

Remarks on fasting and on the discipline of the body : in a letter to a clergyman / by a physician.

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Physician.

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REMARKS
ON
FASTING,
AND ON THE
DISCIPLINE OF THE BODY:
IN A LETTER TO A CLERGYMAN.

BY
A PHYSICIAN.

LONDON:
FRANCIS & JOHN RIVINGTON,
ST. PAUL'S CHURCH YARD, AND WATERLOO PLACE.

1848.



A
LETTER,
&c.

MY DEAR —,

THE subject to which you allude in your letter of — has often engaged my attention. I have no doubt that ill-directed fasting, (especially if at other times diet be not carefully regulated,) has done serious harm to many persons of delicate constitution; and I have been led to this conclusion, in considering the cases of clergymen and others, respecting which I have been asked to advise, who have brought on themselves the evils under which they laboured, by the neglect of due regulation both in taking and in abstaining from food.

I am very glad to take up my pen for the purpose of giving you some remarks upon these subjects, and hope you may derive assistance from my suggestions, not only for yourself, but for others, who may have recourse to you, as their spiritual adviser,

to guide them in their observance of the practice of fasting.

“To be in the body, what a mystery! To exercise its senses, what a blessing! *To rule its appetites*, what a charge¹!” How few there are who reflect on the vast importance of the care of the body, which is so intimately associated with the soul, that the slightest disturbance in the former exercises the most potent influence (often insensibly) over the latter; and that the complexion of our thoughts and feelings takes its hue chiefly from the habitual condition or temperament of our body. “If,” says the excellent writer from whom I have already quoted, “the body be considered as nothing more than the servile exponent of the soul in the world of matter, if it be not regarded as that part of ourselves, which, as far as we can form any distinct apprehension, defines our human nature, if it be not treated as the intimate associate of the soul, which all the power of our abstraction cannot separate in practice or practical thought, whatever it may do in language, and which, however disjoined for a time, shall be reunited to all eternity, can it receive from us that vigilant care which a vessel of sanctification demands²?”

Nothing is better calculated to remind us of the charge which is laid upon us in the exercise of our

¹ Evans, “The Ministry of the Body,” p. 1, 1847.

² Evans, loc. cit. p. 8.

bodily functions, than the practice of fasting at stated periods, as enjoined by our Church. The frequent recurrence of the inquiry, how far our senses and appetites are under our control, is a discipline which cannot fail to produce the most wholesome effects upon both body and soul. At these seasons, the questions which should engage the attention of one, who duly estimates the intimate connexion of these two parts of our nature, would be such as the following. Am I using my body as the temple in which the soul is to dwell not only in this life but throughout eternity? Do I look sufficiently to its state of order, of subjection, of purity? or do I merely employ it as an instrument or machine, which has no other use than to do the bidding of my will, regardless of its tendency to re-act on my thoughts and affections, and to usurp the mastery over that will to which it should be in subjection? Do I, on the one hand, indulge those appetites, which are given me as guides for the preservation of my body, to such a degree that they have lost their proper use, and no longer may be safely followed; or do I, on the other hand, neglecting the warnings of legitimate appetite, devote myself so exclusively to my pursuits, whatever they may be, that the fabric "so fearfully and wonderfully made" falls out of repair, and becomes unable to respond to the impulses of the mind, which, in its turn, (such is the intimacy of the union of both,) languishes and falls into decay, or, losing its harmony of action, deviates into some

strange paths, dragging the body with it, to the serious injury of both?

If the observance of the fasts of the Church lead to such reflections as these, I can conceive no practice which is better calculated to subserve the highest physical and moral ends, by giving habits of self-control, by promoting temperance of mind as well as of body, by maintaining a vigilant superintendence over the actions of both, and over their mutual influence upon each other, and by weaning the mind from inordinate desires, "casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ."

But, like almost every other duty, fasting may be misapplied, and so may defeat the very object for which it is most needed. If indiscreetly practised, carried too far, and without reference to the actual condition and powers of the bodily frame, instead of chastening the appetites, and forming that solid character of sober earnestness, which ought to be the groundwork of the Christian's life, fasting may have quite an opposite effect. It may induce habits of indolence instead of energy, bring on a state of nervous irritability, weaken the powers of the intellect, and so impair the exercise of the will, as to favour to the greatest extent the intrusion of wandering and irregular thoughts. Under such circumstances, the fancy is apt to usurp dominion over sober reason and calm judgment.

I would impress upon all this fact, which I think receives the fullest support both from reason and experience, namely, that the body cannot be weakened without the mind more or less becoming affected in a similar way. The brain is the instrument of the mind. No organ is more dependent for the healthy exercise of its functions on a healthy state of the general nutrition of the body: it receives, perhaps, a larger amount of blood than any other single organ; an amount estimated at rather more than one-fifth of the whole blood of the body. There are many facts to show, that a deficiency in the quantity of the blood, or a depraved quality of blood, is felt most severely by the brain. How then can we expect that this complicated, delicate, ever working organ can hold out, if it be not supplied with blood in the natural quantity and of the proper quality³?

Now a healthy blood, both as to quality and quantity, implies a healthy state of general nutrition. Nor is it possible to conceive that the latter can exist without the former. Modern researches in chemistry and physiology show a most interesting and striking connexion between the chemical constitution of the food and that of the blood. The addition to our knowledge, which has thus been

³ There is a form of delirium, with which practical physicians are well acquainted, which is due entirely to overwork of the brain and imperfect or irregular feeding. I have met with several instances of this affection in professional men of all classes.

obtained, simplifies greatly the solution of many questions of dietetics, which previously admitted of no clear explanation : such as the proper mode of feeding children, and even adults ; the diet most fitting for particular forms of disease ; the relative value of an animal and vegetable diet, &c. &c.

We know that the very same elements which constitute that complex liquid, the blood, are found in the various kinds of food which instinct, and custom founded on instinct, prescribe for man ; they exist in vegetable substances as well as in animal matters, but in the latter, less encumbered with incidental elements, which are of little or no importance for nourishment. And it would seem to follow from this fact, as well as from the most approved researches upon the intimate nature of the digestive process, that the process is, in the main, a power of reducing certain elements of the food, which exist also in the blood, into a state of solution ; in which state they admit of a ready absorption into the blood, from which, again, they are extracted by the various organs of the body.

This view of the digestive process obviously suggests what, indeed, we have already learned from experience,—that *the quantity* of the food taken or administered has a material influence on nutrition. This quantity should bear such a relation to the daily waste which is going on in the body, as to exactly supply it. The appetite, if strictly followed, would serve as an excellent guide to determine this

quantity ; but there is so much to interfere with the natural development of appetite, that its warnings, when regarded, are not always the most certain monitors. When the appetite cannot be depended on, or followed as a guide, the only means left is to ascertain by experiment the quantity of food which is most conducive to health, and to adhere strictly to that, paying no regard to appetite. A short continuance of such a plan will restore the appetite to a healthy state, so that its indications may afterwards afford a safe guide as to the quantity of food.

Liquids, although absolutely necessary in a certain proportion, need not be taken in large quantity. The quantity of water excreted from the system through various channels, and which is necessary for the solution of many substances which must necessarily be removed from it, does not exceed four pints in each day. This is supplied partly by the water which is in combination with the various animal or vegetable substances which are taken as food, and partly by the chemical decompositions which are connected with the respiratory and the heat-producing processes ; the rest must be provided for by drinks. Supposing one-third to be supplied from the two former sources, the quantity of fluid necessary through the day need not be much more than two pints and a half.

I would lay down the following dietary, as affording sufficient nourishment for persons in the higher

classes; such, for instance, as devote themselves to professional avocations.

The morning meal may consist of six ounces of bread, with half a pint of liquid, the most wholesome being a decoction of cocoa-nibs, with milk and sugar, and about two ounces of meat.

About mid-day, a crust of bread, and a glass of water or a little sherry.

Dinner, six or eight ounces of meat, with half as much vegetables, well boiled, and two or three ounces of bread.

Pies and puddings, and the other addenda of modern *cuisinerie* to the plain English fare of meat and vegetables, should be taken very sparingly, and must be regarded altogether as superfluous luxuries.

And, as regards the use of malt liquor and wine, my deliberate opinion, after much consideration, is, that while most persons may omit them with advantage, there are some who need them in moderate quantity. Persons of plethoric habit, those of rheumatic or gouty tendency, or liable to deranged liver or kidneys, should never take beer; and such persons are generally better without wine or spirits. Spareness of habit, with coldness of extremities, and languor of circulation, are indications for the use of malt liquor and wine. Persons who exercise their minds very much, the duties of whose position demand great physical and mental exertion, require, I think, a moderate allowance of stimulants; not ex-

ceeding a pint of porter, and one or two glasses of wine. In every case, however, I am satisfied that beer and wine should not be taken at the same meal.

I am persuaded that much evil arises from the too abundant use of tea and coffee; both by reason of the undue quantity of liquid taken into the stomach, and because of the stimulating quality of the essential principle of both tea and coffee, which is apt to affect injuriously both the liver and the nerves ⁴.

I have thus endeavoured to point out a course of diet for ordinary days, which may conduce to health in nearly all constitutions; but which, in order to secure its favourable influence, must be combined with a proper amount of exercise, and with attention to the state of the skin by frequent ablutions. The custom of early rising is as highly conducive to health, as that of sitting up late is extremely prejudicial to it. I believe the practice, which will be found most generally beneficial, and at the same

⁴ The following simple rules, the good sense of which will readily commend them to all, are laid down by an excellent practical Physician, Dr. Holland, as "maxims, serving as a foundation for lesser injunctions:"—"First, that the stomach should never be filled to a sense of uneasy repletion. Secondly, that the rate of eating should always be slow enough to allow thorough mastication, and to obviate that uneasiness which follows food hastily swallowed. Thirdly, that there should be no urgent exercise, either of body or mind, immediately after a full meal."—*Medical Notes and Reflections*, p. 361.

time very practicable, is to retire at eleven o'clock, or half-past, and to rise at six, or at latest seven. I may remark, that early rising affords the means of exercising self-control and self-discipline in a very useful way. There are very few who cannot bear to give up one or two hours from their morning sleep; on the contrary, most persons derive great benefit from curtailing sleep at that period. On the other hand, it is well known to medical men, that sitting up late, or contracting one's hours of sleep by late watching, is frequently most pernicious, inducing palpitations, debility, and nervous excitement.

I would next remark, that any great departure from such a course, as that above laid down, must, sooner or later, tell unfavourably upon health. I fear that the generality of persons are apt to err on the side of excess, and not only do they take too much, but they eat too quickly, and without sufficient mastication,—a preliminary to digestion very necessary for the perfect exercise of that function. To such persons, the observance of the Church's fasts must prove extremely beneficial, if for nothing else, at least for their bodily health. The weekly fast on Fridays, and on the other days appointed by the Church, not only gives rest to their digestive organs, but it may also wean them from many bad customs in their habitual mode of living. This class of persons, I need scarcely remark, may be safely advised to observe the Church's fasts regularly, and you may say to them, in the

words of Jeremy Taylor, "Were I to enumerate the benefits of fasting (to them), I might in the next page also reckon all the benefits of physic ⁵;" and if, with these helps to the body, they can also find it "the nourishment of prayer, the restraint of lust, the wings of the soul, the diet of angels, the instrument of humility and self-denial, the purification of the spirit," they will need no persuasion to persevere in the practice.

There are many persons of feeble constitution, and of weak powers of digestion, who require to exercise great care and caution in the observance of the Church's fasts; to whom, indeed, the preservation of the bodily health is at all times a matter of much difficulty. Others, again, are during seasons of fasting engaged in active professional pursuits, following out the duties of their calling, and using much physical and mental exertion—can such persons carry out to the fullest extent the observance of the fasts enjoined by the Church, and at the same time continue their usual amount of active professional exertion? Clergymen must exercise their ministry,—they must visit the poor and the sick in times of fasting, as well as at other seasons. Medical men must still attend their patients, and must not shrink from rendering to them their best assistance, however infectious or loathsome their diseases may be. Lawyers must not neglect the interests of their clients, while they are endeavouring to forward their own spiritual advantage. How can

⁵ Holy Living, c. 4, § 5.

the Church's directions be observed in cases like these, whilst, at the same time, due attention is paid to the care of that important trust, the health of the body ?

It is with the object of enabling you to advise in such cases as these, in which there is much probability that an indiscreet observance of the fasts of the Church would be detrimental to health, that I venture to offer you some further remarks. It is possible, I believe, by the observance of a little care and caution, for the class of persons to whom I have referred, to obtain all the spiritual benefits of fasting without injury to their bodies. Bishop Taylor lays it down, "that all fasting must be used with prudence and charity;" and cautions us, that we must have "this in our first care, that we secure our virtue, and next that we secure our health, that we may the better exercise the labours of virtue, lest out of too much austerity we bring ourselves to that condition that it be necessary to be indulgent to softness, ease, and extreme tenderness."

In such cases, as I now write for, I think that the practice of omitting certain meals altogether is highly objectionable. Assuming that it is one of the principal objects of fasting at stated periods, to accustom oneself to the frequent exercise of acts of self-denial, and thereby to "keep under the body," I venture to affirm that that object is just as fully gained, and in some cases more so, by materially curtailing the quantity of food at each meal, as by

giving up the meal altogether. Is it, I would ask, a greater act of self-denial to abandon a meal altogether, or, the meal being before you, to diminish the quantity you usually take, to deny yourself those things which would be grateful to your appetite, and to stop considerably short of satisfying it as to quantity?

No doubt different temperaments would be differently affected under these circumstances. Nevertheless I am persuaded, that to the vast majority of persons it is an act of greater self-discipline to *curtail the quantity* usually taken at a meal, and to refrain from what would be grateful to the palate, than to give up a meal altogether.

When total abstinence is practised, it is the custom to select for that purpose the early part of the day, until three o'clock, or until sunset. Many of the fasts recorded in the Old and New Testaments were severe abstinences of this nature.

Persons of a weak and delicate constitution should not, in my opinion, adopt this practice. No part of the Church imposes, as a matter of necessary duty, this mode of fasting upon those whose bodily health might be injured by it. If such persons wish to exercise themselves in severe abstinence, I would advise that they should take a light meal early in the day, and fast for the rest of it—or until after sunset, taking care that the last meal at night should be a very light one.

A light meal is one which consists not only of a

small quantity of food, but also of that kind of food which is easily and quickly digested, and does not readily disturb the stomach, by producing acidity, flatulence, and other distressing symptoms. Such a meal would consist of bread and water, or bread and a decoction of cocoa, with or without milk, or weak coffee—and, in some instances, a small quantity of meat.

I am aware that in suggesting meat as an ingredient of a meal on a fast day, I may appear to set myself against the universal custom of abstaining from flesh on such occasions. This custom, however, was adopted at a period when but little was known of the nature of different kinds of food, and of their relative digestibility. I must leave it for others to decide how far the discoveries of modern times may justify us in departing from a long established usage, and shall content myself with stating, that for the vast majority of persons, a small quantity of animal food (fresh meat or fish) is easier of digestion, and is, therefore, lighter food than an equal quantity of vegetables—for example, an ounce of meat is more easily and quickly digested, and is at the same time more nutritious, than an ounce of potato or other vegetable.

Eggs are not suitable to a light meal. They are less digestible than meat. An egg is a concentration of highly nutritious material, and a type of the sort of nourishment which is necessary to fulfil the wants of the body. It is more suitable to the young

than to the old; and to a time of exercise and activity than to one of rest and quiet.

I have no difficulty in advising against that which I have often seen done, namely, dining off vegetables only. These are substances more difficult of digestion than meat, and much more likely to create disturbance of the digestive function.

The practice which I have frequently seen adopted of taking at breakfast the usual allowance of liquid, omitting the solid food altogether, or taking an extremely small quantity of it, is, I think, much to be condemned. Persons who do this, act as if the liquid were to be regarded as of no account. A much better rule would be to take one-half, or a less proportion, of the liquid as well as of the solid food; and this, I believe, would be a greater exercise of self-denial and of self-discipline, than to take liquid only, which often by its mere bulk *satisfies* the craving of appetite, but affords no real sustenance; the object of fasting being to refuse all gratification of appetite, and to withhold self-indulgence, but not to withdraw that amount of sustenance which is necessary for the exercise of our bodily functions.

I shall conclude this letter, by throwing into the form of rules some of the more important points to which I have referred.

1. At all times the *quantity* of the food, whether solid or liquid, is a much more important element in reference to healthy digestion than its quality. Next to this is the rate of eating. Eat slowly and masti-

cate well, is a rule which should be strongly impressed upon all who wish to avoid the evils of imperfect digestion.

2. Those who, in digestion, experience discomfort and difficulty immediately, or within a short time after taking food, should take animal food sparingly; those whose discomfort does not begin for some hours after a meal, should be sparing in the use of vegetable food (bread included), or abstain from it altogether.

3. In fasting, choose the latter, rather than the early part of the day, for the practice of *total* abstinence.

4. The diminution of the quantity of the food to one-half or one-third its usual amount at each meal, is more suited to the condition of weak constitutions, and is, in general, a more decided exercise of self-discipline and control, than total abstinence from food ⁶.

5. When a meal ought to consist of solids and liquids, do not take the liquid, leaving the solid portion; but curtail the quantity of both.

6. When a meal consists of animal food and of vegetables, it is better to curtail the quantity of both, than to take the latter only.

⁶ I am far from admitting that even this modified practice should be adopted for any continuous period, as, for instance, throughout Lent, by any except the most robust, especially by those engaged in the active duties of professions, or of mercantile or other pursuits, or in close study.

7. Eggs are more nutritious than meat—fish less so. He who dines on either to satiety, in no degree fasts. Neither is suited to weak stomachs.

Lastly, I would remind those who desire, as all ought, to combine with the exercise of self-denial, meditation and self-examination, that this double object may be best attained, even in the most busy callings of life, by curtailing the hours of sleep, in the *morning*, and not at night ⁷.

I hope that nothing that I have said in this letter will lead you to suppose that I mean to throw difficulties in the way of those who are sincerely desirous of following out the practice of fasting as enjoined by our Church; or that I would create any new obstacle to the revival of these observances among members of the Church of England. I know that, where a practice has long been laid aside, a reaction is very apt to take place, whereby persons are led into an opposite extreme; and my experience

⁷ It was early in the morning that the righteous Job offered his sacrifices to God. At the same period of the day Moses built his altars, and offered his sacrifices, and at this period likewise he received those special communications by which God graciously revealed his will to the children of Israel and to all mankind. It was early in the morning that the children of Israel in the wilderness gathered the manna, of which Moses said, "This is the bread which the Lord hath given you to eat." "My voice shalt thou hear in the morning, O Lord," says the Psalmist; "in the morning will I direct my prayer unto thee, and will look up." And again: "I prevented the dawning of the morning and cried: I hoped in thy word."

has furnished me with instances of this, which have been of a painful kind. On this account I have ventured to make the suggestions contained in the foregoing pages; founding them upon the improved knowledge which the light of modern science has afforded. That some of these suggestions differ from precepts received in a part of the Church, I admit: but as these precepts were given at a period of comparative ignorance in matters of science, and for a climate to which a different mode of living is suited from that necessary for our cold and variable climate, I humbly think and believe that there is nothing in my suggestions which can be distasteful to the most Catholic-minded amongst us.

It is our lot to hold our treasure in earthen vessels: surely it becomes us to pay close attention to the state and condition of those receptacles which are not only the conservatories of our spirits here—and in which the Holy Ghost deigns to dwell—but which are destined to be fashioned like unto the glorious body of our Blessed Saviour, and to dwell in his presence for ever.

Believe me,

My dear friend,

Yours very faithfully,

London,

June, 1848.