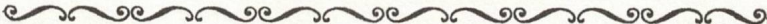


THE PRACTICE OF GODLINESS



III

Godliness

FASTING is but a more emphatic expression of Paul's outcry, "Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?"

For it is the body that protests when we would fast. It is the body that occupies almost all of our time, demanding to be fed and clothed and tended. We are so busy from morning till night fulfilling the demands of the body, that there is barely a half hour left in the day for quiet meditation and prayer. That is a common complaint.

Paul says, "I buffet my body and bring it into bondage..." Thereby he reverses the natural tendency which says, "My body is master and I am its servant."

It is amazing how the physical often dominates, even in a Christian home. A large proportion of time is spent in the procuring, preparing and eating of food, in cleaning, sewing, mending, buying and beautifying. And above all, how largely our minds—our conversations, plans and wishes—are occupied with these things!

Would Paul's words be a fitting motto on our walls: "I bring my body into bondage"?

Not only does the physical occupy a great share of our time. There is the further danger that it may actually dominate the spiritual. Particularly when men abandon themselves to the enjoyment of food and drink.

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Our meals should be festive events in the home life, an expression of family unity, an enjoyment of each other's company even more than of the food.

But the over-indulgence sometimes practised, especially on feast days, makes one wonder if the body is truly the temple of the Holy Spirit—even though a blessing is asked at the beginning of the meal, and the Bible appears at the end.

When the mind and heart are so largely occupied with earthly affairs and with the enjoyment of food, drink and clothing, does prayer flow spontaneously?

Ah no, we are not advocating that godliness consists of "touch not, taste not" rules. Nor can moderation in food and drink take the place of faith and hope and love. There is nothing more repugnant to us than a piety which tends toward outward show.

Our intention is quite the opposite. We would have you *know* yourself, know if perhaps the service of external things is a hindrance in your prayer life, if it does not chill your love and prevent close fellowship with your Lord.

To counteract this danger, can there be a more natural remedy than fasting?

In many of our Christian homes Sunday is still observed with impressive quietness and solemnity. There is a hush in the home. No running up and down the stairs, no rushing about. But a subdued, restful spirit of solemnity. In the kitchen, too, there is little activity, for the meals are of the simplest, merely enough to satisfy hunger.

Much like such a Lord's Day, carried a bit farther, were the prayer and fast days of our fore-fathers. Sobriety in food

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and clothing, a minimum of work, and a conscious subduing of the spirit before God.

Total abstinence from food was suggested, but not required. A bit of bread or a drink of milk might prevent the distraction of physical discomfort. The strong made no rules for the weak; little children were given enough to content them. There was complete freedom, combined with the sincere desire to subdue the demands of the body in order that the spirit might the better worship God.

Appearance, too, expressed humility before God. Not by obvious dishabille, or by pharisaical sadness of face, but simply by abstaining from the self-satisfaction of ornament.

As far as possible, daily tasks were laid aside. The entire congregation spent as much as possible of the day in church, gathering in quiet groups between services to discuss spiritual matters, as in the presence of the Lord. It was a day of congregational mourning and prayer.

Fasting as a family was slightly different. The occasion was perhaps some adversity, or a spirit of disharmony in the home, or perhaps some special sin of a member of the family. The father, as head of the house, would then enjoin a day of fasting—not as punishment, but as a “humbling before God.” And the end of such a day usually saw peace and contentment restored, while the spirit of prayer lingered for many a day afterward.

Then there was also perpetual fasting. As one who is bowed in mourning cannot eat, so one oppressed with spiritual sorrow may refuse food for a day. An overwhelming sense of having grieved the Lord, and a longing for renewed peace with God, these sentiments were not uncommon in those days. And they caused men to humble themselves in fasting before Him who searches the hearts.

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We seldom hear of such fasting today.

We have become estranged from it. Men shrug their shoulders and smile at the mention of it. In our thoughts it is associated only with Roman Catholicism.

Physical hygiene has a place of importance in our lives. But spiritual hygiene? That hardly seems worth the effort.

Good behaviour, decency and good manners, even these are almost too much to expect.

And where is the genuine thirst for fellowship with the eternal God?

We are not referring to unbelievers. They have their vain ideals. We have in mind confessors of the Name of Christ. And we would ask: What is it that motivates your life? What is most important to you? Is it how you may remain in sweet fellowship with the Lord? Enjoy His presence? And know the peace of reconciliation with Him?

Is that what motivates you and guides your steps? Is that your reason for choosing what to do or not to do?

If not, is your spiritual life what it ought to be?

Mere abstinence from food is not pleasing to God.

But when it is motivated by true humility before God, it is a means of regaining blessed fellowship with Him.

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IV

Not by Bread Alone

UNHESITATINGLY we recommend fasting for the Christians of today. In fact, we are inclined to say that there is more reason for fasting in our day than ever before. Corrupted human nature yearns for luxury, and tends to become more corrupt as wealth and luxury increase. God knows that we cannot well be checked except by burdens and sorrows. And He himself has suggested fasting, by means of which we may guard against the unspiritual influence of ease and luxury. I

Israel's experience in the wilderness contains a lesson to which we may well give heed.

When Jesus thrust away the temptation of Satan, he quoted from Deuteronomy 8, "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God."

These were Moses' words, spoken in reference to the forty years* wandering in the wilderness. And Moses tells us the reason for that prolonged hardship, "The Lord your God led thee these forty years in the wilderness to humble thee, . . . to prove thee, to know what was in thine heart. . . . He humbled thee and suffered thee to hunger ... to do thee good at thy latter end. That your heart should not say, 'My power and the might of mine hand hath gotten me this wealth,' but that thou shalt remember the Lord thy God; for