

# The Sermon on the Mount: A Reformed Exposition

## Chapter 25: Fasting

[Brian Schwertley](#)

Moreover when ye fast, be not, as the hypocrites, of a sad countenance: for they disfigure their faces, that they may appear unto men to fast. Verily I say unto you, they have their reward. But thou, when thou fastest, anoint thine head, and wash thy face; That thou appear not unto men to fast, but unto thy Father which is in secret: and thy Father, which seeth in secret, shall reward thee openly (Mt. 6:16-18).

The third illustration, where Jesus sets forth the proper way to practice piety for his disciples in contrast to the phony righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, regards fasting. This is an important topic because this is an area in which, generally speaking, modern Reformed and evangelical churches know very little and, for the most part, no longer practice. This author is unaware of any Reformed denominations or any Western nations within the last one hundred years proclaiming a day of prayer *and fasting*. This ought not to be the case, for fasting was an important and frequent practice in Scripture and Christ assumes that His followers will fast when He says, “When you fast, do not be like the hypocrites” (Mt. 6:16). The *Westminster Confession of Faith*, following Scripture, regards “solemn fastings” as a biblical, extraordinary aspect of religious worship (21:5). In other words, although there are not set times for fasting, nevertheless believers will fast. Moreover, the apostle Paul spoke of Christian married partners abstaining from marital relations to devote themselves to a period of fasting and prayer (1 Cor. 7:5). So, the assumption of both Christ and the apostles is that believers ought to fast.

The neglect of fasting is not new. John Calvin, writing in the sixteenth century, spoke of a similar problem in his *Institutes*: “Let us, therefore, say something about fasting, since very many, while they do not understand how useful it is, regard it as not very necessary; others also, considering it superfluous, completely reject it. And since its use is not well understood, it can easily lapse into superstition.”<sup>1</sup> Perhaps there was an overreaction among Protestants to the mechanical, meaningless, superstitious way that papists were fasting. In any case, we will greatly benefit from learning the occasions and purpose of fasting, as well as the proper way to fast, which is the Redeemer’s purpose in our text.

### Fasting Defined

Biblical fasting refers primarily to the complete abstention from food. Some extend the term to what we would call partial fasting where delicacies and rich foods are completely avoided for a time; that is perhaps what was going on with Daniel and his brethren. Some fasts only last a day, from sunrise to sunset, while others are for more extended periods. Fasting is only *commanded* in Scripture in connection with the Day of Atonement and even here a synonym is used for fasting (Lev. 16:29). Yet fasting was practiced throughout the Old

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<sup>1</sup> John Calvin, *The Institutes of Christian Religion*, 2:1241; 4:12:14.

Testament by God's people. It is primarily from these inspired historical examples that we learn when and why it is appropriate.

## The Occasions and Purposes of Fasting

In this section we want to determine the purposes for fasting by examining the different occasions of fasting in Scripture.

The first occasion is connected with repentance and humility before God because of past sin or declension. Note the following examples. (1) On the Day of Atonement the people were required to "afflict their souls" (KJV) as they were conscious of the guilt of their sin before God. The Hebrew terms *innah nepes* could be translated "humble themselves" or "deny themselves." This expression in Psalm 35:13 is more explicitly defined by the additional words "with fasting." In Isaiah 58:3, 5 it is used in a parallelism with the word "fast." Fasting is an expression of deep humiliation and sorrow before God because of sin. Matthew Henry writes, "Fasting from bodily refreshments, upon such extraordinary occasions, is a token of self-judging for the sins we have committed (we own ourselves unworthy of the bread we eat, and that God might justly withhold it from us), and of self-denial for the future; fasting *for* sin implies a resolution to fast from it, though it has been to us as a sweet morsel."<sup>2</sup>

(2) When the city of Nineveh was threatened with the judgment of God because of its wickedness, the people repented with fasting and sackcloth and cried out to God in prayer. The king and the nobles of the city decreed, "Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything; do not let them eat, or drink water. But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and cry mightily to God; yes, let every one turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands. Who can tell *if* God will turn and relent, and turn away from His fierce anger, so that we may not perish?" (Jonah 3:7-9). The Ninevites' acknowledgment of their guilt, repentance and desire to avoid God's judgment led them to prayer and fasting. Once again, fasting, coupled with sackcloth and ashes, is an expression of humiliation before God.

(3) A similar case is found with King Ahab's response to Elijah's prophecy of severe judgment against him. "So it was, when Ahab heard those words, that he tore his clothes and put sackcloth on his body, and fasted and lay in sackcloth, and went about mourning. And the word of the LORD came to Elijah the Tishbite, saying, 'See how Ahab has humbled himself before Me? Because he has humbled himself before Me, I will not bring the calamity in his days. In the days of his son I will bring the calamity on his house'" (1 Kgs. 21:27-29). The cases of Nineveh and Ahab are unique and interesting in that both returned to their sinful ways and were destroyed by God.

(4) When David's child through Bathsheba lay sick, as a consequence of his adultery and murder, he pleaded with the Lord for the child and fasted and lay all night on the ground (2 Sam. 12:16). David continued his fast until the child died hoping that God would spare the child.

(5) When Daniel understood the full measure of God's judgment against Israel, he sought God through prayer and fasting. "Then I set my face toward the Lord God to make request by prayer and supplications, with fasting, sackcloth, and ashes. And I prayed to the LORD my God, and made confession, and said, 'O Lord, great and awesome God, who keeps His covenant and mercy with those who love Him, and with those who keep His commandments, we have sinned and committed iniquity, we have done wickedly and rebelled, even by departing from Your

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<sup>2</sup> Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 2:966.

precepts and Your judgments. Neither have we heeded Your servants the prophets, who spoke in Your name to our kings and our princes, to our fathers and all the people of the land... O Lord, hear! O Lord, forgive! O Lord, listen and act! Do not delay for Your own sake, my God, for Your city and Your people are called by Your name” (Dan. 9:3-6, 19). Daniel is not only confessing his own sins, but is also confessing the sins of the nation with fasting in sackcloth and ashes, humbling himself before God.

(6) After Israel heard the book of the law of God read for the first time in many generations, the people “assembled with fasting, in sackcloth, and with dust on their heads” (Neh. 9:1). They repented, “stood and confessed their sins and the iniquities of their fathers” (Neh. 9:2). This fast may have been ordered by Nehemiah. The people forsook their sins and they mourned over them. “By these outward expressions of sorrow and humiliation, they gave glory to God, took shame to themselves, and stirred one another to repentance... They spoke to him in prayer, offered their pious and devout affections to him in the confession of sin and the adoration of him as the Lord and their God. Fasting without prayer is a body without a soul, a worthless carcass.”<sup>3</sup> The Word of God, accompanied with the power of the Holy Spirit upon their hearts, had done its work and the people fervently turned to God.

Fasting is also associated with mourning over judgments and calamities that come from God. After Israel had suffered a defeat at the hands of the Benjamites because of pride and carelessness, they sought the Lord through prayer and fasting before they fought again. “Then all the children of Israel, that is, all the people, went up and came to the house of God and wept. They sat there before the LORD and fasted that day until evening; and they offered burnt offerings and peace offerings before the LORD” (Judg. 20:26). They humbled themselves and acknowledged their complete dependence upon God for victory. “We cannot expect the presence of God with us, unless we thus seek it in the way that He has appointed.”<sup>4</sup>

David, the people of Israel and especially the people of Jabesh-Gilead fasted and mourned over the death of Saul and Jonathan his son (1 Sam. 31:13; 1 Chr. 10:12; 2 Sam. 1:12). Fasting is a fitting response to these situations because judgment and calamity are the consequences of sin. “[T]hey humbled themselves under the hand of God, and prayed for the repairing of the breaches made upon Israel by this defeat.”<sup>5</sup>

Fasting is a proper action when the people of God seek Him in prayer because of external threats and dangers. When Judah was threatened by the Moabites, Ammonites and other wicked forces, “Jehoshaphat feared, and set himself to seek the LORD, and proclaimed a fast throughout all Judah. So Judah gathered together to ask *help* from the LORD; and from all the cities of Judah they came to seek the LORD” (2 Chr. 20:3-4). There was a seriousness, earnestness and settled resolution of the heart to look to God in prayer.

Ezra and the godly remnant sought God’s direction, protection and blessing for their journey back to the promised land. “Then I proclaimed a fast there at the river of Ahava, that we might humble ourselves before our God, to seek from Him the right way for us and our little ones and all our possessions” (Ez. 8:21). They humbled themselves and by faith cast themselves upon the guidance and protection of divine providence. “Note, all of our concerns about ourselves, our families and our estates, it is our wisdom and duty by prayer to commit them to God, and leave the care of with Him.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 2:1098.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 2:247.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 2:449.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 2:1056.

There are times of fasting that are unique, where the person is nourished supernaturally by God. For example, both times that Moses met with God to receive the covenant law, the ten commandments (Ex. 24:18; 34:28; Dt. 9:18; 10:10; the second occasion was a renewal of the covenant), he fasted for forty days; he neither ate nor drank water. This means that God sustained his health in a miraculous manner. Scholars are divided as to why Moses fasted. Some think it was a preparation to receive divine revelation. Others see the symbolism of 40 days as a time of testing for Israel. Still others view it as a means of strengthening Moses' faith. It may be a solemn preparation for receiving the covenant law. The people were not holy, while God was infinitely holy. Moses humbled himself before God. From this we see that man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from God. "*The kingdom of God is not meat and drink, neither in the abundance nor delicacy of food, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Ghost.* As Moses, so Elijah and Christ, fasted forty days and forty nights. The more dead we are to the delights of sense the better prepared we are for the pleasures of heaven."<sup>7</sup>

Jesus fasted forty days and nights at the beginning of His public ministry (Mt. 4:2; Lk. 4:2). Although a number of commentators believe the whole forty days of fasting was a period of temptation, it is more likely that the temptation came at the end of the 40 days. Christ went into the wilderness as the second Adam to pray, meditate and commune with the Father in preparation for the work set before Him. Calvin's comments on this passage are excellent: "There were two reasons why Christ withdrew into the wilderness. The first was, that, after a fast of forty days, he might come forth as a new man, or rather as a heavenly man, to the discharge of his office. The next was, that he might be tried by temptation and undergo an apprenticeship, before he undertook an office so arduous, and so elevated."<sup>8</sup> It is interesting that Moses who represented the law, Elijah who, in a sense, represented the prophets and the Savior who ushered in the gospel in all its fullness all experienced forty day fasts.

Fasting can be a regular practice of self-discipline. The gospel accounts tell us that John the Baptist taught his disciples to fast often (Mk. 2:18; Lk. 5:33). Apparently, the disciples of John were fasting to maintain the discipline encouraged by their leader. John had a ministry of repentance and preparation for the coming Messiah. Fasting was suited to self-consecration and personal piety. John's disciples were puzzled as to why Jesus' followers did not fast and were told by Christ that they would fast when the Bridegroom was taken from them (Mk. 2:18; Lk. 5:33-35; Mt. 9:14-15). In other words, when Jesus was with His disciples it was inappropriate for them to fast because figuratively speaking they were groomsmen at a wedding party. Weddings are for feasting, not fasting. "The wedding imagery suggests a sense of new beginnings, and of a new relationship established with the people of God, and it especially conveys the joy and exhilaration of this new situation."<sup>9</sup>

Godly Anna demonstrated her great piety before Jehovah by serving "God with fastings and prayers night and day" in the Temple (Luke 2:37). Anna was a widow who had given herself completely over to the service of God. "Anna's activity pictures a person totally focused on serving God."<sup>10</sup> She was a woman of self-denial for the kingdom of God who continually mortified the flesh and kept it in subjection so she could more readily serve God in prayer. This teaches us that crucifying the sinful flesh and continually communing with God are companions; they complement each other.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 1:429.

<sup>8</sup> John Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, and Luke*, 1:207.

<sup>9</sup> R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 139.

<sup>10</sup> Darrell L. Bock, *Luke 1:1-9:50* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 252.

Cornelius, whom the Holy Spirit calls a devout man that feared God, was fasting and praying when an angel appeared to him with instructions on where to hear the gospel (Ac. 10:30-31). His prayer and fasting were private, not ostentatious.

In 1 Cor. 7:5 Paul assumes that Christians will have special times of seeking the Lord with prayer and fasting. It is obvious from these examples that fasting ought to be the practice of the church in our own time. Biblical fasting is a mark of dedication to godliness and devotion to Jehovah and, yet, it is almost absent from the church today.

Fasting was also done before sending men out into the mission field. For example, the leaders of the church at Antioch “ministered to the Lord and fasted” before God set apart Paul and Barnabas (Acts 13:2). They also fasted and prayed before sending them out (Acts 13:3). The choosing of men for the ministry was regarded as so important that God’s help was sought by extraordinary means. The spread of the gospel was such a monumental task that success was also sought by prayer and fasting. The modern church needs to take these responsibilities more seriously.

From these many examples, there are certain things that can be said about the purpose of fasting. The central purpose is clearly seeking God’s help in prayer. Fasting is always accompanied by prayer and communion with God. Fasting is also often coupled with repentance, humility and self-mortification. Fasting is the appropriate preparation for spiritual conflict (see Mk. 9:29) because, on the one hand, it mortifies the flesh and, on the other, it shows a radical reliance on God for everything. “When we find Satan strong and violent, and not yielding ground for us, when he is opposed or set upon us, then must we set an edge upon our faith by prayer; and an edge upon our prayer by fasting and separation of ourselves to the exercise of prayer.”<sup>11</sup> The one who fasts is taking spiritual discipline a step further by mortifying the flesh and setting aside even normal necessities such as food and even undergoes hunger and pain to wholly devote himself to spiritual exercises. By fasting we dispose the body to serve the soul in prayer. “The use of a full, and especially of a luxurious diet, is inconsistent with that clear, calm state of thought and feeling which devotional exercises require. When the mind and heart are very much engaged with any subject, especially if that subject is of a serious and mournful kind, there is an indisposition to take food; and in that state of mind produced by deep sense of the evil of sin, and of the supreme importance of things unseen and eternal, to refrain from food seems a natural expression of our sense of our own unworthiness, and the comparative insignificance of all earthly things.”<sup>12</sup>

As we consider fasting, it is important that we do not view it in a mechanical manner as if it automatically produces results. The results of prayer are completely dependent upon God, whether we fast or not. Moreover, it is important that we do not look upon fasting in a superstitious way, as if it were at all meritorious. The man who fasts is just as much the beggar as any man. Fasting, however, renders us more eager, dedicated and unencumbered for prayer.

## The Pharisees’ Hypocritical Fasting

Before Jesus instructs his disciples in how to fast, He first tells them the improper method. “Moreover when ye fast, be not, as the hypocrites, of a sad countenance: for they disfigure their faces, that they may appear unto men to fast. Verily I say unto you, they have their reward” (v. 16). The Pharisees had perverted fasting and turned it into a means of gaining a

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<sup>11</sup> David Dickson, *Matthew*, 239.

<sup>12</sup> David Brown, *Discourses and Sayings of Our Lord*, 1:256.

reputation among the people as the most pious. The purpose of fasting in connection with private prayer was an expression of humiliation and a means of concentration towards God. There is no reason whatsoever for fasting to be placed on display to impress others. In fact, we know from other passages that God rejects the piety of fasting as nothing more than an empty show when it is insincere. When the Jews fasted without accompanying heart repentance, the Lord commanded the people through Joel, “Rend your hearts and not your garments, and turn unto the LORD your God” (Joel 2:13). Similarly, God rebuked the people through Isaiah because they were fasting even while they were blatantly violating God’s moral law: “In fact, in the day of your fast you find pleasure, and exploit all your laborers” (Is. 58:3).

The Pharisees took a useful act of piety that was designed for extraordinary occasions to seek God in prayer and turned it into a meritorious work before God. That which was designed to work humility and an inner concentration before God was turned into an act of pride and self-exaltation. This was hypocrisy of the worst sort; fasting is for humility not self-exaltation. They walked around with a sad countenance, not out of sorrow over sin, but so that others would know that they were fasting. The expression “they disfigure their faces” means literally that they made their faces invisible. (The verb *aphanizousin* means “to make invisible.”) Thus, what occurred was likely a rubbing of ashes on the face to make them unrecognizable. In the Greek there is even a play on words: “They hide their faces in order to be seen.” When the Pharisees fasted they rubbed ashes on their head and appeared completely disheveled like a modern “street person.” They called attention to themselves and made themselves stand out sharply in a crowd. Consequently our Lord says, “Assuredly I say to you, they have their reward” (Mt. 6:16). “Again as in the previous examples of ostentatious piety (see vv 2, 4), the present tense of *apechousin*, ‘they are having,’ is emphatic and ironic. They are *at that moment* receiving the *only* reward they will get.”<sup>13</sup>

The purpose of fasting is to humble oneself and seek the Lord in prayer. The person who fasts comes to God as a beggar and seeks an answer to his prayers. He realizes his complete dependence upon God and casts himself on His mercy for an answer to his particular need. The hypocrite is not genuinely concerned about this. He is simply seeking praise from men, a human reward and that is precisely what he will get, but nothing more. As in the example of alms and prayer, the Savior is emphasizing the absurdity of phony pious acts done to be seen and praised by men. True religion is about glorifying God, not ourselves. The man who puts God above all else will receive a reward, but the man focused on the things of this world and the pride of life will receive a worthless, temporary reward from sinful men. What foolishness!

We see in the practice of the Pharisees a very common error of ritualism or focusing on the externals of religion. The visible aspect of fasting, the sackcloth and ashes, were only external signs of what was supposed to be the state of one’s heart. The purpose of fasting is to humble oneself and seek God. The Jews in the days of Christ had made the act of fasting an end in itself. The voluntary, occasional, unique circumstances that normally were associated with fasting had given way to the human tradition of a required fast twice a week. The degenerate Jewish religious leaders took an extraordinary means of religious devotion and made it an ordinary weekly requirement. They took a useful act of piety designed to focus our attention on our own unworthiness and turned it into an act of self-righteousness and self-exaltation. They took something designed to focus our attention upon God and made it all about man. All of this is connected to their diabolical scheme of works-righteousness in relation to salvation. They believed that eternal life was achievable by keeping the law and doing acts of piety. Therefore,

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<sup>13</sup> Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*, 154.

their whole concept of good works and piety was perverted. The pious man who fasted was, in their view, causing God to react to his righteousness.

The Pharisees looked humble on the outside, but they were proud and unrepentant on the inside. It is such foolishness when men think that they can deceive God by an outward show without the inward reality. When we approach God and seek Him through the extraordinary means of fasting, our hearts must be truly humbled first or our hunger is nothing more than a shadow and an affront to God. Let us beware of spiritual pride, which is deceitful and very dangerous. There are cults and false religions all over the world where men fast not unto God, but to their own pride. They serve their delusions with much outward pomp and solemnity. “The fast that God has chosen, is *a day to afflict the soul, not to hang the head like a bulrush, nor to spread sackcloth and ashes under him*; we are quite mistaken if we call this a fast, Isa. lviii.5.”<sup>14</sup>

Anyone familiar with the history of the Christian church knows that, in the centuries after the close of the canon of Scripture, superstitious ideas regarding fasting arose that led the church into bondage on this issue. In fact it is apparent that our Lord’s teaching on fasting was almost completely ignored. The Jews required fasting on Tuesdays and Thursdays; therefore, some ancient Christian writers so as not to follow the Jews, required fasting on Mondays and Wednesdays. Fasting came in also as the church held superstitious observances of Lent (i.e. the spring period of fasting in preparation for Easter).

Fasting among the papists is a complete perversion of Scripture and contains many gross errors. First, in order to make fasting acceptable to the masses they allowed eggs, fish and cheese to be substituted for meats. Thus, one could fast on Friday by feasting on pizza or barbequed salmon. They also placed no restrictions on other delicacies. Second, they took an extraordinary ordinance that was voluntary (except in the O.T. on the Day of Atonement and in exceptional circumstances) and made it into a mandatory law of the church. Thus, not fasting on that particular day was considered a mortal sin. This is a violation of *sola Scriptura* and Christian liberty. Third, they declared that fasting gained merit before God and could reduce one’s suffering in purgatory. This is a denial of the sufficiency and perfection of Christ’s sacrifice on the cross. For the papists, fasting was another good work that was an automatic means of blessing before God. Thus, Calvin declared that in “both fasts and in all other parts of discipline the papists have nothing right, nothing sincere, nothing well-ordered and arranged, to give them occasion to boast, as if anything remained among them deserving of praise.”<sup>15</sup>

## The Proper Way to Fast

After criticizing the hypocritical method of fasting, our Lord turns His attention to the biblical way. “But thou, when thou fastest, anoint thine head, and wash thy face; That thou appear not unto men to fast, but unto thy Father which is in secret: and thy Father, which seeth in secret, shall reward thee openly” (Mt. 6:18). Like His teaching on almsgiving and prayer, Christ teaches that our fasting should be as inconspicuous as possible. Instead of walking around with one’s hair unkempt and in disarray, we should anoint our head and comb our hair. (Keep in mind in that dry climate they would anoint their head with oil.) We should appear in public well-groomed; instead of putting ashes on our faces to look pale and malnourished, we should wash our faces so that we look completely normal. Although it is unstated, we also should not go

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<sup>14</sup> Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:77.

<sup>15</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes*, 2:1248; 4:7:21.

around with a gloomy look on our faces so that people will know we are fasting. We also must not announce the fact that we are fasting to others or brag about it when the fast is over.

Such behavior violates the spirit of our passage. We are to conduct ourselves in such a way that others will have no idea that we are fasting. We are to fast only to be seen by our Father who dwells in a secret or unseen place. The One who cannot be seen will see everything that we do in secret. The purpose of fasting is not to build up our reputation or to advertise our piety, but rather to humble and discipline ourselves before God. If we fast and pray to God and He hears us and answers our prayers, then we should be satisfied with that alone. It is this approach to fasting that will receive a reward from God.

## Some Applications

This teaching on the proper and improper way to fast contains a number of important applications.

First, professing Christians must not conduct their piety in a manner that draws attention to them or that leads to self-exaltation. (This is certainly the central point of all three of these illustrations.) For example, the Bible requires modesty in dress and all believers should dress in a manner that does not cause anyone to stumble. Certain Anabaptists, however, take this principle to mean that they must dress in styles of the distant past and thus they stand out in a crowd like sore thumbs. They draw attention to themselves and advertise their piety to the world. In fact, the Amish have taken this concept of piety and separation from the world to the extreme and have become tourist attractions. Some people violate this principle by putting on an act when they pray, changing their tone of voice and speech patterns. Others choose a prominent place in the church so that people can hear their beautiful singing voice. We must always be on guard against doing acts of piety in such a way as to be seen by and glorified of men. Our sole purpose is to glorify God.

Second, fasting is a useful tool in our quest for self-discipline and mortification of the flesh. There are times when a believer may be struggling with a particular sin or temptation. These are the times to seek God with prayer and fasting. If we buffet our body, we will learn to avoid excess. The extreme hunger of fasting should help us to learn moderation. Modern America is a land of excess, gluttony and hedonism and this self-centered attitude has made its way into the church. In this time of self-indulgence and spiritual apathy, we need to seek God with extraordinary means.

Third, in this age of the progress of evil, apostasy, antinomianism and heathenism, the church, as a whole, needs to fast; humble itself; confess its sins; and seek God in prayer for revival. We live in a time when many, even in "conservative" Presbyterian and Reformed denominations, are arrogant and work to justify the accumulations of their departures from the Scriptures that have occurred over the past few centuries. Modern, so-called conservative Presbyterian seminaries are using John Frame's and/or Dr. Gore's book on worship, both of which repudiate reformed worship for an Anglican or Lutheran view. Instead of humbling themselves and repenting, they are seeking to justify their declension, their departure from God's law. That's pride and self-exaltation. The church needs to humble itself, confess its sins, proclaim a fast and repent. We live in an era of self-justification, not humility before God. If we are to have a return to vital godliness, biblical worship and purity of doctrine, we need to afflict our souls, repent and seek a return of the Holy Spirit's blessing upon the church.

Our nation is far from God at present and sins boldly in every aspect of civil government. The people are wicked and seek out rulers who exult in high-handed rebellion against God. God's judgment no doubt hangs over our wicked Christ-hating country. We need to fast and pray for God to have mercy on our nation and bring a radical change of heart to many in it, so that we will glorify God and be spared from His judgment.

Fourth, believers who encounter trials and tribulations must learn to display a cheerful countenance. While times of public mourning are certainly appropriate, Christians who go through life with no joy or happiness and walk about with a dour visage give people the impression that Christianity is a negative thing; that salvation does not lead to great joy among God's people. We are to mourn in spirit over our sins, but we are not to look sad and serious to impress people with our piety and dedication to Christ.

Fifth, we must always be on guard against viewing fasting in an external, ritualistic manner, as if it automatically bestowed blessings. Fasting is an aid to fervent prayer and mortification. However, whether or not God blesses us in some special way or answers our prayers is completely in His hands. It is solely a matter of grace and not merit. We cannot manipulate God or use fasting as a means to get what we desire. This is a great error that will lead to superstitious concepts of piety.

In conclusion, we need to remember that our piety must be directed solely to God. We are not to concern ourselves with what others think of us or be egotistical about our pious conduct. We are to concern ourselves solely with what God thinks of our conduct. God is watching. Focus on what God sees and what God thinks. We are to focus on glorifying God and do these things in a way that pleases Him. If we do this, then our sanctification will progress, our reputations will be above reproach; and God will reward us openly for being faithful to the teaching of His own dear Son. Our faith must be focused on God's reward, which never perishes and not on the fleeting, temporary opinions of sinful men.

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