

When You Fast

by John Wesley (1703-1791)

“When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to men that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.” [Matthew 6:16-18]

Satan has attempted, from the beginning of the world, to separate what God has joined together; to separate inward from outward religion; to set one of these at odds with the other. And he was very successful among those who were “unaware of his schemes.”

Many, in every age, “are zealous for God, but their zeal is not based on knowledge.” They have held strictly to the “righteousness of the law,” that is, the performance of outward duties, but in the mean time completely disregarding inward righteousness, which is “the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith.” And many others have run into the opposite extreme, disregarding all outward duties, perhaps even “speaking evil of the law, and judging the law,” so far as it directs any action on their part.

It is by this very scheme of Satan, that faith and works have been so often set at odds with each other. And many who had a real zeal for God have, for a time, fallen into the snare at either extreme. Some have magnified faith to the utter exclusion of good works, not only stating that good works are not the cause of our justification, (for we know that man is justified freely by the redemption which is in Jesus,) but even stating that good works are not even the necessary fruit of it, yes, stating that good works have no place in the religion of Jesus Christ. Others, eager to avoid this dangerous mistake, have run just as far in the opposite direction; and either maintained that good works were the cause, at least the previous condition, of justification, or spoken of them as if they were everything, the whole religion of Jesus Christ.

In the same way the ends and the means of Christianity been set at odds with each other. Some well-meaning persons have seemed to equate Christianity with the saying of prayers, in receiving the Lord’s supper, in listening to sermons, and in reading books on holiness; neglecting, at the same time, the end purpose of all these things, which is the love of God and their neighbor. And this very thing has confirmed others in the neglect, if not the contempt, of the very ordinances of God, -- thereby wretchedly abusing and undermining and overthrowing the very end they were designed to establish.

But of all the means of grace there is scarcely any concerning which men have run into greater extremes, than that of which our Lord speaks in our text this morning, I mean religious fasting. Some have exalted this type of fasting beyond all Scripture and reason; and others have utterly disregarded it; as if were retaliating by undervaluing it as much as the others had overvalued it! There have been those who have spoken of fasting, as if it were everything in religion; if not the end itself, yet on the opposite extreme has been others who treated the subject of fasting as if it were nothing, as if it were a fruitless labor, which had no relationship at all to Christianity. No doubt the truth lies somewhere in-between. It is not everything, nor yet is it nothing. It is not the end, but it is a precious means to the end; a means which God himself has ordained, and in which therefore, when it is properly used, God will surely give us his blessing.

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In order to set this in the clearest light, I shall endeavor to show,

I. First, what is the nature of fasting, and what are the different types and degrees.

II. Secondly, what are the reasons, purposes, and objectives of fasting.

III. Thirdly, how we can answer the most likely objections against fasting.

IV. Fourthly, how we are to fast.

I. First, what is the nature of fasting, and what are the different types and degrees?

As to the nature of it, all the inspired writers, both in the Old Testament and the New, take the word to fast in its simple sense, meaning, “not to eat, to abstain from food.” This is so clear, that it would be a waste of time to quote the words of David, Nehemiah, Isaiah, and the Prophets, or of our Lord and his Apostles; all agreeing in this, that to fast, is, not to eat for a prescribed time.

In the Old Testament, we find that other conditions were usually tied to the fasting, which had no real necessary connection with it. Such as the neglect of their clothing; the absence of those ornaments which they were accustomed to wear; the outward expressions of mourning; the strewing of ashes on their head; or wearing sackcloth next their skin. But we find little mention made in the New Testament of any of these additional conditions. Nor does it appear, that any importance was given them by the Early Christians; however some Christians might voluntarily use them, as outward signs of inward humiliation. The Apostles, or their fellow Christians did not beat or tear their own flesh: Such actions as these were typical for the priests or worshippers of Baal. The gods of the Heathens were nothing but devils; and surely it was acceptable to their devil-god, when his priests (1 Kings 18:28) “shouted louder and slashed themselves with swords and spears, as was their custom, until their blood flowed.” But it cannot be pleasing to Jesus, nor be appropriate for His followers, for Jesus “did not come to destroy men's lives, but to save them.”

As to the degrees or types of fasting, we have instances of some who have fasted for a long period of days. Such as, Moses, Elijah, and our blessed Lord, being endowed with supernatural strength for that purpose, are recorded to have fasted, without interruption, “forty days and forty nights.” But the time of fasting, more frequently mentioned in Scripture, is one day, from morning till evening. And this was the fast commonly observed among the ancient Christians. But in addition to these, they also had their half-fasts on the fourth and sixth days of the week, (Wednesday and Friday,) throughout the year; on which they ate no food till three in the afternoon, the time when they returned from the public service.

Nearly related to this, is what some Churches mean by the term abstinence; which may be used when we cannot completely fast, because of sickness or weakness of the body. This is the eating just a little; abstaining in part; taking a smaller quantity of food than usual. I do not remember any scriptural instance of this. But neither can I condemn it; for the Scripture does not. It may have its use, and receive a blessing from God.

The lowest kind of fasting, if it can be called by that name, is the abstaining from pleasant food. Of this, we have several instances in Scripture, besides that of Daniel and his friends, who because of a special consideration, namely, that they might “not defile themselves with the royal food and wine (a daily provision which the King had appointed for them), asked the chief official for permission not to defile themselves in this way, saying, “Give us nothing but vegetables to eat and water to drink. (Daniel 1:8ff) Perhaps from a mistaken imitation of this event we have the very ancient custom of abstaining from meat and wine during such times that were set apart for fasting and abstinence. It may also have come into practice simply from a supposition that vegetables and water

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were the better diet, and a belief that it was proper to use what was least pleasing to the flesh at those times of solemn approach to God.

In the Jewish religion there were some stated fasts. Such was the fast of the seventh month, appointed by God himself to be observed by all Israel under the severest penalty. “The LORD said to Moses, ‘The tenth day of this seventh month is the Day of Atonement. Hold a sacred assembly and deny yourselves, and do no work on that day, because it is the Day of Atonement, when atonement is made for you before the LORD your God. Anyone who does not deny himself on that day must be cut off from his people’” [Leviticus 23:26-29]. In later years, several other stated fasts were added to these. So mention is made, by the Prophet Zechariah, of the fasts not only “of the seventh, but also of the fourth, of the fifth, and of the tenth month.” (Zech. 8:19)

In the ancient Christian Church, there were likewise stated fasts: both annual and weekly. Of the former sort was that before Easter; observed by some for 48 hours; by others, for an entire week; by many, for two weeks; taking no food till the evening of each day: Of the latter, those of the fourth and sixth days of the week, observed at least in every place where any Christians lived. And in our church today, in the 18th century, we have added many more days of fasting.

But besides those which were fixed, in every God-fearing nation there have always been occasional fasts, appointed from time to time, as the particular circumstances and occasions of each required. So when “the Moabites and Ammonites came to make war on Jehoshaphat, he resolved to inquire of the LORD, and he proclaimed a fast for all Judah” [2 Chronicles 20:1, 3]” And likewise we read in Jeremiah’s day, “In the ninth month of the fifth year of Jehoiakim son of Josiah king of Judah,” when they were afraid of the King of Babylon, “a time of fasting before the LORD was proclaimed for all the people in Jerusalem and those who had come from the towns of Judah” [Jeremiah 36:9].

And, in like manner, certain persons, who are careful of their ways, and desire to walk humbly and closely with God, will find frequent occasion for private seasons of humbling their souls, in secret, before their Father in heaven. And it is to this kind of fasting that the directions given here in our text do chiefly and primarily refer.

II. In the second place let us look at the reasons, purposes, and objectives of fasting:

1. First, men and women who are experiencing deep emotions of mind, who are affected with any intense passion, such as sorrow or fear, are often swallowed up with them, and even forget to eat their food.

At such times they have little regard for food, not even what is necessary to sustain life, much less for any delicacy or variety; being taken up with quite different thoughts. Thus when Saul said, “I am in great distress; for the Philistines are fighting against me, and God has turned away from me;” it is recorded, “His strength was gone, for he had eaten nothing all that day and night” [1 Samuel 28:15, 20]. In the same way, those who were in the ship with the Apostle Paul, “When neither sun nor stars appeared for many days and the storm continued raging, finally gave up all hope of being saved. Just before dawn Paul urged them all to eat. ‘For the last fourteen days,’ he said, ‘you have been in constant suspense and have gone without food - you haven’t eaten anything.’” [Acts 27:20, 33] And likewise, David, and all the men that were with him, when they heard that the people had fled from the battle, and that many of the people were fallen and dead, and Saul and Jonathan his son were dead also, “They mourned and wept and fasted till evening for Saul and his son Jonathan, and for the army of the LORD and the house of Israel” [2 Samuel 1:12].

So we can see, that many times they whose minds are deeply engaged in thought because of a crisis or burden are intolerant of any interruption, and even dislike the food their bodies need, because it would divert their thoughts from what they desire to give their whole attention to. Even Saul, when, on the occasion mentioned before, had

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“fallen full length on the ground . . . His strength was gone,” yet he said, “I will not eat.” Until “his men joined the woman in urging him.”

2. Here, then, is one “natural” reason for fasting. A person experiences deep affliction because they are overwhelmed with sorrow for sin, and a strong apprehension of the wrath of God.

This person, would, without any instruction, without knowing or considering whether it was a command of God or not, would “forget to eat his food,” and abstain not only from delicacies but even from required food-like the Apostle Paul, who, after being confronted with Jesus on the Damascus Road, was blind “For three days . . . and did not eat or drink anything” [Acts 9:9].

Yes, when the storms of life come; when a horrible dread is experienced, one who has been living without God in the world, his soul would “detest all kinds of food;” it would be displeasing and annoying to him; he would be impatient with anything that would interrupt his ceaseless cry, “Lord, save me or I wish perish!”

How strongly this was expressed in a recent sermon, preached at our church, on the subject of fasting! Listen, “When unsaved men and women feel in themselves the heavy burden of sin, and see that it only brings damnation, and see with the eye of their mind, the horrors of hell, they tremble, they shake, and are inwardly touched with sorrowfulness of heart, and cannot help but accuse themselves, and express their grief to Almighty God, and call to him for mercy. After this their mind is so overwhelmed with sorrow and distress, partly with an earnest desire to be delivered from this danger of hell and damnation, that all desire for food and drink is laid aside, and they lack any desire for worldly things and pleasures. The only thing they desire to do is to weep, to grieve, to mourn, both with words and actions of their body to reveal that they are tired of life.”

3. Another reason for fasting is this: Many of those who now fear God are deeply aware how often they have sinned against him, by the abuse of food.

They know how much they have sinned by excess of food and drink; how long they have transgressed the holy law of God, with regard to a lack of self-control; how they have indulged their sensual appetites, perhaps even to the point of impairing their bodily health-certainly to the point where they even hurt their soul. For they continually fed and increased that foolishness, that flippant attitude of mind, that lightheartedness, that inattention to things of the deepest concern, that giddiness and carelessness of spirit, which was nothing other than drunkenness of the soul, which confused all their noblest faculties, and was expressed by the excess of wine or strong drink. Therefore, to remove the effect, they remove the cause. They keep at a distance from all excess. They abstain, as far as is possible, from what had almost plunged them in everlasting judgment. They often completely refrain; always being careful to be careful and temperate in all things.

Likewise, they well remember how their lack of restraint in eating not only increased carelessness and flippancy of spirit, but also foolish and unholy desires, yes, unclean and wicked feelings. And this experience is very real. Even a discreet, regular gratification of the body is continually gratifying the soul, and sinking it into a level of the animals that perish. It cannot be expressed what an effect variety and delicacy of food have on the mind as well as the body; making it ripe for every pleasure of the senses, as soon as opportunity will provide. Therefore, because of this, every wise man and woman must control their soul, and keep them in check; they will wean it more and more from all those indulgences of the inferior appetites, which naturally tend to chain it down to earth, and to pollute as well as debase it. Here is another continual reason for fasting; to remove the food of lust and sensuality, and to remove the incentives of foolish and hurtful desires, of evil and worthless feelings.

4. Perhaps we should not completely omit another reason for fasting, which some people have insisted on; namely, the punishing of themselves for having abused the good gifts of God.

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They do this by sometimes completely refraining from these gifts of God; thus exercising a kind of holy revenge on themselves, for their past folly and ingratitude, in turning the things which should have been for their health into an occasion of sin. They believe David felt this, when he said, “I wept and chastened,” or punished, “my soul with fasting;” and the Apostle Paul, when he mentions “what revenge” godly sorrow caused in the Corinthians.

5. A fifth and the most important reason for fasting is, that it is a help to prayer; especially when we set apart larger portions of time for private prayer.

Sometimes God is often pleased to lift up the souls of his servants above all the things of earth, and to lift them up, as it were, into the third heavens. And fasting is chiefly an aid to prayer, so much so, that it has frequently been found a means, in the hand of God, of confirming and increasing, not one virtue, but also seriousness of spirit, sincerity, sensitivity and tenderness of conscience, deadness to the world, and consequently a love of God, and of every holy and heavenly feeling.

Not that there is any natural or necessary connection between fasting, and the blessings of God. But he will have mercy on whom he will have mercy; he will convey whatever seems good to him by whatever means he is pleased to use. And he has, in all ages, appointed fasting to be a means of averting his wrath, and obtaining whatever blessings we, from time to time, are in need of.

Just how powerful a means this is to avert the wrath of God, we may learn from the remarkable instance of Ahab. “There was never a man like Ahab, who sold himself”-wholly given himself up, like a slave bought with money-“to do evil.” Yet when he “he tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and fasted, and went around meekly. Then the word of the LORD came to Elijah, saying, “Have you noticed how Ahab has humbled himself before me? Because he has humbled himself, I will not bring this disaster in his day.”

It was for this end, to avert the wrath of God, that Daniel sought God “in fasting, and in sackcloth and ashes.” This appears from the whole tenor of his prayer, particularly from the solemn conclusion of it: “O Lord, in keeping with all your righteous acts, turn away your anger and your wrath from Jerusalem, your city, your holy hill-hear the prayers and petitions of your servant. For your sake, O Lord, look with favor on your desolate sanctuary. O Lord, listen! O Lord, forgive! O Lord, hear and act! For your sake.” (Daniel 9:3, 16ff)

6. But it is not only from the people of God that we learn, when his anger is moved, to seek him by fasting and prayer; but even from the heathens.

When Jonah had declared, “Forty more days and Nineveh will be destroyed, the people of Nineveh declared a fast, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth. When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, took off his royal robes, covered himself with sackcloth and sat down in the dust. Then he issued a proclamation in Nineveh: ‘By the decree of the king and his nobles: Do not let any man or beast, herd or flock, taste anything; do not let them eat or drink.’” (Not that the beast had sinned, or could repent; but that, by their example, man might be admonished, considering that, for his sin, the anger of God was hanging over all creatures) “Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish” And their labor was not in vain. The fierce anger of God was turned away from them. “When God saw what they did (the fruits of that repentance and faith which he had brought about in them by his Prophet) and how they turned from their evil ways, he had compassion and did not bring on them the destruction he had threatened” [Jonah 3:4-10].

7. Fasting is a means not only of turning away the wrath of God, but also of obtaining whatever blessings we are in need of.

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We read in the Bible, that when the other tribes of Israel were in battle against the Benjamites and 18,000 Israelites were killed that, “Then the Israelites, all the people, went up to Bethel, and there they sat weeping before the LORD. They fasted that day until evening;” and then they asked the Lord, “‘Shall we go up again to battle with Benjamin our brother, or not?’ The LORD responded, ‘Go, for tomorrow I will give them into your hands’” [Judges 20:26-28].

In the same way, Samuel gathered all Israel together, when they were in bondage to the Philistines, and “On that day they fasted” before the Lord: And when “the Philistines drew near to engage Israel in battle, the LORD thundered with loud thunder against the Philistines and threw them into such a panic that they were routed before the Israelites” [1 Samuel 7:6, 10]. Likewise, Ezra tells us, that, “There, by the Ahava Canal, I proclaimed a fast, so that we might humble ourselves before our God and ask him for a safe journey for us and our children,” [Ezra 8:21]. In the same way, Nehemiah says, “I fasted and prayed before the God of heaven. And said, ‘Give your servant success today by granting him favor in the presence of this man.’ And God granted him mercy in the sight of the king. (Nehemiah 1:4-11)

In like manner, the apostles always joined fasting with prayer when they desired the blessing of God on any important undertaking. Thus we read, (Acts 13) “In the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: while they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, surely for direction in this undertaking, the Holy Spirit said, ‘Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.’ So after they had,” a second time “fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off.” [Acts 13:1-3]

In the same way also, Paul and Barnabas, as we read in the following chapter, “appointed elders in each church and, with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord, in whom they had put their trust” [Acts 14:23].

Finally, one more example, we see that blessings are to be obtained by the use of fasting, which are not otherwise attainable, our Lord expressly declares in his answer to his disciples, who had asked Him, “Why couldn't we drive the demon out? Jesus replied, Because you have so little faith. I tell you the truth, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there’ and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you. But this kind [of demon] does not go out except by prayer and fasting” [Matthew 17:19-20]- In other words, prayer and fasting are the appointed means by which the very demons are subject to you.

Fasting has been the appointed means: For it was not by intelligence or reason, that the people of God have been, in all ages, directed to use fasting as a means to these ends; but they have been, from time to time, taught it by God himself, by clear and open revelations of his will. A good example is found in the Book of Joel, where God says to His people, “return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning . . . Who knows? He may turn and have pity and leave behind a blessing. Blow the trumpet in Zion, declare a holy fast, call a sacred assembly . . . Then the LORD will be jealous for his land and take pity on his people. The LORD will reply to them: "I am sending you grain, new wine and oil, enough to satisfy you fully; never again will I make you an object of scorn to the nations.” (Joel 2.12ff)

Nor are they only earthly blessings which God tells his people to expect in the use of fasting with prayer and repentance. For, at the same time that he promised those who would seek him with fasting, and weeping, and mourning, that ““I will repay you for the years the locusts have eaten - the great locust and the young locust, the other locusts and the locust swarm - my great army that I sent among you;” he adds, “You will have plenty to eat, until you are full, and you will praise the name of the LORD your God.-Then you will know that I am in Israel, that I am the LORD your God.” And then immediately follows the great gospel promise: “I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days” [Joel 2:25-29].

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Now whatever reasons there were to motivate those of ages past, in the zealous and constant accomplishment of this duty, they are of equal force still to stimulate us. But above all these, we have a special reason for fasting often; namely, the command of Him by whose name we are called. Surely, Jesus does not, in His Sermon on the Mount, expressly command either fasting, the giving of money to the poor, or prayer; but his directions to be used when we fast, when we give to the poor, and when we pray, are of the same force. For by telling us how to fast, how to give, and how to pray, is an unquestionable command to do those very things. Consequently, the saying, "Give to the poor, pray, and fast" in such a manner, is a clear command to perform all those duties; as well as to perform them in that manner which will not lose its reward.

And an another additional motive and encouragement for the performance of this duty; is the promise which our Lord has graciously attached to the proper discharge of fasting, prayer, and the giving to the poor: "Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you."

Now we have seen the clear reasons and the purpose in fasting, however, there are some who consider themselves wiser than their Lord and have raised a number of objections against fasting.

III. Thirdly, how we can answer the most common objections against fasting:

1. The most plausible of these objections has been that "A Christian should fast from sin, and not from food: This is what God requires at his hands."

So he does; but he requires the other also. Therefore one should fast from sin, but also from food when God requires or calls for it.

Now look at their argument in its full dimensions; and you will easily judge of the strength of it:

If a Christian ought to abstain from sin, then he ought not to abstain from food:

But a Christian ought to abstain from sin.

Therefore he ought not to abstain from food.

It is completely true that a Christian must try to abstain from sin; but how does it follow from that, that he ought not to abstain from food? Yes, let him do both the one and the other. Let him, by the grace of God, always abstain from sin; and let him often abstain from food, for such reasons and ends as experience and Scripture plainly show.

2. Secondly, it has been objected, "But is it not better to abstain from pride and vanity, from foolish and hurtful desires, from crabbiness, and anger, and discontent, than from food?"

Without question, it is. But here again we must remind you of our Lord's words: "You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former."

And, indeed, the latter is just as important as the former; it is a means to that great end. We abstain from food with this view, that, by the grace of God conveyed into our souls through this outward means of fasting, in conjunction with all the other channels of his grace which he has appointed, we may be enabled to abstain from every passion and attitude which is not pleasing in his sight. We refrain from the one, that, being enabled with power from on high, we may be able to refrain from the other. So that your argument proves just the contrary to what you designed. It proves that we ought to fast. For if we ought to abstain from evil attitudes and desires, then we ought thus to abstain from food; since these little instances of self-denial are the ways God has chose, wherein to bestow that power to overcome sin.

3. A third objection: "But we do not find it to be true:" "We have often fasted; but what did it benefit us? We were not a bit better; we found no blessing as a result.

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No, we have found it a hindrance rather than an help. Instead of preventing anger, for instance, or fretfulness, it has been a means of increasing them to such a degree, that we could neither bear others nor ourselves.”

This may very possibly be the case. It is possible either to fast or pray in such a manner as to make you much worse than before; more unhappy, and more unholy. Yet the fault does not lie in the means itself, but in the manner of using it. Still use it, but use it in a different manner. Do what God commands as he commands it; and then, doubtless, his promise will not fail: His blessings will no longer be withheld; but, when you fast in secret, “Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.”

4. The fourth objection is: “But isn’t it mere superstition, to imagine that God regards such little things as fasting?”

If you say it is, you condemn all the generations of God's children. Will you say, all of them were weak, superstitious men? Can you be so bold as to call as weak and superstitious men such as Moses and Joshua, Samuel and David, Jehosaphat, Ezra, Nehemiah, and all the prophets? Yes, even the greatest of all-the Son of God himself? It is certain, both our Master, and all His servants just mentioned, did believe that fasting was not a little thing, and that He who is higher than the highest does honor it. Likewise, along the same lines, it is clear, that all of Christ’s Apostles, after they were “filled with the Holy Spirit, and with wisdom” when they had the “anointing of the Holy One, teaching them all things,” and commended themselves as the ministers of God . . . in fastings,” as well as “with weapons of righteousness in the right hand and in the left.” After “the bridegroom was taken from them; then they did fast.” Nor would they attempt anything where the glory of God was concerned, such as the sending out workers into the harvest fields, without solemn fasting as well as prayer.

5. The fifth objection is stated, “But if fasting is indeed of so great importance, and attended with such a blessing, then isn’t it best to fast all the time?”

The argument is, that we should not fast now and then, but to keep up a continual fast. To abstain from food, as much as our bodily strength will bear.” Let no one be discouraged from doing this. By all means eat as little as you desire and only plain food, exercise as much self-denial as you desire, and as much as your bodily strength will bear. And this may promote, by the blessing of God, several of the great ends mentioned above. It may be a considerable help, not only to holiness and purity, but also to heavenly-mindedness; to the weaning of your hearts from things below, and setting them on things above. Now listen carefully, this is not fasting, scriptural fasting; it is never termed as such in all the Bible-it is quite another thing. By all means practice it; but not in order to set aside a command of God, and as an instituted means of averting his judgments, and obtaining the blessings of his children.

So you may continually use as much abstinence as you please; which, is nothing other than Christian temperance; but this must never interfere with your observing solemn times of fasting and prayer. For instance: Your habitual abstinence or restraint must not prevent your fasting in secret, if you were suddenly overwhelmed with huge sorrow and remorse, and with horrible fear and dismay. Such a situation of mind would almost constrain you to fast; you would loathe your daily food; you would scarcely tolerate even to take in such foods that would be needful for the body, till God “lifted you up out of the horrible pit, and set your feet on a rock.” The same would be the case if you were in agony of heart, vehemently wrestling with God for his blessing. You would need no one to instruct you not to eat bread till you had obtained the request of your lips.

Again, had you been at Nineveh when it was proclaimed throughout the city, “Do not let any man or beast, herd or flock, taste anything; do not let them eat or drink. Let everyone call urgently on God;”-would your continual fast have been any reason for not taking part in that general humiliation? Doubtless it would not. You would have been as much concerned as any other not to take any food on that day.

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Lastly. Had you been with the brethren in Antioch, at the time when they fasted and prayed, before the sending out Barnabas and Saul, can you possibly imagine that your own personal abstinence would have been a sufficient reason for not joining in this special time of fasting and prayer? Without doubt, if you had not joined them, you would soon have been cut off from the Christian community. You would have deservedly been cast out from among them, as bringing confusion into the Church of God.

IV. In the last place, how we are to fast, so that it may be acceptable to the Lord?

1. First, let it be done to the Lord, with our eye firmly fixed on Him.

Let our intention be this, and this alone, to glorify our Father in heaven; to express our sorrow and shame for our many transgressions of his holy law; to wait for an increase of purifying grace, focusing our attention on things above; to add seriousness and earnestness to our prayers; to avert the wrath of God, and to obtain all the great and precious promises which he has made to us in Jesus Christ.

Let us beware of mocking God, of turning our fast, as well as our prayers, into an abomination to the Lord, by the mixture of any worldly view, particularly by seeking the praise of men. Our blessed Lord specifically warns against this in the words of the text. "When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting." In addition, they also covered themselves with dust and ashes to be sure everyone knew they were fasting, which was their chief purpose. "I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full"-the admiration and praise of men. "But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face:" Do as you are accustomed to do at other times; "so that it will not be obvious to men that you are fasting;" - do not let this be any part of your intention; for it doesn't matter whether others know it or not-it doesn't make you any better or worse. The only one that matters is "your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you."

2. Secondly, if we do desire this reward, let us beware of thinking we will merit anything from God by our fasting.

We cannot be warned too often of trying to "establish our own righteousness;" trying to procure salvation or any other need by our works and not by grace, for this is so deeply rooted in all of our hearts. Fasting is a way which God has ordained for us to receive his unmerited mercy; God is not obligated to give us anything, but he has promised to freely give us his blessing.

Now we are not to imagine, that the performance of any mere outward act of fasting will receive any blessing from God. God says, "Is this the kind of fast I have chosen, only a day for a man to humble himself? Is it only for bowing one's head like a reed and for lying on sackcloth and ashes?" Are these outward acts, however strictly performed, all that is meant by a man "humbling himself?" - "Is that what you call a fast, a day acceptable to the LORD?" No, surely not, for if it nothing but a mere external act, then it is nothing but wasted effort. Such a performance may possibly humble the body; but as to the soul, it profits nothing.

Now we must remember that in our fastings, that the body may sometimes be denied too much, so to become unfit for what God has called us to do. We must diligently guard against this; for we ought to preserve our health, as a gift of God. Therefore care is to be taken, whenever we fast, to proportion the fast to our strength. For we may not offer God murder for sacrifice, or destroy our bodies to help our souls.

But at these solemn times of our lives, we may, even when our bodies are weak and need nourishment, avoid that other extreme, for which God condemns those of the past who complained to God for not accepting their fasts. "'Why have we fasted,' they say, 'and you have not seen it? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you have not noticed?'" To which God replied, "Yet on the day of your fasting, you do as you please." If we cannot completely

When You Fast

by John Wesley (1703-1791)

abstain from food, we may, at least, abstain from our most favorite foods; and then we will not seek his face in vain.

3. Thirdly, let us be careful to humble our souls as well as our bodies.

Let every time of either public or private fasting, be a time of exercising all those holy attitudes which are implied in a broken and contrite heart. Let it be a time of devout mourning, of godly sorrow for sin; such a sorrow as that of the Corinthians, concerning which the Apostle said, "I am happy, not because you were made sorry, but because your sorrow led you to repentance. For you became sorrowful as God intended and so were not harmed in any way by us. Godly sorrow," which is a precious gift of his Spirit, lifting the soul to God from whom it flows, "brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret." Yes, and let our godly sorrow work in us the same inward and outward repentance; the same complete change of heart, renewed after the image of God, in righteousness and true holiness; and the same change of life, until we are holy as He is holy, in all of our conversations. Let it work in us the same sincerity that is found in him, without spot and blameless; the same integrity, evidenced in our lives rather than just in our words, by our abstaining from all appearance of evil; the same indignation, fervent hatred of every sin; the same fear of our own deceitful hearts; the same desire to be in all things conformed to the holy and acceptable will of God; the same zeal for whatever may be a means of his glory, and of our growth in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ; and the same revenge against Satan and all his works, against all filthiness both of flesh and Spirit. (2 Corinthians 7:9ff)

4. Fourthly, let us always join fervent prayer with fasting, pouring out our souls before God, confessing our sins, humbling ourselves under his mighty hand, laying open before him all our needs, all our guiltiness and helplessness.

This is a time for expanding our prayers, both in behalf of ourselves and of others. Let us now grieve over the sins of our people; and cry aloud for the Church, that the Lord may build her up, and cause his face to shine on her. Thus, we may observe, the men of God, in ancient times always joined prayer and fasting together; likewise the Apostles, in all the instances cited above; and even our Lord fasted and prayed.

5. Lastly, one other thing needs to be mentioned with regard to fasting: in order for our fasting to be acceptable to the Lord, we need to add prayers and gifts to the poor; works of mercy, within our power, both to the bodies and souls of men, for: "With such sacrifices God is pleased."

We see this clearly illustrated when the angel declares to Cornelius, who was fasting and praying in his house, the angel said, "Your prayers and gifts to the poor have come up as a memorial offering before God" [Acts 10:4ff]. And God himself clearly and specifically declares: "Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke. Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter - when you see the naked, to clothe him, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood? Then your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear; then your righteousness will go before you, and the glory of the LORD will be your rear guard. Then you will call, and the LORD will answer; you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I. If you do away with the yoke of oppression, with the pointing finger and malicious talk, and if you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed, then your light will rise in the darkness, and your night will become like the noonday. The LORD will guide you always; he will satisfy your needs in a sun-scorched land and will strengthen your frame. You will be like a well-watered garden, like a spring whose waters never fail" [Isaiah 58:6-11]. Amen.