

GUIDE TO
PRAYER
AND
FASTING



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In the 'Sermon on the Mount' Jesus addresses the spiritual disciplines -- there referred to as 'religious duties' -- of:

- *Giving to the needy...*
- *Praying...*
- *Fasting....*

read **Matthew 6:1-18**

We note that all of these are described as 'private matters' that do not need to be on public display. If they are done to show off, or to demonstrate how 'spiritual' we are, then we "will not have any reward from our Father in heaven," claims Jesus (verse 1). These are spiritual disciplines, intended to deepen the faith of the disciples, not to impress other people.

GIVING TO THE NEEDY

When we give to the needy, we do so as a response to God's call to serve. It is our love for God that motivates us, more than our concern for people. This is why Jesus says, "When you help a needy person, do it in such a way that even your closest friend will not know about it" (verse 3). God knows, and that is all that matters.

Which is why we do not make a judgement as to who is truly 'in need' or who 'deserves' our help. It is not about the person we give to, it's about our obedience to God's requirement to care for others. Jesus spelled it out very simply and clearly in Matthew 25:35-40:

I was hungry and you fed me, thirsty and you gave me a drink; I was a stranger and you received me in your homes, naked and you clothed me; I was sick and you took care of me, in prison and you visited me.'

The righteous will then answer him, 'When, Lord, did we ever see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you a drink? When did we ever see you a stranger and welcome you in our homes, or naked and clothe you? When did we ever see you sick or in prison, and visit you?'

The King will reply, 'I tell you, whenever you did this for one of the least important of these followers of mine, you did it for me!'

We leave that 'religious duty' there for the moment, as our focus in this guide is more on PRAYER and FASTING. We are preparing for Lent, the time each year when we take our spiritual 'pilgrimage to the cross' in the spirit of surrender and the practice of sacrifice. Let us **pray...** and **fast.**

PRAYER

Jesus said, "When you pray, do not be like the hypocrites!" (Matt.6:5). Sometimes Jesus teaches us what to do, and sometimes he teaches us what not to do. In condemning the Pharisees he is pointing us in the right direction. Unlike the hypocrites, who want people to see them, we should pray in a way that does not attract anyone's attention. Prayer is intimate communion with God our Father.

Jesus also said, "When you pray, do not use a lot of meaningless words, as the pagans do" (Matt. 6:7). In our prayers we are not informing God of anything he doesn't already know... we are sharing our heart with God, who delights in hearing from his children. As St. Augustine put it: "True, whole prayer is nothing but love."

We certainly do not impress God by our eloquence in articulating our prayers... God listens to our heart more than our words. Sometimes we can't find the words; we can't express what we are dealing with or struggling through. Jesus faced this in the Garden of Gethsemane, when, "being in agony, He prayed more earnestly. Then his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground" (Luke 22:44 NKJV). Even the Holy Spirit may not be able to put our prayers into words, as Paul (in Romans 8:26) reminds us:

Likewise the Spirit also helps in our weaknesses. For we do not know what we should pray for as we ought, but the Spirit Himself makes intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered.

Richard Foster, in *Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home*, describes the prayer relationship as one in which we 'come home' to God. He "welcomes us home: home to serenity and peace and joy, home to friendship and fellowship and openness, home to intimacy and acceptance and affirmation."

"We do not need to be shy," he continues, for God

invites us into the living room of his heart, where we can put on old slippers and share freely. He invites us into the kitchen of his friendships, where chatter and batter mix in good fun. He invites us into the dining room of his strength, where we can feast to our heart's delight. He invites us into the study of his wisdom, where we can learn and grow and stretch... and ask all the questions we want. He invites us into the workshop of his creativity, where we can be co-laborers with him, working together to determine the outcomes of events. He invites us into the bedroom of his rest, where new peace is found and where we can be naked and vulnerable and free. It is also the place of deepest intimacy, where we can know and are known to the fullest. (pp. 1-2)

Foster is, of course, speaking about personal prayer. As is Jesus, when he gives the instruction to "go to your room, close the door, and pray." Our corporate prayer life -- when we pray in worship services, or Prayer Meetings, or Bible Studies, or other gatherings -- is different. We still have the reverence, but we cannot have the same degree of intimacy. We still worship through prayer, but as it seeks to include everyone, it is more general. Hence we have **A General Confession** (on page 10) and **A General Thanksgiving** (on page 16) in our liturgy of *Morning Prayer* in the 'Book of Offices' in the back of our Hymn Book.

[Some editions have these prayers inside the back cover]

Our focus in this ***Guide to Prayer & Fasting*** is on personal prayer.

While we can pray spontaneously, and they can be effective prayers, we really should develop a consistent regular prayer time, daily or weekly. This we should prepare for, in terms of a designated place, time, environment...

"The preparation of your own little sanctuary can draw the heart into worship," Foster reminds us. "The idea is to use all the means at our disposal to urge all that is within us into doxology: 'Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name' (Ps.103:1)." (p. 77)

Early in each new year we Methodists renew our covenant with God, reminding ourselves of God's faithfulness to us, and recommitting ourselves to be faithful to him. In one of the prayers we say:

Eternal God, in your faithful and enduring love you call us
to share in your gracious Covenant in Jesus Christ.

In obedience we hear and accept your commands;
in love we seek to do your perfect will;
with joy we offer ourselves anew to you.

We are no longer our own, but yours.

Along those lines Foster also prays -- we might wish to make his prayer ours:

Blessed Savior, I pace back and forth at the altar of commitment. I really do want a fixed habit of prayer. At least, that is what I want right now. I'm not sure if that is what I will want two weeks from now. I do know that without some kind of consistent communion with you I will not know holy obedience. So, as best as I can, I promise to set aside time regularly for prayer, meditation, and spiritual reading. Strengthen me in this covenant. Help me to so delight in your presence that I will want to come home to you often. In your name and for your sake I make this covenant. Amen. (p. 77)

Preparing our hearts, and putting things in place, so that we may have a regular, consistent time for prayer and meditation is good. But it is not enough. We need to actually do the praying and meditating. This is where our Lenten Study Guide should prove useful, providing daily a scripture reading, meditation and prayer focus for each of the 40 days of Lent.

Foster reminds us that we must not neglect the ***Prayer of Rest***... it is how "God places his children in the eye of the storm. When all around us is chaos and confusion, deep within we know stability and serenity. In the midst of intense personal struggle we are still and relaxed. While a thousand frustrations seek to distract us, we remain focused and attentive. This is the fruit of the ***Prayer of Rest***... Today, this very moment, Jesus is inviting you, Jesus is inviting me, into his rest: 'Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls' (Matt. 11:29)." (p. 93)

He lists three well-established practices to lead us into the ***Prayer of Rest***:

- 1 - ***Solitude*** Have you ever noticed how many times Jesus experienced solitude?
(p. 101) The haunting words "in the morning, a great while before day, he arose and went out to a lonely place" describe a pattern of life more than a single event (Mark 1:35 RSV). Jesus needed frequent retreat and solitude to do his work. Yet we somehow think we can do without what he deemed essential.
- 2 - ***Silencio*** ...the stilling of what the old writers call 'creaturely activity.' This
(p. 101) means not so much a silence of words as a silence of our grasping, manipulative control of people and situations. It means standing firm against our codependency drives to control everyone and fix everything.
- 3 - ***Recollection*** ...means tranquility of mind, heart, and spirit... What can we do?
(p. 102) We can prayerfully cultivate a life of reflection. We can wrestle with existence clarification -- who we are and what our purpose for being is. We can take a private retreat just to consider our direction in life. This is the stuff of recollection.

Even in our daily routine, with all the busyness of life, we can still focus on God and pray. Many of us do pray often, including when driving on the streets, though we dare not close our eyes and fold our hands! We know that prayer is more an attitude than a posture... tuning our hearts to God's heart more than bowing and kneeling. While a quiet time intentionally carved out of our busy life is ideal, we can also commune with God at our work and in our play... in the times and experiences that make up life.

Foster reminds us that we all "share in what D. Elton Trueblood calls 'the common ventures of life' -- birth, marriage, work, death." He continues:

Jesus, in his life and in his teaching, gave sacramental significance to these ordinary experiences of daily life. In his own birth the common and the sacred have forever been united. He rejoiced in the wedding of a couple in Galilee and added wine to the sacred festivities. He rubbed shoulders with fishermen and tax collectors and other entrepreneurial types. And he stared down death without flinching so that we can face our own death with hope.

Because of this rock-solid foundation, we know that all work is holy work and all places are sacred places. Therefore we lift our voices in joyful song, declaring, "This is holy ground.... for the Lord is present. These are holy hands; He works through holy hands."

from the song 'Holy Ground' by John Michael Talbot (p. 177)

"For sheer power and majesty," says Foster, "no prayer can equal the Paternoster, the 'Our Father' (Matt. 6:9-13). It really is a 'total prayer.'

Its concerns embrace the whole world, from the coming of the kingdom to daily bread. Large things and small things, spiritual things and material things, inward things and outward things -- nothing is beyond the purview of this prayer. It is lifted up to God in every conceivable setting. It rises from the altars of great cathedrals and from obscure shanties in unknown places. It is spoken by both children and kings. It is prayed at weddings and deathbeds alike. The rich and the poor, the intelligent and the illiterate, the simple and the wise -- all speak forth this prayer. . . It is such a complete prayer that it seems to reach all peoples at all times in all places. (pp. 184-185)

While this prayer is essentially petitionary -- asking of God -- it begins and ends with adoration. "Of its seven perfectly crafted requests," observes Foster, "three relate to personal petition. These three entreaties can be gathered up into three words: give, forgive, and deliver."

Give If we were not so familiar with the Lord's Prayer, we would be astonished at the petition for daily bread. If it had come from the lips of any other than Jesus himself, we would consider it an intrusion of materialism upon the refined realm of prayer... When we think about it for a moment, though, we realize that this prayer is completely consistent with Jesus' pattern of living, for he occupied himself with the trivialities of humankind... He went out of his way to find the 'little people': the poor, the sick, the powerless. So it is fully in order that he invites us to pray for daily bread.

Forgive I am constantly amazed that the petition "give" precedes the petition "forgive" and not vice versa. It is as if God's graciousness in giving to us allows us to see the enormous debt we owe and leads us to cry out, "Forgive us our debts." But in this petition we are faced with a quandary.

We are taught to pray: “Forgive us our debts, as we also forgive our debtors.” It is a conditional request. We are forgiven as we forgive.

Deliver This third petition is perhaps the most important of them all. It contains both a negative (lead us not into temptation) and a positive (but deliver us from evil)... How can God tempt us or lead us into temptation? [It] means this: “Lord, may there be nothing in me that will force you to put me to the test to reveal what is in my heart.”
(pp. 188-189)

We borrow another of Foster’s prayers... maybe you can identify with this one also:

Dear Father, I don’t want to treat you like Santa Claus, but I do need to ask things of you. Give me, please, food to eat today. I’m not asking for tomorrow but I am asking for today. Please forgive me for the infinite offenses to your goodness that I have committed today... this hour. I’m not even aware of most of them. I live too unaware. That in itself is a sin against heaven. I’m sorry. Increase my awareness.

And in my ignorance if I have asked for things that would really be destructive, please, do not give them to me -- do not lead me into temptation. Do protect me from the evil one.

For Jesus’ sake. Amen. (p. 190)

Foster gives us this word of caution: “none of us is to shoulder the burden of prayer for everyone and everything. We are finite human beings, and it is an act of humility to recognize our limitations. Often people will come to us with a glib “pray for me,” and they have no idea what they are asking of us. In such cases we are able to take the matter under advisement and wait until there are promptings from a higher source. God will make it clear who and what are to be our prayer concerns, and the other situations we are to leave with him.” (pp. 200-201)

Prayer... one of the spiritual disciplines that will help us to draw closer to God, that will deepen our relationship with our Saviour, and that will strengthen us in our service. So, not only at Lent, but especially during this season. . . *let us pray.*

Resources for Prayers:

- Prayers for Lent faithandworship.com/prayers_Lent.htm
- Praying through Lent -- a printable list of Prayers for each day of Lent onlineministries.creighton.edu/CollaborativeMinistry/Lent/Daily-prayers-00.html

*Is prayer your
steering wheel
or your spare tire?*

- Corrie ten Boom

FASTING

Jesus said, "And when you fast, do not put on a sad face as the hypocrites do" (Matt.6:5). Note, in both cases Jesus says when, not if, you *pray* and *fast*. He expects we will give to those in need, we will pray, and we will fast.

While some denominations stress fasting more than others, and some require fasting on certain days and times, many of us feel it is a personal choice whether or not to fast, and -- if we do -- *how* we will fast.

As Methodists we have the example of John Wesley, who regularly fasted two days a week. He considered fasting an equally important spiritual discipline and means of grace as prayer and giving to the needy... just as Jesus lists them in Matthew 6.

Here is some information from *seedbed.com* that you might find helpful:

Lent is a time for prayer and fasting. It is a season of spiritual preparation in which we remember Christ's temptation, suffering, and death. Historically, the church has celebrated Lent as a 40-day period beginning on Ash Wednesday and concluding the day before Easter. It is observed in many Christian churches as a time to commemorate the last week of Jesus' life, his suffering (Passion), and his death, through various observances and services of worship. Many Christians use the 40 days of Lent as time to draw closer to the Lord through prayer, fasting, repentance, and self-denial.

We live in a culture of fast food, instant gratification, and self-centeredness. One of the best ways to get our eyes off of ourselves and back onto the Lord is through fasting. However, fasting has practically been disregarded and forgotten in the comforts of the modern church.

What is fasting?

What does it really mean to fast? According to the Oxford Dictionary, fasting means "to abstain from food; especially to eat sparingly or not at all or abstain from certain foods in observance of a religious duty or a token of grief."

Fasting and religious purposes cannot be separated because they are intricately intertwined. The Bible gives us numerous references to individual and corporate fasts. There were even certain days that were designated each year for fasting and prayer. Fasting is a gift that God has given to the church in order to help us persevere in prayer. Fasting draws us closer to God and gives power to our prayers. Our central motivation with this lesson is to teach about the reasons to fast, different types of fasting, and then discuss how to fast.

Reasons for fasting

People have been fasting since the ancient days of the Bible. The Bible records numerous accounts where people, cities, and nations have turned to God by fasting and praying: Hannah, who grieved over infertility, “wept and did not eat” (1 Samuel 1:7); Anna, who was an elderly widow, saw Jesus in the temple and “served God with fasting and prayer” (Luke 2:37). Saul, who encountered Jesus on the road to Damascus, “was three days without sight, neither ate or drank.” (Acts 9:9). Cornelius told Peter, “Four days ago I was fasting until this hour...” (Acts 10:30). Most people fast for religious and spiritual reasons, while others choose to fast for health reasons. There are several specific reasons that the Bible tells us to fast.

1. To be Christ like. (Matthew 4:1-17; Luke 4:1-13)
2. To obtain spiritual purity. (Isaiah 58:5-7)
3. To repent from sins. (See Jonah 3:8; Nehemiah 1:4, 9:1-3; 1 Samuel 14:24)
4. To influence God. (2 Samuel 12:16-23)
5. To mourn for the dead. (1 Samuel 31:13; 2 Samuel 1:12)
6. To request God’s help in times of crisis and calamity. (Ezra 8:21-23; Neh.1:4-11)
7. To strengthen prayer. (Matt. 17:21; Mark 9:17-29; Acts 10:30; 1 Corinthians 7:5)

Types of Fasting

In the same way that God appointed times and seasons to fast, He also designated several types of fasts. Because of certain medical problems, and physical needs, there are different types of fasting. Not everyone can go on an extended 5-7 day fast; in a similar way, not everyone can totally abstain from food and water.

A person should exercise wisdom and consult their physician if they have any medical concerns before they fast, otherwise it could actually be harmful to your health. We can choose from at least three types of individual fasts: absolute fast, solid food fast, and partial fast.

1. Absolute Fast

An absolute fast is conducted by abstaining from all food and water for a certain period of time. This is also known as the “total fast” because an individual chooses to abstain from all foods and beverages. There are several Biblical examples for the total fast. Moses and Elijah both abstained from food and water for forty days and forty nights. (Deuteronomy 9:9, 10:10, 18:25-29; 1 Kings 19:8). Although the Bible says they fasted for forty days, many people usually only totally abstain from food and water for three days.

2. Solid Food Fast

A solid food fast is where an individual may drink juice and water, but chooses not to eat solid food. Certain scholars and theologians think that Jesus may have drank water while in the wilderness since the Bible doesn't say that he was thirsty after his forty day fast (see Matthew 4:2). Drinking water while fasting for several days can actually be therapeutic for your body. In any case, you should not fast for more than a week unless you consult a doctor.

3. Partial Fast

To fast simply means to "abstain" from something. A partial fast is where you choose to abstain from certain foods and drinks instead of complete abstinence of food or drink. The Bible tells us that Daniel abstained from bread, water, and wine for twenty-one days (Daniel 10:3). Others may choose to fast from television, computer, newspaper, and hobbies. This will help you free up some time to spend in prayer and reflection.

*Fasting is a gift that God has given to the Church
in order to help us persevere in prayer.*

What Jesus Said About Fasting

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught a lesson about how to fast and how not to fast: "Moreover, when you fast, do not be like the hypocrites, with a sad countenance. For they disfigure their faces that they may appear to men to be fasting. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward. But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, so that you do not appear to men to be fasting, but to your father who is in the secret place; and your father who sees in secret will reward you openly." (Matthew 6:16-28).

We see that it is important to not brag or boast to others about fasting. The Jews of Jesus' day used fasting and giving to make everyone think that they were more spiritual than others. But Jesus tells us that fasting should be done in secret so that it can't be used as a way of bringing glory to ourselves. Fasting should make us humble instead of proud. In the end it is not our works, but our hearts, that matter most to God. God promises to reward openly those who fast and pray in secret.

Six Practical Steps for Fasting

There are several practical steps that you should follow before you begin fasting.

1. You should decide which fast is better for you. As we said earlier, due to health reasons not everyone can do a total fast, for example. Also, sometimes work schedules and other duties may prevent an individual from a certain type of fast. You may want to begin with a partial fast and work your way to a total fast. Ultimately, you should pray and ask God what His will would be for your fast.
2. Decide how long you want to fast. People in the Bible often chose to fast for a certain period of time. To prepare their hearts for the seasons, the early church would fast before Christmas and Easter. John Wesley chose Friday as a day of the week to fast. This was a day that he set aside for fasting and prayer unto the Lord.
3. You should consult a physician before you go on an extended fast. If you have any physical problems then you will certainly want to follow this advice. Fasting can be healthy to the body when it is done right, but it can also be dangerous if you don't exercise wisdom.
4. Make sure that you have time to pray. Although some people fast for health reasons, it will not do you any spiritual good if don't allow yourself time to pray. Be sure to get the most out of your fast and spend plenty of time in prayer -- you might consider setting aside a few days for a retreat to totally fast and pray. When was the last time you can remember spending an entire day with the Lord?
5. You should slowly begin eating soft food when your fast is over. If you have been on an extended fast from solid foods, it is a good idea to slowly reintroduce your system to solid food again. For instance, you may want to eat soup or salad for your first meal after a fast. Bananas or other soft fruit are also a great way to break a long fast.
6. Just do it! Many people never fast because they are afraid to do it or because they have never done it before. Don't let fear or inexperience stop you from experiencing one of God's greatest blessings. Probably all of the great heroes of the faith spent many hours fasting and praying unto the Lord.

We learn about how different churches/denominations practice fasting from *thoughtco.com*:

The *Roman Catholic Church* has a long tradition of fasting for Lent. Unlike most other Christian churches, the Catholic Church has specific regulations for its members covering Lenten fasting. Not only do Catholics fast on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday, but they also abstain from meat on those days and all the Fridays during Lent. Fasting does not mean complete denial of food, however. On fast days, Catholics are allowed to eat one full meal and two smaller meals which, together, do not constitute a full meal. Young children, the elderly, and persons whose health would be affected are exempt from fasting regulations.

In the *Episcopal (Anglican) Church*, members are encouraged to fast on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. Fasting is also to be combined with prayer and alms-giving.

The *Presbyterian Church* makes fasting voluntary. Its purpose is to develop a dependence on God, prepare the believer to face temptation, and to seek wisdom and guidance from God.

The *Methodist Church* has no official guidelines on fasting but encourages it as a private matter. John Wesley, one of the founders of Methodism, fasted twice a week. Fasting, or abstaining from such activities as watching television, eating favorite foods, or doing hobbies is also encouraged during Lent.

The *Baptist Church* encourages fasting as a way to draw closer to God, but considers it a private matter and has no set days when members should fast.

The *Assemblies of God* consider fasting an important practice but purely voluntary and private. The church stresses that it does not produce merit or favor from God but is a way to heighten focus and gain self-control.

The *Lutheran Church* encourages fasting but imposes no requirements on its members to fast during Lent.

On your pilgrimage this Lent, pray and fast. Through the sacrifices you make, and in redirecting the saved time, energy, and money may you be drawn closer to the Christ who prayed and fasted for you... and died for you... and lives in you!

Resources:

Helpful article on fasting
Fasting: Discovering life-restoring limits
pushton.wordpress.com/2013/02/12/fasting/

T. D. Jakes teaching: 'Denial Produces Discipline'
youtube.com/watch?v=UfzHs2z17c

*A diet changes the way you look.
A fast changes the way you see.*

- Lisa Severe

Sources:

Richard J. Foster *Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home*

www.thoughtco.com

www.prayerfoundation.org

www.beliefnet.com

www.seedbed.com