

LESSON 5

PRAYER AND FASTING

IN THIS LESSON

Learning: What is the point of prayer and fasting?

Growing: How do I know if God is calling me to spend time in fasting?

Our motivation as believers in Christ is always to express love—love for God and for others. Our behavior must never be rooted in pride or displayed so we draw attention to ourselves. Jesus made this clear in the Sermon on the Mount in regard to three particular areas of Christian behavior: almsgiving, prayer, and fasting (see Matthew 6:5–8, 16–18).

In a previous lesson, we discussed two examples of prayer—Elijah’s prayer before the prophets of Baal and Jehoshaphat’s prayer before the people of Israel. In those two examples, the leaders openly expressed their faith and trust in God alone. These men represent bold examples of giving public witness through prayer—and a bold witness through prayer can only be made if it is the outgrowth of countless hours of private and personal prayer.

God desires to know us best. He is a jealous God who insists on being the foremost object of our affection and loyalty. When we pray, we are invited to disclose our innermost thoughts, feelings, and desires to Him alone. Sharing our secrets and desires in this manner results in a relationship with God. As we share, we open ourselves up to His healing, guiding, and comforting power and presence. In contrast, public displays of prayer performed primarily to draw attention to oneself do nothing to further a relationship with the Lord God.

Jesus said, “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” (Matthew 6:5). Jesus said the same for public displays of fasting: “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” (verse 16).

Such open displays bring attention solely to the person and not to God. The purpose of prayer and fasting is not that others might applaud us but that we might be changed and transformed. The Bible has repeated references to this “secret” nature of our relationship with God. This does not mean we are to deny our relationship with God or keep our witness for Christ under wraps. Rather, our relationship with God is to be intimate. It is intensely personal and private. When we have a deep relationship with the Lord, we can then speak and act publicly as He directs.

1. “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” (Matthew 6:6). Why would some people want to be seen praying in public? What would be their motivation? Their “reward”?
2. “When you pray, do not use vain repetitions as the heathen do. For they think that they will be heard for their many words” (Matthew 6:7). What are “vain repetitions” in prayer? Why are Christians to avoid such types of prayer?

THE PURPOSE OF PRAYER AND FASTING

The Word of God, our faith, praise, the name of Jesus, and the blood of Jesus are all weapons in our spiritual warfare against evil. Yet prayer and fasting are two of our *foremost* weapons in our battle against Satan. For this reason, we must be sure to use these weapons correctly.

First, we must not use prayer and fasting to avoid doing God’s will. Some people turn to prayer and fasting as a substitute for obedient action. They think they can convince themselves (and God) that they are being obedient by praying and fasting about a situation, when in reality they are avoiding the business that God has called them to do.

Second, we must not think prayer and fasting are a substitute for repenting of sin. Some people think they can continue to sin if they balance it with a proper amount of prayer and fasting. Only the shed blood of Jesus Christ can provide atonement for sin. Prayer and fasting might strengthen our ability to turn away from sin and not give in to temptation, but they are not an antidote or a compensation for sin.

The real purpose for fasting is to bring the body and soul into subjection so that in prayer we can be focused solely on God and His plans and purposes for our lives. Each of us has natural desires and appetites that are a part of our creation. These are to be satisfied in proper ways according to God's commandments so the fulfillment of our desires and appetites brings about good to our bodies and souls.

For example, we have an appetite for food, which is to be exercised within the boundaries of good nutrition and moderation. We have a desire for beauty, which is to be satisfied in purity. We have an appetite for sex, which is to be satisfied within the bounds of a marriage covenant. We have an appetite for sleep, which is to be met for the purposes of rejuvenation, not as an escape from life's responsibilities.

However, there are times when God asks us to set aside these natural appetites and concentrate on the spiritual dimension of our being. True fasting goes beyond skipping a meal or denying food for a period of time. It is a denial of all natural human appetites so we might concentrate solely on the Lord and what He wants to say to us. God may call us to a time of fasting and prayer to reveal an area of our lives that needs to be changed, to express His desires (and perhaps even a new direction for our lives), or to direct us to intercede for others.

The ultimate purpose for fasting and prayer rests with God. When we fast, submitting all of our normal life patterns to Him, He has our full attention and can mold us completely and totally for His purposes. When we are in this spiritual state, God can guide our prayers like arrows to accomplish His will. He can then do the real transforming work in our inner spirit that causes us to speak and act more like Jesus Christ.

3. "He changes the times and the seasons; He removes kings and raises up kings; He gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to those who have understanding. He reveals deep and secret things" (Daniel 2:21-22). What sort of "deep and secret things" has the Lord revealed through prayer in your own life?

4. Why does God give wisdom to the wise, rather than to the foolish? Why does He give knowledge to those who have understanding, rather than to the ignorant?

INITIAL BENEFITS OF FASTING AND PRAYER

God's call to fasting and prayer is always for our benefit. The Bible points out at least seven benefits of fasting and prayer. *First, our attitudes and thoughts are pruned and purified so God might entrust us with a greater ministry.* By fasting and praying, we become more disciplined toward the things of the Father. We yield ourselves fully to Him. We give Him opportunity to cut away those things that will slow us down or keep us from the plans that He has for our lives.

Jesus fasted and prayed for forty days in the wilderness and was perfected for ministry (see Matthew 4:1–2, 11). Queen Esther fasted and prayed for three days and was stripped of the fear that kept her from telling the king about the plot against her people (see Esther 4:15–16). As we likewise confront the devil, using the Word of God as our weapon, we are made stronger. We know we have had a showdown with the enemy. We know the power of God's Word to defeat the enemy. We know that God is preparing us for His purposes.

Second, we are able to discern more clearly the will of God for our lives. Fasting clears our spiritual eyes and ears so we can discern what God desires to reveal. If you are facing a major decision, I strongly encourage you to go away for three days of fasting and prayer. Spend your time in the Word of God. Rein in your attention so that you are totally focused on the things of God. Listen intently to what God desires to say to you. He will reveal what to do.

Daniel found this to be true. He was greatly troubled over the sin of Israel, but he set his face toward the God “to make request by prayer and supplications, with fasting, sackcloth, and ashes” (Daniel 9:3). While he was praying, the angel Gabriel came to him “to give [him] skill to understand’ ” (verse 22). God may not send an angel to tell you His will for your life, but He will give you understanding. He will speak to your innermost spirit by the Holy Spirit concerning what action you are to take. He will reveal all you need to know so you can perform His will.

Third, we are confronted with our sins so we might confess them to God, receive forgiveness, and walk in righteousness. There may be an area in your life that you just can't change. Many

times these habits are broken as you fast and pray. At other times, the Lord reveals something in your life that you need to confront and correct. You may not have been aware of it before, but as the Lord reveals it, you can respond immediately, “Lord, please forgive me of this and change me so I will not behave or think this way in the future.” Fasting and prayer purify us as we face the temptations that have kept us entangled in sin.

5. “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 . . . the devil left Him, and behold, angels came and ministered to Him” (Matthew 4:1–2, 11). Why did Jesus fast for forty days? How might this have prepared Him for the temptations of the devil?

6. Note that Jesus’ fasting did not drive away the devil. In fact, He was severely tempted while fasting. How did Jesus resist Satan? What does this teach about our fasting?

FURTHER BENEFITS OF FASTING AND PRAYING

A fourth benefit of fasting and prayers is that we experience a release of supernatural power in our lives. The outcome of genuine fasting and prayer is spiritual growth, including a renewed outpouring of supernatural power. Furthermore, certain problems and situations cannot be resolved apart from fasting and prayer (see 2 Corinthians 10:4).

As Paul and Barnabas traveled in ministry, they made many disciples in Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch. They exhorted the disciples to continue in the faith, appointed elders in every church, “prayed with fasting,” and “commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed” (Acts 14:22–23). The purpose of this prayer and fasting was to release supernatural power into the lives of the believers so that they might remain true to the Lord and endure any kind of tribulation. Likewise, prayer and fasting will strengthen us against the temptations of the enemy so we can endure any trouble that comes our way.

Fifth, we can make an effect on national issues. We have already noted how Jehoshaphat called the people of Israel to fasting and prayer. At the conclusion of Jehoshaphat's prayer, the Lord spoke through a prophet with the plan they were to follow. The battle plan was amazing—send out the choir before the soldiers (see 2 Chronicles 20:18–23). The plan worked, and it brought all the glory to God. As we fast and pray for our nation, God will move. He will pour out His Spirit, in His ways and in His timing. We can count on it.

Sixth, we can help buildup God's people. Prayer is the generator of the church. It gives power to its ministers, propels outreach to the lost, and creates a climate in which evangelistic efforts succeed. Nehemiah heard about the plight of his people and the destruction of the walls of Jerusalem, and he “sat down and wept, and mourned for many days . . . fasting and praying before the God of heaven” (Nehemiah 1:4). As we hear of believers who are being persecuted, or are falling into sin, or are becoming lukewarm in the faith, we need to fast and pray that God will strengthen His people to withstand the enemy. God will answer our prayers.

Seventh, our minds are sharpened. When we fast and pray, our minds are quickened so we understand the Scriptures as never before. We are sensitive to God's timing and direction with an increased ability to discern. We are keenly aware of what God desires to accomplish in our lives and in the lives of others around us. When we fast and pray, the pollutants are removed so we can move freely in the flow of God's Holy Spirit.

7. “The weapons of our warfare are not carnal but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ” (2 Corinthians 10:4–5). What are “the weapons of our warfare”?

8. What does it mean that our weapons “cast down arguments” and “bring every thought into captivity”? Give real-life examples.

FOLLOW UP WITH ACTION

Fasting and prayer are to be followed up with action. In the story of Esther, she had to confront Haman in the presence of the king. In the book of Acts, we read how Cornelius—after fasting and praying—took the message of the gospel to the Gentiles (see Acts 10:30). The result of fasting in Paul’s life was increased missionary service (see 2 Corinthians 6:5 and 11:27).

In the book of Isaiah, we read how God clearly called His people to action. The people asked God, “Why have we fasted . . . and You have not seen?” The Lord responded, “In fact, in the day of your fast you find pleasure, and exploit all your laborers. Indeed you fast for strife and debate, and to strike with the fist of wickedness” (58:3–4). God pointed out the people’s motives were wrong and they were using fasting as a substitute for right action. He said, “Is this not the fast that I have chosen: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, to let the oppressed go free, and that you break every yoke?” (verse 6).

God will reveal through fasting and prayer something you are to do. It may be a change in a behavior or a call to a new behavior. Look for specific next-step actions that God has for you as you emerge from a time of fasting and prayer. He has a plan for you to fulfill.

9. What does it mean to “loose the bonds of wickedness,” “undo heavy burdens,” “let the oppressed go free,” and “break every yoke”? Give practical examples.

10. How can prayer and fasting accomplish these things? [Your Response Here]

TODAY AND TOMORROW

Today: Times of prayer and fasting help me clear my spiritual vision and purify my life.

Tomorrow: I will ask the Lord to show me when He wants me to spend time in fasting and prayer.

CLOSING PRAYER

Father, we thank You for giving us the examples of fasting and praying that we find throughout the Scriptures. Help us to commit ourselves to begin to fast, pray, and seek Your face. Move us to confess and repent of our sins so that You may be able to use each and every one of us to our fullest potential. We pray that together—in small groups, as the body of Christ, and as whole nations—that through us You may demonstrate Your supernatural power. We want the lost to know that You are alive, that You are God, that You are sovereign, and that everything is under Your perfect control.

NOTES AND PRAYER REQUESTS

Use this space to write any key points, questions, or prayer requests from this week's study.