

Matthew 9:14-17 We Need God More Than Food Falls OPC PM Aug. 15, 2021

The national meeting of the Orthodox Presbyterian Pastors and Elders held in July in Iowa, called for a day of prayer. Not just a day of prayer, but a day of fasting and prayer.

What is this all about?

**Since Christ has saved us and is bringing us through this world, we need Him more than we need food.**

Fasting and prayer throughout the denomination of the OPC (30,000 people) Saturday, August 21.

For recovery from COVID effects on all levels.

Locally, we ask God for grace for those grieving the loss of a loved one, and for the re-launch of ministries.

Regionally, we seek God for unity to replace divisions and supply lines to be restored.

Nationally, we pray for children to be protected and education to resume fully, for real estate to stabilize.

Internationally, we plead with God for all missionaries to re-start their work, for the lost to hear the gospel of hope, and covid to be contained everywhere.

How did you respond when you first heard this?

Maybe you asked whether fasting should even be done by Presbyterian and Reformed believers?

You may have one of these 3 views: a) You have never fasted and you do not think we should. b) You have only fasted once or twice under extreme circumstances, and you feel vaguely guilty that we do not fast very often, because it sounds like a holy and godly thing to do, but very hard to miss meals. c) You fast more often, and you think it is about time that our church call for a day of prayer and fasting.

So, beware of sermons on fasting! Beware of statements from the General Assembly on fasting! Ha. We need to make sure we are understanding this in a grace-based way.

Fasting can be abused, or done for the wrong reasons, such as:

1. Fasting is abused if you see it as a hunger strike aimed at God. We do not fast in order to boost our prayers. It is not acceptable to fast in order to try to get God to do what God is not otherwise doing. Our fasting must not be a superstitious act to say that this prayer is a prayer that gets extra consideration because of the added dynamic of fasting attached to it. There is no power in fasting, and no ability to force God to answer, like a hunger strike.

2. Fasting is abused if you see it as a way to appear godly to other people. We do not fast because we want God or other people to think of us as earnest. We

do not look up to those who fast, and we do not look down on those who don't fast. We remain protective of Christian liberty – that each person gets to decide for himself or herself whether to eat or fast, whether to participate in this time of fasting or not. That is why we have no prayer meeting on the day of prayer and fasting on Saturday.

Ask yourself this. Would you be more motivated to join in the day of prayer and fasting if it were called for by the highest court of government, or by the highest court of your church? President Abraham Lincoln called for a national day of prayer and fasting in 1863, and here is a quote from his statement, “We have been the recipients of the choicest bounties of Heaven. We have been preserved, these many years, in peace and prosperity. We have grown in numbers, wealth and power, as no other nation has ever grown. But we have forgotten God. We have forgotten the gracious hand which preserved us in peace, and multiplied and enriched and strengthened us; and we have vainly imagined, in the deceitfulness of our hearts, that all these blessings were produced by some superior wisdom and virtue of our own. Intoxicated with unbroken success, we have become too self-sufficient to feel the necessity of redeeming and preserving grace, too proud to pray to the God that made us!”

Now, how do you decide whether you will participate, and if you did participate, how you would do so? Let's turn to the Bible, and we will find three principles arising, which are the 3 points of this sermon. We seek more of the Christ whom we already have. Two, our progress does not depend on ourselves. Three, we remind ourselves that Christ is the life-giver, and that food is a gift from Him.

### **1. We seek more of the Christ whom we already have.**

What does the Bible say about fasting? A lot. Here are some quick examples to give you an overview, Moses fasted for 40 days on Mount Sinai, King David seemed to have a habit of fasting, and we are told that he fasted on a number of occasions, Daniel fasted for 3 full weeks while praying for believers in exile, Esther called for a national fast when Persia threatened to wipe out the people of God. John the Baptist fasted, and taught his students to fast. Our Lord Jesus Christ Himself began his official ministry with 40 days of fasting, and Jesus fasted on other occasions. In Acts 13, the early church engaged in prayer and fasting.

For an important part of Scripture that guides us this week in our call to prayer and fasting, we turn to our passage tonight Matthew 9:14-17, where the John the Baptist was fasting, and the disciples of John the Baptist were fasting, and the Pharisees were fasting. It is possible that Jesus was fasting, but we are not told, if you look at it carefully. The issue is not the actions of Jesus, but the actions of the disciples of Jesus. Why weren't the disciples of Jesus fasting? Jesus answered with three parts. Part one, how can My disciples possibly fast while I am here?

The lesson: God's presence outweighs any other cause for fasting! Part two, the day will come when I will be removed through death, and that will be the cause of fasting for My followers! Part three, a new time is coming that is not going to fit their view of religion. That time was when Jesus subsequently rose again from the dead. Christ ascended, and sent down His Holy Spirit to always be with us.

## **2. Our progress does not depend on ourselves.**

Fasting is in the area of personal self-control. But remember that self-control is a fruit of the Spirit. That means it comes from the Spirit of God. You cannot by yourself produce the good results you are seeking. You must depend on the Spirit of God to give you the results you desire.

C.S. Lewis wrote, "...when you are training soldiers in maneuvers, you practice in blank ammunition because you would like them to have practices before meeting the real enemy. So we must practice in abstaining from pleasures which are not in themselves wicked. If you don't abstain from pleasure, you won't be good when the time comes along."

Our spiritual progress in self-control from food that is acceptable, is used of God to strengthen us to deny ourselves from sins that are not acceptable. Spiritual progress is what God gives us. We don't do this ourselves by works, but rather we receive spiritual growth by God's grace.

Jesus fasted, so isn't that a pattern for us? Not really, because Christ was in a unique position of the Second Adam going into the wilderness to do battle with Satan. We cannot follow Christ into that battle, and compare ourselves to Christ in that way. However, now that we are redeemed by Christ, it is understood that we imitate Him as recipients of grace. In fact, in Matthew 6, Jesus was teaching about prayer and said, "*When you fast...*" This means that Jesus assumed that His disciples would fast.

The church that we read about in the New Testament – they fasted, so isn't that a binding pattern for us as the church today? Not really. Saul fasted, the church in Antioch fasted (Acts 13), and Paul and Barnabas ordained elders with fasting and prayer. Notice: 1) Those are the only post-resurrection appearances of fasting. 2) Paul did not command fasting but modeled it. 3) Paul was fairly private about it – he made only two personal references to fasting, and they were both involuntary. That means Paul had no choice to fast, because there was no food available! Yes, fasting is a pattern in the New Testament church, but fasting is not a binding pattern – in other words, fasting is not a command. The issue in fasting remains the gospel. If fasting is done superstitiously or legalistically, it falls under condemnation.

## **3. We remind ourselves that Christ is the life-giver, and that food is a gift from Him.**

a. We pray and fast to decide to hunger more for God's Spirit. We can pray and fast in the Spirit to ask for MORE of the Spirit. Luke 11:13, "*If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, HOW MUCH MORE will your Father in heaven GIVE THE HOLY SPIRIT TO THOSE WHO ASK HIM!*" We seek more of God's Spirit to be given to us. We desire God together with intensity and focus.

b. We pray and fast to express to God together our desperate, broken hearts. In this case, our hearts are broken for the spiritually dead our families, in our community, in our nation, and in the world. To keep working in these desolate harvest fields, we decide for one day to experience the fact that we need God more than we need food. Christ alone is the life-giver, who can give eternal life to souls. We need Him ourselves. For one day, we skip out on food, in order to re-gain the perspective that all of our food is a gift from God.

c. We pray and fast to purify our hunger for God together. How much do we hunger for God to come by His Spirit into our nation? Matthew 5:6, "*Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.*" Are we prepared to be more satisfied simply in knowing God than in meeting our own goals? Let our God be God, and let His will be done, and we will praise Him!

Prepare to be satisfied! We look to God in our hearts secretly and expectantly. We come to God collectively in prayer together each Sunday. God will answer us with His wisdom for His glory and for our good. Sometimes God will not change the circumstances at all, but will instead meet us in our labors and supply for us His marvelous provisions to endure in the toil. We hunger for God, we seek Him together, He will meet us, and we will be satisfied in Christ Himself.

#### **Concluding Application:**

1. Stay safe. Is fasting too dangerous for your health? What if you feel a headache or feel weak and faint? What if you have diabetes or another medical problem? Fasting has different effects for various people, based on a multitude of factors. Please do only what is safe for you. God wants us to be aware of our bodies and take good care of ourselves, as stewards of the bodies that He gave us. Maybe this Saturday does not work in your schedule. You can substitute a fast on another day. You can skip it entirely, without guilt. Remember also that there are 3 types of fasts: a) a whole fast, which is no food or liquid at all. b) a food fast, which is only consuming liquids, and no food items. c) a partial fast, which is no dessert or skipping one meal or even passing over a certain item. For example, you could fast from meat, or fast from sugar. There are fasting from other things, like television, all screens, your hobbies, from games. Lately, people get discouraged

by the news media, so how refreshing it would be if you fasted from the news media for a day! Fast from facebook. Fast from Instagram. Fast from your smartphone! See also 1 Corinthians 7:5 for another fast, and the Bible's specific instructions for it.

If you love music and decide to miss a concert in order to spend time with God, that is fasting. It is helpful to think of the parallel of human friendship. When friends decide to spend time together, they will cancel all other activities in order to make that time possible. There's nothing magical about fasting. It's just one way of communicating to yourself and to God that your priority at that moment is to be alone with God, sorting out whatever is necessary. To make that time available, you have cancelled the meal, party, concert, or whatever else you had planned to do in order to fulfill that priority.

2. Be discrete. Remember to look normal. Don't make it obvious to other people that you are fasting. Don't brag about this day and our church or denomination. Seek God in the privacy of your heart, and in solidarity with our church family and church denomination, as we all ask God for the same thing – His Spirit's life-giving presence in our church, our community, and our nation, even more than He is already present and at work now. Be hopeful and excited!

3. If you decide to fast, do not fast on a Sunday. The Lord's Day is a day of feasting and rejoicing in the presence of God and His people in our worship services, and throughout the day. Fast on any other day, but not on a Sunday.

4. With every hunger pang, tell yourself to put your hope in God. Psalm 42, "my soul thirsts for God...my tears have been my food day and night, while men say to me all day long, 'Where is your God?' These things I remember as I pour out my soul...Why are you so downcast O my soul? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise Him, my Savior and my God."

5. Whether you decide to fast or decide not to fast, do not pass judgment on other people. Romans 14:6, "*The one who observes the day, observes it in honor of the Lord, since he gives thanks to God, while the one who abstains, abstains in honor of the Lord and gives thanks to God.*"

6. Please pray. Whether you fast or not, you can pray with us this Saturday. Pray as Jesus taught us to pray, starting out with longings for God. A) longing for God's name to be revered. B) longing for God's kingdom to come C) longing for God's will to be done on earth the way that it is in heaven. Pray that you would conquer your own bad habits. Pray for the grace to remove every obstacle so that you can have full enjoyment of God. Pray for the Spirit of God to fill your preacher next Sunday, so that Christ will be exalted in our worship, and so that your soul will be fed. Pray for government leaders on all levels to respect God in their positions, so that it magnifies the goodness and the justice of God. Pray that you will have a God-centered view of yourself and the world.

7. Let your hunger for Christ be deepened. The last words of the Bible are a statement by Jesus, followed by a response of the church. Revelation 22:20, Jesus said, *“Surely I am coming soon.”* Then the church responded, *“Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!”* And the final words of the Bible are in verse 21, *“The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all. Amen.”* Do we long for Jesus to come soon? Do you miss Christ Jesus? Do we feel Christ’s absence keenly, and would we feel Christ’s presence keenly? This means to hunger for Christ. Think of our relationship to Christ, and how much better is our hunger for Christ than our hunger for food. Christ Jesus has come. He has died for our sins. He has risen from the dead. Our guilt is removed. Our sin is forgiven. Our condemnation and punishment has been transferred to Christ. Our pronouncement of innocence is confirmed. Our reconciliation with God is accomplished. Our bondage to sin is broken. Our enemy has been conquered. The sting of death is removed. Our arrival in hell is averted. Eternal life has been granted. The Lord and come and is coming again. Let us feast on these spiritual realities and establish our souls on the great foundation of God’s grace in the death and resurrection of Christ. Let your hunger for Christ be deepened.

Let me end with words of Scripture about a man named Simeon, and a woman named Anna, who longed for Jesus more than they longed for food or anything else. I will not make any more statements, but expect the Spirit of God to use the Word of God to encourage your heart in deepening your hunger for Christ. I will just read this passage, and close in prayer. I now read from Luke 2:25-38, *“Now there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon, and this man was righteous and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. 26 And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Christ. 27 And he came in the Spirit into the temple, and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him according to the custom of the Law, 28 he took him up in his arms and blessed God and said, 29 “Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word; 30 for my eyes have seen your salvation 31 that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, 32 a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel.” 33 And his father and his mother marveled at what was said about him. 34 And Simeon blessed them and said to Mary his mother, “Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed 35 (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also), so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed.”*

*36 And there was a prophetess, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was advanced in years, having lived with her husband seven years from when she was a virgin, 37 and then as a widow until she was eighty-four. She did not depart from the temple, worshiping with fasting and prayer night and day. 38 And coming up at that very hour she began to give thanks to God and to speak of him to all who were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem.”*