

A Study on Fasting; Presented to the Adult Sunday School Class of the Reformed Baptist Church by Pastor Paul Rendall on March 3rd, 2012.

Lesson # 1 – The Difference between True Christian Fasting and the Fasting of the Muslim and other false religions.

I want to step aside from our study on the Ten commandments to briefly consider the subject of Christian fasting. Christian fasting is not the same as fasting done by people in other religions. The Christian religion is the only true religion because our God is the only true and living God, and Jesus Christ His Son is the only way of salvation. (John 14: 6) Therefore, our fasting will not be the same as any of the false religions of the world. For instance, when we see the zeal of the Muslim to fast for whole days during the month of Ramadan, we should not think of him as being super spiritual when he does this. He is being religious, but his religious activity we know is not truly spiritual. We think of him as being very deceived, and we pity him, even though his description of his reasons for fasting in many ways is very similar to the Christian. The reason that we think that he is very deceived is because there is at least one radical difference between Christian fasting and Muslim fasting, which I will explain to you here in a moment. I went on-line as I was preparing this study, and I found a web-site called al.islam.org which told me that there were 18 reasons why Muslims fast. This was, in part, what was said: “Every year the month of Ramadan comes and goes; every year we fast, yet without proper appreciation of the potentials of character building that the fasts hold for us.” “We find ourselves as spiritually backwards after the fasts are over as when the month began.” “In fact our lack of knowledge of the real objectives of fasts often tends to produce an adverse effect in us, for, as is well known, the best of medicines could have ill effects if not taken in accordance with the physician's directives and instructions.” Let me pause and say, “I agree”. But the Physician that the Muslim needs, in order to rightly fast in accordance to His instructions, is the Lord Jesus Christ. More on this in a moment. But let me list for you the reasons that a Muslim fasts, and we will see if you agree with me that at least some of them, are also reasons that Christians should fast.

Here was what was said on this Muslim site: “Besides of course being a means to acquiring the pleasure of God, for which all acts of devotion are basically meant, fasting could be used as a stepping stone to build up the various traits of character in accordance with the clear injunctions of the Qur'an itself that fasts have been prescribed with a view to developing piety in man.” “How are the many facets of piety sought to be cultivated through fasts?” “This article tries to list as concisely as possible, the various benefits the fasts would confer upon Muslims.” (All 18 points that follow, here, are a direct quote from the site.)

1. The most important consideration in undertaking a fast, as in any act of devotion, is to seek nearness to God, and seek His pleasure and Forgiveness. This itself generates a spirit of piety in man.

2. Creating the conditions of hunger and thirst for oneself, simply in obedience to the Divine order, measures the faith of man in God and helps strengthen it by putting it to a severe test.
3. Fasting enhances through creation of artificial non-availability, the value of the bounties of God which man often takes for granted. This inculcates in man a spirit of gratitude and consequent devotion to God. Nothing else can bring home to a man the worth of God's bounties than a glass of water and a square meal after a day-long fast. This also reminds man that the real joy in enjoying God's bounties lies in moderation and restraint and not in over indulging.
4. Fasting makes us deeply conscious of the pangs of hunger and discomfort suffered by the less fortunate among our brethren. They have to put up with difficult conditions all through their lives. It thus kindles in man a spirit of sacrifice leading to change towards his suffering brethren.
5. Fasting gives man an unfailing training in endurance, a spirit of acceptance. This could well prepare him to put up with the unchangeable situations in life in the same spirit of resignation as cultivated during the fasts.
6. Fasting develops courage, fortitude, and a fighting spirit in man to surmount the heavy odds in life with a cool and tranquil mind. It sharpens his power of concentration to overcome obstacles through a vigorous exercise all throughout the month, leading to a steeling of his will power and resolve, that could help him in challenging situations in life. It is seen that many an undesirable habit which is difficult to give up, is more easily given up during the days of fasting.
7. Fasting teaches man reliance on God, and confidence in Him. Just as the vigorous state of fasting for a whole month is undertaken with His assistance, bitter situations in life could also be surmounted with His help.
8. Fasting develops a spirit of patience in man, with the realization that the days of fasting, though seemingly unending, do have a successful and happy end. Thus is life. All bitter situations pass, and come to an end.
9. Fasting is meant to conquer anger and develop self-control in man. The vigorous effort required to put up with hunger and thirst can well be extended to conquer other infirmities of human character that lead man into error and sin.
10. Fasting inculcates a spirit of tolerance in man to face unpleasant conditions and situations without making his fellow beings the victim of his wrath. Many people, when facing discomfort and deprivation, become irritable and annoyed. This anger is then vented on those around them. Fasting helps a man become more tolerant despite his own discomfort.
11. Fasting mellows a man and enhances his character, giving a jolt to the human instincts of pride, haughtiness, jealousy and ambition. Fasting softens his character, and clears his heart and mind of many negative emotions.
12. Fasting exposes the weakness of man in the event of his being deprived of two basic bounties of God; food and drink. It infuses into him a spirit of weakness and submission, generating humility and prayer in an otherwise arrogant being.

13. Fasting breathes the spirit of forgiveness in man towards others, as he seeks God's forgiveness through fasts and prayers.

14. Fasting gives lessons in punctuality. Man has to adhere to a strict schedule of time in the observance of the fast.

15. Fasting could affect the economy of the individual as he is less wasteful on food and meals.

16. Fasting demands a rigid sense of discipline, mental, spiritual and physical. This forms characteristics which are an essential ingredient to success in life.

17. Fasting creates spiritual reformation in man, infusing him with a spirit of enthusiasm and zest to change and become a better human being in the eyes of God. This is an excellent opportunity, given to believers (that is, Muslim believers) each year, to change themselves and consequently their destinies.

18. On the physical side, fasting cleanses the human system of the accumulated impurities of uninterrupted eating throughout the year. It prepares the body to face diseases or conditions of scarcity. The rigid abstinence of a fast regulates man's health, sharpens his intellect and enhances the qualities of his heart.

Fasting is thus a bounty in itself, encompassing within itself many bounties. It instills a spirit of reformation in man, creating a wide awakening in him to fulfill his duties towards God and man, and towards himself. (End of Quote)

(Adapted from an article by Marhum Ahmed Sheriff Dewji, published in the Light Magazine)

Now, I would venture to guess that you are very surprised at all that I have just read to you. Because much of what I just read to you is something that a true Christian could agree with if it was transposed, generally, in to their Christian context. But, as we look more closely we find that in points #2, and 8, and #17 there is a radical difference between Muslim and Christian fasting. In regard to # 2, We do not believe that creating the conditions of hunger and thirst for oneself, simply in obedience to the Divine order, measures the faith of any man in God, nor does it help strengthen human faith (that is, faith which has not come from God's grace) by putting it to a severe test. That kind of faith is simply human self-determination. And what is worse it is human self-determination coming from the false doctrine of the Koran. It is not a real and true saving faith which is found which looks outside oneself to obtain salvation in Jesus Christ. It is not a faith of which Jesus Christ is the author, but rather it is a human originated faith, which trusts in its own strength, in relation to pleasing God. In regard to # 8 we know that all bitter situations do not pass, and all does not turn out right in the end unless we have Christ as our Savior. And in regard to # 17 - The true Christian does not believe that fasting necessarily "creates spiritual reformation in man infusing him with a spirit of enthusiasm and zest to change and become a better human being in the eyes of God." The real difference between Christian fasting and Muslim fasting is the difference between grace and self-effort. It is the difference between the good grace of Christ and a human originated self-denial

that has no real reference to the only One true and living God who has revealed Himself in Christ, and in the Bible. We will speak at a later time about the poor conceptions of fasting that have also come to us from churches which believe that they should observe Lent.

A Definition of Christian Fasting -

We will be looking at a number of Bible verses in relation to fasting in this study, but I would like to begin with a definition. Biblical Christian fasting is a spiritual tool and spiritual weapon which the Christian employs to achieve spiritual goals. Christian fasting is the voluntary abstinence from food for a period of time in order to show God that you are serious about receiving answers to your prayers in relation to these spiritual goals. The spiritual reality sought for in fasting is a humbling of oneself in order to understand God's will, with a view then to doing God's will, and thus overcome the world, the flesh, and the devil in a particular time or situation that is being faced. Fasting is righteously afflicting the soul in connection with this physical abstinence from eating, so that one's sins can be seen and acknowledged and repented of. This is done in order to devote oneself more completely to prayer so that Biblically righteous spiritual goals can be reached. The time in fasting is used in order to see certain holy spiritual desires cultivated, and goals in ministry reached; goals that will glorify the God who has revealed Himself in the Bible. The Christian will use this tool of fasting in connection with their searching of the Scriptures, in the hope that God Himself will hear and answer their prayers, and the kingdom of Christ will be advanced through this means. Fasting can be done individually, or in connection with the leaders of their local church calling for a fast. There also may be times that the Christian will participate in a fast called by national political leaders in relation to righteous causes which affect the welfare of the nation, or individuals, or groups within the nation. But the thing which distinguishes Christian fasting from all the fasting of false religions of the world is this one all important consideration; its relationship to Jesus Christ. I want you to turn over with me to

Matthew Chapter 9, verse 10 –

“Now it happened, as Jesus sat at the table in the house, that behold, many tax collectors and sinners came and sat down with Him and His disciples.” “And when the Pharisees saw it, they said to His disciples, ‘Why does your Teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?’” “When Jesus heard that, He said to them, ‘Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick.’” “But go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy and not sacrifice.’” “For I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.” Now, I want you to see that Jesus is telling these self-righteous men, these Pharisees, that He did not come to call them, but He came to call sinners to repentance. The sinners in the immediate context of what He was speaking about, were the tax-collectors and the obvious

sinner who happened to be there sitting down at the table with Jesus. These Pharisees disapproved of Jesus' doing this. They thought that He ought to be "separate" from such sinners. And Jesus was perfectly morally pure, and uncontaminated by them because He had never once participated in any of the kinds of sins that were represented by those who were there. But what Jesus says to these Pharisees, we need to take notice of. "Those who are well have no need of a physician." He is speaking of those people like the Pharisees, who thought that they were not sinners because they had outwardly kept most or all of the commandments. Really, they did not realize that they were sin-sick at all. They thought that they were spiritually well. They thought that they did not need a spiritual Physician, as Jesus was, and still is today. And Jesus declares to them that He did not come for such as think that are well, and need no spiritual Physician. He came for sinners; those who know themselves to be so, and they will seek the help of the One and only Great Physician.

Now, that is what is wrong with Muslim fasting, and the fasting by people who are involved in any other religion besides the Christian religion. All these other religions are assuming that their adherents are not sick spiritually by nature. And so their holy book and their Imam's set them to being religious, without being saved. In all works-righteousness religions, people are fasting, assuming that they need some spiritual help, but they are not saying that they need to be saved from their sins, or given a new nature in order to be able to conduct a fast which is pleasing to God, or attain any of their spiritual goals. They are assuming that the power is inherently within them to do that, and that they just need to be more self-disciplined to achieve their spiritual goals. The true Christian, who believes in the Bible, knows the reality of his own sinfulness, and his continual need of Jesus Christ, not only to save Him, but also to help him to do anything that is truly spiritual and pleasing to God.

Now let's continue – Matthew 9: 14 – Then the disciples of John came to Him, saying, "Why do we and the Pharisees fast often, but Your disciples do not fast?" "And Jesus said to them, 'Can the friends of the bridegroom mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them?' "But the days will come when the bridegroom will be taken away from them, and then they will fast." You see, the Pharisees probably were bringing the worst out in John's disciples. John had taught his disciples a strict and definite discipline of fasting. It was probably like one which was rehearsed by the Pharisee in Jesus' parable in Luke 18: 11 – "God, I thank You that I am not like other men—extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector." "I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess." They thought of fasting as a duty which would make them strong in doing what God required; or worse, they thought that it was a duty that proved them to be more spiritual than Jesus' disciples. But Jesus says, "Can the friends of the bridegroom mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them?" What is He saying? He is saying that as long as his disciples know His immediate presence with them, there is no reason for them

to fast. They have everything that they need fulfilled when Jesus is with them. John the Baptist himself refers to Jesus as the “bridegroom” in John 3: 29. “He who has the bride is the bridegroom; but the friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly because of the bridegroom’s voice.” “Therefore this joy of mine is fulfilled.” “He must increase, but I must decrease.” This is indeed one of the greatest reasons for fasting; to obtain more of a sense of the presence and power and blessing of Christ. Notice that Jesus calls fasting “mourning” here. One of the main reasons for fasting is when we do not sense the presence or power of the Lord Jesus, or have the joy of the Lord. Whether it is in our activities of devotion, or in going about to do what would be pleasing to God, we truly need the joy of the Lord. Our joy is in beholding Christ by faith in our lives. If we sense the presence and power of Christ with us, then we have great joy. But if we do not, we mourn, and we should at times express that mourning over not sensing Christ with us, by fasting. But in verse 17 we see that there is a real difference between duty and delight. “Nor do they put new wine into old wineskins, or else the wineskins break, the wine is spilled, and the wineskins are ruined.” “But they put new wine into new wineskins, and both are preserved.” There is a joy in the grace of Christ; the new wine, which cannot be put into the old wineskins of legal duty or it will ruin the spiritual taste of it. Fasting in this New Covenant light of Christ is something that has to have a new container to put it in. That container is the joy of having Christ in all the spiritual duties that we do.

Turn with me over to Matthew 6: 16 – “Moreover, when you fast, do not be like the hypocrites, with a sad countenance.” “For they disfigure their faces that they may appear to men to be fasting.” “Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward.” “But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, so that you do not appear to men to be fasting, but to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly.” And turn also over to John Chapter 4, verse 31. Here was the attitude of the Lord Jesus about fasting. You know how it was that He fasted 40 days and 40 nights before He began His public ministry. When are told here. “In the meantime His disciples urged Him, saying, ‘Rabbi, eat.’” “But He said to them, ‘I have food to eat of which you do not know.’” “Jesus said to them ‘My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me, and to finish His work.’” This is the focus, as well, of those of Jesus’ disciples who fast. They have food of which others do not know. It is having communion and fellowship with Christ and in learning to trust in Him and learn of Him; to take His yoke upon them, He being gentle and humble of heart. This is true fasting.

Lesson # 2 – The Difference between True Christian Fasting and False Christian Fasting.

I want you to turn over with me to Isaiah Chapter 58.