

Series: Conversations with God
Title: Prayer and Fasting
Text: Matthew 6:5-8; 16-18; Acts 4:13-31
Key Word: Reasons and Ways
Proposition: Everyone will understand the reasons to pray and fast, and practice this way to power.

Good morning everyone. My name is Chris Farmer. I thank God that I can serve as one of your pastors. We are thrilled that you have chosen to come and worship with us today. God is in this place. He is here to reveal His presence so that we can live the life God created us to live. As we express our love for God and others, we will encounter the Risen Christ who helps us grow to be like Him and to serve the world.

Like our conversations with people, Conversations with God move our encounters with the Holy from rewarding acquaintance to deepening friendship. Conversations with God heighten our gratitude for the courageous sacrifice of our deliverer. Paul encourages us to seize every opportunity to pray. In fact, he tells the Church, “to pray continually.” I am convinced that a praying church is a united church...a praying church is a thankful church...a praying church is a contagious church...a praying church is a growing church...a praying church is powerful church.

Jesus knew and taught about such holy conversations. Matthew tells us that one day he ascended to a hilltop and began to teach the crowds about the way of the kingdom of God. He said, “*When you pray, don’t be like the hypocrites who*

love to pray publicly on street corners and in the synagogues where everyone can see them. I tell you the truth that is all the reward they will ever get. But when you pray, go away by yourself, shut the door behind you, and pray to your Father in private. Then your Father, who sees everything, will reward you.

“When you pray, don’t babble on and on as people of other religions do. They think their prayers are answered merely by repeating their words again and again. Don’t be like them, for your Father knows exactly what you need even before you ask him!”

Then Jesus teaches a model for prayer that many call the “Lord’s Prayer.” Jesus continues his thought on prayer with these words: *“And when you fast, don’t make it obvious, as the hypocrites do, for they try to look miserable and disheveled so people will admire them for their fasting. I tell you the truth that is the only reward they will ever get. But when you fast, comb your hair and wash your face. Then no one will notice that you are fasting, except your Father, who knows what you do in private. And your Father, who sees everything, will reward you.”*

What is fasting? Fasting is simply the abstaining from, withholding from, doing without food for a specific time. It is clear that Jesus links prayer with fasting. Why did he make this connection? We know that Jesus prayed and fasted 40 days in the wilderness before he began fulfilling his purpose. Jesus and his

disciples periodically fasted especially during the Day of Atonement. We also know that Moses, Daniel, Elijah, Paul, and others prayed and fasted.

Jesus also expected his followers to pray and fast. Jesus told the crowd, “When you pray...When you fast.” He did not say, “If you pray....If you fast...” He did not say, “If you feel like praying...If you feel like fasting.” He assumes that his followers are praying and fasting. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, “*Jesus takes it for granted that his disciples will observe the pious custom of fasting. Strict exercise of self-control is an essential feature of the Christian's life.*”

For Jesus, prayer and fasting are like the right and left hand. Without one or the other, we are limited in what we could do. Each strengthens and balances the other. One takes hold of the power of God, the other lets go of the power the flesh. Missionary and author, Andrew Murray wrote, “*Prayer needs fasting for its full growth. Prayer is the one hand with which we grasp the invisible. Fasting is the other hand, the one with which we let go of the visible.*”

Some would say that prayer accompanied with fasting is for the super Christian, the Jesus’ freaks, the radical followers. They would say that prayer and fasting is not necessary for the ordinary Christian. In his book, The Rewards of Fasting, Mike Bickle wrote, “*Fasting is for the common, weak, frail, ordinary individual who realizes his or her lack and has a desperate need for more of God.*”

The Bible also reveals that prayer and fasting empowered God's people and the Church. If we were to name some of the great people of the Bible, many would lift up the name of Moses, Elijah, Peter, Esther, Mary the mother of Jesus, and Priscilla. A few may lift up Ezra, an unheralded priest and scribe. He focuses on God's promise that the Jews would return to their land. Ezra and the people traveled about 900 miles on foot through dangerous and difficult territory to reclaim the land God had promised. Then Ezra called them to pray and fast denying themselves before the Lord and seeking Him for a safe journey into the land God was calling them. With prayer and fasting, they proclaimed their dependency upon God's strength and power. Their prayer and fasting prepared them spiritually by showing their reliance upon God for protection and direction. They simply were not strong enough and not smart enough to make the trip without him. Friends, when we take God seriously enough, when we seek him, and sacrifice for him, when He is first place in any endeavor, we are fully prepared for whatever lies ahead.

Finally, prayer and fasting exposes healthy remorse. The book of Jonah tells his story where he tried to run away from God. God called him to do something he did not want to do. He learned though that he could not run and hide from God. God told him to go and proclaim a message of repentance to the Ninevites, for no one, no community; no nation is beyond God's favor and mercy.

However, Jonah did not like them, in fact, he hated them. He wanted judgment, not mercy. Eventually Jonah listened to God and spoke God's message to change their attitudes and ways. Then "*The people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth.*" (Jonah 3:5) They demonstrated healthy remorse for their sin.

Many are tempted not to take healthy remorse seriously unless they pray and fast. Many fail to discover God's complete deliverance because of insufficient genuine repentance. Because our repentance is shallow, our victory is shallow. Prayer and fasting though reveals the things that control us and sets us free from its paralyzing grip.

You see, we cover up what is inside of us with food and other pleasures, but in fasting these kinds of things come to the surface. The Lord has revealed to me through prayer and fasting, that fear can and often does control me. Now fear can be a healthy emotion when it protects us from dangerous situations and relationships. I am afraid of fire, I respect its power to harm and as well as its energy to consume things in its path. So, I avoid exposing my body and skin to its destructive power. But, unhealthy fear has kept me from taking necessary risks, from managing difficult relationships, and revealing my thoughts and ideas. Prayer and fasting invites me to healthy remorse, the threshold of God's complete healing and deliverance. I invite you, in the name of the Lord, I call us to pray

and fast as God moves us forward in our journey and go to a new place. In the name of the Lord, I call us to pray and fast so we may know what controls us; what has kept us in the wilderness and what has kept us from possessing the place God is calling us to possess.

So how do we pray and fast? Here are some ways. First, **Praise the Sovereign Holy God.** Acts 4 reveals that for the first time the early church was threatened with extinction. Peter and John are put in prison and commanded not to teach in the name of Jesus. The threats did not faze them because they knew where the real power was...and it was not in those religious leaders who thought they understood God's plan.

They did not go back to the brothers and plan a strategy session. They did not try to discover a loophole in the threats. They did not complain and point fingers at those who had threatened them. They did not choose to move their ministry to a safer place. They went back and called a prayer meeting!

They understood where the power was. Their priorities were in the right place. Rather than coming up with a plan, they prayed! Charles Spurgeon wrote, *"The condition of the church may be very accurately gauged by its prayer meetings. If God be near a church, it must pray. And if He be not there, one of the first tokens of His absence will be slothfulness (sluggishness) in prayer!"*

They began their prayers with an upward focus. They turned their attention away from the problems of the day and turned it toward the God, who is more than enough, who is bigger than any problem, larger than any national or international deficient. He is the great I AM, the Lord of lords and King of kings. He is Sovereign. Supreme. Almighty, Glorious God.

The question is do we want a Sovereign God or do we want a butler God. I wonder how many want a God who is ready to meet our every need when we want it. A.W. Tozer noted, *“Left to ourselves we tend immediately to reduce God to manageable terms. We want to get Him where we can use Him, or at least know where He is when we need Him. We want a God we can in some measure control.”*

Friends, we cannot control a Sovereign God. Our only response is to bow before Him. Whenever I see the vastness of a clear, starry night or the rising of the sun, or ponder the mysteries of science, or the love revealed at the cross, I am in awe of the Sovereign God who absorbs my problems and my sins into His Great love.

Such authentic worship compels us to realize how imperfect we are, so we apologize for how imperfect, fragile, impotent we are. We apologize for our sin. In the presence of a holy God, we see how our greed, our lusts, our pride, our fear, jealousy, our envy, destructive habits and addictions, and how they

contribute to the mess our world is in. So, we have nothing left to do but say...I apologize God for not only have I sinned against those whom I love and my neighbor, but also I have sinned against you. When we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us of all of sins and cleanse all our imperfections.

Turn away from all that controls you and toward your Deliverer. If you are struggling with any type of addiction...to drugs, alcohol, pornography, fear, control, pride, try prayer with fasting. Crucifying the most basic human appetite leads to victory in other areas. Disciplined prayer and fasting provides strength to resist life's temptations.

Hear and obey the Holy Spirit. Prayer energized by fasting feeds a burden for the things God desires. God desires that His church reach those far from Him. There is nothing more precious to God than those who do not know his love and power. Prayer and fasting brings them to Christ.

Bishop Bruce Ough of the West Ohio Conference challenges us to pray and fast for a heart for the lost. We can begin by committing to pray for one person or one family who is far from God.

Prayer and fasting is not a bribe to get God to pay more attention to our prayers. It is a way to ask God for help to choose to put everything aside and to focus on worship, confession, and making our requests known to Him. It is our

way of accepting our complete reliance upon His strength and love rather than our strength and love.

I am reminded of the story recorded in Acts 13, when the early church was worshipping the Lord and fasting. During this time, the Holy Spirit clearly spoke to them; telling them to set Barnabas and Paul for the work, He had called them to do. After they fasted and prayed, they laid hands on them and sent them off. It was while they were worshipping, praying, and fasting that the Holy Spirit spoke. Is it possible that we fail to hear the Holy Spirit because we never retreat from our pleasures and appetites long enough to truly hunger for the Lord? Prayer and fasting arouses a hunger for more of God's direction, more of God's presence, and more of God's power to drive one's life.

God's PATH to prayer and fasting unleashes His presence and power as we move forward into the new land where God is calling us. This new land maybe filled with much ambiguities and uncertainties. However, we are certain that our Sovereign God has His best ahead of us. (2220)

