

THE TEACHING OF THE NEW TESTAMENT CONCERNING FASTING

The Meaning of Fasting

To fast means to abstain from food. Sometimes the word is used in the New Testament to describe voluntary abstinence as a religious exercise, as for example:

“But thou, when thou fastest, anoint thine head, and wash thy face” (Matthew 6:17).

At other times, it is clear that fasting was involuntary. By this we mean that no religious significance was necessarily involved. For instance, in Matthew 15:32, we read:

“Then Jesus called his disciples unto him, and said, I have compassion on the multitude, because they continue with me now three days, and have nothing to eat: and I will not send them away fasting, lest they faint in the way.”

Here the fasting was obviously unplanned. The people became so interested in the miracles of our Lord that they remained with him rather than to return home for their meals.

Another instance of involuntary fasting is found in the account of the storm at sea during Paul's voyage to Rome:

“And while the day was coming on, Paul besought them all to take meat (food), saying, This day is the fourteenth day that ye have tarried and continued fasting, having taken nothing” (Acts 27:33).

While it is possible that Paul's pagan shipmates may have been fasting to appease their gods, it is more likely that they were preoccupied with their peril and refrained from eating for this reason.

There are two passages in which it is difficult to determine whether the fasting was voluntary or involuntary. The first is 2 Corinthians 6:5, where Paul is listing some of the things which he encountered in his Christian service:

“In stripes, in imprisonments, in tumults, in labors, in watchings, in fastings.”

The other is 2 Corinthians 11:27, another catalog of Paul's sufferings and privations:

“In weariness and painfulness, in watchings often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness.”

Perhaps W. E. Vine is correct in concluding that while these latter two cases of fasting are primarily involuntary, they might include voluntary abstinence as well.

Does Fasting Mean Complete Abstinence?

The question inevitably arises as to whether fasting necessarily means complete abstinence from food.

In connection with the Lord's temptation in the wilderness, Matthew simply tells us that He fasted:

“And when he had fasted forty days and forty nights, he was afterward an hungered”
(Matthew 4:2)

But then in the companion passage, Luke 4:2, it is clearly stated that He ate nothing:

“Being forty days tempted of the devil. And in those days he did eat nothing: and when they were ended, he afterward hungered.”

This shows that in its strictest sense, fasting means doing without food completely.

In a broader sense, fasting is taken by some to mean the eating of a very minimum amount of food for a certain period of time. In order to give himself to prayer, a man may eliminate his regular meals but take an occasional glass of milk, for instance. If he took no nourishment at all, he might develop such an acute headache that the very purpose of the fasting might be hindered. Yet by taking only a small amount, his senses would be preserved keen and alert. There is no Scriptural counterpart for this limited type of fasting, but if it helps a person in his spiritual exercises, who can forbid it?

The Reasons for Fasting

We come now to a consideration of the reasons for fasting.

1. First of all, this practice is associated with mourning. In Matthew 9:14, 15 (and the companion passages, Mark 2:18-20 and Luke 5:33-35), the disciples of John asked the Lord why they fasted, as did also the Pharisees, but Jesus' disciples did not fast. The Savior answered them:

“Can the children of the bride chamber mourn, as long as the bridegroom is with them? But the days will come, when the bride groom shall be taken from them, and then shall they fast.”

The meaning here is clearly that it would not have been appropriate for Jesus' disciples to fast as long as He was with them. But after His departure from the world, they would have occasion to mourn and fast.

2. Secondly, fasting is associated with prayer. The godly widow Anna served God with fastings and prayers night and day (Luke 2:37).

In the book of Acts, fasting is three times linked with prayer in connection with crises in the church, when momentous decisions were being made.

Thus, in Acts 13:2., it was after the prophets and teachers at Antioch had fasted and prayed that the Holy Spirit said, “Separate me Barnabas and Saul for the work whereunto I have called

them.”

Following this revelation of the Lord’s will, the brethren fasted and prayed again, then laid their hands on Barnabas and Saul, and sent them away (verse 3).

Again in Acts 14:23, we read:

“And when they (Paul and Barnabas) had ordained them elders in every church and had prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord on whom they believed.”

In these passages it appears that fasting accompanied prayer as an acknowledgment of deep earnestness in discerning the will of God and of a solemn awareness of the responsibility of obeying His guidance.

Disputed Uses of the Word “Fasting” in the New Testament

There are four disputed uses of the word “fasting” in the New Testament. Many ancient authorities omit it in these four verses; others maintain that it should be left in.

The first is Matthew 17:21. The Lord had just cured a demon-possessed lad. When the disciples asked, “Why could not we cast him out?”, the Lord replied, according to the King James Version, “This kind goeth not out but by prayer and fasting.” In the Revised Version, verse 21 is omitted entirely.

The companion passage is Mark 9:29. In the King James Version, it reads, “And he said unto them, This kind can come forth by nothing, but by prayer and fasting.” In the Revised Version, the words “and fasting” are left out.

The third instance is in Acts 10:30, where we read:

And Cornelius said, “Four days ago I was fasting until this hour; and at the ninth hour I prayed in my house . . .”

Here again the Revised Version omits any mention of fasting, by rendering the verse:

“And Cornelius said, Four days ago, until this hour, I was keeping the ninth hour of prayer in my house...”

The final passage is generally agreed to be one where the reference to fasting should be omitted. It is 1 Corinthians 7:5:

“Defraud ye not one the other, except it be with consent for a time, that ye may give yourselves to fasting and prayer; and come together again, that Satan tempt you not for your incontinency.”

This verse permits the voluntary abstinence from the intimacies of married life, by mutual agreement and for a limited time, in order that one might give himself undistractedly to prayer. Most of the better manuscripts do not contain the word “fasting,” and the Revisers accordingly omit it.

Fasting Not Meritorious for Salvation

One thing about which we can be certain in connection with fasting is that it is absolutely valueless as a means of gaining God's favor. It is not a meritorious act as far as salvation is concerned. This is clearly taught in the parable of the Pharisee and the publican (Luke 18:9-14). The Pharisee boasted that he fasted twice in the week and gave tithes of all that he possessed (verse 12). But this did not avail to bring him the justification he sought (verse 14). God's favor can only be obtained by trusting in His Son, the Lord Jesus, and thus being accepted in Him.

At the same time, we should remember that when a Christian fasts in order to please the Lord, this act will be rewarded by Him:

“But thou, when thou fastest, anoint thine head, and wash thy face; that thou appear not unto men to fast, but unto thy Father which is in secret: and thy Father, which seeth in secret, shall reward thee openly” (Matthew 6:17,18).

Here a reward is promised for those believers who fast in secret. The Lord sees It as an act of self-denial, aimed at praying or preaching more effectively, or otherwise worshipping or serving Him better.

Fasting Should Be Secret

Although Christians are not specifically commanded to fast, they are instructed that when they do abstain from food, they should do so without public display of any kind:

“Moreover when ye fast, be not, as the hypocrites, of a sad countenance: for they disfigure their faces, that they may appear unto men to fast. Verily I say unto you, they have their reward.

“But thou, when thou fastest, anoint thine head, and wash thy face;

“That thou appear not unto men to fast, but unto thy Father which is in secret: and thy Father, which seeth in secret, shall reward thee openly” (Matthew 6:16-18).

It is apparent from this that fasting is a private matter between a person and his Lord, and should never be used to create an Impression of superior sanctity.

The Fast, a Jewish Holiday

There is one other mention of the word “fast” in the New Testament which should be quoted in order to give a complete picture. It is in Acts 27:9:

“Now when much time was spent, and when sailing was now dangerous, because the fast was now already past, Paul admonished them...”

Most Bible students are agreed that the fast referred to here is the Day of Atonement, an important date in the Jewish calendar, but not applicable to the Christian church.

Benefits of Fasting

It cannot be denied that fasting can be an aid in one's personal devotional life as well as in one's service for Christ. One can pray more effectively while fasting than one can do after a heavy meal. Thus, if there is some great prayer burden which is weighing on a believer's heart, it is not out of order to suggest that he give himself to a time of fasting in order that his prayers might be unhindered by drowsiness or mind-wandering.

The same is true with regard to public preaching of the Word. Many servants of the Lord prefer to abstain from food or to eat very lightly before preaching in order that their minds might be clear and alert.

Even apart from spiritual considerations, it is generally agreed that there are physical advantages to periodic fasting. Many doctors recommend it as a means of resting bodily functions.

Summary

In conclusion, we would say that fasting is neither commanded nor forbidden in the New Testament, but it is encouraged by the offer of reward. Those who fast are taught to do so secretly. The practice of fasting can be an aid to one's prayer life, delivering the person from dullness and sleepiness. It is also recommended for special times of crisis when one wishes to discern the will of God. Public preaching can be more effective if one has not eaten beforehand or has eaten only lightly. It is largely a matter of one's individual exercise of soul before God, and, as with everything else in the Christian life, it should be done to the glory of God and with a desire to please Him and to serve Him more effectively.

William MacDonald

References to fasting can be found in the following Scripture references:

Matthew 6:17

Matthew 15:32

Acts 27:33

2 Corinthians 6:5

2 Corinthians 11:27

Matthew 4:2

Luke 4:2

Matthew 9:14, 15; Mark 2:18-20;
and Luke 5:33-35

Luke 2:37

Acts 13:2

Acts 14:23

Matthew 17:21; Mark 9:29

Acts 10:30 KJV

1 Corinthians 7:5

Luke 18:9-14

Matthew 6:16-18

Acts 27:9