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Future Grace

A HUNGER FOR GOD

*Desiring God
Through Fasting and Prayer*

JOHN PIPER

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A Hunger for God

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*To my fellow elders
of Bethlehem Baptist Church,
who hunger with me
for the fullness of God,
and feast with me
at the table of grace.*

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PREFACE

Beware of books on fasting. The Bible is very careful to warn us about people who “advocate abstaining from foods, which God created to be gratefully shared in by those who believe and know the truth” (1 Timothy 4:1-3). The apostle Paul asks with dismay, “Why . . . do you submit yourself to decrees, such as ‘Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch?’” (Colossians 2:20-21). He is jealous for the full enjoyment of Christian liberty. Like a great declaration of freedom over every book on fasting flies the banner, “Food will not commend us to God; we are neither the worse if we do not eat, nor the better if we do eat” (1 Corinthians 8:8). There once were two men. One said, “I fast twice a week”; the other said, “God be merciful to me a sinner.” Only one went down to his house justified (Luke 18:12-14).

The discipline of self-denial is fraught with dangers—perhaps only surpassed by the dangers of indulgence. These also we are warned about: “All things are lawful for me, *but I will not be mastered by anything*” (1 Corinthians 6:12). What masters us has become our god; and Paul warns us about those “whose god

is their appetite” (Philippians 3:19). Appetite dictates the direction of their lives. The stomach is sovereign. This has a religious expression and an irreligious one. Religiously “persons . . . turn the grace of our God into licentiousness” (Jude 4) and tout the slogan, “Food is for the stomach and the stomach is for food” (1 Corinthians 6:13). Irreligiously, with no pretext of pardoning grace, persons simply yield to “the desires for other things [that] enter in and choke the word” (Mark 4:19).

“Desires for other things”—there’s the enemy. And the only weapon that will triumph is a deeper hunger for God. The weakness of our hunger for God is not because he is unsavory, but because we keep ourselves stuffed with “other things.” Perhaps, then, the denial of our stomach’s appetite for food might express, or even increase, our soul’s appetite for God.

What is at stake here is not just the good of our souls, but also the glory of God. God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in him. The fight of faith is a fight to feast on all that God is for us in Christ. What we hunger for most, we worship.

*His goodness shines with brightest rays
When we delight in all his ways.
His glory overflows its rim
When we are satisfied in him.
His radiance will fill the earth
When people revel in his worth.
The beauty of God’s holy fire
Burns brightest in the heart’s desire.*

Between the dangers of self-denial and self-indulgence there is a path of pleasant pain. It is not the pathological pleasure of a masochist, but the passion of a lover’s quest: “I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish in order that I may gain Christ” (Philippians 3:8). That is the path we will try to follow in this book.

That I could even attempt the journey is owing to God's grace, which I live on every day. It has come to me in Jesus who loved me and gave himself for me. It has come to me in my wife, Noël, who supports me in the work of preaching and writing and tending the flock. I love you, Noël, and thank you for your partnership in the great work. God has been good to us. Grace has come to me again in the faithful labors of Carol Steinbach, whose careful reading has left its mark, and whose industry created the indexes. And grace has come to me through my fellow elders at Bethlehem Baptist Church. They forged a mission statement for our church that I embrace as the mission of my life. And they gave me the charge and the time to write this book and make it a part of that mission: "We exist to spread a passion for the supremacy of God in all things for the joy of all peoples." That is my prayer for this book. When God is the supreme hunger of our hearts, he will be supreme in everything.

John Piper
May 1, 1997

*Whom have I in heaven but thee?
And there is nothing upon earth
that I desire besides thee.
My flesh and my heart may fail,
but God is the strength of my heart
and my portion for ever.*

—PSALM 73:25-26, RSV

Almost everywhere at all times fasting has held a place of great importance since it is closely linked with the intimate sense of religion. Perhaps this is the explanation for the demise of fasting in our day. When the sense of God diminishes, fasting disappears.

—EDWARD FARRELL¹

INTRODUCTION

A Homesickness for God

The birthplace of Christian fasting is homesickness for God. In the summer of 1967 I had been in love with Noël for a whole year. If you had told me then that we would have to wait another year and a half to marry, I would have protested firmly. For us, it seemed, the sooner the better. It was the summer before my senior year in college. I was working as a water safety instructor at a Christian athletic camp in South Carolina. She was hundreds of miles away working as a waitress.

Never had I known an aching like this one. I had been homesick before, but never like this. Every day I would write her a letter and talk about this longing. In the late morning, just before lunch, there would be mail call. When I heard my name and saw the lavender envelope, my appetite would be taken away. Or, more accurately, my hunger for food was silenced by the hunger of my heart. Often, instead of eating lunch with the campers, I would take the letter to a quiet place in the woods and sit down on the leaves for a different kind of meal. It wasn't the real thing. But the color, the smell, the script, the message, the signature were fore-

tastes. And with them, week by week, I was strengthened in hope, and the reality just over the horizon was kept alive in my heart.

The Romance and the Resistance of Fasting

Christian fasting, at its root, is the hunger of a homesickness for God. But the story of my heart-hunger to be with Noël could be misleading. It tells only half the story of Christian fasting. Half of Christian fasting is that our physical appetite is lost because our homesickness for God is so intense. The other half is that our homesickness for God is threatened because our physical appetites are so intense. In the first half, appetite is lost. In the second half, appetite is resisted. In the first, we yield to the higher hunger that is. In the second, we fight for the higher hunger that isn't. Christian fasting is not only the spontaneous effect of a superior satisfaction in God; it is also a chosen weapon against every force in the world that would take that satisfaction away.

God's Greatest Adversaries Are His Gifts

The greatest enemy of hunger for God is not poison but apple pie. It is not the banquet of the wicked that dulls our appetite for heaven, but endless nibbling at the table of the world. It is not the X-rated video, but the prime-time dribble of triviality we drink in every night. For all the ill that Satan can do, when God describes what keeps us from the banquet table of his love, it is a piece of land, a yoke of oxen, and a wife (Luke 14:18-20). The greatest adversary of love to God is not his enemies but his gifts. And the most deadly appetites are not for the poison of evil, but for the simple pleasures of earth. For when these replace an appetite for God himself, the idolatry is scarcely recognizable, and almost incurable.

Jesus said some people hear the word of God, and a desire

for God is awakened in their hearts. But then, “as they go on their way they are choked with worries and riches and *pleasures of this life*” (Luke 8:14). In another place he said, “*The desires for other things* enter in and choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful” (Mark 4:19). “The pleasures of this life” and “the desires for other things”—these are not evil in themselves. These are not vices. These are gifts of God. They are your basic meat and potatoes and coffee and gardening and reading and decorating and traveling and investing and TV-watching and Internet-surfing and shopping and exercising and collecting and talking. And all of them can become deadly substitutes for God.

The Deadening Effects of Innocent Delights

Therefore, when I say that the root of Christian fasting is the hunger of homesickness for God, I mean that we will do anything and go without anything if, by any means, we might protect ourselves from the deadening effects of innocent delights and preserve the sweet longings of our homesickness for God. Not just food, but anything. Several years ago I called our people to fast for a twenty-four-hour period once a week (breakfast and lunch on Wednesdays, if possible) during the month of January. We were facing huge issues of self-assessment and direction, and we needed the fullness of God’s presence with all his wisdom and purifying power. Within a few days I got this note in the mail:

I’m behind this. I think God is in it. It doesn’t work for me on Wednesday. I’m with people over lunch every day. So I have a couple of things I believe are from the Spirit that may be more of a fast for some than food. I thought not watching television for a week, or for a month, or a night of the week when I normally watch it, might be more of a fast than food. Instead of watching my favorite program, I might

spend the time talking and listening to God. I wonder if there might be others for whom this would be a fast and would be a focused time of prayer to them.

I said to the congregation the next Sunday, “Amen. If you say, ‘Fasting on Wednesday doesn’t work for me,’ that’s okay. If your heart is right and you’re open to the Lord and you’re asking him, ‘Lord, draw me into the spirit of awakening through fasting,’ he will show you. He’ll show you when and how. If your health doesn’t allow for that, if the doctor says, ‘No fasting for you,’ that’s fine. The Great Physician knows all about that, and something else will work for you.”

The issue is not food *per se*. The issue is anything and everything that is, or can be, a substitute for God. Martyn Lloyd-Jones (1899-1981), the pastor of Westminster Chapel in London, delivered a great sermon on fasting when he was preaching through the Sermon on the Mount in 1959-1960. In it he said,

Fasting if we conceive of it truly, must not . . . be confined to the question of food and drink; fasting should really be made to include abstinence from anything which is legitimate in and of itself for the sake of some special spiritual purpose. There are many bodily functions which are right and normal and perfectly legitimate, but which for special peculiar reasons in certain circumstances should be controlled. That is fasting.²

My assumption so far has been that good things can do great damage. Oxen and fields and marriage can keep you out of the kingdom of heaven. Which is why Jesus says, “No one of you can be my disciple who does not bid farewell to *all his own possessions*” (Luke 14:33, author’s translation³). *Anything* can stand in the way of true discipleship—not just evil, and not just food, but anything. Nor should it be surprising that the greatest com-

petitors for our devotion and affection for God would be some of his most precious gifts.

When Abraham Preferred God to the Life of His Son

How does fasting help us keep from turning gifts into gods? Consider the almost-sacrifice of Isaac by his father Abraham. When Abraham had stretched out his hand to kill his son and the heir of God's promise, "the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven, and said, 'Abraham, Abraham!' And he said, 'Here I am.' And he said, 'Do not stretch out your hand against the lad, and do nothing to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me'" (Genesis 22:11-12). Now here was a radical kind of fast: the sacrifice of a son. God did not call for this "fast" because Isaac was evil. On the contrary, it was because in Abraham's eyes he was so good. Indeed he seemed indispensable for the fulfillment of God's promise. Fasting is not the forfeit of evil but of good.

But why would God call for such a thing? Because it was a test. Does Abraham delight in the fear of the Lord (Isaiah 11:3) more than he delights in his own son? God spoke through the angel: "Now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me." These words, "now I know"—what do they mean? Did God not know that Abraham was a God-fearing man and that he valued God above his son? The Bible teaches that God "knows the hearts of all men" (1 Kings 8:39; Acts 1:24); indeed, he "fashions the hearts of them all" (Psalm 33:15). Why then the test? Here is the way C. S. Lewis answers the question,

[I am concerned with the question] "If God is omniscient he must have known what Abraham would do, without any experiment; why, then, this needless torture?" But as St.

Augustine points out, whatever God knew, Abraham at any rate did not know that this obedience would endure such a command until the event taught him; and the obedience which he did not know that he would choose, he cannot be said to have chosen. The reality of Abraham's obedience was the act itself; and what God knew in knowing that Abraham "would obey" was Abraham's actual obedience on that mountain top at that moment. To say that God "need not have tried the experiment" is to say that because God knows, the thing known by God need not exist.⁴

God wills to know the actual, lived-out reality of our preference for him over all things. And he wills that we have the testimony of our own authenticity through acts of actual preference of God over his gifts. Lewis is right that God may as well not have created the world, but only imagined it, if his knowing what "would be" is as good as his knowing it in the very act. God wills that he have an experiential-knowing, an actual seeing-knowing, a watching-knowing. A real lived-out human act of preference for God over his gifts is the actual lived-out glorification of God's excellence for which he created the world. Fasting is not the only way, or the main way, that we glorify God in preferring him above his gifts. But it is one way. And it is a way that can serve all the others.

Eating as the Anesthesia of Sadness

Lewis referred to St. Augustine. What Augustine said was this: "For the most part, the human mind cannot attain to self-knowledge otherwise than by making trial of its powers through temptation, by some kind of experimental and not merely verbal self-interrogation."⁵ In other words, we easily deceive ourselves that we love God unless our love is frequently put to the test, and we must show our preferences not merely with words but with

sacrifice. Admittedly the sacrifice of a son says more than the sacrifice of a sandwich. But the principle is the same. And many small acts of preferring fellowship with God above food can form a habit of communion and contentment that makes one ready for the ultimate sacrifice. This is one way that fasting serves all our acts of love to God. It keeps the preferring faculty on alert and sharp. It does not let the issue rest. It forces us to ask repeatedly: do I really hunger for God? Do I miss him? Do I long for him? Or have I begun to be content with his gifts?

Christian fasting is a test to see what desires control us. What are our bottom-line passions? In his chapter on fasting in *The Celebration of Discipline*, Richard Foster says, “More than any other discipline, fasting reveals the things that control us. This is a wonderful benefit to the true disciple who longs to be transformed into the image of Jesus Christ. We cover up what is inside of us with food and other things.”⁶

Psychologically, that sort of thing is spoken of a lot today, especially in regard to people who have much pain in their lives. We would say they “medicate” their pain with food. They anesthetize themselves to the hurt inside by eating. But this is not some rare, technical syndrome. All of us do it. Everybody. No exceptions. We all ease our discomfort using food and cover our unhappiness by setting our eyes on dinnertime. Which is why fasting exposes all of us—our pain, our pride, our anger. Foster continues:

If pride controls us, it will be revealed almost immediately. David said, “I humbled my soul with fasting” [Psalm 35:13]. Anger, bitterness, jealousy, strife, fear—if they are within us, they will surface during fasting. At first, we will rationalize that our anger is due to our hunger. And then, we know that we are angry because the spirit of anger is within us. We can rejoice in this knowledge because we know that healing is available through the power of Christ.⁷

One of the reasons for fasting is to know what is in us—just as Abraham showed what was in him. In fasting it will come out. You will see it. And you will have to deal with it or quickly smother it again. When midmorning comes and you want food so badly that the thought of lunch becomes as sweet as a summer vacation, then suddenly you realize, “Oh, I forgot, I made a commitment. I can’t have that pleasure. I’m fasting for lunch too.” Then what are you going to do with all the unhappiness inside? Formerly, you blocked it out with the hope of a tasty lunch. The hope of food gave you the good feelings to balance out the bad feelings. But now the balance is off. You must find another way to deal with it.

The Hungry Handmaid of Faith

At these points we really begin to discover what our spiritual resources are. The things I discover about my soul are so valuable for the fight of faith. I almost subtitled this book: *Fasting—the Hungry Handmaid of Faith*. What a servant she is! Humbly and quietly, with scarcely a movement, she brings up out of the dark places of my soul the dissatisfactions in relationships, the frustrations of the ministry, the fears of failure, the emptiness of wasted time. And just when my heart begins to retreat to the delicious hope of eating supper with friends at Pizza Hut, she quietly reminds me: not tonight. It can be a devastating experience at first. Will I find spiritual communion with God sweet enough, and hope in his promises deep enough, not just to cope, but to flourish and rejoice in him? Or will I rationalize away my need to fast and retreat to the medication of food? The apostle Paul said, “I will not be mastered by anything” (1 Corinthians 6:12). Fasting reveals the measure of food’s mastery over us—or television or computers or whatever we submit to again and again to conceal the weakness of our hunger for God.

Why Did God Create Bread and Hunger?

One of the reasons food has this amazing power is that it is so basic to our existence. Why is this? I mean, why did God create bread and design human beings to need it for life? He could have created life that has no need of food. He is God. He could have done it any way he pleased. Why bread? And why hunger and thirst? My answer is very simple: He created bread so that we would have some idea of what the Son of God is like when he says, “I am the bread of life” (John 6:35). And he created the rhythm of thirst and satisfaction so that we would have some idea of what faith in Christ is like when Jesus said, “He who believes in me shall never thirst” (John 6:35). God did not have to create beings who need food and water and who have capacities for pleasant tastes.

But man is not the center of the universe, God is. And everything, as Paul says, is “from him and through him and to him” (Romans 11:36). “To him” means everything exists to call attention to him and to bring admiration to him. In Colossians 1:16, Paul says more specifically that “all things were created by [Christ] and for [Christ].” Therefore bread was created for the glory of Christ. Hunger and thirst were created for the glory of Christ. And fasting was created for the glory of Christ.

Which means that 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.

How the Book Is Organized

There is no safe and easy way home to heaven. The hard and narrow way is strewn with obstacles and many fatal paths of innocent pleasure. There is a war to be fought within and without. And one of the weapons along the way is fasting. Therefore this book has an inward and an outward thrust. It's about the inward war with our own appetites that compete with hunger for God. And it's about the outward war of revival and reformation and world evangelization and social justice and cultural engagement. Though they are deeply interwoven, the first three chapters are more inward, and the last three are more outward. And the one in the middle is a crossover chapter because longing and fasting for the coming of Christ is intensely personal but demands global engagement until he comes.

Why I Wrote This Book

My aim and my prayer in writing this book is that it might awaken a hunger for the supremacy of God in all things for the joy of all peoples. Fasting proves the presence, and fans the flame, of that hunger. It is an intensifier of spiritual desire. It is a faithful enemy of fatal bondage to innocent things. It is the physical exclamation point at the end of the sentence: "This much, O God, I long for you and for the manifestation of your glory in the world!"

One might think that those who feast most often on communion with God are least hungry. They turn often from the innocent pleasures of the world to linger more directly in the presence of God through the revelation of his Word. And there they eat the Bread of Heaven and drink the Living Water by meditation and faith. But, paradoxically, it is not so that they are the least hungry saints. The opposite is the case. The strongest, most mature Christians I have ever met are the hungriest for God. It

might seem that those who eat most would be least hungry. But that's not the way it works with an inexhaustible fountain, and an infinite feast, and a glorious Lord.

When you take your stand on the finished work of God in Christ, and begin to drink at the River of Life and eat the Bread of Heaven, and know that you have found the end of all your longings, you only get hungrier for God. The more satisfaction you experience from God, while still in this world, the greater your desire for the next. For, as C. S. Lewis said, "Our best havings are wantings."⁸

The more deeply you walk with Christ, the hungrier you get *for* Christ . . . the more homesick you get for heaven . . . the more you want "all the fullness of God" . . . the more you want to be done with sin . . . the more you want the Bridegroom to come again . . . the more you want the Church revived and purified with the beauty of Jesus . . . the more you want a great awakening to God's reality in the cities . . . the more you want to see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ penetrate the darkness of all the unreached peoples of the world . . . the more you want to see false worldviews yield to the force of Truth . . . the more you want to see pain relieved and tears wiped away and death destroyed . . . the more you long for every wrong to be made right and the justice and grace of God to fill the earth like the waters cover the sea.

If you don't feel strong desires for the manifestation of the glory of God, it is not because you have drunk deeply and are satisfied. It is because you have nibbled so long at the table of the world. Your soul is stuffed with small things, and there is no room for the great.⁹ God did not create you for this. There is an appetite for God. And it can be awakened. I invite you to turn from the dulling effects of food and the dangers of idolatry, and to say with some simple fast: "This much, O God, I want you."

*But the days will come
when the bridegroom
is taken away from them,
and then they will fast.*

—MATTHEW 9:15

*If you have died with Christ
to the elementary principles of the world,
why, as if you were living in the world,
do you submit yourself to decrees, such as,
“Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch!”
(which all refer to things destined to perish with the using)—
in accordance with the commandments
and teachings of men?
These are matters which have, to be sure,
the appearance of wisdom
in self-made religion and self-abasement
and severe treatment of the body,
but are of no value against fleshly indulgence.*

—COLOSSIANS 2:20-23

I

IS FASTING CHRISTIAN?

New Fasting for the New Wine

There's a little document called the *Didache* which was written near the end of the first century. In it there is a section on fasting. One verse goes like this: "Let not your fasts be with hypocrites, for they fast on Mondays and Thursdays, but do you fast on Wednesdays and Fridays."¹ Now that seems strange. Why is changing the fast days such a big deal? I think the point of the early church was this: the Jewish custom was to celebrate its Sabbath on Saturday. That's what the Old Covenant called for. Now, to show that we have continuity and discontinuity from Judaism, we Christians will celebrate the Sabbath, but on a different day. We will celebrate on Sunday, the day the Lord rose from the dead and created a new people. In the same way the Jews did their fasting on Mondays and Thursdays, but we will do ours on different days. Why? Same reason: to show there is continuity and discontinuity. Yes, we embrace fasting; but, no, not just as we find it. There is something new about Christian fasting. We'll take it, but we'll change it. No, we don't mean that fasting on different days is what makes it Christian. That is only

a pointer. But Christian fasting *is* new. That is for sure. How it is new is the point of this chapter.

In this connection, the most important word on fasting in the Bible is Matthew 9:14-17.² I know this is a sweeping claim for me to make. But I say it because these words of Jesus speak most directly and deeply to the central problem of fasting—namely, Is it a distinctively Christian thing to do? If so, how?

It Is Not Obvious That Fasting Is Christian

This is a crucial question for at least four reasons. First of all, fasting, as a deliberate abstinence from food for religious, cultural, political, or health reasons, is “a practice found in all societies, cultures and centuries.”³ Virtually every religion in the world practices fasting. And even non-religious people fast for political and health reasons. So why should Christians join this pagan parade of asceticism? Second, even if fasting was practiced extensively by God’s people in the Old Testament, does not the arrival of the kingdom in the ministry of Jesus make this practice obsolete? Can you put the new wine of the kingdom into the old wineskins of external form and ritual? Third, does not the finished triumph of Christ on the cross, and the ongoing presence of the Holy Spirit in the church mean that the victorious Christ is so powerfully among us that the dominant spirit of life should be celebration, not mortification? And besides these three objections, does not the triumph of fasting over the body’s appetites lead to pride and self-reliance, which is even worse than gluttony?

So it is not at all obvious that fasting is a distinctively Christian thing to do. If it is, we need to see how it relates to the Center. And the Center is the triumph of Christ in dying and rising and reigning over history for the salvation of his people and the glory of his Father.

Fasting Is a Universal Religious Practice

No one knows how or where fasting had its beginning.⁴ Wherever you go, there are customs and traditions of fasting. Most people are aware of the Jewish fasts including Yom Kippur, or the day of Atonement (Leviticus 16:29-31),⁵ and the Muslim fasting during Ramadan and the severe fasting of the Hindu high caste of Brahmans.⁶ But the extent of the practice is worldwide. For example,

the Andaman Islanders . . . abstain from certain fruits, edible roots, etc. at certain seasons, because the god Puluga . . . requires them, and would send a deluge if the taboo were broken. . . . Among the Koita of New Guinea a woman during pregnancy must not eat bandicoot, echidna, certain fish, and iguana; and the husband must observe the same food taboos. . . . Among the Yoruba, [at the death of a husband] widows and daughters are shut up and must refuse all food for at least 24 hours. . . . In British Columbia, the Stlatlunh (Lillooet) spent four days after the funeral feast in fasting, lamentations, and ceremonial ablutions. . . . Before slaying the eagle, a sacred bird, the professional eagle-killer among the Cherokees had to undergo a long vigil of prayer and fasting. . . . [Other] American Indian youth [often undergo prolonged austerities] in order that by means of a vision [they] may see the guardian spirit which will be [theirs] for the remainder of [their] life. . . . Among the tribes of New South Wales, boys at the bora ceremonies are kept for two days without food, and receive only a little water.⁷

Fasting Is a Political Weapon

In addition to worldwide religious fasting, there is also political or protest fasting. One of the most famous examples is Mahatma Gandhi, who lived from 1869 to 1948 and spent over

thirty years crusading peacefully for the independence of India. His family and his Hindu culture fed his passion for fasting as a political weapon. His mother was a devout Hindu who went beyond the required duties of fasting each year and added several more rigorous fasts during the rainy season. Gandhi recalled,

She would take the hardest vows and keep them without flinching. Living on one meal a day during the Chaturmas was a habit with her. Not content with that she fasted every alternate day during one Chaturmas. During another Chaturmas, she vowed not to have food without seeing the sun. We children on those days would stand, staring at the sky, waiting to announce the appearance of the sun to our mother. Everyone knows that at the height of the rainy season the sun does not often condescend to show his face. And I remember days when, at his sudden appearance, we would rush and announce it to her. She would run out to see with her own eyes, but by that time the fugitive sun would be gone, thus depriving her of her meal. "That does not matter," she would say cheerfully, "God did not want me to eat today." And then she would return to her round of duties.⁸

It's not surprising that Gandhi would make fasting an essential part of his political career. By the ancient laws of Manu, a creditor could only collect a debt owed him by shaming the debtor. He would sit, for example, before the debtor's house without eating day after day until the debtor was shamed into paying his debt. Eric Rogers observed that "this very Indian technique worked for Gandhi. . . . His fasting undoubtedly touched more hearts than anything else he did. Not just in India, but practically everywhere, men were haunted by the image of a frail little man cheerfully enduring privation for the sake of a principle."⁹

Fasting Is a Health Regimen

Then, besides religious and political fasting there is health fasting, with or without religious associations. A brief search on the World Wide Web under the topic “fasting” reveals hundreds of organizations and publications devoted to fasting for health. For example, one of the prominent locations is the Fasting Center International. The blurb on their Internet home page goes like this:

Feeling out of shape, self-conscious, low on energy, or downright unhealthy? Want to improve your physical health, while heightening your clarity of consciousness and your spirituality, as well? Scientific juice-fasting enables you to accomplish all of these goals, very quickly, without any interruption of your work, life, exercise or study routines. Fact is, you’ll experience more energy than you now have, during and after your fast!

Glimpses like these, of worldwide religious, political, and health fasting, free us from the notion that fasting, in and of itself, is peculiarly Christian. It may, in fact, be emphatically anti-Christian, as it was already in the New Testament, when forty men “bound themselves under a curse not to eat or drink” until they had killed the apostle Paul (Acts 23:21). And it may be distorted, even among Christians, not only into legalistic technique (as we will see), but also into a destructive bondage like anorexia nervosa.¹⁰ All of this raises the question why a Christian would put much stock in a ritual so widely used for non-Christian religious, political, and fitness purposes.

Does Fasting Belong in the Kingdom of God?

Not only that, the prevalence of fasting in the Old Testament raises the question whether the practice has abiding validity for people who live on this side of the coming of the Messiah and the

appearance of the kingdom of God. Jesus said, “If I cast out demons by the finger of God, then *the kingdom of God has come upon you*” (Luke 11:20). And when the Pharisees asked about the coming of the kingdom, he said, “*The kingdom of God is in your midst*” (Luke 17:21). So there is a profound sense in which the long-awaited kingdom of God has *already* come in the life and ministry of Jesus.

This is the “mystery of the kingdom” that Jesus had in mind when he said to his disciples, “To you has been given the mystery of the kingdom of God; but those who are outside get everything in parables” (Mark 4:11). This was a stunning new reality in the world. “The new truth, now given to men by revelation in the person and mission of Jesus, is that *the Kingdom which is to come finally in apocalyptic power, as foreseen in Daniel, has in fact entered into the world in advance in a hidden form to work secretly within and among men.*”¹¹

So the question is pressing: does fasting belong in the Church—the new kingdom-people that God is assembling from all the peoples of the world? Some think not. For example, in his book, *Prayer and Fasting: A Study in the Devotional Life of the Early Church*, Keith Main argues that the inbreaking of the kingdom of God in Jesus’ ministry radically changes the importance of fasting. “Thus far,” he says, “we have suggested that the joy and thanksgiving that marks the prayer life of the New Testament is a sign of the inbreaking of the Kingdom of God. *Fasting is no longer consistent with the joyous and thankful attitude that marks the fellowship.*”¹²

Does Paul Nullify Fasting?

Keith Main’s viewpoint gains more credibility when we look at the rest of the New Testament outside the Gospels. Fasting is barely visible.¹³ Main presses his point:

[Fasting] ceases to be a crucial issue within the church. . . . Paul, following the lead of Jesus, deliberately diverted the disciples' attention away from fasting and any form of food asceticism and into prayer, service, and toil on behalf of the Kingdom. Missionary work served as a corrective and counterpoise not only to apocalyptic dreaming but also to the outworn and overworked custom of fasting. . . . A sense of Life Eternal is ever breaking in upon us. The believer marches to the sound of music from a different world! And it is exceedingly difficult to reconcile the Risen Christ with the fasting forms.¹⁴

Does the scarcity of fasting in the New Testament epistles, and the joyful presence of the kingdom and the glorious ministry of the Spirit of Christ nullify the relevance of fasting in the Christian church? The urgency of this question is what makes Jesus' words on fasting in Matthew 9:14-17 so important—the most important in the Bible in my opinion.

The urgency is increased when we consider that in Paul's letters food is celebrated as something good, asceticism is treated as a weak weapon against fleshly indulgence, and practices of eating and drinking are regarded as nonessential, except as they express love and contentment in Christ.

The Goodness of Food

In 1 Timothy 4:1-5 Paul warns that in the end times "some will fall away from the faith . . . and advocate abstaining from foods." He responds to this attitude toward food by saying, "God has created [food] to be gratefully shared in by those who believe and know the truth. For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected, if it is received with gratitude; for it is sanctified by means of the word of God and prayer." So Paul is eager to warn against a kind of asceticism that exalts fast-

ing in such a way that the goodness of God in the gift of food is overlooked or distorted. Even during the holy times of sharing the Lord's Supper, Paul did not discourage eating, but told the Corinthians to "eat at home, so that you may not come together for judgment" (1 Corinthians 11:34).

The Weakness of Asceticism

And when Paul pondered the value of harsh measures for the body, he cautioned the Colossians that such disciplines are of limited value and can stir up as much carnal pride as they subdue carnal appetite. He fears that the Colossians have drifted away from deep and simple faith in Christ toward external ritual as a means of sanctification: "Why do you submit yourself to decrees, such as, 'Do not handle, *do not taste*, do not touch!' (which all refer to things destined to perish with the using)—in accordance with the commandments and teachings of men?" (Colossians 2:20-22).

What's wrong with these "teachings of men" that call us not to "taste"? He answers, "These are matters which have, to be sure, the appearance of wisdom in self-made religion and *self-abasement and severe treatment of the body*, but are of no value against fleshly indulgence" (Colossians 2:23). This is a strong warning against any simplistic view of fasting that thinks it will automatically do a person spiritual good. It is not that simple. "Severe treatment of the body" may only feed a person's flesh with more self-reliance. C. S. Lewis saw this clearly and sounded the warning:

Fasting asserts the will against the appetite—the reward being self-mastery and the danger pride: involuntary hunger subjects appetites and will together to the Divine will, furnishing an occasion for submission and exposing us to the

danger of rebellion. But the redemptive effect of suffering lies chiefly in its tendency to reduce the rebel will. Ascetic practices which, in themselves, strengthen the will, are only useful insofar as they enable the will to put its own house (the passions) in order, as a preparation for offering the whole man to God. They are necessary as a means; and as an end, they would be abominable, for in substituting will for appetite and there stopping, they would merely exchange the animal self for the diabolical self. It was therefore truly said that “only God can mortify.”¹⁵

The true mortification of our carnal nature is not a simple matter of denial and discipline. It is an internal, spiritual matter of finding more contentment in Christ than in food.

Eating and Not Eating Are Not Essential

Paul regards eating or not eating as a matter that is nonessential in itself, but which gains value as it expresses love and superior satisfaction in God. Therefore he tells the Roman church, “Let not him who eats regard with contempt him who does not eat, and let not him who does not eat judge him who eats, for God has accepted him. Who are you to judge the servant of another? To his own master he stands or falls; and stand he will, for the Lord is able to make him stand. . . . Let each man be fully convinced in his own mind. . . . He who eats, does so for the Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and he who eats not, for the Lord he does not eat, and gives thanks to God” (Romans 14:3-6).

These words from Romans 14 are not addressed to a situation of fasting. The situation has to do with eating food that some in the church consider taboo because of its associations. But that does not change the principle. Eating and not eating—fasting and not fasting—can both be done “for the Lord” with “thanksgiving to God.” Therefore, “let each be fully convinced

in his own mind.” And, as Paul says in Colossians 2:16, “Let no one act as your judge in regard to food or drink.” For “food will not commend us to God; we are neither the worse if we do not eat, nor the better if we do eat” (1 Corinthians 8:8). For “all things are lawful for me, but not all things are profitable. All things are lawful for me, but I will not be mastered by anything” (1 Corinthians 6:12).

The Most Important Word on Fasting in the Bible

So the question demands our attention: Is fasting Christian? If so, how? This is what the words of Jesus in Matthew 9:14-17 ultimately address. That is why they are the most important words on fasting in the Bible. It’s time to look at them.

The disciples of John came to [Jesus], saying, “Why do we and the Pharisees fast, but Your disciples do not fast?” And Jesus said to them, “The attendants of the bridegroom cannot mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them, can they? But the days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast. But no one puts a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment; for the patch pulls away from the garment, and a worse tear results. Nor do men put new wine into old wineskins; otherwise the wineskins burst, and the wine pours out, and the wineskins are ruined; but they put new wine into fresh wineskins, and both are preserved.”

The disciples of John the Baptist come to Jesus and ask why Jesus’ disciples don’t fast. So evidently Jesus’ disciples were not fasting while he was with them. In fact, Jesus had set them an example that earned him the reputation of being anything but an ascetic. When he praised the ministry of John the Baptist he said to the crowds, “John the Baptist has come eating no bread and

drinking no wine; and you say, 'He has a demon!' The Son of Man has come *eating and drinking*; and you say, 'Behold, a gluttonous man, and a drunkard, a friend of tax-gatherers and sinners!'" (Luke 7:33-35). In other words, John practiced much fasting, and Jesus practiced little if any (apart from his initial forty-day fast).

Why Didn't Jesus' Disciples Fast?

Now the disciples of John have come to Jesus and want to know why this is. "Why do we and the Pharisees fast, but Your disciples do not fast?" Jesus answers with a word picture. He says, "The attendants of the bridegroom cannot mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them, can they?" With those words Jesus teaches us two things. One is that fasting was, by and large, associated with mourning in that day. It was an expression of brokenheartedness and desperation, usually over sin or over some danger or some deeply longed-for blessing. It was something you did when things were not going the way you wanted them to.

But that's not the situation with the disciples of Jesus. This is the second thing he teaches: the Messiah has come, and his coming is like the coming of a bridegroom to a wedding feast. This, he says, is just too good to mingle with fasting. Jesus was making a tremendous claim for himself here. In the Old Testament God had pictured himself as the husband of his people Israel. "As a young man marries a virgin, so your sons will marry you; and as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so your God will rejoice over you" (Isaiah 62:5). "'Then I [the Lord] passed by you [Israel] and saw you, and behold, you were at the time for love; so I spread My skirt over you and covered your nakedness. I also swore to you and entered into a covenant with you so that you became Mine,' declares the Lord GOD" (Ezekiel 16:8). "I [the Lord] will betroth you [Israel] to Me forever; yes,

I will betroth you to Me in righteousness and in justice, in lovingkindness and in compassion, and I will betroth you to Me in faithfulness. Then you will know the LORD” (Hosea 2:19-20).

Now the Son of God, the Messiah, the long-hoped-for Prince and Ruler in Israel, has come, and he claims to be the Bridegroom—that is, the husband of his people—who will be the true Israel. John the Baptist had recognized this already. When his disciples asked him about who Jesus was, he said, “You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, ‘I am not the Christ,’ but, ‘I have been sent before Him.’ He who has the bride is the bridegroom; but the friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly because of the bridegroom’s voice. And so this joy of mine has been made full” (John 3:28-29).

John’s partially-veiled claim is the kind Jesus made about his identity with God. If you had ears to hear, you could hear it. God, the one who betrothed Israel to himself in covenant love, has come.

This is so stunning and so glorious and so unexpected in this form that Jesus said, you simply cannot fast now in this situation. It is too happy and too spectacularly exhilarating. Fasting is for times of yearning and aching and longing. But the bridegroom of Israel is here. After a thousand years of dreaming and longing and hoping and waiting, he is here! The absence of fasting in the band of disciples was a witness to the presence of God in their midst.

When Will the Disciples Fast?

But then Jesus said, “The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast.” This is the key sentence: “*Then they will fast.*” When is he referring to?

Some have suggested that he was referring only to the several days between his death and resurrection. In other words, the

Bridegroom will be taken away from Good Friday through Easter Sunday morning. During those three days the disciples would fast. But then he would be with them again, and they would not fast any longer. Support for this view is found in John 16:22-23 where Jesus predicts his death and resurrection with these words: "You too now have sorrow; but I will see you again, and your heart will rejoice, and no one takes your joy away from you. And in that day you will ask Me no question. Truly, truly, I say to you, if you shall ask the Father for anything, He will give it to you in My name." In other words, after the resurrection, during the church age, there will be indestructible joy among Christ's disciples. Does this mean that fasting is excluded? Is Jesus only prophesying that his disciples would fast between Good Friday and Easter?

That is very unlikely for several reasons. One is that, for all its joy, the early church fasted on certain occasions (Acts 13:1-3; 14:23; 2 Corinthians 6:5; 11:27). Therefore the earliest Christians did not take Jesus' words to mean that fasting would be excluded after the resurrection.

What then does Jesus mean when he says, "The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast"? He means that after his death and resurrection he will return to his Father in heaven, and during that time the disciples will fast. Robert Gundry is right when he says, "The entirety of the church age constitutes 'the days' that 'will come when the bridegroom is taken away.'"¹⁶ In my judgment, the strongest reason for this view is that the only other place in Matthew where Jesus uses this term "bridegroom" is to refer to himself coming back at the end of the church age. In Matthew 25:1-13 Jesus pictures his second coming as the arrival of the bridegroom. "At midnight there was a shout, 'Behold, the bridegroom! Come out to meet him'" (verse 6). So Jesus clearly thinks of himself as a bridegroom who is gone not only for three days

between Good Friday and Easter, but for all the time until the second coming. This is the time he has in mind when he says, “Then they will fast”—until the second coming.

Arthur Wallis is justified in entitling the sixth chapter of his book, *God’s Chosen Fast*, “The Time Is Now.”¹⁷ Now is when Jesus says his disciples will fast. He is saying: Now while I am here in your midst as the bridegroom you cannot fast, but I am not going to remain with you. There will come a time when I return to my Father in heaven. And during that time you will fast. That time is now.

It is true that Jesus has given the Holy Spirit in his absence, and that the Holy Spirit is “the Spirit of Jesus” (Acts 16:7; 2 Corinthians 3:17). So in a profound and wonderful sense Jesus is still with us. He said, speaking of the “Comforter,” the Spirit, “I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you” (John 14:18). Nevertheless, there is a greater degree of intimacy that we will enjoy with Christ in heaven when this age is over. So in another sense Christ is *not* with us, but away from us. This is why Paul said in 2 Corinthians 5:8 “We [would] prefer to be absent from the body and *at home with the Lord*,” and in Philippians 1:23, “*To depart and be with Christ . . . is very much better.*” In other words, in this age there is an ache inside every Christian that Jesus is not here as fully and intimately and as powerfully and as gloriously as we want him to be. We hunger for so much more. That is why we fast.

Is Fasting the Old Wineskin That Has to Go?

But then Jesus says something very crucial in Matthew 9:16-17. He puts together two images, one about patched garments, and the other about worn-out wineskins. “But no one puts a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment; for the patch pulls away from the garment, and a worse tear results. Nor do men put new

wine into old wineskins; otherwise the wineskins burst, and the wine pours out, and the wineskins are ruined; but they put new wine into fresh wineskins, and both are preserved.”

The patch of unshrunk cloth and the new wine represent the new reality that has come with Jesus—the Kingdom of God is here. The Bridegroom has come. The Messiah is in our midst. And that is not temporary. He is not here and then gone. The kingdom of God did not come in Jesus and then just vanish out of the world. Jesus died for our sins once for all. He rose from the dead once for all. The Spirit was sent into the world as the real presence of Jesus among us. The kingdom of God is the present reigning power of Christ in the world subduing hearts to the King and creating a people who believe him and serve him in faith and holiness. The Spirit of the bridegroom is gathering and purifying a bride for Christ. This is the gospel of Christ and “the mystery of the kingdom” that we referred to above.¹⁸ This is the new wine.

And Jesus says the old wineskins can’t contain it. Something has to change. What is the old wineskin? In the context, we can’t escape the connection with fasting. There is no break in Jesus’ thought. Follow it from verse 15 to 16: “The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast. But no one puts a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment. . . .” There is no break. And this is true in all three Gospels where this account is recorded. The old shrunken patch of cloth and the old brittle wineskins relate directly to fasting as an old Jewish custom.

Fasting was inherited from the Old Testament and had been used as part of the Jewish system of relating to God. In Luke 18:11-12 we get a glimpse of this old practice as the Pharisee prays, “God, I thank Thee that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax-gatherer. *I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get.*” This traditional fast-

ing is the old wineskin. And Jesus says that it cannot contain the new wine of the kingdom that he is bringing.

Now this presents us with a problem. In Matthew 9:15 Jesus says that we will fast when the Bridegroom is gone. And two verses later he says that the old fasting cannot contain the new wine of the kingdom. In other words, Jesus' disciples *will* fast; but the fasting they have known is not suitable for the new reality of his presence and the inbreaking kingdom of God.

New Wine Calls for New Fasting

What then shall we say? Are we to fast as Christians, or are we not? Is fasting Christian, or isn't it? I believe the answer is that the new wine of Christ's presence demands not *no* fasting, but *new* fasting. Years ago I wrote in the margin of my Greek Testament beside Matthew 9:17, "The new fasting is based on the mystery that the bridegroom *has* come, not just *will* come. The new wine of his presence calls for new fasting."

In other words, the yearning and longing and ache of the *old* fasting was not based on the glorious truth that the Messiah had come. The mourning over sin and the yearning for deliverance from danger and the longing for God that inspired the old fasting were not based on the great finished work of the Redeemer and the great revelation of his truth and grace in history. These things were all still in the future. But now the Bridegroom has come. And in coming he struck the decisive blow against sin and Satan and death.

What distinguishes Christianity from Judaism is that the longed-for kingdom of God is now present as well as future. The King has come. "The kingdom of God has come upon you" (Luke 11:20). "The kingdom of God is in your midst" (Luke 17:21). It is true that the kingdom of God is not yet fully consummated. It is still to come in glorious fullness and power. At

the Last Supper Jesus said, “I will not drink of the fruit of the vine from now on *until the kingdom of God comes*” (Luke 22:18). So it is plain that the kingdom of God is still a future reality yet to come, even though Jesus said that “the kingdom of God has come upon you” and “is in your midst” (which is why George Ladd’s book is entitled *The Presence of the Future*¹⁹).

This is the Center referred to earlier, which fasting has to relate to if it is going to be Christian. The Center is the decisive triumph of the Son of God, the Messiah, entering history and dying and rising from the dead and reigning over history for the salvation of his people and the glory of his Father. Christians are a people captured by a great hope that one day they will see and be enthralled by the fullness of the glory of God in Christ. But what is decisively Christian in this is that our hope is rooted in the past historical triumph of that very God over sin and death and hell by the death and resurrection of Jesus.²⁰ Christianity is a vibrant hope for the consummation of history in the universal manifestation of the glory of God in Christ—a hope that is unshakably rooted in the past incarnation of Christ who offered himself once for all as a sacrifice for sin and sat down at the right hand of God (Hebrews 10:12). This is the new wine.

The great, central, decisive act of salvation for us today is past, not future. And on the basis of that past work of the Bridegroom, nothing can ever be the same again. The Lamb is slain. The blood is shed. The punishment of our sins is executed. Death is defeated. The Spirit is sent. The wine is new. And the old fasting mindset is simply not adequate.

The Newness of the New Fasting

What then is new about the new *Christian* fasting? What’s new about Christian fasting is that it rests on all this finished work of the Bridegroom. It assumes that. It believes that. It enjoys

that. The aching and yearning and longing for Christ and his power that drive us to fasting are not the expression of emptiness. Need, yes. Pain, yes. Hunger for God, yes. But not emptiness. The firstfruits of what we long for have already come. The downpayment of what we yearn for is already paid. The fullness that we are longing for and fasting for has appeared in history, and we have beheld his glory. It is not merely future. We do not fast out of emptiness. Christ is already in us the hope of glory (Colossians 1:27). We have been “sealed . . . with the Holy Spirit of promise, who is given [now!] as a pledge of our inheritance” (Ephesians 1:13-14; see also 2 Corinthians 1:22; 5:5).

We have tasted the powers of the age to come, and our fasting is not because we are hungry for something we have not experienced, but because the new wine of Christ’s presence is so real and so satisfying. We must have all that it is possible to have. The newness of our fasting is this: its intensity comes not because we have never tasted the wine of Christ’s presence, but because we have tasted it so wonderfully by his Spirit, and cannot now be satisfied until the consummation of joy arrives. The new fasting, the *Christian* fasting, is a hunger for all the fullness of God (Ephesians 3:19), aroused by the aroma of Jesus’ love and by the taste of God’s goodness in the gospel of Christ (1 Peter 2:2-3).

The Fasting That Is Feasting

Another way to say it is that the new fasting is the fasting of *faith*. Faith stands on the finished work of Christ and, on that foundation, becomes the “assurance of things hoped for” (Hebrews 11:1). Faith is a spiritual feasting on Christ with a view to being so satisfied in him that the power of all other allurements is broken.²¹ This feasting begins by receiving the past grace of Christ’s death and resurrection, and then embraces

all that God promises to be for us in him. As long as we are finite and fallen, Christian faith will mean both delighting in the (past) incarnation and desiring the (future) consummation. It will be both contentment and dissatisfaction. And the dissatisfaction will grow directly out of the measure of contentment that we have known in Christ.

Fasting Does Belong in the Kingdom of God

This understanding of Christian fasting answers all the concerns raised earlier by Keith Main. He said that “the prayer life of the New Testament is a sign of the inbreaking of the kingdom of God. Fasting is no longer consistent with the joyous and thankful attitude that marks the fellowship.”²² We see now that this is an overstatement. Yes, the kingdom has broken in. Yes, there is a deep drinking even now on the end-time glory manifest in Christ and experienced by his Spirit. But, no, this is not so full and uninterrupted that aching and longing and desiring are completely overcome.

Even Main himself backs off and admits this when he says,

It is true that the crisis and the tragedy are there as a stark reality. The Kingdom is not *fully* realized. Granted that the Bridegroom is present and now is not an appropriate time to mourn. Yet this is not entirely so, for we are still in the flesh and weak in faith. . . . Within this “bitter struggle” the believer, in his devotional life, might conceivably find occasion to fast. It would be only one among many of the ingredients that go to make up the life of the man in Christ.²³

That’s right. The presence of the Bridegroom through his Spirit, in the triumph of forgiveness and fellowship, does not make fasting negligible, it makes it new.

Fasting as an Expression of Dissatisfied Contentment

As an act of faith, Christian fasting is an expression of dissatisfied contentment in the all-sufficiency of Christ. It is an expression of secure and happy longing for the all-satisfying fullness of Christ. Christian fasting does not tremble in the hope of earning anything from Christ. It looks away from itself to the final payment of Calvary for every blessing it will ever receive. Christian fasting is not self-wrought discipline that tries to deserve more from God. It is a hunger for God awakened by the taste of God freely given in the gospel.

Christian Fasting Affirms the Goodness of Food

This is why the warnings we raised earlier from Paul's letters are not really objections against Christian fasting, but only against its distortions. "God has created [food] to be gratefully shared in by those who believe and know the truth. For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected, if it is received with gratitude; for it is sanctified by means of the word of God and prayer" (1 Timothy 4:3-5). Paul's praise for the goodness of food, and for the freedom that Christians have to enjoy it, is not a contradiction of Christian fasting. The Christian says yes to every good and perfect gift that comes down from the Father of lights (James 1:17).

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. If a husband and wife resolve to give up sexual relations for a season to deal earnestly with a problem keeping them at odds, this is not a condemnation of sex but an exaltation of love. 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.

Christian Fasting Is Not “Willpower Religion”

The great danger Paul saw in self-made and self-exalting fasting does not nullify the new Christian fasting. Paul warns that there is a fasting that is a “self-made religion and [a] self-abasement and severe treatment of the body, [but has] no value against fleshly indulgence” (Colossians 2:23). In other words, this fasting is a “willpower religion”²⁴ that actually stirs up the spiritual pride of the flesh even while mastering its physical appetites.

But this is the exact opposite of Christian fasting. Christian fasting moves from broken and contrite poverty of spirit to sweet satisfaction in the free mercy of Christ to ever greater desires and enjoyments of God’s inexhaustible grace. Christian fasting does not bolster pride, because it rests with childlike contentment in the firmly accomplished justification of God in Christ, even while longing for all the fullness of God possible in this life. Christian fasting is the effect of what Christ has already done *for* us and *in* us. It is not our feat, but the Spirit’s fruit. Recall that the last-mentioned fruit of the Spirit is “self-control”²⁵ (Galatians 5:23).

All Eating Is Lawful, but Not All Is Helpful

What all this means for Paul’s practice is that he was free to fast or not to fast. “All things are lawful for me, but not all things are profitable. All things are lawful for me, but I will not be mastered by anything” (1 Corinthians 6:12). The reason for this is that the act of fasting was not the essential thing. Doing it—or not doing it—for the glory of God was the essential thing: “He who eats, does so for the Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and he who eats

not, *for the Lord he does not eat, and gives thanks to God*” (Romans 14:6). Fasting gives glory to God when it is experienced as a gift from God aimed at knowing and enjoying more of God. God is glorified in us when we aim our behavior at being most satisfied in him. We may do this by grateful eating or by grateful fasting. His gifts leave a hunger for him beyond themselves, and fasting from his gifts puts that hunger to the test.

Should a Christian Buffet the Body?

It is misleading, without careful qualification, to say (as Keith Main does) that “Paul . . . deliberately diverted the disciples’ attention away from fasting and any form of food asceticism and into prayer, service, and toil on behalf of the kingdom.”²⁶ I agree with the positive second half of this statement, not the negative first half. I would say Paul *did* direct our attention toward fasting and numerous other kinds of self-denial—*not* as meritorious religious rituals, and not as an end in themselves, but as a weapon in the fight of faith. Twice, when Paul was listing his trials, he mentioned fasting. “I have been in labor and hardship, through many sleepless nights, in hunger and thirst, *often in fastings*,²⁷ in cold and exposure” (2 Corinthians 11:27; see also 6:5).

This fits with what he said about how he handled the appetites of his body. “*I buffet my body and make it my slave*, lest possibly, after I have preached to others, I myself should be disqualified” (1 Corinthians 9:26-27). I take this to mean that Paul regarded some ascetic discipline as a useful weapon in the fight of faith. Holding fast to Christ *by faith* is the key to not being “disqualified.” This is plain, for example, from Colossians 1:23, “[Christ will present you holy and blameless to God] if indeed you *continue in the faith* firmly established and steadfast,

and *not moved away from the hope* of the gospel.” Persevering *faith* is the key to standing before God acceptable in the last day.

Paul says that one weapon in this ongoing fight of faith is the practice of “buffeting the body.” He was not unaware that the desires of the body are deceitful as well as delightful. He said that the “old self” is “being corrupted in accordance with the *desires of deceit*” (Ephesians 4:22, author’s translation). The nature of this deceit is to lure us subtly into living for the “fleeting pleasures” of body and mind, rather than the spiritual delights of knowing and serving God. These pleasures start as innocent delights in food and reading and resting and playing, but then become ends in themselves and choke off spiritual hunger for God. Paul buffets his body to put himself to the test. Does he hunger for God? Is his faith real? Or is he becoming the slave of comfort and bodily pleasures? You can hear the passion of his heart in 1 Corinthians 6:12, “I will not be mastered by anything!” This is not the pride of Stoic self-exaltation. It is the passionate resolve to resist anything that lures the heart away from an all-controlling satisfaction in God.

When I was preaching on fasting and prayer some years ago, a young man came up to me after one of the messages and told me a story that illustrates the kind of buffeting the body in prayer that fits a person for heaven. I had referred to the South Korean church as pacesetters in this regard. That moved the young man to talk to me after the service.

I grew up on the mission field in Korea. There is one experience emblazoned on my mind to show the sacrificial dedication to prayer and fasting in Korea. My father worked with a leper colony, and they had prayer meetings that met at four o’clock in the morning. I was a little boy, but my father took me with him, getting me up at about 3:30 A.M. to get there on time. He sat me down in the back where I

could see out the door. And I'll never forget one man who had no legs, no crutches, and was using his hands and crabbing along the ground, dragging his body to pray at 4 A.M. I'll never forget that.

Rising early is a kind of fast. And coming to pray when it is hard to get there is another kind of fast. When we make such choices, we make war on the deceitfulness of our desires and declare the preciousness of prayer and the all-surpassing worth of God.

Is Fasting Christian?

Is fasting Christian? It is if it comes from confidence in Christ and is sustained by the power of Christ and aims at the glory of Christ. Over every Christian fast should be written the words, "I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish in order that I may gain Christ" (Philippians 3:7-8). In fasting, as well as in all other privations, every loss is for the sake of "gaining Christ." But this does not mean that we seek to gain a Christ we do not have. Nor does it mean that our progress depends on ourselves. Four verses later Paul makes plain the dynamics of the entire Christian life—including fasting: "I press on in order that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus."

This is the essence of Christian fasting: We ache and yearn—and fast—to know more and more of all that God is for us in Jesus. But only because he has already laid hold of us and is drawing us ever forward and upward into "all the fullness of God."

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.