

Day Twenty-Six

As they ministered to the Lord and fasted, the Holy Spirit said, So, then, separate Barnabas and Saul to Me for the work to which I have called them. Then having fasted and prayed and laid hands on them, they let them go. -Acts 13:2-3

Prayer and Fasting

If it weren't for going without food, fasting would be much easier. I think most people would agree with that. Just the thought of foregoing a meal is a sobering ordeal.

Richard Foster's Book, "**Celebration of Discipline- The Path to Spiritual Growth**" lists three separate disciplines. The Inward, The Outward, and The Corporate. He lists four disciplines for the "Inward": 1. Meditation 2. Prayer 3. Fasting 4. Study. His concepts seem to be in line with the New Testament thoughts on the subject of fasting. It is an inward not an outward act.

Consider what Jesus said concerning the act of fasting. ***"And whenever you fast, do not put on a gloomy face as the hypocrites do, for they neglect their appearance in order to be seen fasting by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. "But you, when you fast, anoint your head, and wash your face so that you may not be seen fasting by men, but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will repay you. -Matthew 6:16-18.***

Why is it that the subject of fasting has been so neglected by the Church? Is it ignorance? Is it fear? Is it a misunderstanding? Is it doctrinal? For whatever reason the topic of prayer and fasting has been, at best, scantily covered, more in an apologizing way than in the spirit of which it was given us. It has been excused with such passages as Paul's treatise on self abasement in his letter to Colossians. ***"Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch!" (which all refer to things destined to perish with the using)--in accordance with the commandments and teachings of men? These are matters which have, to be sure, the appearance of wisdom in self-made religion and self-abasement and severe treatment of the body, but are of no value against fleshly indulgence. -Colossians 2:21-23.*** They may cite Isaiah's passage as to that which the Lord prefers: ***"Is this not the fast which I***

choose, To loosen the bonds of wickedness, To undo the bands of the yoke, And to let the oppressed go free, And break every yoke? -Isaiah 58:6. If this is their reasoning, then it is inconsistent with the inspired apostles, the early Church, and Christ Himself who fasted.

However, a closer look will show that this most certainly does not explain away fasting as a practice for Christians. In fact, we find that fasting was a vital part of the early Church. They prayed and fasted before they made important decisions. They prayed and fasted before they sent out the apostles on their missionary journeys. Jesus told His disciples that there were some things that required prayer and fasting and not miraculous healings alone. Paul tells husbands and wives to separate from each other for a time that their prayers not be hindered when they fast and pray.

Then the disciples came to Jesus apart, and said, Why could we not cast him out? And Jesus said to them, Because of your unbelief. For truly I say to you, If you have faith like a grain of mustard seed, you shall say to this mountain, Move from here to there. And it shall move. And nothing shall be impossible to you. However, this kind does not go out except by prayer and fasting. -Matthew 17:19-21 (MKJV)

When they had appointed elders for them in every church, having prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed. -Acts 14:23

Do not deprive one another, unless it is with consent for a time, so that you may give yourselves to fasting and prayer. And come together again so that Satan does not tempt you for your incontinence. -1 Corinthians 7:5

And while they were ministering to the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." Then, when they had fasted and prayed and laid their hands on them, they sent them away. -Acts 13:2-3

It is here that most reliable people will warn anyone attempting to fast to seek medical advice prior to engaging in it. I would not disagree with this. Some people simply cannot fast for health reasons. There are some who cannot because of psychological issues with disorders such as bulimia, anorexia or other such things that makes it a dangerous undertaking. It may be that conditions

such as diabetes or chronic health problems would prevent this. One need not think that because they are unable to physically fast that they are in any way less spiritual.

Why fast? What is there to gain from fasting? Whatever it is, there is a blessing in it, or God would not have given it as something to do. The answers to some of our questions may lie in the Old Testament. It seems that fasting was a way in which those who were in dire circumstances sought God with prayer and fasting.

Jehoshaphat was afraid and turned his attention to seek the LORD, and proclaimed a fast throughout all Judah. So Judah gathered together to seek help from the LORD; they even came from all the cities of Judah to seek the LORD. -2 Chronicles 20:3-4

Then I proclaimed a fast there at the river of Ahava, that we might humble ourselves before our God to seek from Him a safe journey for us, our little ones, and all our possessions. -Ezra 8:21

Now it came about when I heard these words, I sat down and wept and mourned for days; and I was fasting and praying before the God of heaven. -Nehemiah 1:4

Now on the twenty-fourth day of this month the sons of Israel assembled with fasting, in sackcloth and with dirt upon them. The descendants of Israel separated themselves from all foreigners, and stood and confessed their sins and the iniquities of their fathers. -Nehemiah 9:1-2

When Mordecai learned all that had been done, he tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and ashes, and went out into the midst of the city and wailed loudly and bitterly. And he went as far as the king's gate, for no one was to enter the king's gate clothed in sackcloth. And in each and every province where the command and decree of the king came, there was great mourning among the Jews, with fasting, weeping, and wailing; and many lay on sackcloth and ashes. -Esther 4:1-3

But as for me, when they were sick, my clothing was sackcloth; I humbled my soul with fasting, And my prayer kept returning to my bosom. I went about as though it were my friend or brother; I bowed down mourning, as one who sorrows for a mother. -Psalms 35:13-14

For zeal for Thy house has consumed me, And the reproaches of those who reproach Thee have fallen on me. When I wept in my soul with fasting, It became my reproach. When I made

sackcloth my clothing, I became a byword to them. -Psalms 69:9-11

For I am afflicted and needy, And my heart is wounded within me. I am passing like a shadow when it lengthens; I am shaken off like the locust. My knees are weak from fasting, And my flesh has grown lean, without fatness. -Psalms 109:22-24
So I gave my attention to the Lord God to seek Him by prayer and supplications, with fasting, sackcloth and ashes. -Daniel 9:3

"Yet even now," declares the LORD, "Return to Me with all your heart, And with fasting, weeping, and mourning; And rend your heart and not your garments." Now return to the LORD your God, For He is gracious and compassionate, Slow to anger, abounding in lovingkindness, And relenting of evil. -Joel 2:12-13

With the examples given before us, we can see that fasting was accompanied with such things as prayer, repentance, mourning, tears, weeping, wailing, sackcloth, ashes and confession. At the very least we have solemnity and the intensity of our soul's deepest feelings being devoted during a time of prayer and fasting. It is not a dietary constriction for health reasons. It is not to lose weight. It is not a punishment of the body. It is not for outward show for others to see.

Fasting may be for individuals and it may be for a congregation for those who are able and it may even be a national day of prayer and fasting as has been done in the United States by John Adams and Abraham Lincoln (see attached page). Your fast may be for guidance in an important decision in your life. it may be to refocus your life to God. It may be because of sin in your life. it may be a regular occasion in which you seek a deeper relationship with God.

There will no doubt be those who disagree with those who wish to fast. We must remember that this is something that is voluntary and not forced. A fast should be accompanied with prayer and done in the spirit with which the Bible teaches us. Fasting will not make us 'Super Christians'. It is a deeply personal relationship you share with God and thus it is He who will bless you. Again, the greatest of care should be taken for your health and well being.

Prayerful Thoughts: Father, we seek Thee for guidance in all things.