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# Why God's People Should Fast

Joel Rishel

Many people fast today for a variety of health and psychological reasons. Some even fast for religious reasons, which can be defined as deliberately abstaining from food for spiritual purposes. I contend that God desires his people to fast and I want to explain why.

## Is Fasting Meant For Today?

First, it is necessary to demonstrate that fasting is biblical and meant for today. Many Christians may be surprised to hear that we ought to fast. They would claim that it is simply a phenomenon of the Old Testament, and that today we are to be joyful in Christ, not sad and mournful. Such an attitude neglects the biblical emphasis that Christianity does require a broken heartedness and despair over human sinfulness.

Tertullian defended the practice of fasting in the third century A.D., protesting against the psychics of his day. These people denied fasting on the basis of the "Christian liberty" principle in [Galatians 5](#) and [1 Corinthians 8:8](#). Tertullian traced the principle of fasting back to Adam who was commanded not to eat of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, thus making it an everlasting ordinance of God's creation.<sup>1</sup> St. Isaac the Syrian agreed: "As the first commandment imposed upon our nature in the beginning was against the tasting of

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the food, and in this point the head of our race fell, therefore those who strive for the fear of

<sup>1</sup> Tertullian, "On Fasting," *Ante-Nicene Fathers*: Vol. IV, edited by Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Buffalo: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1885), 127-28.

God begin the building where the first injury originated."<sup>2</sup>

Whether or not fasting can be traced back to Adam as a creation ordinance may be debated. But it was certainly given as part of the Mosaic Law for the Day of Atonement—the only prescribed day of fasting.

This shall be a statute forever for you: in the seventh month, on the tenth day of the month, you shall afflict your souls, and do no work at all, whether a native of your own country or a stranger who sojourns among you. For on that day the priest shall make atonement for you, to cleanse you, that you may be clean from all your sins before the Lord. It is a sabbath of solemn rest for you, and you shall afflict your souls. It is a statute forever ([Leviticus 16:29-31](#)).

By comparing this passage with [Leviticus 23:27-32](#) and [Numbers 29:7](#), it can be observed that "afflicting your souls" was a reference to fasting. In addition to the prescribed annual fast on the Day of Atonement there are twenty-eight Old Testament examples of fasting on other days, some of which will be referred to later.

Dissenting Christians will still insist that fasting in the Old Testament has nothing to do with us today. Surprisingly, though, fasting is given no less emphasis in the New Testament, which contains seventeen instances of fasting. It is predicted by Christ for New Testament Christians in the Parable of the Bridegroom ([Matthew 9:14-15](#); [Mark 2:18-20](#); [Luke 5:33-35](#)), "But the days will come when the Bridegroom will be taken from

<sup>2</sup> St. Isaac the Syrian, "Fasting in the Writings of the Church Fathers," *Coptic Church Review*, 6:3 (Fall 1985), 78.

them, and then they will fast.” Despite those who say otherwise, the removal of the Bridegroom is an obvious reference to the ascension of Christ.<sup>3</sup> Calvin agrees citing the apostles who interpreted the Bridegroom passages as mandating fasting after the ascension. “The apostles, therefore, followed what was not new to the people of God, and what they foresaw would be useful to them.” In response to those who insist that fasting was only for the Old Testament,

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Calvin continues: “If anyone declines to accept the testimonies which can be cited from the Old Testament, as if inappropriate to the Christian church, the fact remains that the apostles also followed the same practice.”<sup>4</sup>

The intent of Jesus’ teaching in the Parable of the Bridegroom is that fasting is an expression of a real desire for the presence of Christ. So much so that fasting is not necessary when Christ is present, but when he is absent, then those who love him will fast. Their fasting gives evidence to the fact that they yearn, ache, and long for spiri-

<sup>3</sup> For instance, J. A. Ziesler argues that while Christ is absent from us, he has sent us his Holy Spirit. Thus fasting is not appropriate for true believers who have the actual presence of the Holy Spirit in them. J. A. Ziesler, “The Removal of the Bridegroom: [Mark 2:18-22](#),” *New Testament Studies*, 19:2 (January 1973), 190–94. Ziesler’s interpretation must be considered improper exegesis of [Mark 2:18-22](#). In this passage Christ uses the word “Bridegroom” several times, a term, which is exclusively applied to the second person of the Trinity, and nowhere used in reference to the Holy Spirit.

<sup>4</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 1241. See [Acts 13:2-3](#) for an example of the apostles fasting after the ascension.

tual realities, which are too easily obscured by the shadows of this world.

The verses immediately following the Parable of the Bridegroom indicate that the focus of our fasting is slightly different than that of the Old Testament ([Matthew 9:16-17](#); [Mark 2:20-22](#); [Luke 5:36-39](#)). Old Covenant fasting cannot contain the new features of the kingdom. The new wine of the New Covenant indicates that our perspective in fasting is different. We are no longer fasting that the Bridegroom *will* come, but that he *has* come, has ascended, and will come again ([2 Corinthians 5:8](#)). A radical change in covenant structure has taken place, and it calls for a new fasting which rests upon the finished work of our Bridegroom on the cross. Fasting today is a physical expression of the heart hungering for the second coming of Christ.

Perhaps the most direct New Testament evidence for fasting today is that Jesus *assumed* in the Sermon on the Mount that his followers would fast. He said, “Moreover *when* you fast. . .” ([Matthew 6:16-17](#)). In [Matthew 6](#) we are taught that if we do these three things (give alms, pray and fast) in secret, God will reward us openly. When Christ taught all his disciples to give alms, pray, and fast *in such a manner*, it was a clear command to perform these duties, as well as to perform them in that *manner*. An important point to notice in the Sermon on the Mount is that fasting is paralleled with benevolent giving and with prayer. Christ spoke on these three subjects using exactly the same wording: “*When* you give alms” ([Matthew 6:3](#)); “*And when* you pray” ([Matthew 6:5](#)); “Moreover *when* you fast. . .” ([Matthew 6:16](#)). Just as giving and

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prayer are ordinances of God, so is fasting.

It is certainly true that fasting is especially united to prayer. Andrew Murray states in his book on prayer that Christ gives the cure for little faith in [Matthew 17:19-21](#): “But this kind does not go out except by prayer and fasting.” Murray concludes that faith depends entirely upon the state of the spiritual life. And he draws two lessons: “One, that faith needs a life of prayer in which to grow and to keep strong. The other, that prayer needs fasting for its full and perfect development. . . . Prayer is the one hand with which we grasp the invisible; fasting, the other with which we let loose and cast away the visible.”<sup>5</sup>

Based on the many scriptural examples, Samuel Miller concludes that “fasting may be confidently affirmed as a divine institution; that it is a duty on which all Christians are bound, at proper seasons to attend.” He adds that just as in prayer, there is no direct mandate for the frequency of fasting, or a prescribed method to follow; but it is an occasional and special duty of the Christian.<sup>6</sup>

Therefore we must assert with Calvin that “Christ, when he excuses his apostles for not fasting, does not say that fasting is abolished, but appoints it for times of calamity and joins it with mourning.”<sup>7</sup> There is no scriptural evidence to support that fasting was external in the Old Testament and that with Christ it was internalized; or that the Old Testament is characterized by mourning and the New by rejoicing; or that Old Testament fasting is prescribed as mandatory but left as a choice of freedom in the New Testa-

<sup>5</sup> Andrew Murray, *With Christ in the School of Prayer* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), 63-65.

<sup>6</sup> Samuel Miller, *Fasting* (Dallas: Presbyterian Heritage Publications, 1983), 5.

<sup>7</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 1244.

ment. No. Our Savior *assumed* that we would fast, and as such, it is a divine institution ordained by God. Fasting has been applicable to all Christians at all times (with the only two exceptions being the disciples when they were with Christ), and to all Christians in our future glorification when we will be with Christ at the Feast of the Bridegroom.

## What Should Be Our Motives In Fasting?

Now if fasting is to be performed by Christians today, we must understand the proper motivation to be obedient to this

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duty. As with all the spiritual disciplines, it is not the mere performance that God desires, but the proper motive of the heart. In the Sermon on the Mount Christ teaches us what would be an improper and hypocritical motive—“that you may not appear unto men to fast, but unto your Father which is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly” ([Matthew 6:16-18](#)). Several other false motives are delineated in God’s chapter on fasting ([Isaiah 58](#)) which include afflicting the soul to attract God (verse 3), to do fleshly pleasures (verse 3), or to be seen in public (verse 4). Even the rigor and the formality of habitual fasting are destructive if that becomes the motive ([Luke 18:12-14](#)).

Actually there is only one motivation that can be the proper basis for religious fasting. That motive is simply to *humble yourself before God* ([Isaiah 58](#); [Joel 2:12](#); [Psalm 35:13](#); [69:10](#); [Ezra 8:21](#); [Daniel 9:3](#); [Nehemiah 9:1-2](#)). Conversely it can be said from the multitude of scriptural examples that a true desire to humble yourself before God ought to result in a life characterized by prayer and fasting. This motivation to *humble yourself before God* contains two aspects. First, *humbling*

*yourself* involves confession and repentance of sin. Second, the requirement that it be done *before God* implies seeking God's face to know him and to discern his will.

## 1. Humble Yourself

First, it should be noted how integral repentance and *humility* are with the biblical accounts of fasting. The Israelites fasted and put away false gods (1 Samuel 7:6). David fasted when he repented of his sin (2 Samuel 12:16, 21-23). Ahab fasted and repented after causing Naboth's death (1 Kings 21:27). Upon hearing God's Word, Israel fasted, confessing their sin (Nehemiah 9:1-3). Daniel fasted and repented for himself and the people for not having walked in the laws of the Lord (Daniel 9:3). Joel called for a fast because of the Lord's chastening (Joel 1:14; 2:12, 15). The people of Ninevah repented in fasting (Jonah 3:5). And David humbled himself before God in fasting (Psalm 69:10-13). On into the New Testament, Paul fasted in Acts 27:9 in keeping with the fast of the

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Day of Atonement. And Cornelius fasted because he humbled himself before God (Acts 10:2-30).

Samuel Miller stated: "Fasting is a natural and significant expression of our penitence for sin. .. as an acknowledgment of our entire dependence on him for all our comforts, and also of our utter unworthiness of them as sinners."<sup>8</sup> This could be referred to as the natural ground of fasting: One who is under deep affliction, overwhelmed with sorrow for sin, and has a strong apprehension of the wrath of God. In short, fasting is utilized as a means to humble yourself and avert God's wrath.

<sup>8</sup> Miller, *Fasting*, 11.

This is exactly the language used to prescribe fasting on the Day of Atonement: "You shall afflict your souls" (Leviticus 16:29-31; 23:27-32; Numbers 27:9). And yet this is exactly what is neglected today—humbleness of heart, repentance of sin, and confession before God. It is this fasting of the soul, characterized by *humility*, that is the first aspect of the proper motive to fast.

This is identical to the attitude of the early church fathers toward fasting. "First of all, be on your guard against every evil word, and every evil desire, and purify your heart from all the vanities of this world. If you guard against these things, your fasting will be perfect."<sup>9</sup> "Fasting of the body is hunger for nourishment and the avoidance of food... Fasting of the soul is hunger and thirst for righteousness and avoiding evil deeds and thoughts."<sup>10</sup> And also:

Let us not believe that the external fast from visible food alone can possibly be sufficient for perfection of heart and purity of body unless it is united with a fast of the soul. For the soul also has foods, which are harmful: slander, anger, envy, vainglory, lust. If then, with all the powers we have, we abstain from these in a most holy fast, our observance of the bodily fast will be both useful and profitable. For labor of the flesh, when joined with contrition of the spirit, will produce a sacrifice that is most

<sup>9</sup> Shepherd of Hermas, "Similitude the Fifth," *Ante-Nicene Fathers: Volume 2*, edited by Rev. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Buffalo: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1885), 34.

<sup>10</sup> St. John of Lycopolis, "Fasting in the Writings of the Church Fathers," *Coptic Church Review*, 6:3 (Fall 1985), 81.

acceptable to God, and a worthy shrine of holiness in the pure and undefiled inmost chambers of the heart. But if, while fasting as far as the body is concerned, we are entangled in the most dangerous vices of the soul, our humiliation of the flesh will do us no good whatever, while the most precious part of us is

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defiled. . . For it is the clean heart which is made a shrine of God and a temple of the Holy Spirit.<sup>11</sup>

Not only has *humility* been closely associated with the fasting of the apostles and the early church fathers, but it was also the hallmark of fasting in American church history. The day before the Pilgrims left the Mayflower, they held a day of fasting and prayer. William Bradford quotes a Pilgrim father from the early 1630s in his book, *Of Plymouth Plantation*: “I proclaimed a fast that we might humble ourselves before God, and seek of him a right way for us.” Then Bradford documents that on November 15, 1636, a law was passed which allowed the governor to “command solemn days of humiliation by fasting, etc. and also for thanksgiving as occasion shall be offered.”<sup>12</sup>

Fasting did not stop with the Pilgrim fathers, nor did its association with *humility*. The House of Burgesses of Virginia declared a day of “fasting, humiliation, and prayer” on June 1, 1774, on

<sup>11</sup> St. John Cassian (Institutes 5:21), “Fasting in the Writing of the Church Fathers,” *Coptic Church Review*, 6:3 (Fall 1985), 80.

<sup>12</sup> Quoted by Derek Prince, *Shaping History Through Prayer and Fasting* (Old Tappan: Revell, 1973), 133, 137.

occasion of the embargo on the port of Boston. John Adams declared May 9, 1798, as a day of “solemn humiliation, fasting and prayer” on the verge of war with France. James Madison declared January 12, 1815, as “a day of public humiliation, fasting and prayer.” Zachary Taylor declared August 3, 1849, as a day of national fasting, on which occasion E. D. MacMaster said:

First of all, doubtless, our duty is that we call to recollection each one his own personal sins, and with deep humiliation and confession of them before God, turn from them, imploring him in his divine mercy to pardon us. It is also our duty to call to remembrance and confess before God the sins of our people and nation, and to make intercession and supplication for their pardon at the throne of grace.<sup>13</sup>

During the Civil War Abraham Lincoln declared three fasts: August 30, 1863; the last Thursday in September of 1863; and the first Thursday in August of 1864. Each of these was specified as a day of “public humiliation, fasting and prayer.”<sup>14</sup> On the first of these fast days, Charles S. Porter

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preached a sermon in Philadelphia in which he stated: “The present National Fast implies, that somehow things are not right with us, and that it is our duty, so far as possible, to set them right.” He then listed three duties imposed by the fast: (1) Recognize God’s Lordship and our place under his sovereignty. (2) Recognize the duty to our

<sup>13</sup> E. D. MacMaster, *Sermon: Impending Judgments Averted by Repentance* (Cincinnati: John D. Thorpe Printing, 1849), 8.

<sup>14</sup> Prince, *Shaping History*, 139–45.

Country. (3) Withstand and forestall the demoralizing influences of war.<sup>15</sup>

In light of the above information, Samuel Miller concludes that the main reason such a duty is necessary is the presence of sin and the depravity of human nature. To see sin as it really is, in all of its horrible evil and filth, will assuredly result in penitence and fasting.<sup>16</sup> The depravity of human nature has not changed from the Old Testament to the New Testament, in the early church, or throughout history. The reason there is very little fasting today is because the sinfulness of the human heart has been neglected or explained away. Today there is precious little humbleness of heart, so it should come as no surprise that very few Christians spend time fasting.

But God is calling us to a humbleness of heart that manifests itself in fasting and prayer. If it should seem that abstaining from food is too radical or extreme, we must be reminded that the sinfulness of our hearts is radically heinous, deeply rooted, and horribly deceptive. Paul says in [Colossians 3](#) that we must “put do death” the members of sin, and one way we do this is to humble ourselves in fasting.

## 2. Before God

The second aspect of the motivation to fast is that it be *before God*. This means that you not only see the problem and want to humble yourself, but you know where to find the solution, thus you *seek God’s face* to know him and to discern his will.

Even here the concept of mourning enters as a

<sup>15</sup> Rev. Charles S. Porter, *Sermon: A Fast Implies a Duty* (Philadelphia: C. Sherman Son & Co., 1863), 7–12.

<sup>16</sup> Miller, *Fasting*, 26–27.

(2002). *Reformation and Revival*, 11.

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definite aspect of the New Testament church age. Even though J. A. Ziesler disagrees with the necessity of fasting today, he admits in his article on [Mark 2:18–22](#): “Because Jesus has departed, the church has fasted as a sign of mourning for an absent Lord, or of longing (petition) for his return.”<sup>17</sup> Along these

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lines Derek Prince makes an interesting point:

Fasting deals with the two great barriers to the Holy Spirit that are erected by man’s carnal nature. These are the stubborn self-will of the soul and the insistent, self-gratifying appetites of the body. Rightly practiced, fasting brings both soul and body into subjection to the Holy Spirit. Fasting changes man, not God, by breaking down these barriers.<sup>18</sup>

In connection with *humility* (repentance and mourning) there is no problem seeing how fasting meets the need. But when we begin to discuss a spiritual concept such as *seeking God* and breaking down the barriers to the Holy Spirit, it may be more difficult to see how a purely physical activity such as fasting can have any good effect. We must remember that offenses to the Holy Spirit are often specific sins of the lust of the flesh as defined in [1 John 2:16](#). I agree with James Blackmore: “Denying oneself of food is the easiest step in learning discipline in the service of One who asks for complete commitment... Of course, the condition of the body affects the soul. We are keener of mind and heart when not so full.”<sup>19</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Ziesler, “Removal of the Bridegroom,” 190–94.

<sup>18</sup> Prince, *Shaping History*, 86.

<sup>19</sup> James H. Blackmore, “A Plea for Fasting,”

Recall how fasting is instituted in [Leviticus 16:19–31](#) for an occasion of *afflicting your souls*, thereby describing the practice of fasting as a spiritual exercise. And the example of Ezra should suffice to delineate the spiritual effectiveness of fasting as ordained to be a means of *seeking God*: “The hand of our God is favorably disposed to all those who seek him, but his power and his anger are against all those who forsake him. So we fasted and sought our God concerning this matter, and he listened to our entreaty” ([Ezra 8:22–23](#)).

Fasting reveals the true allegiance of your heart. If pride controls you, it will be revealed immediately. If lust drives you, the time of fasting will be a sore battle. Does your flesh or the things of this world control you? Then you desperately need to *seek God*, and that necessitates the denying of the flesh. Fasting will teach you to rely less on food and the things of this world, and to rely more on God ([Matthew 4:4](#)).

Richard J. Foster writes appropriate words to summarize

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what has been demonstrated as the proper and singular motivation to fast, that of *humbling yourself before God*. Speaking of all the inward disciplines (meditation, prayer, fasting, and study) he says: “The primary requirement is a longing for God ([Psalm 42:1–2](#)). If fasting is not unto God, we have failed. Physical benefits, success in prayer, the ending with power, or spiritual insights—these must never replace God as the center of our fasting.”<sup>20</sup>

*Christianity Today* (January 18, 1963), 10–11.

<sup>20</sup> Richard J. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978), 2, 48.

(2002). *Reformation and Revival*, 11.

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## How To Maintain A Balanced Approach To Fasting

Many Christians who do practice fasting are well versed in its many benefits, whether spiritual, psychological, or even physical. But these must all be recognized as secondary to the benefits of proper religious fasting—subservient to the major motivation: *humbling yourself before God*. Then as Foster says: “Once the primary purpose is firmly fixed in our hearts, we are at liberty to understand that there are also secondary purposes in fasting.”<sup>21</sup> Or Samuel Miller expresses another way of looking at the benefits: “The duty of religious fasting will be still further illustrated and confirmed when we consider the benefits of fasting.”<sup>22</sup>

In addition to humiliation, expression of penitence, and submitting oneself to God’s will, these benefits include such things as keeping the body under subjection, rendering the mind more active, clear and vigorous, raising one’s consciousness, increasing creativity, helping and intensifying prayer, empowering against temptation, detecting sin by revealing the things that control us, and the strengthening of virtues in general. John Chrysostom listed many several other benefits of fasting:

Fasting is, as much as lies in us, an imitation of the angels, a condemning of things present, a school of prayer, a nourishment of the soul, a bridle of the mouth, and abatement of concupiscence: it mollifies rage, it appeases anger, it calms the tempests of nature, it excites reason, it clears the mind, it disturbs the flesh, it chases

<sup>21</sup> Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 48.

<sup>22</sup> Miller, *Fasting*, 9.

away night-pollutions, it frees from headache. By fasting, a man gets composed behavior, free utterance

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of his tongue, and right apprehensions of his mind.<sup>23</sup>

But here is the challenge. It must always be kept in mind that fasting is not a complete virtue in and of itself, but only a foundation on which other virtues may be built. As Calvin emphasized: “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.”<sup>24</sup>

This is the first danger of which to be aware in regard to fasting: it should not be regarded as a work of merit. This is the deadly trap of legalism. John Wesley reminds us that “fasting is only a way which God hath ordained, wherein we wait for his unmerited mercy.”<sup>25</sup> This is the age-old danger in all the Christian duties. We want to bring in the merits of ourselves. This is why we are warned in [Isaiah 58](#) that a fast unto self is not the fast which God has chosen. Closely associated with viewing fasting as meritorious is the added danger of making it a set of duty-bound, soul-killing regulations, and thus missing the heart of the matter.

But there is another danger with regard to the practice of fasting, which is more prevalent in

the church today. This greater danger is negligence. If God has ordained fasting then we *must* practice it, always being careful to avoid legalism or viewing it merely as an external act. John Wesley recognized both dangers:

But of all the means of grace there is scarce any concerning which men have run into great extremes, than fasting. How have some exalted this beyond all Scripture and reason; and others utterly disregarded it, as it were, revenging themselves for undervaluing, as much as the former had overvalued it!<sup>26</sup>

Long before Wesley, Saint Augustine also recognized both dangers and prescribed the remedy of moderation: “The bridle of the throat then, is to be held in moderation between slackness and stiffness.”<sup>27</sup> Samuel Miller demonstrates a healthy perspective:

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None of the commandments of God are grievous. For every duty that he requires of us, there is a just and adequate reason... We see for example, that religious fasting is not enjoined for its own sake; or because it has any inherent power to recommend us to God; or because he delights to inflict upon us the pain of privation; but because when properly conducted, it tends to promote the benefits of both our souls and our bodies... Thus the wisdom of God as well as the goodness of God appears in all that he requires of us.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Quoted in Cotton Mather, *The Great Works of Christ in America, Volume 2* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1979, orig. 1702), 148.

<sup>24</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 1245.

<sup>25</sup> John Wesley, *Sermons on Several Occasions: Volume 1* (New York: G. Lane & C. B. Tippit Co., 1845), 254.

(2002). *Reformation and Revival*, 11.

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<sup>26</sup> Wesley, *Sermons on Several Occasions*, 245.

<sup>27</sup> St. Augustine, *Confessions of St. Augustine*, edited by William G. T. Shedd (Andover: Warren F. Draper, 1877), 280.



In conclusion then, it must be held that fasting is intended for Christians today. The motivation for religious fasting is none other than to *humble yourself before God*. While it is true that there are many benefits associated with fasting, our primary purpose must be a humble seeking of God's face. However, we cannot legislate fasting; in fact, the specific occasions thereof must remain voluntary—left to the conscience of each individual. Herein we must find the balance: we cannot err on the extreme of forcing the motivation into a man-made law, nor can we claim that since fasting is voluntary we are justified in not fasting at all. Above all, we must strive to follow the teachings and examples of the Holy Word of God.

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<sup>28</sup> Miller, *Fasting*, 21–28.