

A HOMILY ON FASTING

By Nathan Oman

A talk given to the Cambridge First Ward, Cambridge Massachusetts Stake, September 17, 2000.

Good morning brothers and sisters. The Bishop has given me a scripture and a topic for today. The scripture is Psalm 34:13. “I humbled my soul with fasting; and my prayer returned into mine own bosom.” As you can guess from this, my topic is fasting. I am going to try to do something a little daring here. I want to give a talk on fasting that you have not already heard. So if this sounds a little weird at first, bear with me. I promise it will get better.

OK. I will start with a question. Why should we fast?

Mormons are not the only people who fast. It has been a part of traditional Christianity for centuries. The answer of the Christian theologians to the question of “why should we fast” has generally been something like this:

The body is full of wicked and evil urges and appetites. True spirituality requires that we escape from and conquer such appetites. It is only when we escape from the tyranny which our body imposes upon us that we can truly commune with God. Fasting is a way of denying our wicked flesh and getting back to God.

This is a more dangerous idea than one might think. Joseph Smith teaches us that there was a Great Apostasy in which the church fell away from the Gospel. Part of the this was a corrupted conception of God’s nature. Among other things, God came to be viewed as being completely immaterial. Latter-day Saints are most familiar with the Westminster Confession, written in the 16th century, which states “God is without body, parts, or passions.”

The idea, however, is much older than that. It goes back to the ancient Greek teaching that everything physical is changing and therefore evil. The early theologians reasoned something like this. God is perfect and good. Since perfection and goodness are identified with absolute unchangingness, God cannot have a material body because physicality implies change and decay. Therefore, he must be completely “spiritual or immaterial.” Thus, the only way to enter God’s presence is to escape the body. The result over the centuries has been a strong ascetic tendency in Christianity. For example, at the end of the fourth century people made extreme attempts to live a life in which the body was completely negated and subjected to the spirit. One historian describes these ascetic monks this way:

Their recorded mortifications make alarming reading. A heavy iron chain as a belt was a frequent austerity. A few adopted the life of animals and fed on grass, living in the open air without shade from the sun and with the minimum of clothing, and justifying their method of defying society by claiming to be ‘fools for Christ’s sake.’ At the monastery of Telanious in Syria, Symeon the Stylite practiced his idiosyncratic austerity of living on top of a column. . . . He attracted many disciples to the monastery and inspired later imitators like Daniel who spent thirty-three years on a column near Constantinople. Symeon’s prestige was so great that the assent of the illiterate sylite was required by the government to the councils of Ephesus and Chalcedon.¹

However, there are no monks in Mormonism, and there are good reasons for this.

Joseph Smith restored an entirely different notion of God. In 1844 he taught:

If the veil were rent today, and the great God who holds this world in its orbit, and who upholds all worlds and all things by his power, was to make himself visible, - I say, if you were to see him like a man in form – like yourselves in all the person, image, and very form as a man; for Adam was created in the very fashion, image, and likeness of God, and received instruction from, and walked, talked and conversed with him, as one man talks and communes with another.²

¹ Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church* (London: Penguin Books, 1967) 180.

² Joseph Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, ed. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1967) 345.

Notice, how Joseph's teachings completely turns the traditional view of God and salvation inside out. If God is a being "without body, parts, or passions" then it is only by negation of the body that we can enter his presence. However, if god has a body of flesh and blood as the 130 section of the Doctrine and Covenants teaches, then everything is different. In 1918, Joseph F. Smith had the vision now known as section 138. In it, he saw the spirit world. He said that "the dead . . . looked upon the long absence of their spirits from their bodies as a bondage." (D&C 138:50) Furthermore, the Book of Mormon teaches that it is only in the resurrection, that is when we finally receive an eternal body, that we are restored to the presence of God. Latter-day Saints learn that salvation is not an escape from or victory over the body for eternity. Instead salvation is all about *getting* a body for eternity.

So what is the point of all of this? How does this increase our understanding of fasting? Once we understand the Restoration's attitude towards our bodies, we cannot view fasting as a gate to deeper spiritual understanding because it frees us from the body. It may be a practical way of disciplining ourselves, but there must be something else which explains its spiritual importance.

Think for a moment about the Boston Temple. Why are temples important? Ultimately, we build temples so that we have a place to enter into the presence of God. The temple is a "House of the Lord" and the ordinances there bring us symbolically into the presence of the Lord and what the Book of Mormon calls being "encircled about eternally in the arms of his love" (2 Ne 1:15). In the sacred space of the temple we can take our bearings on the world. From the perspective of God's house we can evaluate our

lives to see what makes sense according to His plan. Mircea Eliade, a great student of religion, described this idea of sacred space by saying:

For religious man, space is not homogeneous; he experiences interruptions, breaks in it; some parts of space are qualitatively different from others. “Draw not nigh hither,” says the Lord to Moses; “put off thy shoes from off thy feet, for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground” (Exodus, 3, 5). There is, then, a sacred space, and hence a strong, significant space; there are other spaces that are not sacred and so are without structure or consistency, amorphous. Nor is this all . . . for it is the break effected in space that allows the world to be constituted, because it reveals the fixed point, the central axis for all future orientation.³

Put another way, the world only makes sense because of the eternal perspective provided in the temple. Without “sacred places” in which to orient ourselves the world becomes meaningless and chaotic.

Fasting does the same thing for time that the temple does for space. We fast in order to mark off sacred time from the profane time which surrounds it. We see this again and again in the scriptures. In ancient Israel fasting was used in this way. It was a condition for praying to God in the “house of God” before the ark of the covenant (Judges 20:26). On the Day of Atonement the entire nation of Israel gathered themselves together to repent of their sins. This was the only day of the year when the high priest would enter Lord’s presence in the Holy of Holies in the temple. Part of the ritual of the Day of Atonement was fasting. Paul fasted before his baptism and for several centuries afterwards fasting was required before baptism.

In our dispensation Brigham Young has taught the same idea. In 1855 Brigham traveled to Provo for a stake conference. As the conference opened, Brigham addressed his first remarks to the Brethren who had come with him to speak at the conference. He

³ Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1957) 20-21.

reminded them of the importance of setting apart and acknowledging the sacred time of the conference. He said:

We have much to do of a temporal nature, as it is termed; many duties pertaining to daily business and the affairs of this life devolve upon us.

There is a time for all these duties, and there is also a time to serve the Lord by praying, preaching, singing, meditating, watching, and fasting. Inasmuch as there is a time for all things, and as this is the time that we have unitedly set apart for the express purpose of worshipping the Lord, and of enjoying His Holy Spirit by calling in our reflections pertaining to earthly things and objects, that we may attend more immediately to a deep reflection and contemplation of heavenly things, it is necessary for these my brethren, who have accompanied me to this place, to bring their thoughts to bear upon the things that are present, and while we are here, to let Great Salt Lake City remain where it is--don't bring it here.⁴

I suspect that some of the people in the ward would say the same thing to me and the other Salt Lake City-ers who have come to Cambridge. Brigham associated fasting with “with time set apart for the express purpose of worshipping the Lord.” What does it mean to worship? When do we fast? When we desire to revelation from God. When we want to ask a special blessing. When we want to testify of Christ to one another. In short, we fast in order to leave behind the world and approach God.

In a way, when we fast we enter the temple. Joseph Smith taught that through fasting is like a temple dedication. It literally sets apart the space we occupy and puts us on sacred ground. In 1842 he said:

[We should] humble [ourselves] in faith before God and in mighty fasting and prayer . . . to call upon his Holy name until the elements are purified over our heads and the earth sanctified under our feet.⁵

⁴ Brigham Young, “FAITHFULNESS—REVERENCE FOR SACRED THINGS--REFORMATION. Discourse Delivered July 13, 1855,” in *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (London: Latter-day Saints' Book Depot, 1854-1886) 3:52

⁵ *The Words of Joseph Smith*, ed. and comp. Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook (Provo: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1980) 109, spelling and punctuation modernized.

In the church we are all called “Saints” because that is how members of the church were called in the New Testament. The Greek word translated as “saint” is *αγιος* (*hagios*). *Αγιος* (*hagios*) is the personal noun form of the verb *αγιαζω* (*hagiozo*) meaning “to purify or to sanctify.” Thus, *αγιος* (*hagios*) could literally be translated as “a sanctified one” or perhaps even “a sanctifier, one who sanctifies.” When we fast we literally fulfill this calling by sanctifying our lives.

Fasting is a commandment. In the Talmud, a young man asks a wise rabbi why he should keep the commandments. The rabbi’s answer is wonderful. He doesn’t say that we should keep the commandments in order to earn admittance to heaven or to please God. Instead he says, “Through keeping the commandments we live our lives in the presence of God.”

It is my prayer that we may so live, in the name of Jesus Christ, Amen.