



Shaping the Heart

Spiritual Formation & the Christian Life

"Prayer, in its most basic form, is the surging of the human spirit in its weakness, grasping at the Spirit of God in His strength." Ravi Zacharias

When You Pray, Remember...

1. Prayer is fundamentally an expression of our dependence upon God.
2. Our purpose in prayer is to glorify God by seeing him actively accomplish his will here on earth. God, not self, must be the focus of all our prayers and it is his will and not our own that we must pursue.
3. Submission is an essential ingredient in Jesus' prayer life and should be in ours as well.
4. Emphasize a growing love for others and look for God's movement in the lives of our brothers and sisters. When we do, our prayers will naturally overflow with thankfulness.
5. Ask God to work in and through circumstances, rather than merely change them.
6. God is more interested in us than in what we want and he occasionally denies our requests so that his glory and our good will be optimal. Embrace this.

Preparing to Meet God

Sometimes the effectiveness of our prayer can be impacted negatively by inadequate preparation. So, preparing to meet God is vitally important.

- According to **2 Chron. 7:14-15** what must we do to have an effective prayer life?
- Does God always answer prayer? Are there any conditions for answered prayer? Read **Is 1:15-16; Ps 66:18-20; Jn 9:31**.
- What does **Zech 7:8-13** teach us about the consequences for ignoring God?
- Peter gives a clear warning to husbands about the relationship between their wives and their prayer lives (**1 Pt 3:7**). "No Christian husband should presume to think that any spiritual good will be accomplished by his life without an effective ministry of prayer. And no husband may expect an effective prayer life unless he lives with his wife in an understanding way, bestowing honor on her" (Wayne Grudem).

Jesus' Prayer Life

Our Lord prayed privately, publicly, earnestly, repeatedly, submissively, and expectantly. Jesus prayed...

- *alone with the Father and away from distraction.* **Lk 5:16**, "But Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed."
- *during his inauguration into ministry.* **Lk 3:21**, "When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too. And as he was praying, heaven was opened."
- *before he made an important decision.* **Lk 6:12-13**, "Jesus went out to a mountainside to pray, and spent the night praying to God. When morning came, he called his disciples to him and chose twelve of them."
- *when others were present and about to witness a miracle.* **Jn 11:41-43**, "Then Jesus looked up and said, 'Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me.' When he had said this, Jesus called in a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come out!'"
- *during his greatest need.* See **Mt 26:36-44; Heb 5:7**.
 1. His deep anguish and grief drove him to prayer, rather than to despair or anger.
 2. Knowing His life was about to end he turned to prayer, alone with the Father.
 3. He prayed in total submission to the Father.
 4. He prayed repeatedly (three times for the same thing).



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5. Jesus entreats his followers to pray for victory of spirit over the flesh. Prayer is often the best weapon to defeat the evil one who uses the flesh as his battle ground (cf., Eph. 6:18).

Jesus taught us to pray confidently and expectantly. Read **Mk 11:24**; **Lk 11:9-10**; **Jn 16:23**.

The Prayers of Paul

When reading through the prayers of Paul, we get a sense that his prayers are very different from the way we often pray. Read the following passages from Paul's letters: **Eph 1:15-23**; **3:14-21**; **Philip 1:9-11**; **Col 1:3-14**; **1 Thess 3:9-13**; **2 Thess 1:11-12**.

- In **Eph 1:15-23**, after offering thanksgiving to God for his work of salvation (vv. 15-16), Paul prays for two things (vv. 17-19):
 1. *That we might know God more intimately and personally.* The implicit idea here is that unless God gives us a spirit of wisdom and revelation, it's impossible to know him better. We come to God on his terms by his means in order to accomplish his ends. This kind of knowledge cannot be gained by merely reading your Bible or being involved in Christian ministry. It can only be gained through fervent prayer.
 2. *That we would have special insight into* a) the hope of our calling, b) the riches of God's inheritance granted to us, and c) the power to live for God's glory.

*To Consider: The same power that raised Christ in victory over death and sin lives within us and is unleashed through prayer! The same power that raised Christ from the dead and exalted Him to the heavens is readily on display in our lives **when we pray!***

Fasting

To Consider: "Christians in a gluttonous, denial-less, self-indulgent society may struggle to accept and to begin the practice of fasting. Few Disciplines go so radically against the flesh and the mainstream of culture as this one." Don Whitney

The Function of Fasting

Fasting is the voluntary and temporary abstinence from food and/or drink for the purpose of seeking God's will. In Scripture, it is most often a close associate of prayer. The pangs of hunger serve as reminders that we are a needy people. Fasting often reveals far more than just our dependence upon food; it can reveal other things that control us, which might be eliminated or perhaps better moderated.

Abstaining from food and/or drink causes us to realize that our souls have an appetite for something that food and drink cannot satisfy. "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God" (**Mt 4:4**). Therefore, fasting is really *feasting* on God. In fasting the relationship to our bodies changes as our physical longings are redirected toward God, thus making our bodies servants rather than masters (**1 Cor 6:12-13**; **9:27**).

Like all the spiritual disciplines, fasting has collateral benefit. In fasting we learn self-denial and temperance, which are virtues that carry over into other parts of our lives. Thomas à Kempis said, "Refrain from gluttony and thou shalt the more easily restrain all the inclinations of the flesh." Dallas Willard suggests, "Since food has the



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pervasive place it does in our lives, the effects of fasting will be diffused throughout our personality" (*The Spirit of the Disciplines*, p. 167).

Jesus gives no command for how long or how often to fast, but he seems to assume it is a normal part of spiritual formation, just as prayer and giving are ("When you fast..." **Mt 6:16, 17**; "When you pray..." **Mt 6:5**; "When you give..." **Mt 6:3**).

What Are the Benefits of Fasting?

- *Fasting can strengthen prayer*: Ezra called on everyone to fast before setting out on the 900-mile journey back to Jerusalem after the Jewish exile (**Ezra 8:21-23**; see also **Neh 1:4** and **Dan 9:3**; **Lk 2:37**). Esther calls on the entire nation of exiled Jews to fast (synonymous with prayer) on her behalf as she approached the pagan king Xerxes to plead for their lives (**Est 4:16**).
- *Fasting expresses confession and repentance*: Israel showed genuine contrition by fasting (**1 Sam 7:6**). Through the prophet Joel, God commands that his people demonstrate their repentance by fasting (**Joel 2:12**). After Jonah preaches to Nineveh, they show signs of repentance by fasting (**Jonah 3:5-10**).
- *Fasting strengthens us for ministry*: Jesus refused to succumb to temptation, but persevered in fasting to gain spiritual strength for ministry (**Mt 4:1-11**). Just as God's provision of manna in the desert was sufficient physical strength, so too is God's provision of inner strength during the desert experience of our fast. Daniel engaged in a partial fast for gaining strength to resist the lures of a pagan culture (**Dan 1:8-15**). Before commissioning Paul for his first missionary journey, the church fasted to demonstrate a sense of urgency in ministry, both for discerning God's will and executing it (**Acts 13:2-3**; see also **14:23**). Fasting is a way of "putting your stomach where your mouth is," or showing seriousness in advancing God's kingdom. When spiritual strength is gained from fasting, we are equipped for victory in ministry.
- *Fasting is a needed antithesis to the celebratory practice of feasting*. In feasting we rightly celebrate the good things of this world and all the blessings God has given for our enjoyment (see 1 Tim 6:17). In fasting we focus on repentance, confession, mourning, and our longing for the Day of the Lord. In feasting we affirm the world that God has made for us. In fasting we look with eyes of faith for the world to come (Heb 11:16). Whereas feasting connects us with our present, fasting connects us with our future. Both help us maintain a balance in our spiritual formation.

Suggested Guidelines for Fasting

- There is no biblical mandate to fast with any prescribed frequency. While the New Testament may assume regular fasting (two days / week), it is not prescribed as a necessary devotional habit. That said, it is not wrong to build fasting into our habits; only we must not insist others do likewise.
- Regular or periodic fasting should take into account one's health needs. A consult with your medical professional would be wise before engaging in any fasting practice.
- If one chooses to fast more than one day per week, the additional days to fast should be staggered between days of feasting (i.e., fasting consecutive days is not recommended).
- A "one-off" fasting exercise for a specific purpose while seeking God's will or to complete confession and repentance is appropriate, keeping in mind the additional guidelines offered here.