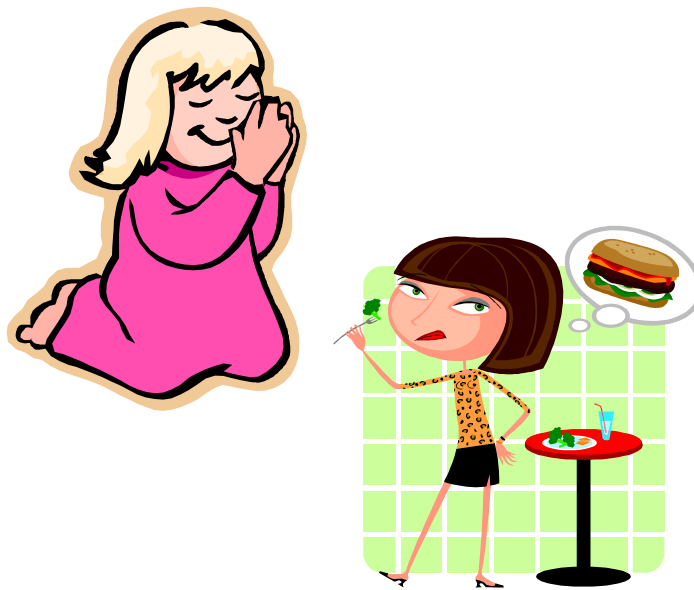


THE IMPORTANCE OF FASTING



Training Resource of:



Central Canadian District
Christian & Missionary Alliance in Canada
155 Pann Road
Burlington, Ontario
L7P5A6

Unit used by:

Leader and Leadership Team
Team Members

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Another acronym for (S)hort (T)erm (M)ission is (S)piritual (T)ransformation (M)inistry. The impact of the faith experience you will have overseas will be directly correlated to the amount of time spent preparing. Making fasting an integral part of your training regime will have immense impact on the team, missionaries, nationals and the mission. But the greatest impact of fasting as a part of the training process will be on the individual. There is no part of training that has a greater impact on a STM than a commitment to fasting in advance of your departure to the field.

Included in this Module...

Fasting As We Prepare for the Field (leaders guide)
Fasting As We Prepare for the Field (handout)
Fasting for the Reward of the Father (Article)
Why Should Christians Fast (Article)

Discussion Points

1. Read the Article as a team. Discuss them.
2. Work your way through the outline on Fasting, have group members fill in the blanks. Stop and have team members look up passages and find answers for themselves when applicable.
3. Discuss the different types of fasting. Survey types group members are familiar with. Be prepared to define the types more fully if necessary.
4. Decide as a team what type of fasting to engage in corporately. Set a length and date together. (Fasting is hard sometimes but the benefits are usually worth it.) Pray over your decision.

Fasting as we Prepare for the Field

On Fasting:

“As men and women are beginning to consider the days and times through which we are passing with a new seriousness, and as many are beginning to look for revival and reawakening, the question of fasting has become more and more important.”

-D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones

“If you say I will fast when God lays it on me, you never will. You are too cold and indifferent. Take the yoke upon you.”

-D.L. Moody

“Fasting is important-more important, perhaps, than many of us have supposed, ... For all that it is not a major biblical doctrine, a foundation stone of the faith, or a panacea for every spiritual ill. Nevertheless, when exercised with a pure heart and a right motive, fasting may provide us with a key to unlocked doors where other keys have failed; a window opening up new horizons in the unseen world; a spiritual weapon of God’s providing, “mighty, to the pulling down of strongholds.” May God use this...to awaken many of His people to all the spiritual possibilities latent in the fast that God has chosen.”

-Arthur Wallis

Q: Who has fasted or attempted a fast?

What was the purpose?

What was the outcome?

What is a fast?

- **Consists of two factors:** **Q:** What might these be?
 - i. **Outward bodily exercise(the practice of willfully\voluntarily abstaining from food, completely or partially, for a specified time period.**
 - ii. **Inward exercises-seeking God, prayer, meditation on scripture, silence, examine (an examination especially of conscience)**

2 Chron. 7:14

A Neglected Discipline:

It is important to take a look a why the spiritual discipline has been neglected in our day.

Q: Why do you think it has been neglected?

- **Possibly we are so into “feel-good-religion”, that we don’t want to be bothered with any thought of hunger or self-denial.**
- **Confidence in activism- in order to grow the kingdom of God we have forgotten the spiritual factors in church growth.**
- **Perhaps the widespread belief that you can have it all has blocked all thought of sacrifice from our minds.**

A Brief History Of Fasting:

a) Old Testament Development:

The verb fasting comes from the Hebrew word *tsum* which refers to the practice of self-denial. Most scholars believe the practice of fasting began with the loss of appetite during times of great duress. 1 Samuel 1:7 says, Hannah was greatly distressed about her barrenness and “wept and did not eat.” Also when King Ahab failed in his attempt to purchase Naboth’s vineyard, he would eat no food. 1 Kings 21:4. So fasting began as a normal expression of grief. After a time it became customary to reflect or prove one’s grief to others by abstaining from food. 2 Samuel 3:25 shows David used fasting to demonstrate his grief at Abner’s death. It also became a religious custom to placate the anger of God, Jonah 3:1-10

b) Fasting In The New Testament:

In the New Testament fasting was a widely practiced discipline, especially amongst the Pharisees and the disciples of John the Baptist. Jesus began his public ministry with an extended fast of forty days. When the apostles were criticized for not fasting, Jesus defended their actions by implying they would fast later, but not during His ministry among them. Matthew 9: 14-15

c) Fasting In The Early Church:

In short, fasting has a long history as a discipline adopted by believers for many reasons, but all are connected by the principle of self-denial.

God’s Perspective On Fasting:

- Matthew 6:17,18 Isaiah 58: 3-8 These scriptures give a list of warnings but also positive results of fasting

Q: What can we learn from these passages regarding the kinds of fasts that do not please God?

They treated it as an empty ritual

They ignored the way fasting should change their lives

Like many Christians today, God’s people considered worship to be a private, inward act—all the focus was inward.

- a) Fasting ought to change your life
- b) Isaiah vs. 5 they were only focused on appearance, fasting is a denial that returns us to God and changes our inward and outward focus.
- c) We must watch out for *guilty fasting*—remember to think about intent

Spiritual Benefits:

Christian fasting is antithetical (opposite to) Hindu fasting. Both seek results, however, Hindu fasting focuses on self and tries to get something for a perceived sacrifice. Christian fasting focuses on God. The results are spiritual results that glorify God, both in the person who fasts and others for whom we fast and pray.

Physical Benefits:

The cells of our bodies need a rest from food. One of the main benefits of a nights sleep includes rest for our digestives systems.

Appropriately, the first meal of the day is called "Break-Fast"

When ill, rest, fever and fasting are parts of God's design to fight infection.

Fasting helps to unclog our systems and eliminate toxins stuck in our systems

It is encouraging to know that the same God who designed the discipline of fasting, designed our bodies to benefit by periods of abstinence from food.

Purposes Of Fasting:

There are many fasts available to the believer.

They can each have a different name, accomplish a different purpose and follow a different prescription.

Examples:

- Col. 3:5, Rom. 13:14 -- Aid to mortification (mortification =the control and subjection of ones physical desires and feelings through self- denial or endurance of pain) To free ourselves or others from besetting sins. (those that habitually attack or trouble)

What are some examples of besetting sin?

Laziness, lust, gluttony, materialism, alcohol, nicotine, caffeine, sports, power, gambling, shopping, work

- 1 Sam. 7:5,6 -- Restoring relationships with God and with one another.
- Acts 9:9 -- Answered prayer, Insight and restoration. To bring clearer perspective and insight as we make crucial decisions. To strengthen personal prayer
- Dan. 1:8, 2 Sam. 12:15-17 -- To gain a healthier life or healing
- Jonah 3:1-10 -- To avoid the wrath of God. To express personal repentance.
- 2 Chron. 20:2-3, Esther 4:15,16 -- To seek the Lord, ie: when facing danger
- Matt. 17:21 -- Spiritual power over demons. **To prepare for or when faced with spiritual warfare.**

Four Types of Fasts:

Q. Who can name one type of fast?

- i. Normal.. going without food for a specific time (1-40 days) with only liquids
- ii. Absolute.. no food or water
- iii. Partial.. omit certain foods ie: no meat or grains.. ie: Daniel ate only vegetables with no rich foods.
- iv. Rotational.. you omit certain foods on certain days.

Note: You may need to consult a doctor. Extreme care should be taken with longer fasts and only after medical advice from a physician.

Other Considerations of Fasting:

- Fasting is not a legalistic discipline and should be adapted to each individual's purpose.
- Religious practices i.e.: fasting, are less important than doing God's will.
- Fasting is not an end in itself; it is a means by which we can worship the Lord and submit ourselves humbly to Him.
- We don't make God love us anymore than He already does if we fast or if we fast longer- nor can we manipulate God. We fast and pray for results, but the results are in God's hands. There is no guarantee that every circumstance in life can be fixed by fasting.
- Be sure to test the spirit that tries to talk you into the 40 day fast

Fasting as we Prepare for the Field

On Fasting:

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 - ii.

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- b) Fasting In The New Testament:
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- i.
- ii.
- iii.
- iv.

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- Fasting is not an end in itself; it is a means by which we can worship the Lord and submit ourselves humbly to Him.
- We don't make God love us anymore than He already does if we fast or if we fast longer- nor can we manipulate God. We fast and pray for results, but the results are in God's hands. There is no guarantee that every circumstance in life can be fixed by fasting.
- Be sure to test the spirit that tries to talk you into the 40 day fast

Abuse of Fasting:

- Remember to think about intent.

Breaking the Fast:

- Break the fast biblically. i.e.: If you have mourned and repented of sin, break the fast in the same spirit as it was carried out.
- Break the fast with praise. i.e.: 1 Sam. 2: 1-10, Hannah ended her fast with praise.

Corporate Fast:

- Conducted by a group of persons in unity.
- May be a spontaneous response to a movement to the spirit of God within the group or an organized event.

Discipline Fast:

- In response to a spiritual conviction from God that a fast should be undertaken even if there is no apparent goal.

Ethics in Fasting:

- Your integrity determines how you fast.
- Fasting is an exercise in character growth and development. Ask yourself some hard questions after a fast.

Individual Fast:

- Done by a solitary person, often without the knowledge of others.

Isolation Fast:

- Allows a person to concentrate more clearly and totally on God.

Keep a Fasting Journal:

- Daily or regular entries provide a means of reviewing God's work in our lives.
- We can record the progress of a goal or the application and benefit of this discipline.

For Further Reading...

- Anderson, Andy "Fasting Changed My Life"
- Beall, James Lee "The Adventure of Fasting"
- Bright, Bill "Seven Basic Steps to Successful Fasting and Prayer"
- Kirban, Salem "How to Keep Healthy and Happy by Fasting"
- Towns, Elmer L. "Fasting for Spiritual Break Through"
- Wallis, Arthur "God's Chosen Fast"

Fasting for the Reward of the Father (Matthew 6:16-18)

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. 17 "But you, when you fast, anoint your head, and wash your face 18 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.

Introduction

Carl Lundquist was the president of Bethel College and Seminary for almost thirty years. He died about four years ago from skin cancer. In the last decade of his life he devoted a lot of energy to studying and promoting personal spiritual devotion and the disciplines of the Christian life.

He even established what he called the "Evangelical Order of the Burning Heart" and began to send out a letter of inspiration and encouragement. In the September, 1989 letter he told the story of how he first began to take fasting seriously.

My own serious consideration of fasting as a spiritual discipline began as a result of visit Dr. Joon Gon Kim in Seoul, Korea. "Is it true," I asked him, "that you spent 40 days in fasting prior to the evangelism crusade in 1980?" "Yes, " he responded, "it is true." Dr. Kim was chairman of the crusade expected to bring a million people to Yoido Plaza. But six months before the meeting the police informed him they were revoking their permission for the crusade. Korea at that time was in political turmoil and Seoul was under martial law. The officers decided they could not take the risk of having so many people together in one place. So Dr. Kim and some associates went to a prayer mountain and there spent 40 days before God in prayer and fasting for the crusade. Then they returned and made their way to the police station. "Oh," said the officer when he saw Dr. Kim, "we have changed our mind and you can have your meeting!"

As I went back to the hotel I reflected that I had never fasted like that. Perhaps I had never desired a work of God with the same intensity. . . His body is marked by many 40 day fasts during his long spiritual leadership of God's work in Asia. Also, however, I haven't seen the miracles Dr. Kim has.

Dr. Lundquist went on to tell of one of the "Burning Heart" retreats that he was leading when he saw a seminary senior not eating. He asked him if he was all right and learned that the student was near the end of a 21 day total fast as part of seeking God's leading for the next chapter of his life.

Dr. Lundquist said that in the later years of his ministry he found a modified fast once a week very helpful in his life and work. He wrote in his letter,

Instead of taking an hour for lunch I use the time to go to a prayer room, usually the Flame Room in nearby Bethel Theological Seminary. There I spend my lunch break in fellowship with God and in prayer. And I have learned a very personal dimension to what Jesus declared, "I have had meat to eat ye know not of."

This is similar to what I have asked the "Fasting Forty" to do during the month of February -- fast for a 24 hour period once a week.

One of the texts that moved Dr. Lundquist in those latter years of his life was the one we are looking at this morning -- Matthew 6:16- 18. The thing that gripped him from this text were the words in verse 16, "And whenever you fast . . ." Like so many others, Dr. Lundquist noticed that it does not say, "If you fast," but, "when you fast." He concluded, as I do, and as most commentators do, that Jesus assumed that fasting was a good thing and that it would be done by his disciples. This is what we saw in Matthew 9:15 -- When the bridegroom is taken away then the disciples will fast.

So Jesus is not teaching on whether we should fast or not. He is assuming we will fast and teaching us how to do it and especially how not to do it.

Hypocrisy: A Danger in Fasting

If fasting is going to be built into our lives as a way of seeking all the fullness of God (Eph. 3:19), we need to know how not to do it. That would include physical tips on how not to endanger our bodies, and spiritual teaching on how not to endanger our souls. On the physical side, I will be making available to you a short paper from a medical doctor who spoke to us when I was in Orlando last December.

But more important than that is the warning of Jesus about the spiritual danger of fasting in the wrong way. That's what this text is about. Jesus warns us what not to do and then tells us what to do instead.

He warns us in verse 16 not to be like the hypocrites: "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." So the hypocrites are folks who do their spiritual disciplines "to be seen by men." This is the reward the hypocrites are after. And who has not felt how rewarding indeed it is to be admired for our discipline or our zeal or our devotion. This is a great reward among men. Few things feel more gratifying to the heart of us fallen people than being made much of for our accomplishments -- especially our religious accomplishments.

So Jesus says in the last part of verse 16, "Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full." In other words, if that is the reward you aim at in fasting, that is what you will get and that will be all you get. In other words the danger of hypocrisy is that it is so successful. It aims at the praise of men. And it succeeds. But that's all.

But let's ask why this is hypocrisy. Here you have religious people. They decide to fast. Instead of concealing that they are fasting they make it plain that they are fasting. Why is that hypocrisy? Why isn't it hypocrisy to fast, but to anoint your hair and wash your face and not let anybody know that you are fasting? Isn't the definition of hypocrisy trying to look on the outside different than you are on the inside? So these religious folks are letting reality show, right? They are the opposite of hypocrites. They fast, and they look like they fast. No sham. Be real. If you fast, look like you fast.

But Jesus calls them hypocrites. Why? Because the heart that motivates fasting is supposed to be a heart for God. That's what fasting means: a heart-hunger for God. But the heart motivating their fasting is a heart for human admiration. So they are being open and transparent about what they are doing, but that very openness is deceptive about what they're feeling. If they wanted to be really open, they would have to wear a sign about their necks that said, "The bottom line reward in my fasting is the praise of men." Then they would not be hypocrites. They would be openly and transparently vain.

So there are two dangers that these fasting folks have fallen into. **One** is that they are seeking the wrong reward in fasting, namely, the esteem of other people. They love the praise of men. And the **other** is that they hide this with a pretense of love for God. Fasting means love for God -- hunger for God. So with their actions they are saying that they have a hunger for God. But on the inside they are hungry to be admired and approved by other people. That's the god that satisfies them.

Jesus' Test of Authenticity in Fasting

In verses 17 and 18 Jesus gives an alternative to this way of fasting -- the way he wants it to be done. He says,

But you, when you fast, anoint your head, and wash your face, 18 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.

Now there are all kinds of public fasting in the Bible, including the New Testament, for example, in Acts 13:1-3 and 14:23. If someone finds out you are fasting, you haven't sinned. The value of your fast is not destroyed if someone notices that you have skipped lunch. It is possible to fast with other people -- for example: our staff fasting together on a planning retreat to seek the Lord -- it is possible to fast like that and NOT to fast "to be seen by men." Being *seen fasting* and *fasting to be seen* are not the same. Being seen fasting is a mere external event. Fasting TO BE SEEN is a self-exalting motive of the heart.

So Jesus gives us instruction that will test our hearts. He says to us when we are fasting, Don't make any effort to be seen. In fact, make efforts in the other direction -- **not** to be seen. Fix your hair, wash your face so that as far as possible people will not even know that you are fasting.

But he goes beyond this and says, that your goal is to be seen by God not man. "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.**" Fast to be seen by God in secret.

What Jesus does here is test the reality of God in our lives. O, how easy it is to do religious things if other people are watching -- preaching, praying, attending church, reading the Bible, acts of kindness and charity, etc. The reason for this is not only the commendation we might get, but more subtly the sense that the real effectiveness of our spiritual acts is on the horizontal axis among people, not the vertical axis with God. If the kids see me pray at meals, it will do them good. If the staff sees me fast they may be inspired to fast. If my roommate sees me read my Bible he may be inspired to read his. In other words, we feel that the value of our devotion is the horizontal effect it has on others as they see us.

Now that's not all bad. But the danger is that all of our life starts to be justified and understood simply on the horizontal level for the effects it can have because others see it happening. And so God can become a secondary Person in the living of our lives. We think that he is important because all these things are the kinds of things he wants us to do. But he himself is falling out of the picture as the focus of it all.

So Jesus tests our hearts to see if God himself will be our sufficiency -- when nobody else knows what we are doing. When no one is saying, "How are you getting on with the fast?" No one even knows -- no one but God! Jesus is calling for a radical orientation on God himself. He is pushing us to have a real, utterly authentic, personal relationship with God. If God is not real to you, it will be miserable to endure something difficult with God if he's the only one who knows. It will all seem very pointless, very inefficient because the whole range of horizontal possibilities will be nullified because no one knows what you are experiencing. All that matters is God and who he is and what he thinks and what he will do.

Which brings us to the last part of verse 18 and the promise Jesus makes about what God will do for those who focus vertically on him and do not need the praise of other people to make their devotion worthwhile. He says, "And your Father who sees in secret will repay you."

The word "repay" in the NASB (New American Standard Bible) is probably a little too mercenary. It seems to suggest a business deal: We do the work of fasting and God pays up with wages. That is not necessarily implied in the word that simply means "give back" or "make a return." In some places it may be money. In others it may be justice. In others it may be God's gracious response to an act of faith and prayer. That's what it is here, I believe.

God sees us fasting. He sees that we have a deep longing that is pulling us to fast. He sees that our heart is not seeking the ordinary pleasures of human admiration and applause. He sees that we are acting not out of strength to impress others with our discipline, but out of weakness to express to God our need and our great longing that he would act. And when

he sees this, he responds. He acts. We have seen him acting in these last weeks of fasting in some remarkable ways. People who have been hard to the gospel, opening up. People closed off to reconciliation opening up. People long lukewarm and indifferent awakening to the greatness of God and their salvation.

But what is the "repayment" or the "reward" that Jesus promises from the Father here? Might it be "the praise of men"? We would make a dupe out of God if we tried to use him in some round-about way to get what we really want instead of him, the praise of men. That's not the reward he gives.

Might it be money? The very next verse (v. 19) warns against laying up treasures on earth (whether God gives them or not) and says to lay up treasures in heaven -- where there is no earthly currency except faith and love.

No, the best place to find out the reward of our fasting is to look here in the Sermon on the Mount. For example, the prayer that Jesus just taught us to pray in Matthew 6:9-13 begins with three main longings: that God's name be hallowed or revered, that his kingdom come, that his will be done on earth the way it's done in heaven. That is the main reward God gives for our fasting. We fast out of longing for God's name to be known and cherished and honored, and longing for his rule to be extended and then consummated in history, and longing for his will to hold sway everywhere with the same devotion and energy that the inexhaustible angels show sleeplessly in heaven forever and ever.

For sure he gives us many, many specific things through fasting. And it is not wrong to seek specifically for his help in every area of our lives through fasting. But these three petitions: hallowing his name, seeking his kingdom, and doing his will -- these give the test to see if all the other things we long for are expressions of these. Do we want our sons and daughters saved because this would hallow God's name? Do we want North Korea to open for the sake of the advance of the kingship of Jesus? Do we want upright leaders in government because God's holy, revealed will for his creation is at stake? Do we want Bethlehem revived and awakened with divine power and love and joy because it glorifies the name of God and advances his kingdom and brings about his will?

This is what Jesus is calling us to -- a radically God-oriented fasting. So for the sake of your own soul, and in response to Jesus, and for the advancement of the kingdom of God's great saving purpose to glorify his name, join the "Fasting Forty" and fix your hair, and wash your face and let the Father who sees in secret see you open your heart of yearning to him with fasting. The Father who sees in secret is brimming with rewards for your joy and for his glory.

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Why Should Christians Fast

Holy and lawful fasting has three objectives. We use it either to weaken and subdue the flesh that it might not act wantonly, or that we may be better prepared for prayers and holy meditations, or that it may be a testimony of our self-abasement before God when we wish to confess our guilt before Him.

The first objective is more appropriate to private fasting. The second is common to both. For both the whole church and every individual believer have need of such preparation for prayers.

The third is common likewise. For it sometimes will happen that God will strike a nation with war, or pestilence, or some calamity. Under this common scourge, the whole people ought to accuse themselves and confess their guilt. But if the hand of the Lord should strike any individual, he ought to do this alone or with his family.

In Times of Need

Whenever men are to pray to God concerning any great matter, it would be expedient to appoint fasting along with prayer. Thus, when the Antiochenes placed their hands upon Paul and Barnabas, the better to commend their ministry to God, a ministry of great importance, they joined fasting to prayer ([Acts 13:3](#)). Their sole purpose in this kind of fasting is to render themselves more eager and unencumbered for prayer. 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.

If either pestilence, or famine, or war begins to rage, or if any disaster seems to threaten any district and people—then also it is the duty of the pastors to urge the church to fasting, in order that by supplication the Lord's wrath may be averted. Therefore, as in ancient times the accused were accustomed to abase themselves as suppliants with long beard, unkempt hair, and dark clothing, in order to appeal to the mercy of the judge—so it redounds to His glory and is also profitable and salutary for us in humble garb to pray that His severity be averted. For since this is a holy exercise both for the humbling of men and for their confession of humility, why should we use it less than the ancients did in similar need?

But, you object, this is an external ceremony which, together with others, ended in Christ. 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, when they are chastised by His lashes. Accordingly, Christ, when He excuses His apostles for not fasting, does not say that fasting is abolished, but appoints it for times of calamity and joins it with mourning ([Mt. 9:15](#), [Lk. 5:34–35](#)).

A New Definition

But to avoid any error in the term, let us define what fasting is. Throughout its course, the life of the godly indeed ought to be tempered with frugality and sobriety, so that as far as possible it bears some resemblance to a fast. But, in addition, there is another sort of fasting, temporary in character, when we withdraw something from the normal regimen of living, either for one day or for a definite time, and pledge ourselves to a tighter and more severe restraint in diet than ordinarily.

This consists in three things: in time, in quality of foods, and in smallness of quantity. By time, I mean that we should carry out those acts of fasting for the sake of which that fast is appointed. As, for example, if a man fasts for the sake of solemn prayer, he should come to it without breaking his fast. Quality consists in that all elegance should be absent, and that, content with common and baser foods, we should not whet our palate with delicacies. The rule of quantity in this is that we should eat more sparingly and lightly than is our custom; only for need, not also for pleasure.

Wanted: Broken Hearts

But we must always take especial precaution lest any superstition creep in. [Pastors] should always urge what Joel teaches, that [believers] are to rend their hearts, not their garments ([Joel 2:13](#)); that is, they should admonish the people that God does not greatly esteem fasting of itself, unless an inner emotion of the heart is present, and true displeasure at one's sins, true humility, and true sorrowing arising from the fear of God. For God abominates nothing more than when men try to disguise themselves by displaying signs and outward appearances in place of innocence of heart.

Another evil akin to this, and to be utterly avoided, is to regard fasting as a work of merit or a form of divine worship. A most dangerous superstition is involved in confusing it with works commanded by God and necessary of themselves without any other consideration.

There is a third error, not indeed so impious, but still dangerous: to require it to be kept too strictly and rigidly as if it were one of the chief duties, and to extol it with such immoderate praises that men think they have done something noble when they have fasted.

[Nevertheless,] the pastors of the church would not be doing ill today if, when they see ruin hanging over the necks of their people, they were to cry out to them to hasten to fasting and weeping.