

Lesson 8—On Fasting and Prayer

Fasting and prayer, especially fasting, evoke all kinds of responses, and a lot of them are negative ones. To Jesus, however, these two disciplines are simply regular matter-of-fact aspects of Christian discipleship. Indeed, they are privileges which can release great blessing.

And as we will see, fasting is another spiritual discipline that releases great blessing. Furthermore, Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount, placed fasting in as normal and regular a practice as giving and praying. Unfortunately, we're often far from that. But fasting is necessary at times to move the supernatural world and give us closer communion with God.

Let's keep these things in mind as we look at what the synoptic Gospels teach about fasting and prayer.

JESUS' PRAYER LIFE

Much of our understanding about prayer in the Synoptics comes from what Jesus models. Luke particularly is interested in Jesus' prayer life, clearly intimating in 22:39 that prayer was one of Jesus' customs, along with Sabbath day worship (Luke 4:16).

According to Luke 3:21, what attends "the heavens [being] opened" to Jesus at His baptism?

According to Luke 5:15–16, how does Jesus handle the temptation to become a popular miracle worker and the stress of pressing duties?

According to Luke 6:12–13, what does Jesus do before choosing key men to be future leaders of His work?

According to Luke 9:18–20, what does Jesus do prior to asking His disciples to give their perspective about His identity?

According to Luke 9:28–29, what is Jesus doing when He is transfigured?

According to Luke 11:1, what effect does Jesus' prayer life have on His disciples?

According to Luke 22:39–46, how does Jesus deal with the overwhelming realization of His impending death?

According to Luke 23:46, Jesus dies doing what?

Jesus prayed before decisions and crises. What can be surmised from this?

Luke also tells us that Jesus prayed for Peter (22:31) and for His enemies (23:34). On at least four occasions, Luke notes that Jesus exhorted His disciples to pray. Read the following passages and note what they are told to pray for.

Luke 6:28

Luke 11:2

Luke 22:40, 46

The temptation (Luke 22:40) which Jesus mentions probably refers to what He had just said (Luke 22:28–38). Prayer will enable them to remain firm amidst the trials awaiting them.

In Matthew 6:5, Jesus warns against what type of prayer? (see Mark 12:38–40)

What should be our motive when we pray? (Matt. 6:6)

WORD WEALTH

Pray, *proseuchomai*. “The word is progressive. Starting with the noun, *euche*, which is a prayer to God that also includes making a vow, the word expands to the verb *euchomai*, a special term describing an invocation, request, or entreaty. Adding *pros*, ‘in the direction of’ (God), *proseuchomai* becomes the most frequent word for prayer.”

Not only does Jesus model prayer and call His disciples to practice it; He gives instruction as well, as is seen in two of His more well-known parables, “The Friend at Midnight” (Luke 11:5–13) and “The Widow and the Judge” (Luke 18:1–8), and in the Lord’s Prayer (Matt. 6:7–15).

THE FRIEND AT MIDNIGHT

Read Luke 11:5–13 and note the following. What is the situation of the arriving friend and why doesn’t the person inside want to answer the request? (vv. 5–7)

Why does the man within finally answer the request? (v. 8)

WORD WEALTH

Persistence, *anaideia*, literally means “shamelessness, importunity, or over-boldness.” It describes a type of brassiness. “It isn’t the brassiness of a smart aleck making demands, but the forwardness of a person who is so taken with an awareness of need that he abandons normal protocol. Jesus is saying, ‘Your first barrier isn’t God, it’s your own hesitance to ask freely. You need to learn the kind of boldness that isn’t afraid to ask—whatever the need or the circumstance.’”

Jesus follows this somewhat humorous parable about importunity with direct instruction on what is involved (vv. 9–10), as well as a reminder of the willing nature of the Father we are addressing (vv. 11–13). What is Jesus’ instruction? (v. 9)

What must we understand in order to ask, seek, and knock effectively? (v. 10)

WORD WEALTH

Aitein [to ask] refers to the act of praying where the will is earnestly fixed on the answering of the prayer. So the desire is not merely a vague or halfhearted one. ***Zetein*** means “to seek with the object of finding or obtaining.” So this includes faithful prayer and all other exertion directed towards the purpose of obtaining the things for which the prayer is offered. While confidently awaiting God’s answer, the one who prays must also

from his side do everything that is necessary. *Krouein*, “to knock,” refers to the urgent sincerity exercised in praying and seeking. All three verbs refer to the continuous, uninterrupted act.

What more can be learned about “asking” from Matthew 18:18–20; 20:21–22, John 14:12–14, and Ephesians 3:20–21? What more can be learned about “seeking” from Matthew 6:33, John 5:30, and Colossians 3:1?

What do we learn in Luke 11:11–13 (see Matt. 7:9–11) about the Fatherhood of God to help us pray?

THE WIDOW AND THE JUDGE

Read Luke 18:1–8 and note the following. What is Jesus’ purpose in teaching this parable? (v. 1)

What is the nature of the judge? (vv. 2, 4) What is the widow doing? (vv. 3, 5)

Why does the judge avenge her? (v. 5)

WORD WEALTH

Weary, *hupopiadzo*, literally means “to strike under the eye; to give a black eye to.” The idea is that in her continued coming to the judge she will somehow socially defame him for refusing to grant her request. It is really a selfishly motivated response of the judge’s, not one of compassion.

How does Jesus apply the parable to our prayer life? (vv. 6–8)

THE LORD’S PRAYER

Pastor Jack Hayford says, “It’s the most prayed prayer in the world: the Lord’s Prayer, we call it. Some challenge that designation, saying, ‘It’s the disciples’ prayer—He gave it to them, told them to pray it.’ But He is the one who taught it. He is the one who breathed its depth of insight.”

The prayer (with slight variations) is recorded in Matthew 6 and Luke 11. In Matthew, it is part of the Sermon on the Mount dealing with a disciple’s motives in religious responsibilities (6:1–18; see “Religious

Practices” in chapter 7). In Luke (11:1–4), it is presented in answer to the request, “Lord, teach us to pray” (v. 1).

In Luke, Jesus introduces the prayer by saying, “When you pray, say ...” (v. 2). In Matthew, He introduces it by saying, “In this manner ... pray ...” (v. 9). This implies that Jesus intended it to be prayed both literally (Luke) and in principle (Matthew).

Read Matthew 6:7–15 and note the following. Because God will not be manipulated through repeated, maybe even magical, phrases, what is Jesus’ warning? (v. 7; see Mark 12:38–40)

WORD WEALTH

Vain repetitions, *battalogo*, has the idea of babbling by repeating meaningless syllables uttered mechanically without thought. The heathen rather than the hypocrites (vv. 5, 16) are referred to because, as R. T. France notes, “prayer in the non-Jewish world was often characterized particularly by formal invocation and magical incantations, in which the correct repetition counted rather than the worshipper’s attitude or intention.” Why does the disciple not have to pray empty phrases? (v. 8)

For prayer to be effective, what must we understand about God? (v. 9)

New Testament prayer is based on understanding the nature of the Father and our relationship to Him. “Father” (Greek, *pater*) is equivalent to the Aramaic word, *abba*, an affectionate and intimate term children used to address their earthly fathers. It emphasizes our intimate relationship with God. “In heaven” emphasizes His transcendence. “As Father, God is concerned for the needs of His children; as the One in heaven, He is all-powerful.”

The prayer proper (vv. 9–13) consists of seven petitions, each one establishing a principle around which effective prayer is built. The first three petitions are “You” petitions addressed to God. They concern His glory and purposes. The final four are “We” petitions, emphasizing the disciples’ present needs. Read these verses and note the petition and the principles they establish.

Petition #1 (v. 9)

“Hallowed be” (Greek, *hagiadzo*) is a petition for God to reveal Himself and His purposes (“Your name”) in history, especially among those before whom it has been profaned (see Ezek. 36:23). Inherent in the petition is an expression of committed worship, the petitioner making himself available to the Father through righteous living and availability to His service.

Petition #2 (v. 10)

The kingdom as taught and demonstrated by Jesus brings God’s sovereign rulership in Jesus into our lives and situations now. It is also a petition that it ultimately come in consummation. This specifies how God will hallow His name.

Petition #3 (v. 10)

This is somewhat synonymous with petition #2, which is perhaps why it is missing in Luke's account (Luke 11:2). Its distinction from the previous petition lies in its implied request of the petitioner to live the kingdom ethics necessary to advance kingdom purposes. Hagner notes that "there is a sense in which the first three petitions of the prayer are also a prayer that the disciples will be faithful to their calling, that they will do their part (in obedience), not to bring the kingdom but to manifest its prophetic presence through Jesus and the Spirit."

Petition #4 (v. 11)

The significance of this petition is contested among scholars, primarily because the Greek word translated "daily" (*epiousion*) is obscure. Most are in agreement, however, that it is a petition for God to supply the day-to-day necessities of life, with the realization that the provision is itself a blessing from heaven. Pastor Hayford comments that "the most important thing about this is not the discovery that we can ask for God's help in the mundane matters of our personal lives. The most important thing is that we are told to [ask].... Back-to-back with prayer that the Almighty's will be worked on earth, we should not overlook the simplest matters of life."

Petition #5 (v. 12)

"Debts" (Greek, *opheilemata*) is from the Aramaic concept of sin as a debt owed to God. It refers to our failures and shortcomings before Him (see Luke's "sins" [11:4]). Jesus explains the matter of forgiving our debtors in verses 14–15.

Petition #6 (v. 13)

This is also a difficult petition because of the ambiguity of a Greek word, *peirasmos*, translated here as "temptation." Should it be rendered "temptation" or "testing"? Both are legitimate renderings of the Greek, yet both have their own difficulties because of other scriptures (1 Cor. 10:13; James 1:2–3, 13). We will reserve judgment until we look at the final petition.

Petition #7 (v. 13)

The conjunction "but," here, presupposes we will face the difficulties defined as *peirasmos* in petition #6, and that "the evil one" will want to take advantage of those difficulties to bring destructive ends. Thus, as to the meaning of *peirasmos* in petition #6, note the following explanation by Hayford: "What we have here [v. 13] is a special facet of prayer which Jesus taught; one which cannot be understood apart from linking it with the last part of the sentence [v. 13]. The two work in tandem: 'Don't bring us in, but bring us out!'"

"The spirit of the text argues that we understand the Lord's instruction as a summons to maturity. He is saying, 'When you pray, acknowledge that the Father isn't your problem when temptation assails you, but that He is your protector.'"

Assuming the traditional ending of the prayer is to be retained (most scholars agree the textual evidence in its favor is weak [see Luke 11:4]), how does the prayer close? (v. 13)

Matthew 6:14–15 (see Mark 11:25) is not part of the prayer. It is an elaboration of the fifth petition (v. 12), stating that principle positively (v. 14) and negatively (v. 15). What is the point? (see Matt. 18:23–35)

FAITH AND PRAYER

James is quite clear about faith and prayer. “Let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for he who doubts is like a wave of the sea driven and tossed by the wind. For let not that man suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord” (1:6–7). Jesus’ teachings on prayer in the Synoptics reflect this same truth. “And whatever things you ask in prayer, believing, you will receive” (Matt. 21:22). Let’s examine a couple of passages on the role of faith in prayer.

WORD WEALTH

Faith, *pistis*, means “conviction, confidence, trust, belief, reliance, trustworthiness, and persuasion. In the New Testament setting, *pistis* is the divinely implanted principle of inward confidence, assurance, trust, and reliance in God and all that He says.” With specific reference to prayer, faith is a relationship of practical trust with the One to whom you are praying. This trust stems from understanding both the nature and will of God.

HAVE FAITH IN GOD

In Mark 11:12–14, Jesus curses a fig tree and it withers. “The fig tree is used here to designate Israel of Jesus’ time, whose religious system and heritage appeared to hold promise of satisfaction. So the curse extended not only to the tree but also to the nation of Israel, an enacted parable, showing the judgment that was to come upon Israel’s false profession.” Jesus does not interpret the significance of the event itself; instead, He uses it to teach a lesson on releasing heaven’s resources into life’s situations. Read Mark 11:20–24.

What prompts Jesus’ teaching on faith and prayer? (v. 21)

What is Jesus’ immediate response? (v. 22)

How does Jesus illustrate the point He has just made? (v. 23)

“Mountain” here symbolizes any type of great difficulty or hindrance (see Zech. 4:7).
What is Jesus’ conclusion? (v. 24)

God is always ready to respond to resolute faith that demonstrates itself in prayer (see Is. 65:24). The following quote summarizes the importance of Jesus' teaching here: "From Jesus' own lips we receive the most direct and practical instruction concerning our exercise of faith. Consider three points: (1) It is to be 'in God.' Faith that speaks is first faith that seeks. The Almighty One is the Source and Grounds of our faith and being. Faith only flows *to* Him because of the faithfulness that flows *from* Him. (2) Faith is not a trick performed with our lips, but a spoken expression that springs from the conviction of our hearts. The idea that faith's confession is a 'formula' for getting things from God is unbiblical. But the fact that the faith in our hearts is to be spoken, and thereby become active and effective toward specific results, is taught here by the Lord Jesus. (3) Jesus' words 'whatever things' apply this principle to every aspect of our lives. The only restrictions are (a) that our faith be 'in God' our living Father and in alignment with His will and word; and (b) that we 'believe'—not doubting in our hearts. Thus, 'speaking to the mountain' is not a vain or superstitious exercise or indulgence in humanistic mind-science, but instead becomes an applied release of God's creative word of promise."

PRAYER AND THE DEMONIC

Of the many "mountains" encountered in prayer, confrontation with the demonic is perhaps the most poignant. Demons, or unclean spirits, move in Satan's authority. Hence, encounters with them are in fact encounters with Satan and his power. (See "Releasing the Demonized" in chapter 4.) From one such encounter, Matthew 17:14–21, we learn how to pray when dealing with the demonic and what hinders effective prayer. Read this passage and note the following.

Describe the situation. (vv. 14–15)

Why is this man asking Jesus' help? (v. 16)

What is Jesus' initial response? (v. 17)

Jesus' response indicates that the disciples' failure here is to some degree symbolic of the entire nation of Israel in her failure to respond to His messianic mission (see Matt. 12:38–45; Deut. 32:5, 20).

How does Jesus deal with the demon? (v. 18)

WORD WEALTH

Rebuked, *epitimaō*, can also be translated "subdued." According to Robert Guelich, *epitimaō* "has a technical meaning coming from the underlying Hebrew word *ga'ar*, meaning a commanding word 'uttered by God or by his spokesman, by which evil powers are brought into submission.' "

When the demonic is involved, a disciple's "prayer" is to be that of speaking directly to the unclean spirit to cease activity and depart. This is possible because disciples are delegated agents of God's kingdom.

Though representative on one hand of the larger picture (v. 17), the disciples have a unique problem that prevents the exorcism. What is it? (v. 20)

A distinction needs to be made between Jesus' accusation in Matthew 17:17 and Matthew 17:20. In verse 17, the problem is a failing to accept the kingdom reign of God through Jesus, His Messiah (see Mark 6:6). In verse 20, the problem is the disciples' little or underdeveloped faith. It does not mean outright unbelief or distrust, but faith that is not sufficiently developed to deal with the situation at hand (see Matt. 6:30; 8:26; 14:31; 16:8). We might term it "immature faith," requiring more understanding and experience to mature.

BINDING AND LOOSING

Throughout our study we have emphasized certain responsibilities and privileges of Christ's disciples. Another such authoritative privilege is that which Jesus terms binding and loosing on earth (Matt. 16:19). This authority is exercised to a large extent through prayer. Jesus teaches this principle in conjunction with a key confession of His messiahship. Read Matthew 16:13–20 and note the following.

Who makes the significant confession? (v. 16)

What is Jesus' response to the confession? (v. 17)

What does Jesus say He will build upon this confession? (v. 18)

What does He promise His church? (v. 18)

"The expression *gates of Hades* means 'the power of death' cannot prevent the advance of the kingdom, nor claim victory over those who belong to God."

What is given to His church as a weapon against the power of death? (v. 19)

"I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven" is like saying, "I will hand over to you delegated authority or control to minister kingdom power as I would."

How is this delegated authority to be exercised? (v. 19)

What application does verse 19 have to individual believers as they face life's daily problems?

“The implications of this significant verse are diverse and need to be understood. *Keys* denote authority. Jesus is passing on to His church His authority or control to *bind* and to *loose on earth*. *Will be bound* and *will be loosed* indicate that Jesus is the One who has activated the provisions through His Cross; the church is then charged with implementation of what He has released through His life, death, and resurrection.

“Clearly rabbinic in imagery, binding and loosing have to do with forbidding or permitting. In other words, Jesus is stating that the church will be empowered to continue in the privileged responsibility of leavening the earth with His kingdom power and provision. For example, if someone is bound by sin, the church can ‘loose’ him by preaching the provision of freedom from sin in Jesus Christ (Rom. 6:14). If someone is indwelt by a demon, the church can ‘bind’ the demon by commanding its departure (Acts 16:18), realizing that Jesus alone made this provision possible (Matt. 12:29). How the church binds and looses is diverse and would most certainly extend far beyond the mere use of these terms in prayerful petitions.”

Matthew 18:15–20 may be an application of this authority in matters of church discipline.

ON FASTING

Fasting is “going without food or drink voluntarily, generally for religious purposes. Fasting, however, could also be done for other reasons. It was sometimes done as a sign of distress, grief, or repentance.” Prayer is to accompany fasting. In the Synoptics, we find Anna (Luke 2:37), John the Baptist and his disciples (Mark 2:18), the Pharisees (Matt. 9:14), and Jesus (Matt. 4:2) fasting. For Jesus, it is a given that His disciples will practice this discipline (Matt. 6:16); however, as with other spiritual disciplines, He must give careful instruction.

MOTIVE AND FASTING

Jesus’ final teaching in His triad on proper kingdom motives for religious disciplines (Matt. 6:1–18) deals with fasting (vv. 16–18). As with acts of mercy or kindness and prayer, so with fasting: the disciple’s motive is of paramount importance.

Read Matthew 6:16–18 and note the following. What is Jesus’ prohibition to His disciples? (v. 16)

What is the hypocrites’ motive in disfiguring their faces? (v. 16)

“Disfigure” (Greek, *aphavidzo*) likely refers to making the face dirty with ashes. This was accompanied by a generally disheveled appearance to attract attention to a personal fast.

What is Jesus’ command to His disciples? (v. 17) Why does He so command? (v. 18)

Hagner notes that “In view here is a special instance of grooming (see 2 Sam. 12:20; Eccl. 9:8) and personal enjoyment, a sign of happiness that was forbidden on fast days. Jesus thus exhorts even an extra measure of care to one’s appearance, so that it could not give the slightest hint that one was fasting.”

WHEN TO FAST

During Jesus’ time with His disciples, they did not fast regularly, and this concerned John the Baptist’s disciples who fasted often. Read Matthew 9:14–17 and note why Jesus did not have His disciples fasting during His earthly ministry.

What reason does Jesus give for not having His disciples practice fasting? (v. 15)

Will this always be the case for His followers? (v. 15; see Acts 13:2–3; 14:23; and 1 Cor. 7:5 for the practice of fasting in the early church.)

What reason does Jesus give for this change from standard Jewish practice? (vv. 16–17)

PROBING THE DEPTHS

Reasonable Jewish piety called for fasting on the Day of Atonement (see [Lev. 16:29–31](#)) and on the anniversaries of the many destructions of Jerusalem. The Pharisees of Jesus’ day went far beyond this general practice with twice-a-week personal fasts. Their fasts were primarily designed to “try to get God” to bring about the messianic promises. Because His kingdom had already come (at least in part), Jesus radically changed the focus of fasting.

As Hagner explains, “All conduct is to be judged on the basis of [Jesus] and his teaching. There is accordingly something fundamentally incompatible between fasting and the joy of the kingdom. If fasting is conceived of as a lamenting or grieving over God’s failure to act, if it is thought of as a way to hasten the coming of the Messiah, if it is thought of as a way of gaining God’s favor, it is contradictory to what the gospel signifies. The Christian is not a person characterized by sorrow, sackcloth, and ashes, laments and fasting, but a person of joy who has experienced grace and fulfillment. There is a place for ... fasting, but it [is] very different in nature from that practiced by the disciples of John and the Pharisees. It must be fasting within the larger framework of the fulfillment and joy of the kingdom already present in the Church. Fasting in this case will be a spiritual discipline practiced with prayer, for such purposes as sharpening one’s focus or deepening one’s experience.”

Although some scholars disagree (1) whether [Matthew 17:21](#) was part of the original Greek manuscript or was added later by the church, and (2) whether “and fasting” should be added to the end of [Mark 9:29](#), there is strong textual evidence that both are legitimate (especially the Mark ending). What does Jesus teach in these verses about the role of fasting in dealing with certain demonic activity?

FAITH ALIVE

What has impacted you the most in this chapter?

Are there two or three areas in which you've gained new understanding or been reminded of something you've forgotten? If so, what changes do you see yourself making to practice these truths?

Realizing that understanding and practicing prayer usually cycles from discipline to duty to delight, where would you say you are on the continuum?

If fasting is not a regular discipline, could it be because you have not yet experienced the profound release and victory that this New Testament discipline brings in the lives of those who practice it?

Hayford, Jack W.: *His Name Is Jesus : Life and Power in the Master's Ministry. A Study of Matthew, Mark and Luke.*
Nashville : Thomas Nelson, 1997, c1995 (Spirit-Filled Life Bible Discovery Guides)