

SERMONS

BY THE

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IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

THE THIRD EDITION.

LONDON:

PRINTED BY ELLERTON AND HENDERSON,
JOHNSON'S COURT, FLEET STREET:

AND SOLD BY J. HATCHARD, PICCADILLY; AND
RIVINGTONS, ST. PAUL'S CHURCHYARD.

1818.

SERMON XXII.

ON FASTING.

PREACHED ON THE SUNDAY PRECEDING A PUBLIC FAST.

2 CHRON. XX. 3.

And Jehoshaphat feared, and set himself to seek the Lord, and proclaimed a fast throughout all Judah.

AS there may probably be some persons amongst us, who have never understood the nature of fasting as a religious service, or even seriously inquired into its design and utility, I propose in this discourse to give as plain and full an account of it as I am able; answering, at the same time, the objections which may suggest themselves against its use.

A fast, then, may be defined to be a voluntary abstinence from food, as a token of our humiliation before God. Repentance, it is true, is seated in the heart. There may be deep repentance, where it is not manifested by any outward sign or expression:—and, on the contrary, there may be much of the outward marks of repentance, where there is no inward feeling; no real sorrow for sin, or strong desire to avoid it.

It may here, then, be asked,—“Of what use is this outward sign? If we do not possess the repentance which it signifies, it is an act of mockery before God; and, if we do, God who sees our hearts cannot need to be informed of their state by any external expression.”

To this I answer, in the first place, that if we have no real repentance in our hearts, the outward expression of it is but mockery. It is indisputable that those who are decidedly and manifestly impenitent had better not pretend to fast; for such fasts are an abomination to God. Such were the fasts which were kept by the hypocritical Israelites, and condemned by the Prophets. “Wherefore have we fasted” (they said), “and thou seest not? Wherefore have we afflicted our soul, and thou takest no knowledge? Behold” (it is replied), “in the day of your fast, ye find pleasure, and exact all your labours.” In other words, in those public fasts, in which they went up to the temple with great solemnity and appearance of devotion, they privately at home spent the day in pleasure, and exacted of their servants their usual labour. “Ye fast,” it is added, “for strife and debate, and to smite with the fist of wickedness.” Instead of cleansing your hearts, you are indulging thoughts of anger and strife, and devising schemes of injustice and oppression. “Ye shall not fast in this manner, to make your voice to be heard on high,” if you would have the Almighty answer you. “Is it such a fast as this

that I have chosen? Is it for a man to bow down his head as a bulrush, to spread sackcloth and ashes under him?" Do I, that is to say, want you merely to cover yourselves with sackcloth, and put ashes on your head; and bow down your heads mechanically, as a bulrush bends before the wind, without any real submission of the heart! "Wilt thou call this a fast, and an acceptable day to the Lord?"—It is evident, that a fast, disgraced by such insincerity, could not be acceptable to a pure and holy God. It was mere hypocrisy, and therefore God says to such corrupt worshippers. "Bring no more vain oblations: incense is an abomination to me: your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hateth; they are a trouble to me, I am weary to bear them." But would you have your fasts acceptable, then let your practice correspond with your worship:—"Wash you, make you clean; put away the evil of your doings from before mine eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do well; seek judgment, relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless, plead for the widow." It is plain, then, that where the heart is not interested, and where sin, so far from being repented of and forsaken, is even cherished on the fast-day itself, such fasting is abomination in the sight of God. The case of such persons is clear. They had better not pretend to fast, than fast in such hypocrisy.

But there is a large class of persons of a different description, who may, perhaps unjustly, apply to themselves what is denounced in Scripture against those gross hypocrites: I mean, such persons as secretly acknowledge their sinfulness before God, and would willingly manifest their penitence if not restrained by the fear of ostentation. Now I beg leave to remind such persons, that fasting, like all other external acts of religion, is not appointed merely to show that we are religious, but also to assist in making us so. The great bulk of a congregation which worship God on the Sabbath, consists of persons who acknowledge themselves to be far from being in all respects what they ought to be; but who come to church, both that they may learn their duty, and that they may obtain help of God to practise it. It is sufficient that they are sincere and possess a real desire of amendment in order to justify their worship of God. If none were to enter the house of God but those who are already pious, by what means are others to become so? We attend the ordinances of God in the hope of improvement, as the sick attend a physician. By nature we are all corrupt; and the use of religion is to reclaim us. This, however, is often effected only by slow means; by endeavours frequently faint at first, but becoming, through God's blessing upon the means used, more and more successful. We worship God, not as angels, but as sinful men; not so much to glorify him, as that we may be improved and saved ourselves. Now this being the case with the bulk of mankind, how ought they to act with respect to fasting? Doubtless exactly in the same manner as with respect to the other appointed

modes of worship. They should consider it as an institution calculated to be highly useful to them, if they employ it properly; and therefore it is their duty, and ought to be their business, thus to employ it. Now I would ask such persons, Have you no sins to answer for? Have you not incurred God's displeasure? Ought you not to live in a much holier manner than you do? If your consciences answer, as I doubt not they will, in the affirmative; then why should you not humble yourselves before God? Here is an opportunity offered you of so doing. Here is a day set apart, on which it is not merely convenient to fast, but on which it is your absolute and solemn duty to humble yourselves. Why, then, should you not embrace this opportunity of acknowledging your sinfulness, and imploring God's pardon and blessing? If you still say, It will appear ostentatious; I answer, that if you alone were to keep the fast, it might wear the appearance of ostentation: therefore, in such a case, the rule ought to be most strictly observed, "Thou, when thou fastest, anoint thy head," instead of covering it with ashes, as was usual on such occasions, "that thou appear not to men to fast." All ostentation is odious and criminal. But, on the contrary, in the case of public fasting, it becomes a duty, not only really to fast, but to show openly your compliance with a prescribed service, and gladly to embrace the opportunity of humbling yourselves before God; and if you still feel a reluctance to comply with this ordinance, examine your hearts, to discover whence this reluctance springs. Is it not your duty to humble yourselves before God? Then, why do you not perform it? Or what good reason can you give for neglecting it? May there not be other and more questionable motives mixed with your dread of ostentation? To say nothing of more serious causes of unwillingness; causes which go to bring into suspicion the very existence of religion in the heart; may it not be, that you are unduly afraid of appearing singular, that you shrink from the ridicule which may be awakened by this open profession of religion? It undoubtedly requires some degree of fortitude to avow a determination to be religious; and, in many cases, the fear of shame acts where we least suspect it.

But again it may be urged, "*If we feel repentance in our hearts, God, who sees our hearts, does not require to be informed of it by any external expression.*"—No: but the same may be affirmed of prayer, Why should we pray? God knows our wants, and does not need that we should formally state them to him. The same also may be said of all the means of grace which God has appointed. If our hearts are right with God, what occasion is there for using them; and if they are not, what benefit can arise from their use? All such reasoning proves too much. It is founded upon a false view of human nature, and of the means by which God changes and rectifies the heart. God, it is true, could infuse grace into the heart; could make us angels in a moment; but it is not his will so to do. He appoints certain means

to that end; the efficacy of which, if they are diligently and devoutly used, is certain, though often gradual and slow. Admitting, then, that a man does not feel the repentance and humiliation which he ought to feel, yet ought he not to feel them? And ought he not to seek them in the channels which God hath appointed for communicating them? If he calls to mind his sins; if he considers the majesty and holiness and goodness of God, against whom he has sinned; if he makes use of outward humiliation, as an indication that he ought to feel, and desires to feel, inward humiliation, he at least does that which has a tendency to produce it. I am sure that a contrary conduct has no such tendency. The words of our blessed Lord are strictly in point;—"To him that hath shall be given." Let a man endeavour to do what he can, and what he ought; and however imperfectly it may be done, the blessing of God will rest upon his endeavours. If, however, the question be repeated, When a man feels real repentance in his heart, what occasion can there be for the external expression of it? I answer, that, in proportion as men feel it, they will be disposed to show it. No truly pious man can be unwilling to attend any ordinances or means of grace, which are calculated to call his religious feelings into exercise. Indeed, where the feelings themselves exist, the exercise of them is not only natural, but necessary. The very idea of true humiliation of heart implies every thing humble and lowly in the outward demeanour.

But there may be some disposed to argue; "Admitting all that has been said, why should fasting in particular be selected as an external mark of humiliation?" I answer, that had it been the will of God, doubtless something else might have been chosen. But, yet, none other occurs to me as a less objectionable expression of sorrow and humility. Fasting, it should be remembered, has always been the public token of humility; and this in heathen nations, as well as amongst Jews and Christians. Now this alone furnishes a strong plea for its adoption and continuance. It is sanctioned by the highest antiquity, and by the most general usage; enjoined of God upon the Jews; practised by our Saviour and his disciples; and recommended by them to the Christian world. Nor is this all;—fasting, it may be confidently said, has all the qualities which might reasonably be expected in an external act of humiliation. In the first place, it is a duty easily practised; requiring no apparatus; connected with no expense; simple in its own nature; equally adapted to all ranks, climates, and places. Moreover, it involves, as every mark of humiliation should, an act of self-denial; and this act, not so severe as to unfit it for general use, nor so slight as inadequately to express its meaning. It has, moreover, this peculiar recommendation, that it is an act connected with the mortification of those very appetites, whence many of the sins, for which we thus humble ourselves, proceed. Fulness of diet and unrestrained indulgence of appetite are frequent sources of intemperance,

lust, pride, and extravagance. That act, therefore, has surely a singular propriety, which has a tendency to correct the evil for which it expresses our contrition.

Still it may be objected, that fasting may disorder persons of weak health, and thus indispose them even for the service of the day. Undoubtedly it may: and therefore such persons are not only allowed, but bound, to use great caution in the performance of this duty. God is not a harsh master: nor does he ever enjoin such duties as are either impossible or injurious. Under the Jewish dispensation, indeed, a total fast was sometimes enjoined under severe penalties. But the spirit of the Christian system insists only on the principle, and leaves the application of it to the case and conscience of the worshipper. It requires repentance, humiliation, and mortification of the flesh, but leaves us to show that repentance, to discover that humiliation, and to practise that mortification, as circumstances may admit, and our consciences direct.

If, therefore, it is asked,—What rule can you lay down as to the length and nature of abstinence? I answer,—None—and none is required. It is a voluntary act of self-denial. One man may be able to fast far longer than another, without the same mortification to himself, or injury to his constitution. Another cannot even fast at all; and yet may be equally desirous of humbling himself before God. Let no one, then, judge or condemn another. The Apostle's rule applies, in this respect:—"Meat commendeth us not to God; for neither if we eat, are we the better; neither if we eat not, are we the worse supposing, that is, in both cases, that the person eats or abstains uprightly and conscientiously. In like manner, no precise rule can be laid down respecting the kind of food which we may use. Formerly a far too artificial, as well as a too general, rule was established—that to eat fish was compatible with fasting, but to eat flesh unlawful. In whatever right motive such a rule originated, it was obviously overstrained, and misapplied in a multitude of instances. The only rules, perhaps, which can safely be laid down are these:—To abridge yourself of all food which you can without injury spare; and, in using necessary refreshment, to use such alone as is least gratifying to the palate. Some self-denial ought to be exercised. This is essential to the nature of a fast; but the degree of it must be measured by every man's conscience and constitution. In general, it would appear, that one entire meal might be spared. But I am ashamed to dwell on minute circumstances. Let there be the real wish to humble yourself before God. Feel strongly and deeply that you are a sinner, desire earnestly to manifest your contrition, and you will be at no loss to determine in what manner it shall be shown. One point is to be remembered, that it is a *voluntary* sacrifice. No person should be compelled to fast. Its very essence is, that it is voluntary, a willing act of humiliation before God.

To this last statement it has sometimes been objected, that a “public command to fast is a species of compulsion, and therefore inconsistent with the notion of a voluntary act of humiliation.” But to this I answer—that all which is done by the command of Government is this: it renders that convenient which might otherwise be very inconvenient, and that practicable which might be otherwise impracticable. It is proper, that when the judgments of God visit a nation, it should humble itself before Him. It is proper also that this humiliation should be as general and as solemn as possible. A day, therefore, is set apart by authority, in which all may fulfil the universal duty. It is rendered generally practicable and convenient, by a general suspension of business. Whether, indeed, a man will avail himself of this opportunity of humiliation, is a matter which lies between himself and his God. But let him remember, he is responsible to God for refusing; and therefore let him carefully weigh his reasons for such refusal. I am not speaking of those cases where a conscience, scrupulous but perhaps ill-informed, may interfere with the discharge of this duty. But, in all others, every good man, I should imagine, would joyfully use the prescribed occasion of drawing near to God, and prostrating himself before him, in order to enliven his repentance and strengthen his resolutions, to confess his wickedness and pray for grace to subdue it. A day thus spent is indeed a day redeemed from the folly and vanity of life.—And here let it be observed, that the mere abstinence from food constitutes but a small part of the solemnity of a fast-day. The essence of the solemnity consists in the religious and holy manner in which the day is spent. It is a day of humiliation, as well as a day of fasting; and indeed these two things are inseparable in their nature. The fasting is only a part of the humiliation. But humiliation supposes the heart to be brought into a right disposition; and this demands retirement, self-examination, and religious exercises. This, then, my brethren, I would earnestly press upon you. If all cannot fast, all can enter into their chambers, and supplicate their God. If, then, you desire to know how you are to keep the fast, I refer you to your own hearts. If they are deeply sensible of the injury you have offered to God, you will at once discover in what manner you should keep the day. You will be much alone. You will use extraordinary prayer. You will direct your attention to your own individual sins. National guilt is made up of the guilt of individuals, and national repentance of individual repentance. You will confess your guilt before God. You will select for meditation those passages of Scripture which are particularly appropriate to penitents, such as the Penitential Psalms. You will earnestly implore the pardon of your own sins. You will extend your prayers also to national events and public characters. You will pray for the king, that he may be protected and blessed; for the parliament, that they may have wisdom from above to guide them, and that all their consultations

may tend to the glory of God and the good of man; for the ministers of state, the judges, the magistrates, the clergy, that each, in their several stations, may fulfil their solemn and appointed duties. Thus you will prepare your heart for the worship of God; and thus prepared, you will worship him in his house with a devout spirit. You will endeavour to join in the service without languor or distraction. You will carry the same spirit and temper throughout the day. It will not be to you a day of worldly business; of recreation, of idleness, of worldly conversation, but a day consecrated to God, and devoted to religion. A fast-day, kept universally in this manner, would indeed be a national blessing.

There is yet another objection which might be urged, especially by some of the poorer classes—that it is unreasonable to expect them to give up a day's labour, and to abridge their diet who scarcely ever enjoy a full meal, and whose families can ill spare even the labour of a single day. Now, it must be admitted, that there is something apparently unequal and hard in the case of the poor. I allow, that a greater sacrifice is made by them, if they keep the day holy, than by others. I would contend also, that the rich ought not to let their workmen suffer in their temporal comforts by such an appointment. Still I would say to the poor what I before said to others—"Remember, it is a voluntary sacrifice: God enjoins no man to make it who is unwilling." But though the sacrifice is greater in your case than in that of others, it is surely not too great to make for Him who gives you life, and food, and raiment, and all which you possess. Remember, my poorer brethren, this life is not all your existence. It is only a very small part of it. Do not therefore call that time lost which is not spent in labouring for the body; God can easily restore tenfold your loss in the present life, and can give you life eternal. There are many who labour and toil incessantly without effect, because the blessing of God does not give success to their labours. I do not say, that piety will always better your worldly circumstances; but this I say, that no man will really be a loser by serving God. Piety will at least prevent the excesses arising from debauchery, extravagance, and folly. The wages of a single day are a cheap price for habits which secure a blessing to every day of our lives.

Such then, my brethren, are some of the most common objections to fasting, and such some of the advantages which may be expected to result from it.—As to the first, I think you will see, that little importance is to be assigned to them. The benefits of public fasts, on the contrary, are established by a succession of facts in the history of the world, as recorded in the Scriptures. God had declared that he would destroy Nineveh; but Nineveh repented, and turned to the Lord with fasting, and the Lord pardoned it. Ahab, who was said to have sold himself to work wickedness, at length humbled himself and fasted, and "put on sackcloth;" and God said to his

Prophet, Seest thou how Ahab humbleth himself: I will not bring the evil in his days.” Jehoshaphat, in the chapter of our text, is described as suddenly attacked by a large army. He set himself to seek the Lord, and proclaimed a fast. And, on the very day of the fast, the Spirit of the Lord came upon Jahaziel, proclaiming that the Lord himself would fight for Judah, and destroy the enemy. And, accordingly, the army of Jehoshaphat stood still, and saw the invaders perish by their own hands. These, my brethren, are so many monuments erected for the consolation and instruction of after-ages. They console us by the assurance, that the true penitent is the peculiar charge of Heaven. They teach us a lesson never to be forgotten by kings, nor by their people, that “righteousness exalteth a nation, and that happy is the people who have the Lord for their God.”

END OF THE FIRST VOLUME.