

# The Spiritual Disciplines

## *Praying, Fasting, Journaling*

*To Consider: "Prayer in its most basic form is the surging of the human spirit in its weakness, grasping at the Spirit of God in His strength." Ravi Zacharias*

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*When You Pray, Remember...*

1. Prayer, fundamentally, is an expression of your dependence upon God.
2. Your purpose in prayer is to glorify God by seeing him actively accomplish his will here on earth. God, not you, must be the focus of all your prayers and it is his will and not your own that you must pursue.
3. Submission and solitude are essential ingredients in Jesus' prayer life and should be in yours as well.
4. Thankfulness for God's movement in the lives of your brothers and sisters allows you the opportunity to see God's work in others.
5. Prayer for knowing God better, gaining special insight into your eternal hope and for power to live for God's glory should eclipse all other requests. A depth of insight into the limitless dimensions of Christ's love for you can only be gained by prayer.
6. When you pray, you must emphasize a growing love for others, pure and blameless living, and all that accommodates your maturity in Christ.
7. When you pray make sure you ask God to work in and through circumstances, rather than merely change them.
8. God is more interested in you than in what you want and he occasionally denies your requests so that his glory and your good will be optimal.

*Jesus' Prayer Life*

Our Lord prayed privately, publicly, earnestly, repeatedly, submissively and expectantly. Jesus prayed...

- *Alone with the Father and away from distraction. Lk 5:16, "But Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed."*
- *During his inauguration into ministry. Lk 3:21, "When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too. And as he was praying, heaven was opened."*
- *Before he made an important decision. Lk 6:12-13, "Jesus went out to a mountainside to pray, and spent the night praying to God. When morning came, he called his disciples to him and chose twelve of them."*
- *When others were present and about to witness a miracle. Jn 11:41-43, "Then Jesus looked up and said, 'Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me.' When he had said this, Jesus called in a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come out!'"*
- *During his greatest need. See Mt 26:36-44; Heb 5:7.*
  1. Knowing His life was about to end he turned to prayer, alone with the Father.
  2. His deep anguish and grief drove him to prayer, not to despair or anger.
  3. He prayed in total submission to the Father.
  4. He prayed repeatedly.
  5. Jesus entreats his followers to pray for victory of spirit over the flesh. Prayer is often the best weapon to defeat the evil one who uses the flesh as his battle ground (cf., Eph. 6:18)

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Jesus taught us to pray confidently and expectantly. Read **Mk 11:24; Lk 11:9-10; Jn 16:23**.

*To Consider: Jesus denounces pretentious prayer (Mt 6:5-8). He does not forbid all public prayer, but stresses the private side of devotion to God in prayer. When right motives are in place, public prayer is appropriate. Note: The reward is the same as the intent. Compare "they have received their reward in full" with "to be seen by men." Drawing attention to ourselves in prayer (or any religious activity) is to take away attention from God and is tantamount to idolatry!*

### *The Prayers of Paul*

When reading through the prayers of Paul, we get a sense that his prayers are very different from the way most Christians pray. Read the following passages: **Eph 1:15-23; 3:14-21; Philip 1:9-11; Col 1:3-14; 1 Thess 3:9-13; 2 Thess 1:11-12**.

- In **Eph 1:15-23**, after offering thanksgiving to God for his work of salvation (vv. 15-16), Paul prays for two things (vv. 17-19):
  1. *That we might know God more intimately and personally.* The implicit idea here is that unless God gives us a spirit of wisdom and revelation it's impossible to know Him better. We come to God on His terms by His means in order to accomplish His ends. This kind of knowledge cannot be gained by merely reading your Bible or being involved in Christian ministry. It can only be gained by fervent prayer.
  2. *That we would have special insight into a) the hope of our calling, b) the riches of God's inheritance granted to us, and c) the power to live for God's glory.*

*To Consider: The same power that defeated death and sin lives within us and is unleashed through prayer! The same power that raised Christ from the dead and exalted Him to the heavens is readily on display in our lives when we pray!*

### *Preparing to Meet God*

Every believer has a prayer life. But, not every believer has an effective prayer life. This is often caused by inadequate preparation. Preparing to meet God in prayer, therefore, is just as important as the act of praying.

- According to **2 Cr 7:14-15** what must we do to have an effective prayer life?
- Does God always answer prayer? Are there any conditions for answered prayer? Read **Is 1:15-16; Ps 66:18-20; Jn 9:31**.
- What does **Zech 7:8-13** teach us about the consequences for ignoring God?
- Peter is a clear warning to husbands about the relationship between their wives and their prayer lives (**1 Pt 3:7**). "No Christian husband should presume to think that any spiritual good will be accomplished by his life without an effective ministry of prayer. And no husband may expect an effective prayer life unless he lives with his wife 'in an understanding way, bestowing honor' on her" (Wayne Grudem).

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### *Reflection/Direction/Decision*

1. How much time do you spend praying alone *and* with no distraction?
2. What *really* counts in your life? Relative financial and material comfort in retirement? Peace among the nations? What *do* you pray for? Compare your prayer life with the catalog of Paul's prayers (**Rom 1:8-10; 10:1; 15:5-6; 2 Cor 13:7-9; Eph 1:15-23; 3:14-21; Philip 1:3-11; Col 1:3-14; Ph 4-7**). How will your prayers change to align with the prayers of Scripture?
3. When crisis hits, is your first response to pray or do you first react to the crisis?
4. After removing all distractions, quietly and solemnly reflect on the prayer below from John Newton (author of "Amazing Grace").

"I asked the Lord that I might grow  
in faith and love and every grace;  
might more of his salvation know,  
and seek, more earnestly, his face.

I thought that in some favoured hour  
at once he'd answer my request;  
and by his love's constraining power,  
subdue my sins and give me rest.

Instead of this, he made me feel  
the hidden evils of my heart,  
and let the angry powers of hell  
assault my soul in ev'ry part.

'Lord, why is this?' I trembling cried,  
'Wilt thou pursue thy worm to death?';  
'Tis in this way' the Lord replied,  
'I answer prayer for grace and faith.

These inward trials I employ  
from self and pride to set thee free,  
And break thy schemes of earthly joy,  
'That thou may'st seek thy ALL in me!"

-- John Newton

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*To Consider: "Christians in a gluttonous, denial-less, self-indulgent society may struggle to accept and to begin the practice of fasting. Few Disciplines go so radically against the flesh and the mainstream of culture as this one." Don Whitney*

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### *The Function of Fasting*

Fasting is the voluntary and temporary abstinence from food and/or drink for the purpose of seeking God's will. In Scripture, it is most often a close associate of prayer. The pangs of hunger serve as reminders that we are a needy people. Fasting often reveals far more than just our dependence upon food; it can reveal other things that control us, which should be eliminated or perhaps moderated.

Abstaining from food and/or drink causes us to realize that our souls have an appetite for something that food and drink cannot satisfy. "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God" (Mt 4:4). Therefore, fasting is really *feasting* on God. In fasting the relationship to our bodies changes as our physical longings are redirected toward God, thus making our bodies servants rather than masters (1 Cor 6:12-13; 9:27).

In fasting we learn self-denial and temperance, which are virtues that carry over into other parts of our lives. Thomas à Kempis said, "Refrain from gluttony and thou shalt the more easily restrain all the inclinations of the flesh." Dallas Willard suggests, "Since food has the pervasive place it does in our lives, the effects of fasting will be diffused throughout our personality" (*The Spirit of the Disciplines*, p. 167).

Jesus gives no command for how long or how often to fast, but he does assume it's a normal part of discipleship, just as is prayer and giving ("When you fast..." Mt 6:16, 17; "When you pray..." Mt 6:5; "When you give..." Mt 6:3).

*Fasting is not...*

- A means of getting God to change his mind. Hunger strikes rarely accomplish much on the human level and never accomplishing anything on the spiritual level.
- A cure for gluttony. Fasting is not intended to be a wait loss program.
- A replacement for the other disciplines. It is not intended to be isolated from other Christian disciplines, especially that of loving others. **Is 58:1-7** clearly demonstrates God is concerned with our love for one another before our devotion to him in fasting (see also, **Zech 7:5; Mt 23:23**).

*What Are the Benefits of Fasting?*

- *Fasting Strengthens Prayer:* Ezra called on everyone to fast before setting out on the 900-mile journey back to Jerusalem after the Jewish exile (**Ezra 8:21-23**; see also **Neh 1:4** and **Dan 9:3; Lk 2:37**). Esther calls on the entire nation of exiled Jews to fast (meaning, "pray") on her behalf as she approached the pagan king Xerxes to plead for their lives (**Est 4:16**).
- *Fasting Expresses Repentance:* Israel showed genuine contrition by fasting (**1 Sam 7:6**). God, through the prophet Joel, commands that his people demonstrate their repentance by fasting (**Joel 2:12**). After Jonah preaches to Nineveh, they show signs of repentance by fasting (**Jonah 3:5-8**).
- *Fasting Strengthens Us for Ministry:* Jesus refused to succumb to temptation, but persevered in fasting to gain spiritual strength for ministry (**Mt 4:1-11**). Just as God's provision of manna in the desert was sufficient, so too is God's provision of inner strength during the

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desert experience of our fast. Daniel engaged in a partial fast for gaining strength to resist the lures of a pagan culture (**Dan 1:8-15**). Before commissioning Paul for his first missionary journey, the church fasted and prayed (**Acts 13:2-3**; see also **14:23**) to demonstrate a sense of urgency in ministry, both for discerning God's will and executing it. Fasting is a way of "putting your stomach where your mouth is," or showing seriousness in advancing God's kingdom. When spiritual strength is gained from fasting, we are equipped for victory in ministry. Fasting provides the spiritual stamina to withstand the pressures of this world.

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### *Journaling*

A prayer journal is simply a spiritual diary. It's a place to record God's responses to your requests, thoughts, feelings, and insights. It's a way of remembering God's activity in your life and holding yourself accountable to spiritual maturity.

### *Is There Biblical Support for Journaling?*

While there are no actual biblical examples of prayer journaling, there are numerous examples of writing down God's activity for remembrance and accountability.

- The Ten Commandments (**Ex 32:15-16**)
- Every king of Israel, after inauguration, was to write down God's Law (**Deut 17:18-20**)
- Joshua reminds the people of Israel not to be influenced negatively by unbelievers, but to obey what God had written down (**Joshua 23:6-8**).
- God's activity was recorded so that future generations would be encouraged to obey and give Him praise (**Ps 102:18-19**; **Rom 15:4**; **1 Cor 9:10**).
- John recorded the life of Jesus so others would know the truth about Him and be encouraged by His promises (**Jn 21:24-25**; **1 Jn 5:13**).

### *The Benefits of Journaling*

- When we get discouraged, journaling helps us recall the power of God displayed in our lives (**Ps 77:11**).
- Journaling provides a disciplined activity that trains us in godly living (**1 Tim 4:7**).
- It reminds us that God answers prayer and increases our trust in Him.
- Journaling helps us put into words our feelings and ideas about God, ourselves, and others. It's a way of "seeing" our feelings.

### *Ideas for Journaling*

Each page of your journal could include questions like, "Have I..."

- Confessed my sins?
- Thanked the Lord for His blessings?
- Used the time wisely that God has given me this day?
- Read through my journal lately?
- Thought or spoken kindly to family and friends today?
- Meditated upon God's Word today?

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## A Sample Journal

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Have I ...

Confessed my sins?

Yes       No

Thanked the Lord for his blessings?

Yes       No

Used the time wisely that God has given me this day?

Yes       No

Read through my journal lately?

Yes       No

Thought or spoken kindly to family and friends today?

Yes       No

Meditated upon God's Word today?

Yes       No

Today I felt like ...

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My prayer request(s) are:

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God's answers are:

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Insights from my Bible reading are:

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The practical steps I will take to change are:

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