

Fasting, Hungering for God By Phillip Sessa



Is such the fast that I choose, a day for a person to humble himself? (Isaiah 58:5)

There is a treatise by an old Puritan, called, “The soul-fattening institution of fasting,”. John Calvin said, “**Holy and legitimate fasting is directed to three ends; for we practice it either as a restraint on the flesh,** (1) to preserve it from licentiousness, (2) or as a preparation for prayers and pious meditations, (3) or as a testimony of our humiliation in the presence of God when we are desirous of confessing our guilt before him.

(1) To preserve it from licentiousness. Licentiousness is immorality, depravity, wickedness, evil, corruption. Furthermore it is extreme indulgence in sensuality without regard for moral restraints.

- [Mk 7:21–23](#) For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.”
- [Ga 5:19](#) Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality,
- [Eph 4:19](#) They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity.
- [Ro 13:13–14](#) Let us walk properly as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and sensuality, not in quarreling and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

It is not hard to make provision for the flesh, and gratify its desires. The flesh is always hungry and desires instant gratification. The heart of the issue, is the issue of the heart. Do you try to starve the flesh and feed the spirit by the Word of God on a daily basis. Do you have a steady intake of the Word of God?

(2) As a preparation for prayers and pious meditations.

In Spurgeon's day, steam was the main power source. Boiler rooms were powerhouses that drove everything from home heating systems to enormous machines in factories. While boiler rooms were never the most glamorous part of a building they were absolutely essential. Spurgeon said, "If the engine room is out of action, then the whole mill will grind to a halt. We cannot expect blessings if we do not ask." Spurgeon recognized that the prayers of God's people were essential in fueling his preaching and his church. When people came to his church to learn the "secret" of his success, he took them to the basement where there were hundreds of people on their knees in fervent prayer. Yes. There was prayer before, and even during the service! Spurgeon called these prayer gatherings the church's "boiler room."

The Apostle Paul wrote, "For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, ¹⁵ from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, ¹⁶ that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, ¹⁷ so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, ¹⁸ may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, ¹⁹ and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God (Eph 3:14-19)."

The flow of power is that prayer → Spirit → Jesus → God's Power → The Saints. Prayers were like the boiler room that transformed our petitions to God into usable energy. Without the engine room of prayer nothing else works, and all ministry quietly loses its energy and effectiveness.

In a study done by Crossway they found "85% of Christians in a typical church do not have much of a prayer life. Praying communities are, perhaps, even more rare. I was taken aback by the findings of a 2017 Barna study on the state of corporate prayer in America that said 94% of American adults who pray do so by themselves. Only 6% of us are praying with someone else."¹

Coropate Prayer

In Acts 12 when King Herod violently attacked the church murdering James with the sword, it pleased the Jews to seize and throw Peter in jail as next in line to be a martyr. While Peter was sleeping in prison chained between two guards Acts 12:5, "**earnest prayer for him was made to God by the church.**" The angel of the Lord showed up in that cell, opened the door, and caused the chains to fall from his hands, and Peter walked out of that prison. If we believe in the power of pray then why don't we gather to pray? Think about a bonfire. When one log that is on fire is taken out of fellowship with the other logs and placed on its own the fire dies. However, when that same log is placed back into fellowship with the other logs, it ignites once again. The late Missionary Hudson Taylor said: "The prayer power has never been tried to its full capacity...if we want to see mighty wonders of divine power and grace wrought in the place of weakness, failure and disappointment, let us answer God's standing challenge, 'Call unto me, and I will answer thee, and show thee great and mighty things which thou knowest not.'" I trust you already pray alone, but

¹. "Silent and Solo: How Americans Pray," Barna, August 15, 2017, <https://www.barna.com>.

may I challenge you to gather with the saints and may the logs come together in fellowship and ignite one another in the prayer by the Spirit of God.

(3) As a testimony of our humiliation in the presence of God when we are desirous of confessing our guilt before him.

“Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you (1 Peter 5:6). Humility does not seem to be an attribute which is glorified in our culture, but it should be a character of the people of God. When we are humbled we see that we must confess our sin before The Lord, and forsake and “lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, ²looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith (Heb 12:1-2).” One way that we lay aside every weight is to fast and starve the flesh of what it desires, so we might honor the Lord and say no to sin.

Fasting rejected by God

In Isaiah 58, concerning fasting the people complained when God did not recognize their fasting as genuine, but half-hearted. It may seem strange that the Lord should rebuke His people for seeking daily to know His ways and delight in Him (v. 2). However, this seeking was not being done from right motives but in proud hypocrisy. Their’s was a hypocritical fast, which resulted in contention, quarreling, and pretense, excluding the possibility of genuine prayer to God. They did not care for the poor who lacked food and clothing as they should have, and oppressed those in slavery (Ex. 21:2; Deut. 15:12). At this time fasting was more than an outward ritual and false repentance, but rather penitence over sin and humility, and acting humanely toward those in need.” However the fasting in Nineveh was not a false hypocritical humility, it was genuine and received by God! Worship means giving to the one you are worshiping that which pleases his heart. Cain did not please the heart and God and his worship was rejected, while Abel’s was received by God. Outward devotion without a true change of heart is worthless in God’s sight.

Fasting Received by God

Many that fast do so as response to being in mourning, lamentation, or sorrow, even being broken, and shattered in heart over their sin. Jonah chapter 3 read, “Jonah began to go into the city, going a day’s journey. And he called out, “Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” ⁵ And the people of Nineveh believed God. They called for a fast and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least of them. ⁶The word reached the king of Nineveh, and he arose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. ⁷ And he issued a proclamation and published through Nineveh, “By the decree of the king and his nobles: **Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything. Let them not feed or drink water,** ⁸ but let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, **and let them call out mightily to God.** Let everyone **turn from his evil way** and from the violence that is in his hands. ⁹Who knows? God may turn and relent and turn from his fierce anger, so that we may not perish.”²

This city mourned over her sin, from the king of Nineveh downward. There were clear outward expressions of contrition, deep-seated sorrow, (2 Cor 7:10) For godly grief produces a repentance that leads

² *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (Jon 3:4-9). (2016). Crossway Bibles.

to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death.” They were the real deal! They fasted, which was an act of self-denial symbolic of what was taking place in their own hearts. There was deep concern that God was going to strike them all down. They realized in their own hearts, they were no contest for the Lord of heaven and earth. Although they were a people and a city that knew no equal in power had met finally its match before the face of The all powerful God of Jonah!

When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it (Jonah 3:10). God was pleased with this fast but why? Let’s look at another fast that God wasn’t pleased with to answer this question.

Jesus’ Fast was War and Weapon, Testing and Triumph

In Matthew 4, Jesus was led into the wilderness to be tested, at which time he was fasting. As the incarnate Christ he was tested, allowing his own heart to be probed with fasting to see where his allegiance lay, with his love for God or his love for bread. Just as God called to Adam, “Adam where are you, after eating the forbidden fruit”, fasting tests where the heart is in a similar way. Is our heart with God and for God, or with the world and for the world? Despite the temptations of the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, Jesus overcame all three temptations, thus succeeding where Adam failed.

Fasting Misconceptions

Some people think that fasting is just sort of a – a ticket to blessing in and of itself. Martin Lloyd Jones says “There are some people who fast because they expect direct and immediate results from it.” Some treat fasting like a genie in a lamp, and when you forsake your three meals God will grant you your hearts desire. After all the Psalm 37 states, “...he will give you the desires of your heart.” Those that quote from this verse divorced from it’s context do put the cart before the horse. The verse actually states, “Delight yourself in the Lord, **and** he will give you the desires of your heart.” God is the chief pleasure of man. And his delight shall be in the fear of the Lord (Isaiah 11:3). You make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore (16:11).” God will not withhold Himself from those who seek Him as their joy and desire (105:3–4; Isa. 55:6; James 4:8), together with all that they need (Matt. 6:33).³

Job had a right heart and perspective when it came to Bible over belly, Scripture over a scumptuous meal when he said, “**I have not departed from the commandment of his lips; I have treasured the words of his mouth more than my portion of food** (Job 23:12).”

Selah:

We need a move of God in our heart and nation in ligh of the soul-fattening institution of fasting. Are you willing, not commanded, to pull away from the tale that you might feast more on the Lord? Who will gather with you to cry out to God, in repentance, humility, and seek that face of God, and desire His Word more than your portion of food?

Resources:

- <https://www.crossway.org/articles/an-open-letter-to-the-prayerless-church/>

³ Beeke, J. R., Barrett, M. P. V., & Bilkes, G. M., eds. (2014). *The Reformation Heritage KJV Study Bible* (p. 791). Reformation Heritage Books.