

prayer & fasting

This Sunday we looked at Matthew 6:16-18 and the subject of fasting. I suspect that there are at least three ways that we might respond to the sermon.

The Hard-Hearted Response

The first is the response of those who would say, “I don’t need to fast.” Strictly speaking that is correct. There is no command in Scripture to fast. But we cannot escape from the expectation that Jesus places on this practice. He expects this to be a part of how we live. And in fact this is how we both Jesus and the early church live. Jesus fasts for 40 days as he prepares for his ministry (Matt. 4:1-2; Luke 4:1-3). In Acts 13:1-3 we see the church in Antioch fasting and praying before they send of Paul and Barnabas on the most important missionary journey in the history of the church. In Acts 14:23 we read that leaders were selected for the churches with prayer and fasting. If Jesus and the Apostles thought fasting was a viable, important spiritual practice, who are we to say otherwise?

The Soft-Heated Response

This is the response of those who say, “I can’t.” Perhaps the burden seems to great. Perhaps you are physically unable to fast. Remember that fasting is not a command and so Jesus’ love for you will in no way be diminished if you do not fast. And yet, we can also step out in faith. In his work *The Institutes of the Christian Religion* John Calvin writes that our fasts can simply be a decision to eat sparingly or forego “luxury” in our eating so a to focus on prayer. (4.12.18)

The Gospel Response

A response that is rooted in Christ’s finished work on the cross is one that sees the spiritual good in fasting, but is not enslaved by either of the responses above. It sees the wisdom in fasting. And it sees wisdom in applying fasting correctly. It rejoices and supports others who fast, but is not condemning on those who are not able. It looks forward to the day when fasting will be obsolete (Matt 9:14f), but in the meantime waits for that day to come.