



Committee on Foreign Missions

Orthodox Presbyterian Church

607 Easton Road, Suite E2, Willow Grove, PA 19090-2539 USA

Reflections on Fasting

Rev. Douglas B. Clawson

While we are not seeking in any way to usurp the place of your pastor, session, or presbytery in offering these observations, we offer these reflections to those who might find them helpful.

Fasting is a way of humbling ourselves to focus our thoughts, our hearts and bodies on God's will for us, to turn our backs on our desires and sins and to turn toward Him—seeking to do what He has commanded and looking to Him to supply our need. While the Old Testament tells us of individuals who fasted (Psalm 35:13; 69:10; 109:24; 1 Kings 21:27; Daniel 9:3; Ezra 9:5; Nehemiah 1:4), and of fasts that were held spontaneously on the occasion of a significant event like the defeat of the army (Judges 20:26; 1 Samuel 7:6); the death of a leader (1 Samuel 31:13; 2 Samuel 1:12; 12:16–22); or a particular request to the Lord (2 Chronicles 20:3; Ezra 8:21–23; Esther 4:3, 16; Jeremiah 36:9; Nehemiah 9:1), the Mosaic Law required only one annual day for Israel to corporately humble itself before the Lord, the Day of Atonement.

Just as prayer can be abused by making selfish requests, fasting was sometimes also abused, done for the purpose of seeking selfish goals or getting attention from others (Isaiah 58:3–6; Jeremiah 14:12; Zechariah 8:19). However, just because something can be misused, doesn't mean that we should not do it.

Our Lord wants us to humble ourselves before Him (Joel 2:12–13), turn our backs on our sins, and seek His will, not our own will. Because our God and Savior Jesus has satisfied all that the Day of Atonement pointed to, there is no longer an annual required church-wide fast. However, fasting should remain part of the fabric of our New Testament worship. In Matthew 6:16–18, we read: "And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you." Further, following a question about why John the Baptist's disciples do fast and Jesus' disciples don't fast, we read: "And Jesus said to them, 'Can the wedding guests mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them? The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast'" (Matthew 9:15; Mark 2:20; Luke 5:35).

And just as Jesus fasted and prayed for forty days in the wilderness before beginning his public ministry, we find the New Testament church fasting and praying before ordaining officers. "Now there were in the church at Antioch prophets and teachers, Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen a lifelong friend of Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. While

they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, 'Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.' Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off" (Acts 13:1-3). "And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed" (Acts 14:23).

Because of this, the Westminster standards indicate that "solemn fastings" would be part of our worship on special occasions and "religious fasting" is a duty required by the second commandment. In the Westminster Confession of Faith 21.5, we read:

The reading of the Scriptures with godly fear, the sound preaching^s and conscionable hearing of the Word, in obedience unto God, with understanding, faith, and reverence, singing of psalms with grace in the heart; as also, the due administration and worthy receiving of the sacraments instituted by Christ, are all parts of the ordinary religious worship of God: beside religious oaths, vows, solemn fastings, and thanksgivings upon special occasions, which are, in their several times and seasons, to be used in an holy and religious manner.

In the Westminster Larger Catechism, Question 108, we read:

Q. 108 What are the duties required in the second commandment?

A. The duties required in the second commandment are, the receiving, observing, and keeping pure and entire, all such religious worship and ordinances as God hath instituted in his Word; particularly prayer and thanksgiving in the name of Christ; the reading, preaching, and hearing of the Word; the administration and receiving of the sacraments; church government and discipline; the ministry and maintenance thereof; religious fasting; swearing by the name of God, and vowing unto him: as also the disapproving, detesting, opposing all false worship; and, according to each one's place and calling, removing it, and all monuments of idolatry.

This is why our OPC Directory for Public Worship, Chapter V, on Special Occasions of Public Worship, is so helpful in providing a section on fasting:

Under the gospel, we are commanded to keep no other particular day holy, except the Lord's Day. Nevertheless, God's people may observe special occasions as the dispensations of God's providence administer cause and opportunity. Such observance is both consonant with Scripture and pastorally appropriate.

A. Prayer and Fasting

1. When great and notable calamities come upon or threaten the church, community, or nation, when judgment is deserved because of sin, when the people seek some special blessing from the Lord, or when a pastor is to be ordained or installed (Form of Government, Chapter XXIII, Section 7), it is fitting that the people of God engage in times of solemn prayer and fasting.
2. Prayer and fasting may be observed by private individuals and families at their discretion or by the Church at the discretion of the appropriate judicatory. If the civil authority calls for a time of prayer and fasting that the judicatories of the Church deem to be in harmony with the Scriptures, they should consider issuing such a call to their members.

3. Public notice is to be given before the time of prayer and fasting comes, to enable persons to order their temporal affairs so that they can participate.

4. It is especially appropriate on days of prayer and fasting called by the Church that the people of God gather for a time of prayer, the singing of psalms and hymns, and the reading and preaching of the Word of God. Let them lament their distress or unworthiness before the Lord, confess their sins, humbly implore the Lord for deliverance from the judgment present or imminent or for the blessing sought, and commit themselves anew to the faithful service of the Lord their God. It is fitting on such days that God's people abstain from food and from such activities as may distract from their solemn engagement in prayer.

Our Lord wants us to humble ourselves before Him. James 4:7–10: “Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.”

1 Peter 5:5–7: “Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for ‘God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.’ Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you, casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you.”

Fasting helps us to humble ourselves before the Lord.