

## Newsletter February 2015

In *Comprehensively Reformed Christianity* Book II, Chapters 10.2 thru 10.5, we discuss many aspects of the great privilege of prayer that God has awarded to all those who believe in Christ. Later on, in Chapters 14.4 and 14.5 we discuss the delusive traditions of ritual prayer and ritual fasting, which have become so deeply ingrained in today's churchianity (cf. Newsletter October 2014). True prayer is not a ritual but a privileged plainspoken communication between the Christian believer and his Heavenly Father. As we pray, the indwelling Holy Spirit often brings us answers by recalling appropriate Scripture texts to our minds and applying them to our current situation. Through this means, God's will regarding various matters is frequently made clear to us. Speaking a barrage of words that has no meaning to our minds hinders that intimate communication thus rendering it worthless; we only speak hypocritical nonsense to ourselves – not all that much different than some do through the ritual practice of glossolalia (cf. Newsletter January 2015). Likewise fasting, which is frequently associated with prayer, is not genuine if it is not accompanied by true contrition of the heart and turmoil of our soul. Fasting then becomes but an outward ritual that is meaningless and without purpose.

All prayers that we offer up can become hypocritical if we merely engage in prayer out of a boring sense of duty through religious form as many do. We can find ourselves kneeling before the throne of grace with nothing to say, yet spouting pious words having no sincerity of meaning and expecting no response. Many memorize certain prayers of others or formulate rote prayers of their own to be repeated as deemed “necessary” in times of distress. The Scripture text commonly referred to as the “Lord’s Prayer” is often recited verbatim in many of today’s churches as a part of a weekly liturgy. Perhaps it was because so many have problems formulating their own prayers that this practice first began in hopes that by reciting it repeatedly men would soon learn to pray with thoughts and words of their own (cf. Mt.6:9-13; *CRC* Book II, Chapter 10.3). Unfortunately, the ritualistic recitation of this prayer has become a religious form that prevents many from ever reaching the throne of grace with personal concerns. Through faith we must believe that God truly hears us at a personal level and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him (cf. He.11:6).

It does not matter where we pray, as long as we are closeted in our minds and soul for the purpose of seeking true and honest communication with God; we certainly must not limit prayer to a church sanctuary lest we neglect this great privilege. God is ever-present in every believer through the indwelling Holy Spirit such that we only need to turn in our minds to speak with our Heavenly Father. In this way, we can be continually in prayer as we go about all of our daily tasks no matter how serious or mundane they may be. Even when we have set aside time and have entered into a secluded place to pray, we must still enter into the closet of our soul and seek the aid of the Holy Spirit in order to shut out the noise of the world that rages within our minds (cf. Mt.6:6). If we become overly concerned about our natural ability of speech, we shall find that we are not praying to God at all, but only seek to satisfy the flesh of our ability to formulate impressive words. When we pray publicly, we must be especially careful that our words are not carefully chosen to impress others with our supposed piety.

Many think that prayer must be attended by specific ritualistic body positions as if the placement of the hands or body can somehow appease God. In Scripture, we find at least four different bodily positions that men took when praying (cf. Ge.24:52; Jos.5:14; 1Ki 8:54; Lu.18:11,13). The fact that no one position is predominant over the other in Scripture indicates that the position of the body is not an important factor in prayer. Many may kneel and fold their hands in humble supplication when they pray. All of this is but a matter of personal pattern and is not a necessary supplemental ritual for our prayers to be heard. It is the mind and soul that must be humbled when we pray, not just the body. We must not exhibit unusual physical positions or activities in an attempt to persuade other men that we hold claim to some unique status with God (cf. Mt.6:5). This greatly contributes to hypocrisy in public prayer inasmuch as pietistic positions of the body are observable by other men. Paul indeed said, “I will therefore that men pray everywhere, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and doubting” (1Ti.2:8), but the ritual raising of hands in false piety is an affront to God. In the prophecy of Isaiah God said, “And when ye spread forth your hands, I will hide mine eyes from you — your hands are full of blood” (Is.1:15).

Deep emotional distress is not merely a mental state, but is most often experienced as a deep turmoil in our abdominal cavity thus greatly suppressing our appetite for food; indeed, ingesting food may only add to this agitation. Emotional turmoil can be brought about through a feeling of hopelessness, fear, illness, death, or the burden of sin. Therefore, we find that fasting has a very close relationship with mourning and sorrow in Scripture

and consequently with prayers of supplication and intercession (cf. *CRC Book II*, page 94,95). A major cause of fasting can be found in mourning over the separation of a loved one through death. When Jesus was questioned as to why his disciples did not observe ritual fasting, Jesus answered, “Can the children of the bride-chamber mourn, as long as the bridegroom is with them? But the days will come when the bridegroom shall be taken from them, and then shall they fast” (Mt.9:15; cf. Mk.2:19). King David engaged in fasting as he mourned over the illness and impending death of his child in 2 Samuel 12:15–17. In still another example, David expresses the close association of mourning with fasting in Psalm 35 verse 13: “But as for me, when they were sick, my clothing was sackcloth: I humbled my soul with fasting; and my prayer returned into mine own bosom.” In the book of Jeremiah, we read that the prophet called for a fast to be proclaimed in response to the prevalent fear of God’s judgments against Judah and Jerusalem (cf. Je.36:9). In still another place, we read “the people of Nineveh believed God [i.e. feared that He would destroy them: Jona.3:9] and proclaimed a fast and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them even to the least of them” (Jona.3:5). An unusual example is found in the book of Esther (cf. Est.4:16). Here fasting was not accompanied by prayer in an attempt to persuade God to intervene, but it was a direct consequence of their mourning over the near certainty of Esther’s impending death.

Fasting and personal ministry are often interlinked as well, inasmuch as fasting can be the result of having no time to eat, or having no food available to eat because of intense effort. We read in the Old Testament, that Moses took no food with him when he went up the mountain to receive the Decalogue (cf. De.9:9), though he had no way of knowing how long he would be up there alone with God. The Apostle Paul, in describing the many perils that he had underwent in preaching the Gospel characterized them in these words, “In weariness and painfulness, in watchings often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness” (2Co.11:27). The context clearly indicates that Paul was not fasting in order to perform some sacred ritual. When God calls us to do something, there is often no time to think about providing ourselves with food or other creature comforts before obeying his command. In John 4:31–34 we read that Jesus was very weary from his journey into Samaria and rested at Jacob’s well as his disciples had gone for food to satisfy their hunger. There Jesus bore witness of Himself to a Samaritan woman. As she went to return with others who needed to hear Jesus’ words for themselves, Jesus’ disciples returned with food and urged Him to eat. However, Jesus’ mind was intently focused upon those men who would soon return with the woman from the city of Sychar as He said, “I have meat that ye know not of...” (Jn.4:32) and “My meat is to do the will of him that sent me, and to finish his work” (Jn.4:34). Two additional examples of consequential fasting are documented on two occasions as Jesus preached to multitudes in wilderness areas. Great throngs had immediately followed Jesus to hear his Words having no time or opportunity to bring food along for a prolonged journey. Jesus had compassion on them and miraculously fed them, lest they should faint along the way while returning to their homes (cf. Mt.15:32; Mk. 8:3).

Another cause of fasting is an intense mourning over sin. We find that Daniel the prophet mourned and fasted over his sins and the sins of his people as he prayed (cf. Da.9:3–5). Would that we should all be so concerned over our sins and the sins of others in our communities and nations that we would mourn over them — not merely acknowledge them, but mourn in deep sorrow over our iniquity against God. We read in the book of Nehemiah that “...the children of Israel were assembled with fasting, and with sackclothes, and earth upon them. And the seed of Israel separated themselves from all strangers, and stood and confessed their sins, and the iniquities of their fathers” (Ne.9:1,2). We should not think that we can “get on the good side of God” through ritual fasting, nor is it an acceptable penance we can pay to atone for sin; Christ has already paid our sin debt in full. Moreover, God does not bend his will to meet our desires because we refuse to eat — like a spoiled child does in an attempt to get his own way. At one point, the prophet Jeremiah was told by God not to offer up intercessory prayer for the people of Judah, since they had already gone far beyond the point of deliverance. “When they fast, I will not hear their cry; and when they offer burnt offering and an oblation, I will not accept them: but I will consume them by the sword, and by the famine, and by the pestilence” (Je.14:12; cf. Ps.51:17).

Moreover, the loss of physical and mental strength brought on by extensive ritual fasting can break down ones guard until they become receptive to an answer from anywhere or anyone in their desperation to end a ritual fast. Some may actually experience delusory visions or receive false revelations that Satan has planted in their minds, having taken advantage of their weakened condition. Satan attempted to do this with our Lord and utterly failed because of Jesus’ sinless nature (cf. Lu. 4:2-4); unfortunately, mortal men often give in to false revelations

to gratify the urgent demands of their flesh. In doing so, they sell themselves again into the bondage of sin through the demands of the flesh and their prayers go unanswered.

The difficulty today is not that we do not fast often enough, but that we do not pray to God with great intensity, mourn over our sinful state with great intensity, and minister to God's calling with such great urgency that food, dress, and other human comforts become secondary to the task at hand (cf. Mt.6:25). Fasting is not something that we can engage in as an alternative to prayer, nor is it a ritual enhancement added to prayer; rather, fasting is something that naturally occurs as a consequence of the fervency of prayer. When we find prayer and fasting mentioned together in Scripture, we should be reminded that the intensity of prayer is being emphasized — not a short quick prayer offered up in haste but an intense calling upon God for a demonstration of his power and revelation of his will. Nevertheless, there are several verses where the word “fasting” has found a very prominent place along side prayer in the New Testament text of some Bible translations that is not found in earlier and better Greek manuscripts. In Matthew Chapter 17 Jesus' disciples were unable to heal a lunatic (cf. Mt.17:15,16). When Jesus had cast out the demon, the disciples asked why they could not cast him out, and Jesus replied that it was because of their unbelief, going on to say that they needed only the faith of a grain of mustard seed (cf. Mt.17:20). Many skip over verse 20 and concentrate instead on verse 21: “Howbeit this kind goeth not out but by prayer and fasting” (cf. AKJV), as if fasting was some “magical” additive to ensure success when prayer alone fails. Verse 21 does not appear at all in better Greek manuscripts. Again, in Mark 9:29, we read “And he said unto them, This kind can come forth by nothing, but by prayer and fasting.” Here it is only the word “fasting” that is not found in better manuscripts. In First Corinthians 7:5, we again find the word “fasting” has been appended to prayer in some versions. It is believed by many Bible scholars that a rogue scribe added these supplementary texts as “enhancements” to a few manuscripts while copying. Only the autographs written in the original languages can be said to be directly inspired; human translations of the Bible, though reliable through divine providence, are not infallible to the same degree. Textual alterations of this kind can be perplexing but fortunately they do not seriously affect any major doctrine of the faith (cf. *CRC Book 1, Chapter 1.1*).

Therefore, all ritual fasting is meaningless hypocrisy. This statement is very hard for more traditional Christians to accept – especially those who erroneously desire to add some sort of human effort or performance to grace in order to salve their pride. Many think that God considers ritual fasting a more spiritual approach than merely openly presenting our petition to Him in simple humility as we have been invited to do (cf. Jn.14:13,14). In what is commonly referred to as the Sermon on the Mount, the Lord Jesus said, “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...” (Mt.6:16). Jesus did not say that they should not fast, but rather said, “when ye fast.” Fasting is a physical expression of distress that is a normal part of living in this fallen world. Nevertheless, even when we genuinely mourn and our souls are truly afflicted, we must not put on an outward mask of ritual fasting to impress others (cf. Mt.6:17,18). If we are so overcome by the Spirit of God that we do not even think about eating, we engage in true fasting since seeking God's will has become all important to us. Genuine fasting reflects the inner state of our minds and souls as we pray. True and honest fasting before God demonstrates to Him that our intent is real. If while fasting, we are sorely tempted to eat because we have an uncontrollable craving for food, we are not fasting as a consequence of a truly contrite spirit; it has become but a vain ritual of the flesh.

In conclusion, we find that we should constantly be engaged in prayer lest we stumble into sin. True fasting always attends some affliction of our soul stemming from a sense of helplessness, fear, illness, death, our sins, or the sins of others. It often occurs when we engage with great intensity in worship, prayer, or ministry. The spontaneous presence of fasting is a sign to God of our true contrition, repentance, and dependence upon Him. If however our remorse is not real, the ritual act is meaningless; we are lying to God and He will not be fooled by false piety. Fasting is not an alternative or a substitute for humble prayer, nor is it a means of wresting some great truth from God that He will not reveal to us in any other way. It is most certainly not a means by which we can bend God's will to our own. May we rather let the joy of our salvation be truly joyous, and let us not put on long faces and fast at a time when He bids us to feast. For, we know that our Redeemer lives and we love the thought of his soon appearing. The afflictions that may now bring mourning will quickly pass away in the glory of his presence (cf. Zec.8:19). Let the Church not be so much inclined to fast in the flesh, but to feast on Him in the spirit who is the source of our joy and righteousness. © *Arthur J. Smith February 2015*