

Fasting by Dr. Joseph A. Pipa

Fasting is one of the neglected means of grace in the contemporary church. Yet God teaches us to fast. In 1 Samuel 7:6, the people fasted in connection with repentance of sin. In 2 Chronicles 20:3, Jehoshaphat called a fast to seek the Lord's favor and deliverance.

But fasting is not merely an Old Testament phenomenon. It is clearly taught in the New Testament as well. In Matthew 9:15, Jesus points out that fasting was for times of mourning and seeking and not for the time of joy. "But the days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them and then they will fast." In Matthew 6:16, Jesus assumed that we would fast. He calls fasting a deed of righteousness and puts it into the category with giving money to the poor and prayer.

Following our Savior's injunction, the New Testament Church practiced fasting. In Acts 13:3, they fasted and prayed when they ordained Saul (Paul) and Barnabas. Paul and Barnabas observed the same practice in Acts 14:23.

Considering the above verses, it is evident that fasting, coupled with prayer, is a divinely appointed means of grace to be practiced by Christians. But what about public fasting? After all, doesn't Jesus say do not fast to be seen by men? In order to answer this question, we must compare Scripture with Scripture. In the Bible, there are several examples of public fasts. We have already noted the practice of the Church of Antioch in Acts 13.

How then do we reconcile this with Jesus' command that we should not fast in order to be seen of men? The answer is quite simple. Jesus is no more prohibiting public fasting than he is prohibiting public prayer when he says that we are not to do these things to be seen of men. He is not dealing with the practicing of fasting or prayer but with the MOTIVES. We are never to do these things to be praised

by men. We are only to do them to seek the Lord. Our motives must always be God-centered and never man-centered.

The *Westminster Confession of Faith* 21.5 teaches the church may practice “solemn fastings and thanksgivings upon special occasions.” The Presbyterian Church in America’s *Directory for Worship* authorizes both private and public fasting as proper acts of worship (Ch. 62). Therefore, we ought not only to fast privately, but also publicly, when such fasts are called by the Session, Presbytery or the General Assembly.

Having established a Biblical basis for private and public fasting, let us consider the purposes of fasting. We will not attempt to cover all the purposes but the two general purposes: one negative and one positive.

The positive purpose is to seek the Lord. Fasting is an aid in prayer and meditation. This was the reason for Jehoshaphat’s fast in 2 Chronicles 20:3: “Jehoshaphat was afraid and turned his attention to seek the Lord and proclaimed a fast throughout all Judah.” As Calvin says, “Their sole purpose in this kind of fasting is to render themselves more eager and unencumbered for prayer. Surely we experience this: with a full stomach, our mind is not so lifted up to God that it can be drawn to prayer with a serious and ardent affection and persevere in it.” (*Institutes*, IV.12.16). Fasting coupled with prayer for a specific purpose gives intensity to the prayer. The mind is keen and sharp as the body joins with the soul in pleading with God.

The negative purpose is to bear testimony of our self-abasement before God when we wish to confess guilt before him. We see a clear example of this in Joel 2:12-16: “Yet even now, declares the Lord, return to Me with all your heart, all with fasting, weeping and mourning; and rend your heart but 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. Who knows whether He will not turn and

relent, and leave a blessing behind Him, even a grain offering and a libation for the Lord your God? Blow a trumpet in Zion, consecrate a fast, proclaim a solemn assembly, gather the people, sanctify the congregation, assemble the elders, gather the children and the nursing infants” On this passage Calvin comments, “He cries out for them to hasten to sackcloth and ashes, to weeping and fasting, that is, to prostrate themselves before the Lord also with outward testimonies. Indeed, sackcloth and ashes were perhaps more appropriate to those times; but there is no doubt that meeting and weeping and fasting, and like activities, apply equally to our age whenever the condition of our affairs so demands. For since this is a holy exercise both for the humbling of men and of their confession of humility, why should we use it less than the ancients did in similar need? . . . No, it is an excellent aid for believers today (as it always was) and a profitable admonition to arouse them in order that they may not provoke God more and more by their excessive confidence and negligence . . .” (IV.12.17). We see here that fasting is a means of humbling ourselves before God in order to express our true sorrow and repentance.

Recognizing the uniqueness of the current pandemic, the Moderator of Presbytery and the Administrative Committee are calling for our congregations on April 13 to observe a Day of Prayer and Fasting to mourn and confess the sins of our nation and particularly the church. We recognize that the current pandemic (among other things) is the hand of God’s judgment on the world and our nation. Peter reminds us that judgment begins with the household of God (1 Peter 4:17).

We will spend this time humbling ourselves for our personal sins, the sins of the church, and the sins of our nation. The Clerk of Presbytery, Mr. Mel Duncan, is preparing a prayer service at Second Presbyterian Church in Greenville, which will be streamed live online.

In fasting, you are to abstain from all food for a period of time in order to devote yourself to the stated purposes. We recommend that you begin your fast after your evening meal April 12 and end it

after the noon meal, April 13. Some, because of health, will not be able to abstain totally, but all can deprive themselves to some extent for the agreed-on purposes: those who are unable to abstain totally should eat less than is their custom.

We also recommend that you take the money spared in not eating and give it to the Deacons of your congregation to be used in relief for those suffering economically.

Dr. Joseph A Pipa, Jr.