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Fasting, a Means of Self-Discipline.

IN AGREEMENT WITH THE TEACHING OF HOLY
SCRIPTURE AND OF THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND.

THE practice of self-denial in some form is generally admitted to be a duty of the Christian life. It is a duty upon the discharge of which depends not only our present, but also future happiness. The self-indulgent have never attained to the truest happiness, even in this life. He who is bent upon seeking his own pleasure, who is always "looking on his own things" (Phil. ii. 4), who seeks exclusively his own ease or comfort, and consults his own convenience, without considering the welfare of others, must sooner or later find that the good he has sought, the advantage which he covets, has passed beyond his reach. Selfishness, in all its multifarious forms, gives birth sooner or later to its own Nemesis. The Christian alone of all men is capable of attaining the truest satisfaction. He may have his trials, his losses, his sorrows, but they seldom come and pass away without leaving behind them some corresponding blessing or advantage. They may be *intensely real*, and such as he is compelled to admit cannot be fully understood (1 Pet. iv. 12, 13), but, inasmuch as they are not of his own seeking, he is assured that they are permitted by One who intends his eternal welfare (St. John xvi. 33). He is, moreover, the servant of One who "pleased not Himself," who "came not to be ministered unto, but to minister," who "took upon Himself the form of a servant," and condescended to appear among men "as He that serveth" (Rom. xv. 3; St. Matt. xx. 28; Phil. ii. 7; St. Luke xxii. 27); and whose words are, "I have given you an *example*, that ye should do as I have done to you" (St. John xiii. 15). Now, from these and many other passages, indeed from the general teaching of the New Testament, we gather that there is no greater contradiction in terms than that which is contained in the words as they are usually understood, a *self-indulgent Christian*. As, moreover, self-denial is of the very essence of Christianity, so no form of real selfishness can live, much less thrive, beneath the Cross of Calvary (Phil. ii. 2-8).

But, inasmuch as the nearest and in many respects the most powerful of our three great enemies acts upon us through "the flesh"—its natural cravings and desires often exceeding their

lawful exercise, and so developing into antagonism to "the spirit" (Gal. v. 16, 17)—and as all men are more or less under its influence, and by far the most numerous class of sins is distinctly traceable to this source, the Church has wisely set apart the season of Lent to "the silent discipline of Repentance," and inculcates in all her Lenten services, year by year, the great Christian duty of fasting as a means of self-discipline. There can be no reasonable doubt, then, of the mind of the Church with regard to this all-important matter. She, at least, fully recognizes its *necessity and utility*, and has marked out for her children the Lenten season as a time for its *special observance*. At each return of the solemn season, she directs the Christian to the records of our Lord's own intensely real self-discipline. She points to His fast as the Christian's warrant for a like exercise of this discipline. She causes to be read in her services His own authoritative words as to the great Christian duties of fasting, alms-giving, and prayer. And in recognition of the fact that these are duties too often and too sadly neglected, and in view of the general necessities of the Christian life, she requires her children to add to them the other exercises of self-examination and humbling of ourselves before God. Thus she meets the weakness and indecision of human nature by suggesting such means of discipline as God has abundantly blessed in all ages of His Church, which in the past He not only sanctioned but *commanded* to be used, and the faithful use of which by His servants He was pleased to mark with His own signal favour (Joel ii. 12-14; Ps. xxxv. 13; Dan. ix. 3, x. 2, 3, 12; Jonah iii.; 1 Kings xxi. 27-29; Jer. xxxvi. 1-10; Acts x. 30-48). Indeed, the practice of *fasting* is met with in all parts of the word of God. It is not confined to the Old Testament. It was not only observed by a David and a Daniel, and proclaimed by a Joel. It was practised by the best and holiest of men with whose names and history the New Testament has made us familiar. It was observed under widely different circumstances, but always, or nearly so, as a distinctly *religious* act, with direct reference to sin and its forgiveness, and consequently as a necessary preparation—either of the individual or of the nation—for a nearer approach to God in order to obtain His mercy or favour (Exod. xxiv. 18, xxxiv. 28; Deut. ix. 9, 18; Joshua vii. 6; Judges xx. 26; 1 Sam. vii. 1-6; 2 Sam. xii. 22; 1 Kings xxi. 27-29, xix. 8; 2 Chron. xx. 3; Ezra viii. 21-23, x. 6; Neh. i. 4, ix. 1, 2; Esther iv.

16 ; Ps. xxxv. 13, xlvi. 3, 10 ; Jer. xxxvi. 1-9 ; Dan. ix. 3, x. 2, 3, 12 ; Joel i. 9, 13, 14, ii. 12-14, 26, 27 ; Jonah iii.). Wherever we meet with passages in the Old Testament which appear on the surface to discountenance the practice (e.g. Isa. lviii. 3-7 ; Zech. vii. 5, 6, viii. 8, 19), passages which those who reject its use quote with a peculiar emphasis, we find that the thing discountenanced is not the practice *per se*, but the *manner* of its observance, or the *spirit* in which it was used.

“ But vain all outward sign of grief,
And vain the form of prayer,
Unless the heart implores relief,
And penitence be there.”

Ostentation, reliance upon the means as though it were the end, the neglect of other duties, as if the discharge of this compensated for such neglect in the sight of God, these were the things condemned. And why ? Because they vitiated the observance of a *true* fast. If it is not allowable to “so expound one place of Scripture that it be repugnant to another” (Art. xx.) we cannot affirm that in “one place of Scripture” the practice of fasting is condemned and in another approved (as e.g. in the case of Daniel and Cornelius).

Moreover, the passages in which it is *commanded* in the prophet Joel (i. 14, ii. 12-14) occur in a book of which Professor Redford says, in a paper on Joel, under the head of “*Studies in the Minor Prophets*,”¹ “a leading feature is its entire freedom from Levitical *formality*,” and he truly remarks, “it is not *disparagement* of external services which deepens religious feeling.” Here and there, however, we meet with a sentence more or less adverse to the practice of fasting, but on the whole the paper is an interesting one.

But we need not confine our attention to the Old Testament. In the opening pages of the Gospel we find our blessed Lord Himself preparing to meet the tempter by “fasting,” prayer and meditation. In this, as in all else, He is our one perfect Example. Happily the shadows of nineteen centuries have not veiled His holy life from our view, while to say that because we cannot reach His “forty days” therefore His fast can be “no example” to us, is to deny so far the teaching of the collect for the Second Sunday after Easter, which speaks of Him as our “ensample of godly life.” In other words, it

¹ See *The Monthly Interpreter*, September, 1885. Cf. also the quotation below vi. (c) from Rev. John Wesley’s Sermon.

it equivalent to saying that the holiness we cannot *fully* attain to we are under no obligation to aim at, or to denying the possibility of *any* likeness in a copy to some great original of which it professes to be a copy. In short, it is a species of argument the fallacies of which are too patent to need pointing out. The Church has ever regarded our Lord's wilderness fast as sufficient justification for her practice.

" Lust of the flesh, lust of the eyes, life's pride—
 Each weapon that o'erwhelmed the primal world—
 'Gainst Him in vain, and thrice in vain, are hurled.
 Then lo, He rests with angels at His side.
 So wars and rests His *Church*. In Him she goes
 Through *fasting*, prayer, and conflict, to repose."

But our blessed Lord not only fasted as our example, He also gave certain general rules for its due observance. He took it for granted that men would fast, and so set it in its right light. For true fasting He had not a word of condemnation. He classed it with prayer, "the Christian's vital breath," and almsgiving (St. Matt. vi. 1-18; St. Luke xviii. 1; 1 Thess. v. 17). He condemned the abuses which like parasites had fastened on it, and He taught that due regard should be paid to the *times* of its observance, that while some were strictly in keeping with it, others were not so (St. Matt. ix. 14, 15; St. Mark ii. 18-20; St. Luke v. 33-35). Referring to the time which would elapse between His Ascension and Second Advent, He announced that His disciples "should fast in those days." He distinctly taught that certain kinds and degrees of evil could only be expelled by "prayer and *fasting*," used with faith in Him (St. Matt. xvii. 14-21; St. Mark ix. 14-29; [St. Luke ix. 37-42]). And here it should be observed that our Lord's answer to His disciples as to their need of "fasting" shows that His previous reply on the subject to the disciples of John and of the Pharisees (St. Mark ii. 19, 20) must be interpreted in the light of His directions in the Sermon on the Mount (St. Matt. vi. 16-18).

It was practised, as our Lord said it would be, after His Ascension, by individuals like Cornelius (Acts x. 30), by teachers of the Church at Antioch (Acts xiii. 1-3), by apostles and their fellow-labourers (Acts xiv. 21-23).

St. Paul, too, mentions it among the things in which the apostles had "approved themselves as the ministers of God"—"in fastings," "in fastings often" (2 Cor. vi. 4, 5, xi. 27); and in cases of a special

nature, we find him advising the use of " fasting and prayer " (1 Cor. vii. 5). And he himself, than whom none knew better the use of lawful things as distinct from their abuse, in order that he might " not be brought under the power of any " such things, practised self-mortification, and even from the time of his conversion onwards used " fasting " as a means to holiness of life (1 Cor. vi. 12 ; Acts ix. 9).

Thus, we see that the view which is so often taken of it—as a practice belonging exclusively to an earlier dispensation, or as something which might very well have served its purpose prior to Pentecost, but which is altogether alien to the spirit of the Gospel and superseded by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit—is a view which derives but little support from the Word of God.

The Lenten fast as a means to an end possesses, moreover, the testimony of *a very favourable ancient consent*. St. Irenæus, Bishop of Lyons, A.D. 177, states that some Christians made it a fast of forty *hours*.¹ Doubtless it was then more rigorously observed than it has been since it was extended to forty *days*. This, however, does not touch the *principle* of its observance. Further, Irenæus testifies that this state of things had existed in the Christian Church long before his time (A.D. 177 *et seq.*).

Eusebius tells us that it was observed in the Christian Church before the end of the second century.

Tertullian (second century) also testifies to its observance.

In the fourth century it extended to thirty-six days, and since the time of Gregory the Great, A.D. 590, its duration has been extended to *forty days*; hence, for the last thirteen centuries the Church has seen in "the Quadragesimal Fast and retirement of our Lord the best original and pattern of ours."

In the early days of Christianity Christians were not in these matters "a law unto themselves" (Rom. ii. 14). It was not then thought that such self-discipline as St. Paul practised, and which received the sanction of his authority, was not agreeable to the spirit of the Gospel. The fear was not then expressed that this self-

¹ The late Bishop Oxenden observes on the point: "At one time the observance of it only lasted forty hours, to commemorate those hours of sadness when our Lord, the Bridegroom of the Church, was taken from us and was laid in the grave, embracing therefore the period between His passion and resurrection, namely the Friday and Saturday before Easter morning" (*Thoughts for Lent*, p. 2).

discipline, wisely observed, would be productive of "more harm than good" to the souls of men. Such exhortations as "*endure hardness*, as a good soldier of Jesus Christ" (2 Tim. ii. 3), were not then regarded as savouring of an asceticism opposed to the spirituality of the Gospel. The wise counsel of the veteran apostle of Jesus Christ was not spoken of as legalism, or as encouraging "levitical formality."¹ The Christian of those days was not ever seeking a laurelled repose before the fight was fought and the victory won. He did not ignore his own responsibility to put forth earnest and persistent efforts, and to contend against the foe, because his Lord had fought and conquered. He did not deem the conquest of self, even in lawful things, a matter of small importance; on the contrary, he rightly regarded it as among the greatest of blessings (Prov. xvi. 32). And this blessing the Church would have us seek during the season of Lent with increased earnestness. At each return of the Lenten season she exhorts us, in the words of St. Anselm, "to flee repose and worldly pleasures, which draw off the mind from the true repose and pleasure, except so far as we learn that they serve to promote our purpose of attaining that end" (*Cur Deus Homo*, Bk. i. c. xx). She would have her children live as those who realize and believe that "the fashion of this world passeth away" (1 Cor. vi. 31), that they are journeying through an enemy's land where they have no "abiding city" (Heb. xiii. 14, R.V.), and that it should be their great aim to strive to be at "peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (Rom. v. 1). Moreover, it has been said that the ante-paschal fast was a custom of the primitive Churches, almost as universal and established as the *Feast of Easter*.² And Eusebius speaks of the Christians of his time as "accustomed to exercise themselves in fastings and watchings, and diligent attention to the Divine Word." Wednesdays and Fridays³ were kept as fast-days in many parts of the Christian Church in commemoration of our Lord's betrayal and crucifixion. Justin Martyr speaks of fasting in connection with baptism; Clement of Alexandria of *weekly fasts*.³

¹ N.B.—As a matter of fact, St. Paul was the great opponent of the Judaizers.

² See two tracts published by the S.P.C.K., *The Observance of Friday*, by Rev. John Isabell, and *A Plea for the Better Observance of Fridays*, by Rev. W. M. Rodwell.

³ Cf. quotation vi. (b) below, from Rev. John Wesley's Sermon. Also the quotation below from George Herbert's *Country Parson*.

Our own branch of the Church Catholic takes it for granted that her faithful children will endeavour to act in agreement with the principles which she affirms, and sets before them in her venerable formularies. She has there clearly shown her agreement with the principles of the Early Church. She does not "merely allude" to the practice of fasting in some of her services, but has appointed definite seasons for its observance, namely, the forty days of Lent, the four Ember seasons, the three Rogation-days, *all the Fridays* of the year, except when Christmas Day falls on *that* day, and the vigils or eves before the feast days to which they belong, being the sixteen marked in the "Table of Vigils, Fasts, and Days of Abstinence" in the Book of Common Prayer. These are the days appointed by our Church as fast-days.

It has been said that "no injunctions are anywhere given to observe these days." But why were they appointed, if they are not to be observed?

And, as it has been remarked, "if our reformed Church lays down no precise laws on fasting for us, remember the principle is not changed, only she trusts more to our honour, she treats us, in comparison with the unreformed Church, as Christianity compared with the Jewish Temple, as grown up, able and willing to apply for ourselves the principles of discipline." She does *not* call the exercise of self-discipline "will-worship," or say that one who practises it becomes "a sort of saviour to himself." She does *not* encourage in her members even a thought of "*compensating* by austerities at *particular* seasons for habitual self-indulgence at other times." On the contrary, she puts into the mouth of her children, in her "daily" services, the prayer that they may "live a godly, righteous, and sober life." But knowing the weakness of human nature, the tendency there is in most men to self-indulgence, and the deep disinclination to self-denial, she calls upon all to mark the solemn and sacred season of Lent by a *special* and fitting observance.

"Grant us to curb the wandering sense
Subdued by wholesome abstinence ;
That temperate food without, within,
May conquer lust and banish sin."

It has been well said that, through a "dread of Popery we have too much slighted the *opposite* danger of self-indulgence. If fasting is 'one of the least commandments' we may not neglect it" (cf.

St. Matt. v. 19). With regard to its practice, however, the Anglican Church cannot reasonably be expected to "distinctly specify details," so much depends upon *physical* capacities and varying circumstances, but it cannot be pretended with any show of reason that she does not distinctly emphasize the principle (see her Sixteenth Homily, *On Fasting*).

The following quotations are sufficient to show the reasonableness of fasting in the judgment of Christians :—

A. (a) "It (fasting) is not all, nor yet is it nothing. It is not the end, but it is a precious means thereto ; a means which God Himself has ordained, and in which therefore, when it is *duly used*, He will surely give us *His blessing*."

(b) "In the ancient Christian Church there were *stated* fasts, and those both *annual* and *weekly*."

(c) "The people of God have been, from time to time, taught it of *God Himself*, by clear and open revelations of His will. Such is that remarkable one by the prophet Joel" (see above).

(d) *Of our Lord's words on Fasting, Almsgiving, and Prayer :* "His directions *how* to fast, to give alms, and to pray, are of the same force with *injunctions*. For the commanding us to do anything *thus*, is an unquestionable command *to do that thing* ; seeing it is impossible to perform it *thus*, if it be not performed *at all*."

(e) "It has been frequently said, 'Let a Christian fast from sin, and not from *food* : this is what God requires at his hands.' So He does ; *but He requires the other also.*"

(f) "Fasting is a way which God hath ordained, wherein we wait for His unmerited mercy ; and wherein, without any desert of ours, He hath promised freely to give us His blessing."

The above quotations are from the Rev. John Wesley's *Sermons*. No. vii.¹

B. Cf. also Hooker's *Eccl. Pol.*, Bk. v, sec. 72 :—

(a) "He ('our Saviour') would not teach the *manner of doing*, much less *propose a reward for doing*, what were not holy and acceptable to God."

(b) "Is the body of the Church so just, that it never needs to show itself openly cast down for those faults which though not properly belonging to any one (had yet a special sacrifice appointed

¹ Cf. *Sermons on Several Occasions*. First Series. Wesleyan Methodist Book Room, 1881.

for them in the law of Moses, and), being common to the whole society, must so far concern *every several man* as at some time to require *solemn acknowledgment with more than ordinary testifications of grief.*"

C. The Rev. J. Milner in his *Sermon of Fasting*, says : " It may truly be observed that self-indulgence, and the *neglect of fasting* and of the other severer duties of the same kind, are evils which, in the practice of many who profess to be religious, need to be rebuked. While we have shunned *one* extreme, we have run into *another.*"

Again " they (the fasts of Moses, Elijah, and our Lord) recommend the thing to us very strongly, to be practised *in our measure.*"

And, further, " they who most resemble Christ in mortification and self-denial, shall be most favoured with spiritual views and refreshments."

D. George Herbert, in his *Country Parson*, ch. x, says : " As Sunday is his day of joy, so *Friday* is his day of humiliation : which he celebrates *not only* with abstinence of diet, but also of company, recreation, and all outward contentments ; and besides a confession of sins, and all acts of mortification."

A practice observed by Bishop Andrewes, Bishop Jeremy Taylor, and George Herbert, Henry Martyn, Wesley, and Brainerd, and by a multitude of others, " whose names are in the book of life " (Phil. iv. 3), and also, as we have seen, by our Lord and His apostles, can need no further commendation.

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