



Fasting and Prayer

FASTING AND PRAYER

By Penn Clark

Jesus approached prayer in such a non-religious way that He stood in contrast to the Pharisees of His day. He took such obvious pleasure in being with the Father that one of His disciples asked Him to teach them to pray: *“Lord, teach us to pray, as John also taught his disciples”* (Luke 11:1).

I doubt the disciples would have done this unless it looked attractive to them.

Jesus didn't pray because there was a law that said He had to. In fact, you cannot find a commandment in the New Testament that tells us that we must pray “or else.” You can look for it, but you won't find it because it's not there. We don't pray to get God to like us, protect us, or provide for us. We pray because we desire His company. We desire His company because Jesus did.

While there is no commandment to pray in the New Testament, Christians were often enjoined to pray. Here are a few examples of this:

Then He spoke a parable to them, that men always ought to pray and not lose heart.
(Luke 18:1)

Pray without ceasing, in everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. (1 Thessalonians 5:17-18)

I desire therefore that the men pray everywhere, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and doubting. (1 Timothy 2:8)

So, we are encouraged to pray and to keep on praying. I can honestly say along with Paul that I pray without ceasing. I can say this, not because of some slavish prayer list I keep, but because I remember to pray for those I have committed to pray for whenever they come to mind. When the remembrance comes, I thank the Lord for it, believing it was He who brought it. This gratitude always releases a fresh desire to pray. I do this for needs as well as for people. I also do it when my beloved enemies come to mind, blessing them the way Jesus taught us.

Notice how the connection between remembrance and desire intersect in Paul's prayers for Timothy:

I thank God, whom I serve with a pure conscience, as my forefathers did, as without ceasing I remember you in my prayers night and day, 4 greatly desiring to see you, being mindful of your tears, that I may be filled with joy, 5 when I call to remembrance the genuine faith that is in you, which dwelt first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice, and I am persuaded is in you also. (2 Timothy 1:3-5)

ASK HIM ANYTHING

One thing I noticed about Jesus' relationship with the disciples is that whenever they asked Him a question, He never ignored them or put them off. He always answered their questions. When I first saw this, I began asking Him a lot more questions. Over these forty-plus years of asking Him questions, I cannot recall one question that He has failed to answer. All I had to learn is not to tell Him when or how to answer. Once I ask Him a question, I leave it up to Him to get the answer to me. He can use many ways to get the answer across to me, such as a sermon in church or on the phone; He can bring a Bible verse to my attention or put a book in my hand.

I noticed, however, that if I asked Him a question and He answered me through a certain book, then the next time I needed an answer, I would look for a book by that author. If He spoke to me through a podcast, I have a tendency to find another where He might speak to me again. If He used a prophet to answer my questions, then I would begin looking to prophets instead of looking to Jesus. He will not go along with this. He wants a real relationship with His disciples. He doesn't want to just be a vending machine where we put something in and get something out.

Jesus says, in essence, "Don't look to the means by which I answer your questions, look to Me and I'll speak to you. These questions may be mysteries for other people, but not for you. I'll always answer. It's part of our student-teacher relationship."

Jesus' discipleship program was also a school of relevant revelation, and His disciples could ask Him anything. We still can, and should, as this is an essential part of our prayer life. While I thank Him for the earthly teachers He has used, I need to rely upon Him first and foremost.

REASONS TO PRAY

When we pray, we should expect a reward, as Jesus taught in Matthew 6:5-8:

"And when you pray, you shall not be like the hypocrites. For they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the corners of the streets, that they may be seen by men. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward. But you, when you pray, go into your room, and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly. And when you pray do not use vain repetitions as the heathen do. For they think that they will be heard for their many words. Therefore do not be like them. For your Father knows the things you have need of before you ask Him."

We should pray because it's part of warfare:

And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God; praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit,

being watchful to this end with all perseverance and supplication for all the saints. (Ephesians 6:17-18)

We should desire to do it because it's the best way to deal with worry and the stresses of life:

Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. (Philippians 4:6-7)

We should do it so we can be on alert to what He is saying and doing:

Continue earnestly in prayer, being vigilant in it with thanksgiving. (Colossians 4:2)

Concerning prayer, as with all these disciplines, there is no "cruise control". In other words, you cannot get into the perfect rhythm of prayer, and then lock it in so it always stays that way. What is more "normal" or typical is having periods of great times in prayer, then not having such great times, and then having to try to find a great time all over again.

Praying comes out of relationship, not religion. Because of this, there is no formula or routine to follow. We must be disciplined in pursuing it, but even that must flow out of what He is currently doing in our lives. For me, I constantly ask the Lord to renew my desire, stoke my fire, and give me fresh incentives to pray. It is like a fire that needs to be continually fed and stoked if it's going to keep burning.

COMMITTED TO FASTING

Jesus was committed to fasting and taught His disciples how to fast. John the Baptist fasted often, which caused his disciples to want to do the same. The Pharisees fasted at least twice a week, so their disciples did the same. This illustrates the idea that disciples need to do what their masters (teachers) do, in order to become what they became.

The scribes and Pharisees noticed that Jesus' disciples didn't fast like they did. They asked Jesus about this, "*Why do the disciples of John fast often and make prayers, and likewise those of the Pharisees, but Yours eat and drink?*" (Luke 5:33)

Even the disciples of John were a bit miffed by their apparent lack of discipline. They also came to Jesus and asked,

"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.”
(Matthew 9:14-15)

Jesus explained that it was simply a timing issue, not a lack of willingness on their part. Discerning the right season to fast isn't always easy, even for disciples today, but He told His disciples that the time would come when they would fast.

The second thing Jesus addressed was the reason His disciples should fast. For Him, having the right motive was everything. Perhaps the fact that the disciples of John and the Pharisees were upset at His disciples revealed something about their motivation. Legalism always condemns others for not doing what the legalists feel obligated to do. They were essentially saying, “If we *have* to do this, then you should have to do it as well.”

Anytime we approach the disciplines as a commandment, it can lead to self-righteousness or legalism as expressed by the Pharisee in Luke 18:11-13:

The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, “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.” And the tax collector, standing afar off, would not so much as raise his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, “God, be merciful to me a sinner!”

Fasting can become a slippery slope unless it remains within the framework of grace. We don't *have* to do it; we *get* to do it. If you approach it this way, you will be so excited about fasting that you will be preparing for the next fast while you are finishing your current one. If you don't have a passion for it, it's likely you don't understand it or understand the great benefits from doing it. You will need to ask Jesus to teach you what motivated Him to fast so often and with such freedom.

REWARDS FOR FASTING

As with all the other disciplines, Jesus taught there were rewards for fasting. These rewards help stimulate our desire:

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 when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face so that you do not appear unto men to fast, but unto your Father, which is done in secret: and your Father which sees in secret shall reward you openly. (Matthew 6:16-18)

He pointed out that some people fasted so they would appear spiritual to others. That was the reward they were seeking, and Jesus said that was the reward they would get, as hollow as this is. They somehow knew fasting could lead to a deep sense of spirituality. The

fact is, Jesus and John the Baptist both fasted extensively and had developed a deep spirituality, so there is a connection between the two. However, the hypocrites were satisfied with the “appearance of spirituality.” It fueled their desire. Their motivation to fast had become hijacked by their flesh, which always longs for the applause and approval of men.

Jesus taught there was something higher, something more satisfying, something truly worth mastering this discipline for—*the approval and honor of the Father*. That was what moved Jesus to fast. He did it to enter into the Father’s pleasure, which is a beautiful motivation for fasting.

PREDETERMINE YOUR OBJECTIVES

It works best if you start a fast with a predetermined goal in mind. Take time beforehand to consider how long you will fast. Will it be one meal, one day, a week, several weeks, or forty days? Will it be a complete foodless fast with only water and juices, or a partial fast consisting of only certain kinds of food? Once you have chosen what to do, stick with it. Then, when you are tempted to eat something, compare it to the reward you are expecting. When tempted to break a fast, I often tell myself, “I can eat that anytime, but I want this thing more!”

According to what Jesus taught in Matthew 6:16-18, you can predetermine the reward you want for fasting. Doing this before you start will help ensure your desire to fast is stronger than your desire to eat. What is the reward you want? Here are some suggestions:

- To take control of your flesh.
- To come into personal revival.
- To receive specific guidance.
- To increase your sensitivity to the Holy Spirit.
- To break a habit or persistent sin.
- To see provision for someone else in need.

Another biblical reason for fasting is that it humbles our flesh. Psalm 35:13-14 says, “*I humbled myself with fasting.*” That’s possibly the best reason to fast. Remember, God gives grace to the humble, so another reason to humble yourself through fasting is to receive more grace.

Our spirit man is in our blood. Fasting effects our blood in a positive way, making it clean and lean, which directly improves our spiritual lives. It also can improve our over-all health. I once heard a testimony of one farmer who got his coat caught in the tines of a manure spreader. It ripped through his skin and opened up his abdomen, mixing manure with the content of his intestines. This would have normally killed a man, but this farmer fasted with regularity. His body was able to fight off infection, along with the help of antibiotics, helped him recover. The doctors said that the habit of fasting was a key factor in saving his life.

KEEPING YOUR FASTING A SECRET

As far as it is possible, keep your objectives between you and the Lord. The only exceptions I make are when I invite people to fast with me, or to let someone know I am standing with them in their trial.

Jesus taught that we should do our fasting for our Father's eyes only, or risk losing the reward we are fasting for (Matthew 6:16-18).

When He taught this, He was warning the disciples that if they fasted like the Pharisees did, drawing attention to themselves by looking thin and gaunt, sad and sanctified, they would not receive any benefit from their fast other than the applause of those who like this kind of hypocrisy.

This warning about having the right motivation for these disciplines has caused some sincere people to take this concept to an extreme in the other direction by being secretive or strangely vague about their fasting, refusing even to mention that they are fasting at all. This practice has inadvertently drawn even more attention to themselves.

Is it wrong to talk about our experience with fasting? Is it wrong to let others know we are fasting? While Jesus taught this concept, He told His disciples about how He had fasted forty days in the wilderness. Otherwise, how would they have known about this period of His life? He was completely alone in the wilderness, right? He must have told them as they walked and talked together.

How do we know that John the Baptist fasted often? He lived a life of continual fasting by limiting himself to eating only locusts and honey. Others must have observed this, or he must have shared details about it with others, right?

How do we know that Paul fasted and prayed often? Because he talked about it in 2 Corinthians 6:5 and 2 Corinthians 11:27.

For that matter, how do we know that Moses fasted water and food for eighty days? How do we know Daniel fasted for twenty-one days? They told others and wrote about it themselves.

There is a time and place to talk about our experiences with fasting, but motives matter. If we do it to draw attention to ourselves, we could lose the approval of the Father. If it is a matter of teaching, training, leading others into it or helping them understand how to do it and how it works, then we are allowed to do so without the risk of forfeiting favor, rewards, or benefits. It is also considerate to let people know that you will be fasting, so they can plan meals accordingly.

The same principle applies to praying and giving. How do we know that Cornelius the centurion, had been praying and giving alms? Because the Bible tells us (Acts 10:1-4). How do we know Jesus prayed often and was inclined to give to the poor? Because we are told about it (John 13:29).

Let's be mature Christians and keep out of the ditches on both sides of the road. Amen! To recap, Jesus taught that we should be careful about telling people that we are fasting, so we don't lose our reward in the process. This helps prevent our flesh from hijacking the fast. It is all right to let people know that you plan to miss some meals out of consideration for those who are preparing the food. I don't think it violates what Jesus taught to let people know that I am not eating with them for a reason. I keep it simple and discreet, without drawing undue attention to the fact that I am fasting. When I lead our church into a time of fasting, it requires that I communicate more about why and when I am fasting. If I keep my motives right, I am free to do this without any fear of losing my reward.

REASONS TO FAST

When we fast in secret, God will reward us openly. What are these rewards? I don't think there are any limits on this. However, God never rewards selfishness. It would be best to choose a reward that would benefit the lives of those around you, which springs from the desire to give.

- Fast so your family can come into what God has for them.
- Fast so you become more sensitive in the Spirit, helping you minister to others more effectively.
- Fast so you can break bondages or habits in your life or in the lives of those you care for.
- Fast so you build your life around eternal priorities rather than the dictates of your flesh.
- Fast so you have better health, allowing you to serve the Lord more effectively.
- Fast so you can experience the promises found in Isaiah 58

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Q. Why do I feel sad during a fast?

A. Some people say they feel sad or down when they fast, which can be harder on our souls than not eating. These feelings are part of it and can actually be a good thing if you use them to draw closer to the Lord. It may be the kind of mourning the Lord was talking about through Joel in Joel 2:12- 13:

"Now, therefore," says the Lord, "Turn to Me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning. So rend your heart, and not your garments; return to the Lord your God, for He is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness; and He relents from doing harm."

Fasting is also a good time to turn to the Lord and repent of anything that comes to mind.

Q. Why do I feel so weak when I fast?

A. Fasting makes me feel weak on a number of levels, which is not something I naturally prefer, but I'm beginning to see the spiritual benefits of it. Rather than resisting and resenting it, I am learning to embrace it. If I use it right it can lead me to be more dependent upon Him, needier, and more sensitive in spirit. All of this can result in more power and grace. Perhaps this is why John the Baptist fasted often and intentionally limited himself to eating locusts and honey, even though he had a "congregation" of millions. What if he had become addicted to a weakened condition that attracts God?

Q. What to do during the fast?

A. During your fast, decide what physical or social activities you need to restrict. For example, I recommend that you stay away from television during the fast. (The commercials alone can work against you) It would be good to restrict how much time you will spend with friends and how much strenuous labor you will do.

Fasting television, your phone, or the internet will help you become more sensitive to what the Spirit wants to do in and through you.

How much time each day will you devote to prayer and exposing your heart to God's Word? This puts you in a place where God can speak to you. If possible, take a break from the routine of your day and spend more time before the Lord. You will get more out of it if you combine fasting with prayer.

Q. What to drink during the fast?

A. Your body is likely used to three mealtimes a day. You can satisfy it by drinking water or a little juice. This stops the hunger pains and gives a natural sugar stimulus that can strengthen you as you fast. I have found that pure coconut water is the best thing to drink when I need a boost of energy. Drinks that contain more acid and sugar (orange juice and soda) will be harder on your system.

I also continue drinking moderate amounts of coffee or tea. My body is used to having these each day, and I don't want to be fighting a headache along with all the other distractions I will face. My thinking is, *Let's handle one battle at a time.*

Q. What is the best way to break a fast?

A. Breaking your fast can affect your physical and spiritual well-being. If, for some reason, you cannot keep your original commitment, you may have to deal with some condemnation or disappointment with yourself. To reduce this, begin talking to the Lord about your intentions and the reasons for stopping. Just be honest with Him. Realize that any attempt to fast is still worthwhile and will bear fruit.

Don't break your fast by eating all the foods you were tempted to eat while you were fasting. It is best to break a fast with something simple like toast and eggs or oatmeal. Soups are also a good way to re-introduce food to your system. It is always better to start with smaller portions and gradually add a few snacks throughout the day. If you eat rich or heavy foods immediately, you may experience a gastric reaction. Even worse, you might lose all the spiritual sensitivity you gained. Avoid sugary foods like candy and desserts during this time. By ending your fast gradually, you can continue to experience the benefits of self-control.

CHANGING APPETITES

One of the things fasting does is help change our appetites. It is possible, to re-write the desire scripts that drive our lives, whether it is food, entertainment, or sex. The key to doing this is abstinence. Our flesh takes good things to an extreme, but by saying no to this lower nature, by abstaining, you are taking control away from it.

Part of your motivation for fasting should be to substitute food, or whatever you are fasting, for something else. For example, you can fast food and replace it with eating God's word.

Job discovered the words that came out of God's mouth were more fulfilling than the food he put in his:

"My foot hath held his steps, his way have I kept, and not declined. Neither have I gone back from the commandment of his lips; I have esteemed the words of his mouth more than my necessary food." (Job 23:11-12)

Have you found this to be true in your own life?

"I have not refused His commandments but have enjoyed them more than my daily food." (Job 23:11-12, taken from Today's Living Bible)

David found His words to be sweeter than honey:

"How sweet are thy words unto my taste! Yea, sweeter than honey to my mouth!" (Psalms 119:103)

David went on to say that he actually loved God's word. At the time, he only had access to the first five books of the Bible. I can understand someone loving Genesis and Exodus, but he was talking about loving Leviticus, Deuteronomy, and Numbers.

Do you love what you find in these books of the Bible?

"Consider how I love Your precepts; Revive me, O Lord, according to Your lovingkindness." (Psalm 119:159)

He used a word for love the same way we use this word when we say we love a good hamburger. He even loved the precepts of God, which are the regulations or mandates that bring order to our lives.

Jeremiah said that he found that eating God's word brought joy and rejoicing to his heart:

"Thy words were found, and I did eat them; and thy word was unto me the joy and rejoicing of mine heart..." (Jeremiah 15:16)

The priority is to live not just by what we put in our mouths, but by what comes out of His: "So He humbled you, allowed you to hunger, and fed you with manna which you did not know nor did your fathers know, that He might make you know that man shall not live by bread alone; but man lives by every word that proceeds from the mouth of the Lord." (Deuteronomy 8:3)

Whenever we seem to be lacking something we need, or are used to having, there is a word for us in it, which is more needful than just having our need met. It can change our lives. We need to take our eyes off what we want long enough to see what He would say to us.

Jesus embraced the concept contained in this verse to such an extent that He went on a forty- day fast — in the desert — alone, without food or drink. When the devil tempted Him, He used this verse to stand against him. The enemy tried to get Him to break this fast by getting Him to meet His own need:

"Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. And when He had fasted forty days and forty nights, afterward He was hungry."

Now when the tempter came to Him, he said, "If You are the Son of God, command that these stones become bread." But He answered and said, "It is written, 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.'" (Matthew 4:1-4)

An appetite for God's word can be cultivated just like any other appetite:

"Therefore, putting aside all malice and all guile and hypocrisy and envy and all slander, like newborn babes long for the pure milk of the Word that by it you may grow in respect to salvation if you have tasted the kindness of the Lord." (1 Peter 2:1-3)

Have you ever tasted the kindness of God? What does it taste like?

FASTING CHALLENGE

Sometimes the only way to break a habit is to go on a fast. It can be a powerful way to break off the influences of both demons and the pull of our flesh.

The Bible says things like fasting "chastens our flesh" or "humbles our flesh". Both are often needed to break the power our flesh has gained over our spiritual lives. The Psalmist said, "*I humbled myself with fasting...*" (Psalms 35:13-14). Remember, God gives grace to the humble. If you need more grace right now, then I would suggest you begin by fasting for three full days. Then over the next few weeks, try a twenty-four hour fast once a week, or a daily sixteen-hour fast, which involves not eating after dinner and missing breakfast.

I also suggest you go on a media fast, like television, movies and magazines, social media, digital games -- anything that has taken control over your life. If you are a news-junkie, you will need to cut back to reading only the headlines for a while. This will help you become more sensitive spiritually, allowing you to hear from the Lord and begin to feel His presence again. "*Now the king went to his palace and spent the night fasting; and no musicians were brought before him. Also his sleep went from him.*" Daniel 6:18) The musicians were the nightly "entertainment" of kings, so it was something he fasted.

I suggest you write out what you want to accomplish by fasting – becoming clean, godly, more spiritually fit and free – whatever it is, you will need to set it before you whenever you are tempted to give yourself to your flesh. Simply compare the food you are craving to the desire you have set before you, and it will help you stay on course. Another thing that will strengthen your desire to fast is to read stories from the Bible of how someone fasted and had a breakthrough.

Take time beforehand to consider how you will fast. Will it be one meal a day, or no food over several weeks? Will it be a complete foodless fast with only water, or a partial fast, abstaining from certain foods?

I suggest you give up all sugar – energy drinks, soda, processed food, during this time. If you are going to eat, keep it simple, like hearty soups – which provide something for the soul as well. You will find that you will feel better and have more energy to give yourself to this challenge. All of this will add much needed discipline to your life.

During your fast, restrict what physical or social activities you will participate in. It would be good to restrict how much time you will spend with friends and how much strenuous labor you will do.

I recommend that you put yourself in a place where God can speak to you, like exposing your heart to God's Word or reading a good book that contains vision. If possible, take a break from your previous routines and spend more time talking aloud with the Lord.

QUICK TIPS ABOUT FASTING

At the beginning of the fast, try to read a story from the Bible that illustrates how someone fasted and had a breakthrough that benefited others. This will stoke your desire to fast.

- The typical Jewish fast was from one evening meal to the next. This is the easiest way to fast.
- Perhaps the most beneficial short fast may be starting after dinner one day, not eating all the next day, then breaking the fast with breakfast the following day.
- Drink moderately so you are not filling yourself up with liquids. If all you are doing is trying to make yourself feel, then you may be missing the point of fasting.
- The fast is not just from the food itself but from the comfort our soul gets from eating.
- If you have too many sweet beverages, gum, or candy, it will be harder to fast. Sugar can stimulate your appetite.
- I still drink coffee when I fast, but you will have to see how it affects you.
- Usually, by the second day of fasting, you find you are not hungry at all.
- You will get the hungriest around dinnertime. It may not be hunger, but simply that you are struggling with the force of habit. Once you get over this, it will be easier to fast.
- You will need the support and cooperation of your spouse. It may help you to tell him or her your objectives for fasting so he or she can help you achieve them.

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