The Hidden Power of Prayer and Fasting

Matthew 6:16-18 / Acts 14:21-28

5/2/21

Having the right tool, and knowing when to use it, is critical to the success of a building project. Construction workers need the proper tools to build. When they arrive on job, they bring with them a van full of tools. He’s got an air compressor they can hook onto a nail gun which makes putting in nails a snap. He’s got a table saw, a circular saw, a “saws all”, a jigsaw. When he’s in the middle of his project, he knows from experience which tool to pull out and how to use it.

On the other hand, I’ve got 2 saws. Imagine I was to try and do the job on my own with just these rusty, dull saws. It might be possible, but I’d waste a lot of time and effort. It would be silly. But imagine how silly it would be for the construction worker, who possesses all the right tools, to leave them in his truck and pick up my old rusty dull saws and go to work. This would be ridiculous!

This is exactly what the majority of Christians do when it comes to their prayer life. God has given each of us a powerful tool to use in order to increase our effectiveness in prayer, our spiritual power, and our ability to know God’s will, but most of the time we “leave it in the truck” and try to muddle through life on our own. What is this tool? It is FASTING.

This morning I want to introduce you to the practice of fasting, as it is taught in the Bible, and challenge you to begin using this discipline to hop up your communication with God. **Why should we fast?**

**1. We fast in obedience to Jesus’ teaching.** (Matt. 6:16-18)

In Matthew 6, Jesus gives some foundational teaching about some activities that he assumes will be a part of the life of his followers.

* Matt. 6:2 “So when you give to the needy…” Jesus then follows this with instructions about how to give in the proper way.
  + Assumption: If you’re a follower of Christ, you will give to the needy. No problem, we know this.
* Matt. 6:5 “And when you pray…” Jesus follows this with instructions about how to pray in the proper way.
  + Assumption: If you’re a follower of Christ, you will pray. No problem, this is normal.

Just a few sentences later, however, Jesus mentions a third discipline of the Christian life:

* Matt. 6:16-18 (NIV) “When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to men that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.
  + Assumption: If you’re a follower of Christ, you will fast.

Wait a minute, isn’t that something for “religious fanatics”? Isn’t that a bit “legalistic”? No. Fasting is for everyone who follows Christ. It is a tool God has given us to increase our spiritual power and help us communicate more intimately with God. And if we don’t make use of it, we are not only going to be missing out on much of what God wants to do in and through us, we will be disobeying Jesus clear instructions.

So, we fast, at the most basic level because Jesus said so. But what good does it really do? What’s the point? Let’s go on.

**2. We fast to demonstrate our dependence upon God.** (James 4:10, 1Cor 9:24-27)

*James 4:10 – “Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up*.” - There are many ways we can demonstrate our humility before God but choosing to go without food for the sake of spiritual things is one of the more practical ways.

When a person fasts, it will not be long before the stomach starts to say, “feed me”. That physical urge is a test when you’re fasting. Will you do what your flesh is urging you to do, or will you rely upon God for his strength?

* Fasting is a very tangible way to teach our minds and our bodies that we do not have to gratify the urges of our bodies.
  + We CAN say “No” when our body calls for food. And when we do this, we demonstrate to God that we are his, and that we are more needful of his righteousness, of his power, of his wisdom, of His direction, than we need physical nourishment.
* Fasting is a way for us to discipline our bodies for the spiritual battles God needs us to fight.
  + In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul mentions this need of physical discipline in the spiritual battle: *1Cor. 9:24-27 (NIV) Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. Therefore, I do not run like a man running aimlessly; I do not fight like a man beating the air. No, I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize.*

Even as athletes train their bodies for physical contests, fasting trains our spirits for spiritual battles.

**3. We fast to demonstrate repentance from sin** (and to intercede for others who need to repent). (Daniel 9:3-5, Jonah 3:5-10)

In the book of Jonah, the story is told of the prophet Jonah receiving instructions to take a message to his arch-enemies the Ninevites. Jonah’s response is an incredible story, but I want to focus on what finally happened when Jonah got there and pronounced God’s coming judgment upon the people of Nineveh.

*Jonah 3:3-10 Jonah obeyed the word of the LORD and went to Nineveh.… He proclaimed: “Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned.”* *The Ninevites believed God. They declared a fast, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth. When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, took off his royal robes, covered himself with sackcloth and sat down in the dust. Then he issued a proclamation in Nineveh: “By the decree of the king and his nobles: Do not let any man or beast, herd or flock, taste anything; do not let them eat or drink. But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth. Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence. Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish.” When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened.*

Incredible! God planned on wiping out these people, but when they turned to him with fervent prayers accompanied with fasting – God changed his mind and saved them.

It is one thing to pray, “Lord I’m sorry for what I’ve done.” It is something else to deprive yourself of food and plead with God for him to have mercy upon you for the sins you’ve committed against him.

* Such a fast is called for in situations where you or I face a sin that constantly ensnares us. If we are willing to pay the price of fasting and praying, we can know deliverance from that sin, and the joy that follows! A decision to fast in such a situation demonstrates to God that we are truly serious about our repentance, and that we sincerely long for new life in that area.

But sometimes fasting is necessary on behalf of others who need the mercy of God in their lives. In the books of Daniel and Nehemiah we read about times when great men of God fasted and prayed for God to relent from his judgment upon the people of Judah. (For personal study - Daniel 9 and Nehemiah 1.) During these times these men understand that God has every reason to bring judgment upon the people for their sin, yet they plead with him for mercy and to smile upon them once again.

Likewise, there may be times when we will need to pull the tool of fasting out of our prayer toolbox in order to intercede for our nation, our community, our church, our small group, friends, or even people in our family. When it becomes apparent that our routine prayers for these situations are not having an effect – there is something we can do to “turn up the power” in our prayers – and that is to fast for these people or situations that so desperately need the touch of God.

So, we fast to demonstrate our dependance upon God and our fervent intercession for other people. But there are more reasons in scripture why we should fast.

**4. We fast to receive God’s wisdom and direction.** (Acts 13:1-3, 14:21-23)

*Acts 13:1-3 (NIV) In the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen (who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch) and Saul. While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.” So, after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off.*

* Here the early church was blessed with prophets and teachers gifted with the ability to lead the church – but instead of relying upon their own gifts, we find the leaders of this church fasting and praying to God for wisdom about how to proceed as a church. It was only after they had paid the price of fasting and praying that God revealed to them what the next step was to be – that they should send Barnabas and Saul off as missionaries.

Then, in just the next chapter of the story, we’re told how it is that Saul (now called Paul) and Barnabas went about setting apart leaders in the fledgling churches that had been started.

*Acts 14:23 (NIV) Paul and Barnabas appointed elders for them in each church and, with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord, in whom they had put their trust.*

* They appointed elders in each church with prayer and fasting. By this I understand that they would have spent time fasting before making their decisions, seeking God’s wisdom as they fasted. But it also seems clear that they fasted in preparation for the time that they actually “committed them to the Lord”.

By doing this, the Apostles demonstrated to God that they needed the power of the Holy Spirit to guide their decision making. They disciplined their bodies in order to hear more clearly from God and in order to set apart these new leaders with Spiritual power.

When we need wisdom, we should use the gift of fasting, which will focus our minds upon whatever situation we’re praying about. Every time we desire food, we’re reminded to pray for God to speak. Instead of sitting down to a meal with others, we get away with the Lord and ask him to reveal his will – and then we wait!

Although there are many other reasons to fast, I want to mention just one more reason found in the Bible.

**5. We fast to receive deliverance in times of crisis.** (2 Chronicles 20).

After this, the Moabites and Ammonites with some of the Meunites came to make war on Jehoshaphat. 2 Some men came and told Jehoshaphat, "A vast army is coming against you… 3 Alarmed, Jehoshaphat resolved to inquire of the LORD, and he proclaimed a fast for all Judah. 4 The people of Judah came together to seek help from the LORD; indeed, they came from every town in Judah to seek him. 5 Then Jehoshaphat stood up in the assembly of Judah and Jerusalem at the temple of the LORD in the front of the new courtyard 6 and said: "O LORD, God of our fathers, are you not the God who is in heaven? You rule over all the kingdoms of the nations. Power and might are in your hand, and no one can withstand you. …

13 All the men of Judah, with their wives and children and little ones, stood there before the LORD. 14 Then the Spirit of the LORD came upon Jahaziel…(and God makes known his plan for delivering the people).

“We do not know what to do, but our eyes are upon you.” This expresses the heart of someone who is facing a crisis and endeavors to fast and pray for God to bring deliverance.

* When the diagnosis is bad news. When our nation is at a crisis point like an election or because of calamity. When our family is facing a crisis. These are times for fasting. These are times to go beyond our normal routines of prayer and determine that we need to have God’s intervention in our lives much more than we need food.

ILLUS: David Cho pastors the largest church in the world (believed to be the largest church in history) - over 700,000 members! He and his staff have such a belief in the power of prayer and fasting that they rarely counsel people. If someone comes to them with a great problem or urgent need, their standard answer is, “go to prayer mountain and fast and pray for three days”. If they return with the problem still unmet, they tell them to go and fast and pray for a week. (Then for ten days/then for forty days.) They do not think it possible that a person would ever return to them again and not have the problem resolved!

It is important to note, that fasting is not a “magic” way to make our prayers get answered, or to somehow force God into answering our prayers a certain way.

* God cannot be coerced. We may still have to go through the difficult circumstance – but the more we are willing to fast and pray through the process, the more we will be rewarded with the power and the presence of God to strengthen us and give us faith for the journey.

We must also learn that in times of fasting not to expect God to always show up and provide an immediate answer to the situation we’re fasting about.

* Quite often the day progresses in quite an ordinary way. But we will find, more often than not, that in the days following a day of fasting, we’ll receive wisdom and help and strength and whatever it is we need to proceed.

Closing:

God has given us a tool for hopping up our communication with him. It is not easy. How exactly it works remains a mystery. But for those who are willing to make it a regular part of their life, history shows that God will unleash power into their lives. So, the next time you need to demonstrate repentance, or intercede for someone who needs to repent, or if you need wisdom or deliverance from a crisis – I encourage you to make a commitment to God to a set amount of time – and discover what saints throughout the ages have discovered: fasting is a vital part of the Christian life.

Why call a corporate fast for the church?

“Corporate fasting brings unity and a strong awareness of our need for dependence upon God. It heightens our hunger for His presence in our midst. We are believing God for great things in our church and community, fasting together releases unity and clarity of vision in our body to step into every- thing He has called us for.” “The call for corporate fast within the life of the body, is also something that not only pleases the Father, but brings a fresh word and fresh fire of the Holy Spirit into the life of believers.