

## Seminar 5: Prayer & Fasting

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Core Seminar: Spiritual Disciplines / Fasting; Prayer

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The **Spiritual Disciplines** are those personal and corporate disciplines that promote spiritual growth. They are the habits of devotion and experiential Christianity practiced by the people of God since biblical times.

### Introduction

From Genesis 4, when the sons of Seth began to call upon the Lord, to John's prayer on the Island of Patmos when he cries out "Even so, come, Lord Jesus." This is a book filled with stories of those crying out to God and God hearing and answering prayer.

### What is Prayer?

When D. L. Moody, the great American evangelist, was in Edinburgh in the 1880's, he was asked one morning to speak to a room filled with children. In order to get their attention, he began with a question. He asked them, "What is prayer?" Now he didn't really expect an answer -- he was going to answer this question himself -- but to his astonishment, hands shot up all over the room. He called on one young boy to give the answer, and the boy stood up and said in a strong voice: "Prayer is an offering up of our desires unto God for things agreeable to his will, in the name of Christ, with confession of our sins and thankful acknowledgment of his mercies." Moody's response was, "Thank God, my boy, that you were born in Scotland!"

## **Prayer is personal communication with God.** (we should all have a definition)

What we call “prayer” includes requests for ourselves or others (petitions and intercession), confession of sin, adoration, praise and thanksgiving, and the Holy Spirit guiding us to His response.

### **Why does God want us to Pray?**

1. Prayer expresses our trust in God and is a means whereby our trust in Him can increase.

a. It is not so He can find out what we need. [Matthew 6:8](#) “8 Be not ye therefore like unto them: for your Father knoweth what things ye have need of, before ye ask him.”

b. Primary emphasis in prayer in faith. [James 5:14-16](#), [Matthew 21:22](#) “22 And all things, whatsoever ye shall ask in prayer, believing, ye shall receive.”

c. First words of the Lord’s Prayer acknowledge dependence on God as a loving and wise Father.

2. Prayer brings us into deeper fellowship with Him.

3. God allows us as creatures to be involved in eternally important activities.

a. Failure to ask deprives us of what God has for us. [James 4:2](#) “2 Ye lust, and have not: ye kill, and desire to have, and cannot obtain: ye fight and war, yet ye have not, because ye ask not.”

b. Only possible through our mediator, Jesus Christ. [Heb 10:22](#). We can come in His name. [John 14:13-14](#)

# In what manner should we pray?

[Ephesians 6:18](#) “18 Praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, and watching thereunto with all perseverance and supplication for all saints;”

## 1. In the Spirit

How does prayer in the Spirit occur? [Romans 8:26-27](#) “26 Likewise the Spirit also **helpeth our infirmities**: for **we know not what we should pray** for as we ought: but the Spirit itself maketh intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered. 27 And he that searcheth the hearts knoweth what is the mind of the Spirit, because he maketh intercession for the saints according to the will of God.”

True prayer is measured by weight, not by length. A single groan before God may have more fullness of prayer in it than a fine oration of great length.

**The Secret Of Power In Prayer**, Volume 34, Sermon #2002 - [John 15:7](#)

**Charles Spurgeon**

[Jude 20](#) “20 But ye, beloved, building up yourselves on your most holy faith, praying in the Holy Ghost,”

## 2. Praying always

Is continual prayer possible? Yes and no. [Acts 1:14](#) “14 These all continued with one accord in prayer and supplication, with the women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brethren.”

[1 Thessalonians 5:17](#) “17 Pray without ceasing.”

- Prayer called for here is not so much the articulation of words as the posture of the heart.
- Continual prayer is God’s will for every Christian, no exceptions. I can do it; you can do it.

### 3. All prayer

How can our prayers be varied? [1 Timothy 2:1](#) “1 I exhort therefore, that, first of all, supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks, be made for all men;”

Floyd Pierson, a retired Africa Inland Mission worker, was a man who literally prayed “on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests.” So habitual was this that in his seventies, when he went to take a driver’s test, he said to the examiner, “I always pray before I drive — Let’s bow our heads together.” The official likely wondered what kind of a ride he was in for! We can imagine him checking his seat belt and setting his perspiring hand on the door handle. Pierson passed!

### 4. All perseverance

How did Jesus encourage the disciples in this regard? [Mark 14:38](#) “38 Watch ye and pray, lest ye enter into temptation. The spirit truly is ready, but the flesh is weak.”

Men, do we pray with Scriptural persistence for our families? For the Church? Are there individuals, groups, causes, souls for which we hold up our hands in prayer? There ought to be, for God answers persistent prayer.

### 5. For all saints

Do you believe prayer can help you? [Ephesians 6:18–20](#) “18 Praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, and watching thereunto with all perseverance and supplication for all saints; 19 **And for me**, that utterance may be given unto me, that I may open my mouth boldly, to make known the mystery of the gospel, 20 For which I am an ambassador in bonds: that therein I may speak boldly, as I ought to speak.”

# What is Fasting?

## *Fasting in the New Testament*

1. Even in the NT, we still see Jewish religious practice, which involved fasting, continued:
  - The annual fast of the Day of Atonement [Acts 27:9](#)
  - The Pharisees fasted every Monday and Thursday [Luke 18:11-12](#)
  - Anna the prophetess, who prophesied over the infant Jesus at the Temple [Luke 2:36-37](#)
2. Jesus fasted [Matthew 4:1-4](#)
3. Jesus assumed His disciples did and would fast. [Matthew 6:16-18](#)
4. Acts: leaders of the church fast when choosing missionaries (13:2-3) and elders (14:23)
5. Paul twice refers to his “fastings,” in [2 Corinthians 6](#) & 11

**We found it continued through history.**

For a portion of **John Wesley's ministry, he advocated fasting on both Wednesday and Friday each week as a regular spiritual discipline.** It's well known that Wesley would not ordain anyone to the Methodist ministry who was unwilling to fast for those days.

*Let us beware of fancying that we merit anything of God by our fasting. We cannot be too often warned of this; inasmuch as a desire to establish our own righteousness, to procure salvation of debt and not of grace is too deeply rooted in all our hearts. - John Wesley*

Fasting is voluntary abstinence from physical nourishment—food and drink—for special spiritual purposes.

## Degrees of Abstinence

1. Normal Fast. [Acts 9:8–9](#), [Esther 4:15–16](#) “15 Then Esther bade them return Mordecai this answer, 16 Go, gather together all the Jews that are present in Shushan, and fast ye for me, and neither eat nor drink three days, night or day: I also and my maidens will fast likewise; and so will I go in unto the king, which is not according to the law: and if I perish, I perish.”

2. Partial Fast. [Daniel 1:12](#) “12 Prove thy servants, I beseech thee, ten days; and let them give us pulse to eat, and water to drink.”

## Number of Participants in the Fast

1. Private Fast [Matthew 6:17–18](#)

[Matthew 6:16–18](#) “16 Moreover when ye fast, be not, as the hypocrites, of a sad countenance: for they disfigure their faces, that they may appear unto men to fast. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward. 17 But thou, when thou fastest, anoint thine head, and wash thy face; 18 That thou appear not unto men to fast, but unto thy Father which is in secret: and thy Father, which seeth in secret, shall reward thee openly.”

There are a few more things to note in this passage. Christ gives us a negative command, a positive command, and a promise.

- Negative command: Don't look somber, like you're suffering.
- Positive command: No one should be able to tell you're fasting by your appearance. The only observer of your fast should be God.
- Promise: “And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.”

2. Small Group or Congregational Fast [Acts 13:1–3](#) “1 Now there were in the church that was at Antioch certain prophets and teachers; as Barnabas, and Simeon that was called Niger, and Lucius of Cyrene, and Manaen, which had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. 2 As they ministered to the Lord, and fasted, the Holy Ghost said, Separate me Barnabas and Saul for the work whereunto I have called them. 3 And when they had fasted and prayed, and laid their hands on them, they sent them away.”

## Length of Fast

1. Part of a day [Judges 20:26-28](#)
2. One day [Jeremiah 36:6](#)
3. Three days [Esther 4:1](#), [Acts 9:8-9](#)
6. Seven days [1 Samuel 31:13](#)
7. 21 days [Daniel 10:2-3](#)
8. 40 days [Deuteronomy 9:9](#), [1 Kings 19:8](#), [Matthew 4:1-2](#)).
9. Fasts with lengths not mentioned [Luke 2:37](#), [Acts 13:3](#)

## Frequency of Fasts

1. Regular Fast [Leviticus 16:29-31](#), [Luke 18:12](#)
2. Occasional Fast [Acts 9:8-9](#)
3. Continuous Fast [Matthew 3:4](#) “4 And the same John had his raiment of camel’s hair, and a leathern girdle about his loins; and his meat was locusts and wild honey.”

## Should Christians Today Fast?

Let us first consider how the Bible speaks about food. Food is spoken of as a good gift from God. [1 Timothy 4:3](#) “3 Forbidding to marry, and commanding to abstain from meats, which God hath created to be received with thanksgiving of them which believe and know the truth.”

Christian fasting, to be clear, is not asceticism (severe self-discipline) [Colossians 2:20-23](#)

Fasting is not to be a legalistic routine. It is a privilege and an opportunity to seek God’s grace.

[Matthew 9:14-15](#) “14 Then came to him the disciples of John, saying, Why do we and the Pharisees fast oft, but thy disciples fast not? 15 And Jesus said unto them, Can the children of the bridechamber mourn, as long as the bridegroom is with them? but the days will come, when the bridegroom shall be taken from them, and then shall they fast.”

Who is the bridegroom? When is He taken away from His disciples? Jesus means that He will return to his Father in heaven after his death and resurrection. During that time, the disciples will fast.

In this age there is an ache inside every Christian that Jesus is not here as fully and intimately and as powerfully and as gloriously as we want Him to be. We hunger for so much more. That is why we fast.

### **Reasons to Fast**

1. Fast to Strengthen Prayer [Ezra 8:21, 23](#)
2. Fast to Seek God’s Guidance [Judges 20:26-27a](#)
3. Fast to Seek Deliverance or Protection [2 Chronicles 20:2-4](#)
4. Fast to Express Grief [2 Samuel 1:11-12](#)
5. Fast to Express Repentance and a Return to Trust in God [Joel 2:12](#)
6. Fast to Humble Yourself Before God [1 Kings 21:27-29](#)
7. Fast to Express Concern for the Work of God [Daniel 9:2-3](#)
8. Fast to Minister to the Needs of Others [Isaiah 58:6-7](#)
9. Fast to Overcome Temptation and Dedicate Yourself to God
10. Fast to Express Love and to Worship God

### **Why is there no intercessor?**

[Isaiah 59:16](#) “16 And he saw that there was no man, and wondered that there was no intercessor: therefore his arm brought salvation unto him; and his righteousness, it sustained him.”