

CONSIDERATIONS REGARDING FASTING AND PRAYER

On Tuesday, November 9, 2010, the Session of First Presbyterian Church has encouraged our church family to participate in a day of prayer and fasting. This is something that each individual will decide voluntarily. Fasting is simply suggested as an additional spiritual discipline to join with a day devoted to prayer. Fasting is a tool that when joined with a heart seeking God in prayer can aid a hunger for God and his way in our lives.

Some Scripture Passages on Fasting

Matt. 6:16-18 “When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to men that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.”

Matt. 9:14-17 Then John’s disciples came and asked him, “How is it that we and the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?” Jesus answered, “How can the guests of the bridegroom mourn while he is with them? The time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them; then they will fast. “No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment, for the patch will pull away from the garment, making the tear worse. Neither do men pour new wine into old wineskins. If they do, the skins will burst, the wine will run out and the wineskins will be ruined. No, they pour new wine into new wineskins, and both are preserved.”

Acts 13:1-3 In the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen (who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch) and Saul. While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.” So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off.

Acts 14:23 Paul and Barnabas appointed elders for them in each church and, with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord, in whom they had put their trust.

Some Thoughts on Fasting

1. Fasting in the New Covenant celebrates the triumph of Christ in his first coming and longs for the fullness of his kingdom in his second coming.
2. It is important that we view fasting as a means God may use to aid us in our hungering and thirsting after Him. It is secondary to prayer.
3. We must beware of the temptation to view ourselves when we fast as “more spiritual” than those who do not fast.
4. We should not devalue fasting simply because people have abused or misused it—instead we should use fasting in a proper biblical manner.
5. The purpose of fasting is to intensify our time of prayer.

Some Practical Considerations If You Decide To Fast

1. Those with chronic health problems should consult a physician before fasting.
2. Children and pregnant women should not fast.
3. A fast should begin on something other than a full stomach so avoid a big meal before fasting.
4. Avoid caffeine, fat, and sugar as the fast draws near.
5. Those who fast should drink an increased amount of fluids—especially water.

6. Doctors recommend avoiding medications and rigorous exercise while fasting—although moderate exercise like walking is encouraged.
7. Eat a lesser amount of food than normal when coming off of a fast.

Some Quotations on Fasting

From Institutes of the Christian Religion by John Calvin (Westminster Press, 1960)

1. “Their sole purpose [referring to Acts 13:3 and 14:23] in this kind of fasting is to render themselves more eager and unencumbered for prayer. Surely we experience this: 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.” (page 1242)
2. “... they (pastors) 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 sin, true humility, and true sorrowing arising from the fear of God. Indeed, fasting is not otherwise useful than when it is joined as a lesser help to these.” (page 1245)

From A Hunger for God by John Piper (Crossway Books, 1997)

1. “... bread magnifies Christ in two ways: by being eaten with gratitude for his goodness, and by being forfeited out of hunger for God himself. When we eat, we taste the emblem of our heavenly food— the Bread of Life. And when we fast we say, ‘I love the Reality above the emblem.’ In the heart of the saint both eating and fasting are worship. Both magnify Christ. Both send the heart—grateful and yearning—to the Giver. Each has its appointed place, and each has its danger. The danger of eating is that we fall in love with the gift; the danger of fasting is that we belittle the gift and glory in our willpower.” (page 21)
2. “Fasting is not a “no” to the goodness of food or the generosity of God in providing it. Rather, it is a way of saying, from time to time, that having more of the Giver surpasses having the gift. Food is good. But God is better. Normally we meet God in his good gifts and turn every enjoyment into worship with thanksgiving. But from time to time we need to test ourselves to see if we have begun to love his gifts in place of God.” (pages 44-45)
3. “My prayer for the Christian church is that God might awaken in us a new hunger for himself— a new fasting. Not because we haven’t tasted the new wine of Christ’s presence, but because we have tasted it and long, with a deep and joyful aching of soul, to know more of his presence and power in our midst.” (pages 48-49)

From The Life of Prayer by Edith Schaeffer (Crossway Books, 1992)

“Is fasting ever a bribe to get God to pay more attention to the petitions? No, a thousand times no. It is simply a way to make clear that we sufficiently reverence the amazing opportunity to ask help from the everlasting God, the Creator of the universe, to choose to put everything else aside and concentrate on worshipping, asking for forgiveness, and making our requests known - considering his help more important than anything we could do ourselves in our own strength and with our own ideas.” (pages 75-76)

May God in his grace be pleased to bless the Day of Prayer for his glory and our edification as we hunger and thirst for him and as we seek his grace to deepen our life of prayer.