

Fasting
Isaiah 58; Philippians 4:10-13; Matthew 6:16-34

The only way you are acceptable to God is through Jesus Christ.

Specifically, you must be covered with His righteousness through His blood to be acceptable to your Father in heaven.

This never changes.

A mature Christian who has a lifetime of good works is only acceptable to their Father in heaven through the blood of Christ.

I saw this horrible meme the other day. A poor miserable sinner is holding out his heart to Jesus saying, "This is all I have to give." And Jesus says something like, "That's all I need." This is works-based righteousness drivel. This kind of thinking will send you straight to hell if you persist in it. Sadly, dear friend, your heart isn't good enough for Jesus. God must give you a new heart, which He gladly does in your baptism:

"I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules."
(Ezekiel 36:25-27)

Baptism makes you clean and gives you a new heart. And you receive the Spirit of God who works new impulses in you. Baptism is what makes you worthy of your Father in heaven because it gives you the worthiness of Christ. On this side of glory, you still have the old heart of stone and you will constantly fight the Holy Spirit. Even when you cooperate with the impulses of the Holy Spirit, your good works are tainted by your old heart of sin. For standing before God, you must look to your baptism and not your works.

That is you must look to the promise applied to you and not your own works. This is something that the people of Israel forgot and this is why Isaiah is admonishing them in Isaiah 58:

“Yet they seek me daily
 and delight to know My ways,
 as if they were a nation that did righteousness
 and did not forsake the judgment of their God;
 They ask of Me righteous judgments;
 they delight to draw near to God.
 ‘Why have we fasted, and you see it not?
 Why have we humbled ourselves,
 and You take no knowledge of it?’
 Behold, in the day of your fast you seek your own pleasure,
 and oppress all your workers.
 Behold, you fast only to quarrel and to fight
 And to hit with a wicked fist.
 Fasting like yours this day
 Will not make your voice to be heard on high.” (Isaiah 58:2-4)

The people of Israel thought they were righteous before God because of their works and not because of their faith in the promises of their God. They treated good works as a merit system much like the Roman Catholic and Protestant churches do today. Their fasts were a way to check off a merit based work so God would bless them. Yet their fasting had turned into seeking pleasure, oppression of others, and quarreling and fighting. Therefore God refuses to listen to them. The mistake here would be to blame fasting as the problem instead of the works-based righteousness which is something we constantly struggle with this side of glory. Here is how Martin Chemnitz puts it in his great work, “Examination of the Council of Trent:”

“But Scripture censures the abuses of fasts (Is. 58:3–7; Zech. 7:3–6; Matt. 6:16–18), not that it may simply condemn fasting itself, but that it may show its true manner and godly use and approve and confirm it by many godly examples.” (Part IV, Fourth Topic, Section I, Chapter 1, pg 255)

So we are not to abuse fasts, that is, turn them into some kind of merit based work before God. But we are to make fasting a regular part of our Christian *habitus*. There are three reasons for Christian fasting.

Dr. Harold Ristea of our sister seminary in Canada, gives us a nice summary of the first reason Christians fast:

“Fasting isn’t about perfecting ourselves in holy living and self-righteousness. It is about taming the Old Adam, and trapping him under the waters of Holy Baptism, so that he is somewhat manageable until he is finally annihilated in Christian death.”

This is the constant struggle of the Christian between his old heart of stone and the new heart of flesh. This is, in part, the daily contrition and repentance of the Old Adam. This only happens through examination of ourselves against the Law of God. I love how Chemnitz puts it in another one of his great works, “Loci Theologici:”

“By accusing our sins, even the hidden ones which are unknown to our reason, such as, “I would not have known what it is to covet or lust, if the Law had not said, ‘You shall not covet,’ ” Rom. 7:7; likewise by condemning a person’s whole life which is not “of faith.” Thus it leads man to the knowledge of himself. For just as mad men wildly imagine that they are very strong, so also this nature of ours, through the Fall, has been blinded so that it can easily become presumptuous about its own powers and does not fear to put its own kind of discipline or righteousness in opposition to the judgment of God. Therefore the Law shows what a stern examination of our good works we must make in the light of God’s judgment, so that we may be led into a knowledge of our miserable condition and weakness and come to understand that we must seek another kind of righteousness.” (Volume II, Locus VIII, Part E, page 440)

We are so prone to overestimate our strength and only examination by the Holy Spirit through the Law of God is capable of breaking our pride.

The other part of daily contrition and repentance is telling your flesh “No!” This is where fasting comes into play. Fasting is really nothing other than saying “No!” to your flesh. There are three Hebrew words in the Old Testament for fasting. The first definition of fasting is the traditional definition of abstaining from food. The second definition is “afflicting oneself” which really means to humble oneself. This can only come about through the Law and the Holy Spirit. The third definition is more obscure and has to do with suppressing the appetite and passion. All three definitions really talk about saying “No!” to your flesh in some way. And as you practice saying “No!” to your flesh, it becomes easier to say “No!” to your flesh. And sometimes the Christian must simply say “No!” to the Old Adam. There’s no toying with desire and sin. That’s a sure way to get burnt.

So, the first reason Christians fast is to facilitate daily contrition and repentance with the ultimate goal of seeking your righteousness in Christ alone. The second reason a Christian fasts is to be of service to his or her neighbor.

Most of our ailments today, including many cancers, are ailments due to poor diet. For example, Type I diabetes is an auto-immune disease where your body attacks its own pancreas so that it cannot provide insulin. Type I diabetics were doomed to death until insulin could be manufactured. Fasting and a good diet may be helpful for Type I diabetics, but a poor diet didn’t cause Type I diabetes. On the other hand, Type II diabetes is purely a diet problem. The only cause for Type II diabetes is a poor diet; a diet usually high in sugar and processed foods. It can be treated strictly with diet if the doctor is familiar with the benefits of fasting and good wholesome foods. It’s actually quite surprising how little nutritional training medical doctors receive in their schooling. Thanks be to God, many medical doctors are recovering the ancient Greek practice of fasting and whole foods in treatment of many ailments. Medical care, after all, is one of God’s good gifts of daily bread.

Fasting has always been a practice of God’s people and is seen to have great health benefits. Many medical doctors, nutritionists, and scientists proclaim the Mediterranean diet as the most healthy one you can do.

What they often overlook is the fact most of the people that naturally eat a Mediterranean diet are Eastern Orthodox and fasting is a normal practice they incorporate into their diet. Anyway, I'm really not trying to convince you of the health benefits of fasting tonight. I think the evidence clearly shows that fasting is part of a healthy diet and that's something our great grandparents knew. They didn't snack between meals or drink surgery concoctions like soda and energy drinks all day. The real point I'm striving to make, however, is that you must be relatively healthy to be of physical service to your neighbor. Fasting, along with any workout program, is meant to make you fit for service to your neighbor. It isn't meant to make you look good in a bikini or win a bodybuilding contest. Many people tout a good diet or workout program as a way of so-called "self-love," but it's real benefit is the God ordained "other-love."

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Do you remember that God only ordered one regular and yearly fast in the Old Testament? It was on the Day of Atonement or Yom Kippur:

²⁹ "And it shall be a statute to you forever that in the seventh month, on the tenth day of the month, you shall afflict yourselves and shall do no work, either the native or the stranger who sojourns among you. ³⁰ For on this day shall atonement be made for you to cleanse you. You shall be clean before the Lord from all your sins. (Leviticus 16:29-30)

To afflict yourself means to fast with the specific result of humbling yourself before God to remember the atoning sacrifice He makes on your behalf. We don't observe Yom Kippur in the New Testament because Jesus has fulfilled Yom Kippur as it says in Hebrews:

¹¹ But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and more perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation) ¹² He entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood

of goats and calves but by means of His own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption. (Hebrews 9:11-12)

We now have the eternal redemption promised beforehand in the Prophets and pointed to through the animal sacrifices in the temple. Now we receive the fruit of that once-and-for-all sacrifice every Lord's Day or Sunday, if you prefer. It is the custom of many Christians to fast before they receive the Lord's Supper. I don't want to make a law out of this, because we have no mandate from the Lord. But those who fast before the Lord's Supper understand that the purpose of all fasting is to point to the heavenly feast of Christ's body and blood. This is the food that sustains you unto eternal life. There will be no fasting in heaven, and fasting here and now reminds you that you are a sojourner whose real home is your heavenly home. You will eat in the new heavens and new earth because you will have your physical body back. And you will have no need of fasting because your old sinful man will be dead forever.

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You've probably noticed that I've recommended fasting, but I've given you no directions on how to fast. Fasting is really simple. You don't eat for a period of time. That period of time could be a meal or it could be for a longer period of time. It could even mean not eating a particular item like ice cream or meat for a period of time. Regardless, fasting is a good *habitus* for the Christian. Do not let the abuse of a good thing fool you into thinking it isn't good in and of itself. Fasting is a good gift of God if used rightly. Consider making fasting a part of your regular life in Christ. Amen.