

Prayer and Fasting: Why is it Important?

This morning, I want to spend our time together looking at two spiritual disciplines which have become increasingly more important to me, especially since returning to the pulpit in January. And, as we look at the spiritual disciplines of prayer and fasting, I hope you will also discover a new passion for including them in your daily life. One of the things I quickly realized during my sabbatical was just how desperate I had become in my relationship with Jesus. I had been teaching, preaching, and pastoring for some time, but I had not focused on my own personal walk with God. This meant I was relying solely on my own strengths and abilities to get the job done. That was not good for me and especially not good for all of you. After all, part of my role as pastor is to lead by example, by following the example. What I have found is the more I speak with God, the more I speak with Jesus, the more I speak with the Holy Spirit, the closer I get to them. I also found that adding fasting for spiritual purposes had a profound effect on my understanding of how God was transforming me. When I fasted, I was forced to rely on God for my needs. Whether it was hunger, or thirst, or the need for community, fasting allowed me to clear my mind and heart and replace all those things with His power.

Billy Graham believed every believer needed to include daily prayer into their disciplines of faith. Otherwise, they stood powerless and desperate. He viewed prayer as a “declaration of dependence” which allows us to deny self and fully trust God.

Thomas Tarrants, President Emeritus of the C.S. Lewis Institute, suggests that Christians who want a deeper relationship with God or who face particularly demanding situations or crisis moments should add fasting along with their prayers. He believes God instituted fasting as an obedient act which helps us seek Him more earnestly. God told us as much through the prophet Jeremiah. Many of you will be familiar with His words from **Jeremiah 29:11-13**. *“For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope. Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will hear you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.”* God told the exiles in Babylon that if they prayed to Him, He would hear them. If they sought after Him with all their heart (earnestly), they would find Him. How many of you need to find God and hear from Him today? I know I do.

According to prominent research services such as Barna, Belief Net, and Lifeway, most practicing Christians in America no longer see prayer and fasting as valuable. This includes many pastors. Barna research shows that 95% of pastors admit to not praying daily. 98% of pastors also admit they have never fasted for spiritual purposes. When I began researching this topic, I must admit, I was a bit shocked. And we wonder why pastors are walking away from their calls at an alarming rate. They have already walked away from their relationship with God. These same studies show that 90% of professional Christians admit to not having a daily prayer time. 98% do not fast. Of these American Christians, including pastors, when they pray, only 3% pray longer than 10 minutes.

I reached my own conclusions when I read these numbers. Perhaps people no longer see value in prayer because they no longer value their relationship with God. Perhaps they get disappointed when God doesn't answer their prayers in a manner they hoped for. Maybe, praying is just too time consuming. Maybe people just have more pride than they realize. Maybe spending time talking to someone who doesn't audibly respond gets boring. What I think it really comes down to is most people simply no longer pray because they just don't feel like it.

I also think many of these attitudes hold true for fasting. Perhaps people see no value in fasting because they think it's pointless, or it's too difficult, or since it's not commanded of us by God, then why bother? Perhaps Christians do not fast because they have never been taught about its spiritual significance. I can assure you of this, Jesus thought it important!

Having said all these things, I want you to know that I am concerned for my own mind and heart about these disciplines. Concerned enough that I have made some changes to improve in these areas. While I have gotten better, I still have a long way to go. I also want you to know I am concerned not only for us here at Mt Freedom, but for other churches as well. The statistics show that Christians are rapidly forgetting about God, and that should concern us.

Throughout the Bible, God often asks people to pray, but why should we? The simple answer to this is God has commanded us to pray. Consider these examples:

- *“Pray for those who persecute you”* -Matthew 5:44
- *“And when you pray ...”* -Matthew 6:5
- *“Pray then like this ...”* -Matthew 6:9
- *“Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer.”* -Romans 12:12
- *“do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.”* -Philippians 4:6
- *“Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving.”* -Colossians 4:2
- *“Pray without ceasing.”* -1 Thessalonians 5:17

When we acknowledge these commands and pray, God sees these moments as acts of obedience and as you know, He will bless those who are obedient. **Deuteronomy 6:24-25** reminds us of this promise. *“And the LORD commanded us to do all these statutes, to fear the LORD our God, for our good always, that he might preserve us alive, as we are this day. And it will be righteousness for us, if we are careful to do all this commandment before the LORD our God, as he has commanded us.”* If you want to experience the fulness of God in your life, then prayer stands as one of the most important disciplines you need in your life.

Likewise, even though fasting is not commanded by God, its practice is shown for us throughout the Bible as well.

- Moses fasted from food and water in two back-to-back fasts, lasting a total of eighty days while he was meeting with God on Mt. Sinai and receiving divine revelation (Exod. 34:28; Deut. 9:9–10:10).

- Daniel took part in a partial fast for twenty-one days, at the end of which God gave him revelation into important aspects of Israel's future (Dan. 10).
- Hannah was barren, heartbroken, and desperate for a child. She sought God in prayer and fasting, and He answered her with the birth of Samuel, one of the great leaders of the Old Testament (1 Sam. 1:1–20).
- Jesus fasted for forty days in preparation for His public ministry and for the ability to overcome the devil's temptations (Matt. 4:1–11).
- Jesus expected His followers to fast (Matt. 9:14–15) and said that if they did so with proper motives, God would see and reward them (Matt. 6:16–18), just as He rewards those who pray with proper motives (Matt. 6:5–6).

Read Matthew 6:5-8 and then 6:16-18.

If you include regular prayer and fasting as part of your relationship with Jesus, I can honestly attest that you will not regret it. God is faithful, He is just, and He always fulfills His promises. Especially for those who are closest to Him.