

**FASTING: AN INQUIRY INTO ITS
ANTIQUITY, USES, AND
OBLIGATIONS: TO WHICH IS
ADDED, A SERMON FOR THE
EMBER WEEKS**

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Fasting: An Inquiry Into Its Antiquity, Uses, and Obligations: to which is Added, a Sermon for the Ember Weeks by John Frere

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JOHN FRERE

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SERMON

FOR

THE EMBER WEEKS.

BY THE

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ADVERTISEMENT.

The Author of the following pages has long had his attention called to the subject, which he has here undertaken to discuss; and he has ventured to print them in the hope that they may be acceptable to others who have not leisure to collect the information here presented, for themselves.

FASTING,

§c.

ALTHOUGH the practice of Religious Abstinence may have been abused by fond or false opinions, either of the "necessity of the thing itself," or of the holiness or unholiness¹ of meats, or by any other of those ways whereby the fancies of men incline towards extravagance or superstition; and although this practice may sometimes have been upheld upon principles which to us appear unworthy, as savouring too much of worldly policy², too little of godliness; yet certainly it is a practice which in itself is neither superstitious nor extravagant, which may be enforced by many and weighty arguments of authority, of religion, of expediency; and which, however it may have been abused or neglected, (as what Christian duties have not?) has ever been sanctioned by the canons and statutes of the Church, and manifested accordingly in the lives of those who most nearly conformed themselves to the model there exhibited.

Of all arguments, the first and the most forcible are

¹ Jer. Taylor's Holy Living. Sec. v. Ch. 4. Rule 9.

² See a proclamation issued in the first year of King Edward VI. —Cardwell's Documentary Annals. Vol. I. p. 31. line 25—35. See also Apost. Can. L. Harduin.

³ Cardwell's Documentary Annals. Vol. I. p. 32, line 7. And under Elizabeth, A. D. 1576. Vol. I. p. 370, with the note there.

those which are derived from the Holy Scriptures ; and of all Scriptures, if, where all are divine, one may lawfully be preferred before another, none challenge our consent and obedience with greater authority than those which record the sayings of our Lord Himself.

In regard to the question of fasting, our Lord has not, indeed, anywhere positively enjoined this upon His disciples, but He has spoken with approbation of their practising it ; He has even condescended to give rules for the manner of its performance ; and on one occasion, when they were accused by their adversaries for neglect of this duty, He took the defence of their conduct into His own hands, yet not so as in any degree to disparage the importance of the duty itself.

The circumstance which is here alluded to deserves a particular consideration.

The Pharisees, ever seeking occasion to blaspheme, had brought a covert accusation against the disciples and doctrine of our Lord ; intimating that they could not be holy persons who neglected the outward show of mortification, nor that a holy teaching, which permitted such a negligence¹ : " Our disciples," said they, " and the disciples of John, fast, but thy disciples fast not²."

To this our Saviour replied, not by condemning their practice, or by denying that what they said had some foundation of reason : He did not object to their principle, namely, that holy persons ought to fast, but He explained to them that now was not the proper time for His disciples to do so. All things have their times ; " there is a time to weep, and a time to laugh, a time to mourn, and a time to dance. To grieve in the immediate presence of their Saviour, would have been no less inappropriate than

¹ See No. (1.) in App. p. 32.

² St. Mark ii. 18.

³ Eccles. iii. 4.

mourn at "banquets of wine," or to sit at a wedding-feast with a sad countenance. As long as the bridegroom is with them "they cannot fast¹."

But the days were coming when their joy should be removed, "the bridegroom should be taken away from them," and the Church, like a newly-wedded wife violently divorced from her Lord, should seek, and not find Him, should call, but receive no answer; then should she mourn; "then should the disciples fast in those days."

Our Saviour, however, did not confine His answer to this head; there was, besides the unfitness of the time, another reason why His disciples should not fast, namely, the unfitness of the persons. They were as yet new to His doctrine, to be treated, therefore, tenderly; not more than they could bear was to be laid upon them, lest the "smoking flax"² should be quenched, and that spark of faith which He was so studiously fanning into a flame, should be extinguished.

His disciples, in their present state, were fitly to be compared to old and worn-out "bottles;" they must be "renewed in the spirit of their minds³;" they must be "strengthened with might in the inner man"⁴ before they could receive the Gospel in its full force and purity, and sustain the word of God coming with power.

From our Saviour's teaching, on this occasion, we seem warranted in the following conclusions:—

I. That fasting is not universally and absolutely necessary.

II. That it is so necessary, that there should be some good reason for the neglect thereof.

III. That if the time is not appropriate, that is one sufficient reason.

IV. That if Christians are not able to bear it, that is another.

Having laid down these principles, let us proceed,

¹ Mark ii. 19.

² Matt. xii. 20. Isaiah xlii. 3.

³ Eph. iv. 23.

⁴ Eph. iii. 16.

in explanation of them, 1st, to ascertain how far, and upon what grounds, the practice of fasting is to be esteemed necessary by Christians in general, and then go on to examine how far Christians of the present day are liable to the observance of this duty.

As to the first point, namely, the extent of obligation upon Christians in general to exercise themselves in fasting, this may be seen from the authority which we have for this practice, and likewise from the ends and uses of it.

Of fasting, that may be said which St. Paul observed upon another occasion, "Doth not even nature teach this thing?" There are occasions when grief so employs and occupies the heart, that all else is unnoticed. When the spirit is overwhelmed with heaviness, the inferior nature so sympathises with that higher part of us, as to forget her own² necessities, or rather to forget her very self; and to find, for a season, satisfaction in a distasteful and un congenial diet, to feed on sighs and groans, and let "tears be her meat day and night³."

As then nature, ordinarily, teaches us to partake of food with joy and gladness, so does nature teach us upon occasions to abstain from it; and men, as far as nature is concerned, have as much reason to fast at some seasons, as they have to feast at others.

This argument, however, does not prove that fasting is a duty; nor does it prove a necessity of abstinence at set times, or upon solemn occasions; what it does prove is simply this, that when men have cause for great and extraordinary sorrow, then they have, naturally, equal cause to abstain from food⁴.

And, as nature teaches this, so does He who made us allow and approve of it; sometimes by express

¹ 1 Cor. xi. 14. ² 1 Sam. xxviii. 20. Ps. cii. 4. ³ Ps. xlii. 3.

⁴ "And when all the people came to cause David to eat meat while it was yet day, David aware, saying, So do God to me, and more also, if I taste bread, or ought else, till the sun be down." 2 Sam. iii. 36. See also ch. i. 12.

commandment, "Sanctify a fast¹;" sometimes by subsequent approval, "See how Ahab humbleth himself²:" at others indirectly, by expressing his displeasure at the mere outward and carnal observation of these ordinances, 'Wherefore have we fasted,' say they, 'and thou seest not?' "Behold, ye fast for strife and debate; ye shall not fast as ye do this day³."

Nor is the divine approval less clear in regard of the Christian Church, than it is in regard of the Church of the Jews. As our blessed Saviour gives direction for the manner of praying, and of almsgiving, so also for the manner of fasting,—“When thou prayest, thou shalt not be as the hypocrites are⁴;" "when thou doest thine alms, do not sound a trumpet before thee, as the hypocrites do⁵:" "moreover, when ye fast, be not as the hypocrites⁶."

These three Christian duties of Prayer, Fasting, and Almsgiving, though not of equal necessity, are yet, as we see, placed here by our Saviour, in one respect, upon an equal footing⁷; it seems to be taken for granted that the duties were such as His disciples would, of course, perform, and the manner of the performance is the only thing thought needful to be prescribed by the divine regulation; so that we are not to conclude fasting to be unnecessary from the fact of its being nowhere commanded; notwithstanding this, it may be, at certain times, and for certain persons, necessary; how far it is so is another question.

We have seen, then, that in some cases to fast is natural; we have seen that God allows and approves

¹ Joel i. 14.² 1 Kings xxi. 29.³ Is. lviii. 3. 5.⁴ Matt. vi. 5.⁵ Matt. vi. 3.⁶ Matt. vi. 16.

⁷ Apply here to fasting what Sparrow, in his *Rationale of the Common Prayer*, says about Oblations, viz. that our Saviour before all the precepts mentioned in His sermon on the Mount, whereof this of Oblations is one, prefaces this severe sanction, "Whosoever shall break one of the least of these commandments, and shall teach men so, the same shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven." See also what follows under the head of "Offertory."