There are two parts of fasting, outward and inward. Outwardly, fasting consists of abstaining from food and drink, in order to afflict the soul; inwardly it consistent of repentance and urgent prayer.

As with all religious worship, the following rule is to be observed: “I will have mercy and not sacrifice.” That is, it is not to be done to the destruction of man’s life. Fasting is to be done in accordance with what a person’s health and strength can bear. Indeed, if one can bear to go without any food and drink for a day, then let them fast thus. But there are other kinds of fasting in Scripture. Daniel fasted for three weeks by eating no pleasant food. He ate only as was needed to sustain his life, rather than to please his body. “I ate no pleasant bread, neither came flesh nor wine in my mouth, neither did I anoint myself at all, till three whole weeks were fulfilled.” (Dan. 10.3)

For a day of fasting only until the evening, abstaining from all food and drink is doable. If one were to extend that fast beyond a day, say, 3 or 7, then they ought to sustain their life by drinking water, even as they afflict their soul through the abstinence of food. Or if longer, they should eat moderately and plainly (like Daniel), sustaining their life and strength, yet not indulging themselves in delightful food and drink.

Indeed, the purpose of abstinence from food and drink is to afflict one’s soul. “I humbled my soul with fasting” (Ps. 35.13); “I wept, and chastened my soul with fasting” (Ps. 69.10).

Avoiding Abuses of Fasting

- Mere abstinence of food not sufficient
- Fasting without Prayer is worthless
- Abstaining from food while indulging in other pleasures is condemned by God (Isa. 58)
- Fasting is not meritorious

§3. When to Fast

Samuel Rutherford on fasting³:

² Ibid., p. 248.

³ Samuel Rutherford, *Rutherford’s Catechism Containing the Sum of Christian Religion* (Edinburgh: Blue Banner Productions, 1998), pp. 68-69.

Q. How many sorts of prayer are there?

A. Some ordinary, at all times; some extra ordinary, as fasting.

Q. What is fasting?

A. An abstinence from meat and drink and all lawful pleasures (Ex. 33:4, 5; Joel 2:16), that we may in bitterness of soul mourn for our sin.

Q. When should we fast?

A. Not at set times as Papists do, but when the bridegroom Christ is flitting [withdrawing Himself, e.g. Song of Sol. 5:6], and we under great sins (Lk. 5:35).

There are private, and public fasts. One can fast privately, as occasions requires; either for some gross sin, or for the turning away of some calamity, or to plead with God for whatever reason.

A public fast is called by some higher authority, either the civil magistrate or the church. Such fasts, if lawful, are to be observed by all under their authority who have ability to fast.

Fasting is to be done occasionally, as the occasion arises. Under the OT, God commanded a yearly fast during the Day of Atonement. However, under the NT there are no set times of fasting. Fasting is to be used only as the need arises. The ordination of Ministers is to be done with Prayer and Fasting, as we see exemplified in the Book of Acts. It is often appropriate to fast after gross sins are committed, or when seeking to be loosed from the dominion of a particular sin you have been hardened in. Desperate times call for desperate measures. There are numerous examples throughout Scripture of calamities befalling the People of God and they respond by prayer and fasting.

Examples of Fasting

- David fasting for seven days after a judgment is pronounced on his illegitimate son with Bathsheba (2Sam. 12)
- The King of Nineveh proclaims a fast after Jonah prophesies judgment upon them (Jonah 3)
- Daniel mourning for three weeks, fasting from pleasant food and drink, after receiving a fearsome vision (Dan. 10)
- Israel fasting after hearing the Law of God read by Ezra (Neh. 8 & 9). Read Neh. 9.1-3.

§4. How to Fast (Isa. 58.1-12, Joel 2.12-16)