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Fasting: Article No. 1 - Introduction

By Prayer and Fasting (1647 Words - submitted 3/15/06)

Popular Christianity wants to clap its hands, and shout, and laugh – it does not want to weep or mourn. And it certainly is not inclined to deprive the flesh of its pleasures, much less its necessary food. But the early church regularly practiced fasting [Acts 13:2,3; 14:23]. Paul gave instruction to couples that included a reference to fasting which clearly indicates it was common among believers in the early churches [1Corinthians 7:5]. And we should not be surprised, for Jesus had given specific instructions about fasting to His disciples [Matthew 6:15-18]. He even told them why it would be necessary. Once His disciples attempted to cast out a demon and could not [Matthew 17:14-23]. The possessed young man was brought to Jesus, Who rebuked the devil and it departed. The disciples asked why they could not cast it out and Jesus explained it was because of their unbelief. But then He added, “Howbeit, this kind goeth not out but by prayer and fasting” [Matthew 17:21]. When they came to Jesus for help, He rebuked them, “O faithless and perverse generation, how long shall I be with you?” [Matthew 17:17]. And He explained that the spiritual power needed to deal with this kind of demon required fasting and prayer. While He was with them, He was there to take care of it. But He knew that He would be leaving, and that we would need fasting and prayer to have the power necessary to handle some levels of Satanic oppression and opposition. The early church understood this. Popular Christianity had better let its laughter be turned to mourning [James 4:9]. It had better learn to fast and pray. For the demons of Hell are pursuing our children. And among them are devils that, “... goeth not out but by prayer and fasting.”

#### What is Fasting?

Fasting is abstinence from nourishment for a spiritual purpose. Two questions arise. First, does fasting require abstinence from both food and water? And second, what is the spiritual purpose of fasting?

The Scripture expressly notes that Moses abstained from both food and water during his forty day fast [Exodus 34:28]. Although the Scripture is not so explicit in the account of Elijah’s forty day fast, the language of the text inclines me to conclude he abstained from both food and water [1Kings 19:8]. Some think Jesus abstained from food, but did receive water during His forty day fast. This conclusion is based on Luke 4:2, “And in those days He did eat nothing ...” The assumption is that because the Spirit did specify that Moses abstained from both, but did not make this clear regarding Jesus’ fast, that therefore Jesus had water during His forty day fast. But the most that can be said is that Luke 4:2 leaves the question open. I believe Jesus abstained from both food and water. And I think the essential idea of fasting involves abstaining from both. However, this is not to say fasting food only is not a legitimate fast. Because the effectiveness of fasting is not so much in this formal technicality as it is in achieving the effect and obtaining the purpose of fasting.

#### What is the purpose of fasting?

Jesus was glorified in the presence of His special entourage, Peter, James and John, on a mount we have come to call the mount of transfiguration [Matthew 17:13; see Mark 14:33]. Moses and Elijah appeared there with Jesus. Isn’t it interesting that these three are distinguished as having fasted forty days? That is certainly an elite club. But what is more interesting to the purpose of this article is the fact that when Jesus and His special entourage returned from the mountain, Jesus revealed something about fasting that speaks very directly to its purpose. The transfiguration was a presentation of the Kingdom of God on earth – (this fulfilled Jesus’ prophecy saying that some in that day would not die before they saw the Kingdom of God [Luke 9:27]). When they returned to the other disciples they encountered a unique need for kingdom power. Jesus made it clear the only way to access this level of kingdom power was by fasting and prayer. It seems to me that a very clear message is presented to us by the Holy Spirit in Matthew 17 about the need for fasting. First we see a representation of the Kingdom of

God on earth, and the three persons assembled there representing this Kingdom authority is each noteworthy as having fasted forty days. Then, Jesus comes down from the mountain, and informs the disciples that His time with them is limited, and therefore, to have the power of the Kingdom necessary to deal with this special kind of demon power, they would need to fast and pray. The message of Matthew 17 is clear – fasting and prayer, together, are essential to have the kingdom power we need to do the work that needs to be done during Jesus' absence. The essential purpose of fasting and prayer is to secure the spiritual power needed to accomplish the work that could otherwise only be done by Jesus. We must not miss the obvious point that our Lord Jesus, and Moses and Elijah are each noted as having fasted forty days, with the fact that these three demonstrated spiritual power beyond any other personalities in the Bible. The connection between fasting and prayer and spiritual power cannot be missed – must not be missed. The devils of hell are after our ministries, and among them are devils that "... goeth not out but by prayer and fasting."

What does fasting do?

Jesus had a wonderful vision, and I am afraid we have disappointed Him. He prophesied that from our belly would flow rivers of living water [John 7:38-39]. The Spirit, by John, explained that He was talking about the coming of the Holy Spirit, and the fact that He would be working through our lives; that is, flowing from our belly into this world [John 7:38-39]. Fasting opens the door of the belly to allow the Spirit to flow. Let me explain.

The heart is used in the Bible to represent the spiritual center of our lives. It is closely associated with our spiritual affections, and our thoughts [Hebrews 4:12]. It is the dwelling place of the Spirit of God [Galatians 4:6]. By contrast, the belly represents the physical center of our lives, or the flesh – it represents the center of our physical appetites, our carnal desires. The heart is our point of closest contact with the spiritual world, and the belly is our point of closest contact with the physical world around us. It is interesting that the Bible teaches that the Spirit dwells in our heart, and Jesus said the Spirit would flow through our belly. When we get saved, the Spirit takes up residence in our heart. But He does not flow through us into the world through our heart. He flows through our lives into the world through our belly. In other words, our physical appetites, our carnal desires, must be surrendered to His control in order for the Spirit to flow through our lives into the world around us. Notice that there are those whose god is their belly [Philippians 3:19]. These "mind earthly things." The belly is associated with our appetites, or, that which we covet. We make an idol of what we covet when we put what we covet before God. This is New Testament idolatry - for covetousness is the sin of idolatry [Colossians 3:5]. When we surrender to coveting, our thoughts become fixated on earthly things – so we "mind earthly things." Remember, Paul, by the Spirit, said that those who are spiritual "mind the things of the Spirit" and he warned, to be "carnally minded" is death [Romans 8:5-6]. He explained that to walk in the Spirit, we must "mind the things of the Spirit." You can see that the key is to destroy the idols of covetousness in our lives.

Notice also the intriguing relationship between the soul and the belly [Psalm 31:9; 44:25; Proverbs 13:25]. This explains what the Spirit revealed through David when he wrote, "I humbled my soul with fasting" [Psalm 35:15]. By depriving the belly of its necessary food, the flesh is weakened, and this, coupled with intense, fervent, prayer, effects a corresponding humbling of the soul. This is necessary when our soul becomes lifted up in pride [Psalm 24:5]. We are to lift up our soul to the Lord [Psalm 25:1; 86:4; 143:8]. But when we commit the wicked sin of idolatry through coveting, we are lifting up our soul to our idols – and this is an arrogant and prideful thing to do. God resists the proud, but He giveth grace to the lowly [1Peter 5:5]. When we consider the Spirit's warning that we avoid the lusts of the flesh, which "war against the soul" [1Peter 2:11], we begin to get the picture. The belly is the center of our flesh appetites, it's the place where our soul intersects with the world around us. We need to turn our soul from the idols of covetousness to the Lord of glory. For when we serve the idols of covetousness, the thoughts of our heart are fixated on fleshly lusts [Romans 8:5-6], and our affections

are perverted into lustful desires, and this grieves the Spirit [Ephesians 4:30] so that He will not fill His Temple, our body [1Corinthians 6:19], and flow through our belly into the world around us [John 7:38-39].

Fasting with prayer serves to break the idols of covetousness by weakening the strength of fleshly appetites over us and humbling the soul.

In my next article I'll address specific Biblical instruction for fasting.

End Article One: Fasting - Introduction

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