

"GIVE YOURSELF TO FASTING AND PRAYER."

It is a contradiction in terms, that while members of the churches of the Reformation profess to live according to the precepts of Holy Writ, they do not fast. It is certainly a Scriptural rule of life, not only in the Old, but also in the New Testament. Christ himself fasted forty days and forty nights. St. Paul exhorts the children of God, that they give themselves not only to prayer but also to fasting. What is possibly stronger still, Christ has said, that there is a kind of evil spirits that "goeth not out but by prayer and fasting" (Matt. 17:21).

In the days of Jesus' ministry on earth the question arose: "Why do the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but thy disciples fast not." Though it may be inferred from this that in those days the disciples did not observe the Jewish fasts, Jesus settles the question by saying: "When the bridegroom shall be taken away from them, then shall they fast" (Mark 2:18-20). History shows that from the beginning the Church of Christ has practiced fasting. We learn from Acts 13:2 that at Antioch, where the followers of Jesus were first called Christians, as they fasted and prayed, the Holy Ghost gave them a revelation. It is well known that in Roman, Greek and Nestorian communions fasting is observed. It is also known that in Reformation times, days of prayer went hand in hand with fasting. Is it not therefore in contradiction with the significance which Scripture and history attach to fastings, that among us fast-

ing is almost altogether abandoned. It is still our habit, as it was in the days of Hosea, to say: "Our God, we Israel, know thee" (8:2). But when Scripture shows that the Knowledge of God is greatly advanced by prayer, and prayer by fasting, is there not something lacking, when we, who say that we know God, do not fast?

The answer is given in Is. 58:6. In the days of Isaiah there was much fasting observed in Judah, but by his prophet Jehovah declared that he would not accept this kind of fasting. "Is it such a fast that I have chosen; a day for a man to afflict his soul? to bow down his head as a bulrush, and to spread sackcloth and ashes under him? . . . "Is not this the fast that I have chosen? to loose the bands of wickedness, . . . to deal thy bread to the hungry, . . . when thou seest the naked, that thou cover him; and that thou hide not thyself from thine own flesh? Then shall thy light break forth as the morning, and thine health shall spring forth speedily."

This striking protest against dead formalism has justly aroused among us a sense of aversion to formal fasting. As a form, as a mere bodily exercise, and as an exhibition before the world, fasting does not sanctify. Indeed it can work profanation. Hence Jesus' warning in the Sermon on the Mount: "But thou, when thou fastest, be not as the hypocrites, of a sad countenance. . . but anoint thine head, and wash thy face, that thou appear not unto men to fast, but unto thy Father, which is in secret; and thy Father, which seeth in secret, shall reward thee openly."

As strongly, however, as our blessed Lord denounces formal, outward fasting, he commends

fasting of the right sort, and declares that it has its reward of grace with God. We are only safe therefore, when on one hand we oppose dead formalism in fasting, and on the other hand bring into practice the true fasting, which has been appointed of God. And as we look back upon the past, and look around us in the churches, we must observe that dead, formal fasting has assiduously been abandoned, and that real, religious, and Divinely appointed fasting also has almost utterly died out.

This leads to spiritual loss. We want eternal life. "This is eternal life, that they might know thee, the only true God." Nothing advances one in this knowledge of the only true God like prayer. And prayer becomes more fervent and tender by fasting. Can we escape therefore the fatal conclusion that by the disuse of fasting our prayers become less fervent, and that we consequently suffer loss in this ever ripening knowledge of God, which is eternal life?

If this applies to ourselves and to our families, does it not equally apply to our churches? And when every time again we observe in our churches, that there are evil spirits at large, which can not be driven out except by fasting and prayer, is it too much to say, that the disuse of fasting is one cause, among others, that these spirits continue to harrass the life of the church?

Should fasting, as a rule, on a given day of the week be introduced again? By itself there would be nothing against this. But it is to be feared that before long it would end in formalism again. Isaiah 58 and I Cor. 7:5 show that fasting, in the spiritual sense, has a much broader basis than a

temporary abstinence from food. It aims to put an end to the dominion of the body over the soul, and to restore the soul's dominion over the body. You know yourself that everything that feeds and pleases the body has a tendency to repress the clearness and elasticity of the life of the soul. The side of our life that is turned toward the world rarely operates in harmony with the side of our life that is turned toward God. When you are alone you feel as a rule closer to God than when you are in company. In the banqueting hall you are farther away from God than in your bedchamber. In the midst of the cares to increase your wealth you enjoy less of God's presence than at the times when you give of your money to the poor. You are closer to God when you feed the hungry than when, with your family or guests, you feast on choice foods and drinks. In brief, experience confirms again and again, that the less enjoyment you take in the world, the more intimate is your thought of God. The more you get apart from the cares and the joys of the world, the closer becomes your walk with God.

Do not infer from this, that in order to know God, you must withdraw entirely from the world. This is what the Stylists thought, the recluses and contemplative monks. This is wrong, because "fasting and prayer" is indeed one of the means by which to find God, but there are many other means to this same end, which only present themselves in the midst of the busy life. We treated these means in former meditations. We will come back to them later on. But it must be a rule of our life, not to leave untried a single means, by which to grow in knowledge of the only true God,

and that therefore we have to serve God as much in the midst of the world, and in the enjoyment of his blessings in our families and surroundings, as in our practice of "fasting and prayer." For it can not be denied, that it is helpful and beneficial, purposely, from time to time, to break away from the overwhelming dominion of the body and the world, and thereby make ourselves more susceptible to the influences from above. To this end one will be more impressed with the need of fasting and retirement at set times. Another will only come to it in moments of anxiety and deepening seriousness. Let every one with respect to this be sure in his own conscience. It may depend on temperament and circumstances. Let no one judge his brother.

But the practice itself has a right of being introduced into the habits of life. Our first interest is eternal life. This can only be tasted in an ever deeper knowledge of God. This in turn is fed by secret prayer. And secret prayer has need, that in the face of the offensive dominion of the body and the environments, the dominion of the soul be strengthened by fasting rightly understood. That sobriety in food and drink is an aid in this direction, appears from the difficulty to pray, which you find upon your return from a banquet-hall. But this is merely the beginning of real fasting. It is not only abundance of food and drink, but extravagance as well in ornaments and clothes, in diversions and satisfactions of the senses, and in financial cares, voluntary or involuntary, that harmfully affect your approach to God. Fasting, therefore, as an aid to sanctify prayer and to make it more fervent, is by no

means alone the depriving of the body of food and drink, but the withdrawal of self by generosity from the dominion of money, by sobriety and simplicity of life to liberate oneself from the power of self-indulgence, and certainly also by seclusion to escape the mastery of environment.

This is what the Lord declared, when he extended fasting to loosening the bands of wickedness, and to feeding the hungry. From time to time the soul must set itself free, cast away all bands and become entirely itself. Then the gates lift up their heads, then the door of eternity is opened, and God makes his approach to us, and our soul its approach to God, and the knowledge of God, which is eternal life, blossoms in the sanctuary of the heart.

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“NO PRAYER COULD PASS THROUGH.”

When a child wants to ask his father for something, he first seeks him, and only when he has found him, can he ask for what he wants. To state his request before his father is found is folly on the part of the child. Is not this an instruction in prayer?

He who as a child of God would pray to his Father in heaven, and in faith ask something from him, must first make his approach to God. He must first seek the Divine Presence. And only when he has found the Lord, can he ask for what he wants. This is little thought of in prayer. We frequently observe that in our