

The Spiritual Disciplines

Part One: Learning Dependence on God.

I. Prayer.

“If we wait until we are perfect to pray, we will never get started.”¹
--Benedict J. Groeschel, Professor of Psychology

“...More things are wrought by prayer
Than this world dreams of.”²
--Alfred Lord Tennyson, poet

“Prayer is, above all, a means of forming character.”³
--Dallas Willard, author and theologian

“Prayer, which William James described as ‘intercourse with the Ideal Companion,’ is either the primary fact or the worst delusion.”⁴
--George Buttrick, author and preacher

“One of the foundational steps in knowing God, and one of the basic demonstrations that we do know God, is prayer—spiritual, persistent, biblically minded prayer.”⁵
--D. A. Carson, NT scholar

Prayer as Friendship With God

“I believe the most adequate description of prayer is simply, ‘Talking to God about what we are doing together.’”⁶
--Dallas Willard, author and theologian

“Real prayer comes not from gritting our teeth but from falling in love.”⁷
--Richard Foster, devotional writer

¹ Benedict J. Groeschel, *Listening At Prayer* (New York: Paulist Press, 1983), p. 20.

² Alfred Lord Tennyson, "Morte D'Arthur" from *Poems*, 4th edition (London: Moxon, 1845).

³ Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy*, p. 250.

⁴ George Arthur Buttrick, *Prayer* (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1962), p. 15.

⁵ Carson, D. A. (1992). *A Call to Spiritual Reformation: Priorities from Paul and his Prayers* (16). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House.

⁶ Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy*, p. 243.

⁷ Richard J. Foster, *Prayer :Finding the Heart's True Home* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1992), p. 3.

“We are so dependent on God that not only *should* we do everything for him, but we are *unable* to do anything except by him and for him. Therefore we ought to be asking God to give us the means to please him. And this happy necessity to run to him for all our needs, far from being a source of bother to us, ought to be the source of our complete consolation. What a blessing it is to speak to him in trust, to open our hearts to him, and by means of prayer to be untied with him as much as it is possible to be in this life!”⁸

--Francois Fenelon, French devotional writer

I recently asked a men’s class that I was teaching how many of them had a tough time practicing the discipline of prayer. At first, everyone was very reluctant to raise his hand. But after a short, pregnant silence, a few hands were raised. After about a minute at least one-third of the class sat with their hands in the air.

I asked them why they had a difficult time praying. There was a wide range of comments:

- “I can’t seem to find the time to pray.”
- “I begin to pray, and then I get distracted and never finish my prayers.”
- “When I don’t get the answers that I’m looking for, then I get discouraged and stop praying.”
- “I can’t pray when I’m angry. I feel like God won’t hear me if I’m angry.”
- “I have a difficult time looking off into space and praying to someone that I can’t see.”
- “I’m not a very good conversationalist and prayer is all about talking. I just can’t seem to put my thoughts and emotions into words.”

So for the next five or ten minutes the class talked about all the reasons they found it tough to pray.

Prayer can be tough. Sometimes it is tough to look up to what seems to be an empty sky and pour out your heart. It is easier to talk to someone with flesh and blood who is seated right in front of you. So let’s try to change the way we think about prayer. Let’s think of prayer as a friendship. This makes prayer a conversation between friends. When you talk to a close friend, you just talk. You share whatever comes into your mind and whatever is on your heart. You talk in your everyday language with everyday words. You just talk. This is friendship prayer. This is conversational prayer.

I’ve recently tried talking to God in this way and it has helped me tremendously. When I’m at home, I try to picture God sitting across the room from me on my dilapidated couch. We might be listening to Vivaldi or Art Bakley or The Beatles on the stereo. And I begin to talk. I talk to him like he is a friend sitting across the room from me sharing some time together. When I’m driving, I just open my mouth and talk to God as if he were seated right next to me in the passenger seat of my car. I just talk. I talk about the day, the traffic,

⁸ Francois Fenelon, p. 25

my destination, my worries, or my anxieties. I talk about my wife, my kids, and my friends. I talk about my hurts, my sadness, and my joy. I talk about my dreams, my goals, my lack of ambition, and my desire to accomplish more with my life. I talk about whatever comes to my mind and whatever is on my heart. This is friendship prayer. This conversational approach to prayer has helped me to be myself in prayer. It has helped me to open up my heart and to share whatever is on my mind with God.

Do we ask too much of God?

How many times are our prayers just a wish list for God? It is good and right to request things of God in prayer. We ask our friends for favors all the time. Dallas Willard writes, "The picture of prayer that emerges from the life and teaching of Jesus in the Gospels is quite clear. Basically it is one of asking, requesting things from God."⁹ In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught, "Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened."¹⁰ So Jesus invited us to take our petitions to God in prayer. And this is a perfectly legitimate way to pray.

But we also have to realize that prayers that start with requesting must move beyond that as our friendship with God matures. A friendship is based on more than just "what can I get out of this friendship?" We talk to our friends because they are our friends. We talk because we want to stay connected.

A good friend moves away, and you keep talking. You talk. You write. You speak on the phone. You e-mail. You stay connected. George Buttrick in his phenomenal book called *Prayer* states, "To 'use' friendship is to abuse it—and lose it. What did Jesus 'get out of' prayer? The answer might be 'Calvary!'"¹¹ Jesus did pray prayers of petition. We see this in Garden of Gethsemane. But a broader picture of Jesus' prayer life shows us that Jesus prayed because he was connected with the Father. Prayer was as natural to Jesus as breathing is to the rest of humanity. Jesus and the Father were connected. Prayer was an exchange of ideas. It was a conversation. Prayer was the result of their relationship with each other.

Anthony Bloom in his little book entitled *Beginning to Pray* speaks about the difference between wanting something from God verses wanting God himself. He writes, "We want something *from* Him, not *Him* at all. Is that a relationship? Do we behave in that way with our friends? Do we aim at what friendship can *give* us or is it the friend whom we love? Is this true with regard to the Lord?"¹² These are good questions for us to consider as we think about prayer as friendship.

⁹*The Divine Conspiracy*, pp. 241-242.

¹⁰ Matthew 7:7-8.

¹¹ Buttrick, *Prayer*, p. 37.

¹² Bloom, p. 29.

In John 15:7 Jesus states, "If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you." Notice that the asking and the giving are contingent upon the remaining. We must put first things first. We are first to remain in Jesus and to let his word remain in us. Remaining or abiding in Jesus is the focus here. In other words, friendship or relationship with Jesus is the focus. Do you have a friendship with Jesus? Conversational prayer flows from our friendship with Jesus. We talk because we are friends.

Prayer, the Only Necessary Thing

The only necessary thing is prayer. Baron Fredrick von Hugel a philosopher and mystic said, "Prayer is the essential element of life." Why is it the essential element in life? Prayer is our connection with God. It is to our spirit what breathing is to our physical body.

Consider the story of Mary and Martha as related by Eugene Peterson in *The Message*:

As they continued their travel, Jesus entered a village. A woman by the name of Martha welcomed him and made him feel quite at home. She had a sister, Mary, who sat before the Master, hanging on every word he said. But Martha was pulled away by all she had to do in the kitchen. Later, she stepped in, interrupting them. "Master, don't you care that my sister has abandoned the kitchen to me? Tell her to lend me a hand."

The Master said, "Martha, dear Matha, you're fussing far too much and getting yourself worked up over nothing. One thing only is essential, and Mary has chosen it—it's the main course, and won't be taken from her."¹³

Mary chose the only essential thing. She chose the only thing that really mattered. She chose the "main course." What did she choose? She chose to have a conversation with Jesus. She chose to listen—to hang on his every word. She chose friendship.

Martha busied herself with other matters. She was pulled away from conversation with Jesus by all she had to do in the kitchen. That was her choice. She let busyness take her away from a conversation with Jesus. There is nothing wrong with taking care of busyness. In fact, it is the right thing to do. Taking care of busy matters is a spiritual discipline. But it can't come before our friendship with Jesus. Mary chose the one essential thing—to have a conversation with Jesus. To sit down and talk with Jesus, this is the main course.

How do we develop friendship prayer?

1. Through honesty.

One of the benefits of having a best friend is that you can be honest with her or him. In fact, honesty often defines friendship. If God is our friend, then we can be honest with

¹³ Eugene H. Peterson, *The Message* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2005), pp. 145-146.

him in prayer. We can express our anger, our fears, our frustrations, our doubts, our insecurities, and our anxiety to God in prayer. We can be real with God in prayer. Whatever we think, we say. Whatever we feel, we express it to him in prayer.

God will listen to everything we have to say. We can even express our criticisms toward him as a Father. The Psalmists were incredibly honest with God. They cried out to God:

“How long, O Lord? Will you
forget me forever?
How long will you hide your
Face from me?” (Psalm 13:1).

“My soul is in anguish,
How long, O Lord, how long?” (Psalm 6:3).

“I say to God, my Rock,
‘Why have you forgotten me?’” (Psalm 42:9).

“But I cry to you for help, O Lord,
in the morning my prayer
comes before you.
Why, O Lord, do you reject me
And hide your face from me?” (Psalm 88:13-14).

“Awake, my God; decree justice.” (Psalm 7:6).

“O my God, I cry out by day, but
you do not answer” (Psalm 22:2).

“O God, whom I praise,
do not remain silent” (Psalm 109:1).

“O God, do not keep silent;
be not quiet, O God, be not
still” (Psalm 83:1).

“Why are you so far from saving me
so far from the words of my groaning” (Psalm 22:1).

“Why, O Lord, do you stand far
off?
Why do you hide yourself in
times of trouble?” (Psalm 10:1).

“Arise, Lord! Lift up your hand,
O God.

Do not forget the helpless” (Psalm 10:12).

Jeremiah felt that God had tricked him into becoming a prophet. In fact he used an even stronger word—*deceived*. He shared this attitude with God in Jeremiah 20:7,

“O Lord, you deceived me, and I
was deceived;
you overpowered me and
prevailed.
I am ridiculed all day long;
everyone mocks me.”

The *Jerusalem Bible* translates this last line in a unique way:

“I am a daily laughing-stock,
everyone’s butt.”

This is Jeremiah being honest with God. Having a real conversation with the Lord.

And, of course, let’s not forget the words of Jesus on the cross when he cried out to the Father, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46). Jesus was expressing his heart to the Father. At that time, Jesus felt the absence of God. He wasn’t afraid to express his emotion in honest prayer. If we are honest, we all feel like there are times when God is absence. Are we honest with those feelings?

God is big enough to handle our honest emotion. We can complain to God. We can argue with him. We can cry out to him. We can even yell at him. He is big enough to take it. He wants us to be honest with him. The words of Henri Nouwen ring true, “Only by expressing our anger and resentment directly to God in prayer will we come to know the fullness of love and freedom. Only by pouring out our story of fear, rejection, hatred and bitterness can we hope to be healed.”¹⁴

Just talk to God as you would speak to a friend. Don’t put up any pretense. Don’t use flowery language or “God-talk” in your prayers.¹⁵ Talk about the little things. Talk about the minutia. Share your day. Tell him your feelings. Let him know your hurts. Laugh with him and cry with him. Talk to him over a cup of coffee. Read a psalm to him. Just talk. Converse with him—friend to friend.

Come to God as you are. Don’t think that you have to be perfect before you pray. You’ll never be perfect. If you are angry, take your anger to God in pray. Let him hear the reason for your anger. If you are filled with lust, then share it with the Father. Look at him as a friend. Don’t expect your every motive for prayer to be pure. Just talk to God. Just pray. Richard Foster in his excellent book called *Prayer: Finding the Heart’s True Home* writes;

¹⁴ Henri Nouwen with Michael J. Christensen and Rebecca J. Laird, *Spiritual Direction: Wisdom for the Long Walk of Faith* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006), p. 60.

¹⁵ “God-talk” is syntax that is used on in prayer and not normal conversation.

The truth of the matter is, we all come to prayer with a tangled mass of motives—altruistic *and* selfish, merciful *and* hateful, loving *and* bitter. Frankly, this side of eternity we will *never* unravel the good from the bad, the pure from the impure. But what I have come to see is that God is big enough to receive us with all our mixture. We do not have to be bright, or pure, or filled with faith, or anything. That is what grace means, and not only are we saved by grace, we live by it as well. And we pray by it.¹⁶

2. Through Dialogue.

“Prayer at its highest is a two-way conversation. You may say silently or aloud, ‘Lord what art Thou saying to me?’ Then let your imagination perfectly loose while you reply to yourself what you SUPPOSE He would answer.”¹⁷

--Frank C. Laubach, prayer warrior

“There is no mode of life in the world more pleasing and more full of delight than continual conversation with God.”¹⁸

--Brother Lawrence, contemplative

Friendship is a two-way street. It is a give and take. It is a dialogue. When you converse with someone, you speak and you listen. To pray in dialogue means that we not only speak, but we listen. We speak to God in prayer, but we also listen in prayer. God listens to us in prayer, but God also wants to speak to us in prayer. He wants to have a conversation with us. We must listen for his voice. Psalm 95:7-8 reads, “Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.” To hear God’s voice in prayer, we must develop listening ears. Isaiah 55:3 notes, “Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live.”

To hear the voice of God, we must tune out all the distracting noise that keeps us from hearing God. We always practice selective listening. If we focused on every sound around us, we would go crazy. We learn how to filter out the noises that we don’t want to hear. Benedict J. Groeschel calls this “selective deafness.”¹⁹ When we listen in prayer, we are selectively in tune with the voice of God. Henri Nouwen writes, “To pray also means to be quiet and listen, whether or not we feel God is speaking to us. More than anything, prayer is primarily listening and waiting. We listen for God in an attitude of openness of heart, humility of spirit, and quietness of soul.”²⁰ This “listening and waiting” creates a prayer dialogue.

¹⁶ Foster, *Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home*, p. 8.

¹⁷ Frank C. Laubach, *Prayer: The Mightiest Force in the World* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, [n.d.]), p. 76.

¹⁸ Brother Lawrence, *The Practice of the Presence of God* (Philadelphia: Judson, [n.d.]), p. 60.

¹⁹ Groeschel, p. 9.

²⁰ Nouwen, *Spiritual Direction*, p. 63.

Perhaps this is what Paul meant when he wrote, “pray continually” (1 Thessalonians 5:17).” To pray continually is to have a continuing dialogue with God. It is what Brother Lawrence calls practicing the presence of God. It is what Frank Laubach practiced when he attempted to see how many minutes out of the day he could be conscience of God’s presence as recorded in his book *Game of Minutes*. Throughout the day we seek God’s guidance and listen for his voice. At night, when we lie down to sleep, we are still in dialogue with him asking him watch over us as we sleep and to guard our dreams and visions during the night.

This idea of staying constant in prayer is found throughout the New Testament. To the church in Colosse Paul writes, “Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving” (Colossians 4:2, RSV²¹). Paul writes to the church in the capital city of Rome, “Rejoice in your hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer” (Romans 12:12, RSV). Paul exhorts the brothers and sisters in Ephesus to continually pray writing, “And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints” (Ephesians 6:18). To the church in Philippi Paul urges them to replace anxiety with prayer, stating, “Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God” (Philippians 4:6). Prayer is a constant dialogue with God. It is something we practice throughout the day replacing our anxious thoughts with thoughts of Jesus, replacing our fears with the Spirit’s fire, replacing our complacency with God’s passion.

Benedict J. Groeschel in his book *Listening At Prayer* poses these interesting questions for us to consider:

Perhaps you already know how to listen but do you listen when you pray? Do you listen when you live? Could you listen better? Do you feel guilty when all your prayer is listening and not doing? Do you listen when you remember the past or plan the future? Do you listen even when you stop dead in your tracks and realize that you have sinned?²²

In conclusion, we have attempted to redefine prayer as friendship with God. Gregory of Nyssa in his devotional classic “The Life of Moses” wrote, “We regard falling from God’s friendship as the only thing dreadful and we consider becoming God’s friend the only thing worthy of honor and desire. This ... is the perfection of life.”²³ To pray is to have a conversation with our Father. We can share everything with God in prayer. When we pray with our mouths, we should also listen with our ears. But most of all, we should connect with God in prayer. Richard Foster notes, “Prayer is nothing more than an ongoing and growing love relationship with God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.”²⁴ Amen.

²¹ RSV is the Revised Standard Version ©1946, 1952, 1971 (the Apocrypha is copyrighted 1957, 1977) by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA.

²² Groeschel, p. 5.

²³ Gregory of Nyssa, “The Life of Moses,” in *The Classics of Western Spirituality*, translated by Abraham J. Malherbe and Everett Ferguson (New York: Paulist, 1987), p. 137.

²⁴ Foster, *Prayer: Finding the Heart’s True Home*, p. 13.

Four Things That Can Hinder Our Prayers

1. An unforgiving heart.

In Matthew 6:14 Jesus states, "For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you."

2. Being a disrespectful husband.

1 Peter 3:7 states, "Husbands, in the same way be considerate as you live with your wives, and treat them with respect as the weaker partner and as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life, so that nothing will hinder your prayers."

3. A hypocritical, vain attitude.

In Matthew 6:5 Jesus states, "And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full."

4. Sin.

Isaiah 59:1-2 reads,

"Surely the arm of the LORD is not too short to save,
nor his ear too dull to hear.

But your iniquities have separated
you from your God;

your sins have hidden his face from you,
so that he will not hear."

Psalms 66:18 reads,

"If I had cherished sin in my heart,
the Lord would not have listened."

Practical Considerations

1. Start simple.

Start where you are. If you have never prayed before, then just begin. Talk to God like he is sitting beside you. Don't worry about phraseology or wording, just talk. Talk like you are having a conversation with a friend. If you run out of things to say after one minute, then so be it. Prayer is not about the time spent or the number of words spoken, it is about giving your heart to God in that moment. So just talk. Talk about your feelings, your worries, your hurts, your joy, your pain, your concerns, your wants, your contentment, your family, your friends, your co-workers, your enemies, your likes, your dislikes, your ambitions, your hobbies, your temptations, your life. Just talk. How do we learn to pray? By praying.

2. When?

Any time. Any place is a good time for prayer. It doesn't matter when you pray, just pray. For some people, the morning works best. For others, at night before bed is best.

3. Where?

Any place. A place without distractions is ideal, but you can learn to block out the distractions and focus on God anytime and anywhere. Where is the best place to pray? Wherever you are. That's the best place.

4. Consistency.

Dallas Willard writes, "The more we pray, the more we think to pray."²⁵ With anything in life, consistency makes us better at that task. My Kung Fu instructor, Sifu Karl Romain, teaches his students, "The habits you train are the habits you gain." Prayer might not be natural for all of us, but the more we pray, the more prayer becomes a natural part of our lives.

5. Persistence.

Someone asks, "What if I get bored? What if I get tired?" I know I've found myself nodding off in prayer on occasion. Push through. Keep praying. God will honor your persistence. George Buttrick writes, "Prayer has its drudgery; if we shrink from the discipline we shall never gain the joy."²⁶

Abba,

I want to talk to you as friend to friend. I want to open my heart and share with you everything that I am thinking and feeling. Help me to connect with you in prayer. Help me to be abundantly honest with you in prayer. Help my prayer to be a running dialogue with you throughout the day.

Through your Son,
Amen

Suggested Reading:

Appleton, George. General Editor. *The Oxford Book of Prayer*.

Baillie, John. *A Diary of Private Prayer*.

Bloom, Anthony. *Beginning to Pray*.

Buttrick, George. *Prayer*.

_____. *So We Believe, So We Pray*.

²⁵ Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), p. 185.

²⁶ Buttrick, *Prayer*, p. 266.

Foster, Richard J. *Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home*.
Griffin, Emilie. *Clinging: The Experience of Prayer*.
Groeschel, Benedict J. *Listening At Prayer*.
Kierkegaard, Soren. *The Prayers of Soren Kierkegaard*.
Laubach, Frank. *Game with Minutes*.
_____. *Learning the Vocabulary of God*.
_____. *Prayer: The Mightiest Force in the World*.
Quoist, Michael. *Prayers*.
Rauschenbush, Walter. *For God and the People: Prayers of the Social Awakening*.
Rice, John R. *Prayer—Asking and Receiving*.

II. Fasting.

I wonder whether we have ever fasted. I wonder whether it has ever occurred to us that we ought to be considering the question of fasting. The fact is, is it not, that this whole subject seems to have fallen right out of our lives, right out of our whole Christian thinking.

--Martyn Lloyd-Jones, evangelical preacher

Abba John the Short, advising the young brothers to love fasting, told them frequently: "The good soldier, undertaking to capture a strongly fortified, enemy city, blockades food and water. In this way the resistance of the enemy is weakened and he finally surrenders. Something similar happens with carnal impulses, which severely war against a person in his youth. Blessed fasting subdues the passions and the demons and ultimately removes them far from the combatant." "And the powerful lion," he told them another time, "frequently falls into a snare because of his gluttony, and all of his strength and might disappear."

--*The Philokalia* (Fourth to Sixth Centuries)

Fasting is one of the fundamental principles of Christian life; it makes the faithful capable of living in accordance with the will of God in all circumstances. Through fasting the will of God becomes more clearly recognizable and is less easily lost sight of. Just as breathing is the fundamental function of physical life in that it enables other functions to stay alive, so fasting and prayer are fundamental functions of the spiritual life.²⁷

--Slavko Barbaric

Introduction

Let me begin this discussion with an important note: If you have a medical condition or are taking medication, then check with your physician before you fasting. If you have any question or questions about about the adverse effects of fasting on your body

²⁷ Slavko Barbaric's, *Fasting* (Steubenville, OH: Franciscan University Press, 1988), p. 41.

then talk to a doctor. If he or she says “No, don’t fast,” then follow their advice. There will be more on this later, but I wanted to start the discussion with this point.

Now another important observation: If you are a new Christian or someone who is just beginning to explore Christianity, you might want to begin your journey with prayer and Bible study and come back to fasting when you have a little mileage on your journey. Fasting is challenging. When we fast correctly, we suffer a bit, and I don’t know many people that enjoy suffering. However, we can learn valuable lessons through suffering. The book of Hebrews tells us that Jesus learned obedience through his suffering. It says, “During the days of Jesus’ life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. ⁸ Although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered ⁹ and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him ¹⁰ and was designated by God to be high priest in the order of Melchizedek” (Hebrews 5:7-10).

My good friend Oneche Ogauyha wrote a book about his experience with being diagnosed with an aggressive form of prostate cancer and its treatment. He talked about learning lessons through his suffering. He wrote, “So, ‘Why Not Me?’ Adversity is not all that bad you know. As tough as it seems, adversity does carry a positive charge. It strips away all the non-essentials and forces you back to your core values and beliefs, back to the things that matter the most, and back to the bedrock of your faith—Jesus. You will find the strength to carry you through.”²⁸

The three quotes given above each have something unique to say about fasting.

The first quote, by Martin Lloyd-Jones, states that fasting is the forgotten spiritual discipline. In the Western church, he is correct. We aren’t very good at fasting. We might as well say we don’t practice fasting. For many of us, fasting is like surgery, we will do it if there is no way around it.

The second quote, from Abba John the Short as found in the Eastern Orthodox collection of spiritual writing entitled *The Philokalia*, states that fasting helps us engage in the spiritual battle which is being waged for our souls. When we deny the flesh, we awaken the spirit. Fasting helps us in this endeavor.

The third quote, from Slavko Barbaric a Franciscan priest and spiritual writer, states that fasting helps us recognize the will of God for our lives. I believe this to be one of the primary blessings of fasting. Fasting opens our eyes to the spiritual realm all around us and allows us to know God more intimately than we would otherwise know him.

Why Fast?

²⁸ Oneche Ogayuaaha in Refined.

Persons well used to fasting as a systematic practice will have a clear and constant sense of their resources in God.²⁹

--Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*

“Why fast?” I’m often asked this question. The most obvious answer is that Jesus fasted. Jesus fasted when he needed to prepare himself for spiritual war, Jesus fasted before he made important decisions, and Jesus fasted because fasting was a part of his regular regimen for spiritual living.

After giving that answer, people often ask again, “Yes, but will fasting change me?” The answer to that is “No, fasting will not change you.” Sometimes people go on extended fasts thinking that they will be changed because of the fast. That’s not how fasting works. Fasting won’t change you if you go into the fast thinking the fast is going to change you. But here’s the thing, God will change you as you fast. Fasting doesn’t change us, but God does. Fasting helps us to focus on God so that God can change us. That’s the import of fasting.

Someone once said, “We have to control our appetites or our appetites will control us.” I like this statement. When we fast, we say “No” to the flesh and “Yes” to the spirit. The flesh isn’t use to hearing “No.” Fasting prompts a battle between the flesh and the spirit.

Giving and praying are common spiritual disciplines, but how are we doing with fasting? We tend to be pretty inept at this spiritual discipline. Why? It’s tough. It demands something of us. With fasting comes hunger. When we are hungry, we usually grab a meal. We aren’t use to saying “No” to the flesh. And when we say “No” to the flesh, the flesh fights back. The flesh says, “Give me food, or I’ll give you a headache.” The flesh says, “Feed me, or I’ll make you feel fatigue.” So we feed our flesh. Once, twice, three, and sometimes four or five times a day.

Marcia Ford writes about the struggles she had during fasting. She notes:

The first three days of my water-only fast were decidedly unpleasant. The headaches, the hunger pains that were no longer mere pangs, the fuzzy thinking and lightheadedness—it’s a wonder I managed not only to get to work each day but to also retain my job in the process. As a reporter at a busy daily newspaper, I was not in any position to kick back and take it easy for those first three days,. More than once I was tempted to quit. Fasting, that is, not my job.³⁰

Anyone who has been on a water-only fast for any extended period time can relate to what Ms. Ford writes. Fasting isn’t fun.

The flesh doesn’t push back when we don’t pray or study our Bibles. But when it comes to fasting, we feel the battle between the flesh and the spirit. We realize firsthand

²⁹ Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, p. 167.

³⁰ Marcia Ford, *Traditions of the Ancients* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2006), p. 199.

that “the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.” The flesh often wins. Therefore, fasting becomes the forgotten spiritual discipline.

Marcia Ford lists several reasons for fasting in her book, *Traditions of the Ancients*. She writes:

- When we abstain from food, we free our minds from having to think about an ordinary activity like eating. ...
- Fasting reveals a great deal about ourselves: what our priorities are, how cranky we can be at times, how often we turn to food for comfort and a release from anxiety. ...
- Depriving our bodies of the food we’ve come to depend on causes us to turn to God as the One we can always depend on.
- Self-denial, when practiced for the right reasons, always leads to a greater degree of self-control.
- Whenever we purposely suffer, we become better equipped to handle hardships in the future, and we become more sensitive to those around us who are suffering.
- Developing the habit of fasting adds to our growing awareness of the value of spiritual exercises and the impact they can have on our relationship with God.
- Fasting sharpens our senses and our sensitivity to the Holy Spirit, which makes it an invaluable activity when you’re seeking clarity on an important issue.³¹

What is Fasting?

Fasting unto our Lord is therefore feasting—feasting on him and on doing his will.³²

--Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*

Fasting is refraining from food so that we can better focus on spiritual matters. Isabel Bettwy writes:

The word “fasting” comes from a Hebrew word which literally means “to cover or shut one’s mouth.” The Greek word means “not to eat.” Strictly speaking, fasting is voluntary abstinence from food, not as an end in itself, but as a means to holiness. Practically speaking, fasting goes beyond the realm of food into our actions and thoughts.³³

The *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible* defines fasting as, “Eating sparingly or abstaining from food altogether, either from necessity or desire. In medical terms, fasting is

³¹ Ibid., pp. 200-201.

³² Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, p. 166.

³³ From the introduction to Slavko Barbaric’s, *Fasting* (Steubenville, OH: Franciscan University Press, 1988), p. 5.

the detoxification of the body through the restriction of food.... The NT word which is translated “fasting” literally means one who has not eaten, one who is empty.”³⁴ “Fasting allows us to be empty so that we can fill ourselves up with God. In my thinking, this is the greatest benefit of fasting. *The New Bible Dictionary* writes, “Fasting in the Bible generally means going without all food and drink for a period (*e.g.* Est. 4:16), and not merely refraining from certain foods.”³⁵

Slavko Barbaric in his book entitled *Fasting* writes, “The word *fasting* comes from a Hebrew word which literally means ‘to cover or shut one’s mouth.’ The Greek word means ‘not to eat.’ Strictly speaking, fasting is a voluntary abstinence from food, not as an end in itself, but as a means to holiness.”³⁶

Can we call abstaining from other enjoyments of life, like television, music, movies, and candy as fasting? As long as we understand that the strict use of the term “fasting” in the Bible is abstaining from food, then we are safe in stretching the definition to include other things. The key to fasting is to take time to really focus in on God.

Fasting is giving up something good for something better. Fasting is an act of worship to God. Fasting is an act of faith on our part.

Fasting from food can be especially helpful in heightening our spiritual senses. Having gone on several fasts, I find that when I fast, I am more focused on the spiritual realm. For example, I can spend the time that I would have spent preparing food and eating meals in reading my Bible and praying. If you have not fasted recently, then decide to go on a two- to three-day fast. See if you are not challenged to grow in ways that you have not thought about before. (If you have a medical condition, then you should check with your doctor before changing your diet. Remember there are other ways to fast than going without food.)

Historically, the Jews fasted on the Day of Atonement. They also fasted during times of mourning or national calamities. During the first century, Jews fasted twice a week—probably on Mondays and Thursdays. (In later centuries, Christians would fast on Wednesdays and Fridays). When some of the first century Jews fasted, they called attention to themselves by rubbing ashes on their faces—so much so that their face was unrecognizable! This was rather ironic since they were calling attention to themselves by painting themselves with ash, yet at the same time they were concealing their identity with the ash.

³⁴ Elwell, W. A., & Beitzel, B. J. (1988). *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible* (780). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House.

³⁵ Wood, D. R. W., & Marshall, I. H. (1996). *New Bible dictionary* (3rd ed.) (364). Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

³⁶ Barbaric, p. 5.

Jesus restates his warning against hypocrisy in prayer when he speaks of fasting. The disciple of Jesus was to keep his normal appearance during a fast by putting oil on his head, a common practice for that day, and washing his face. By fasting in secret, God would reward him—and us—openly.

Medical Alert.

A word of caution here: Some people need to be careful about fasting. There are certain people who might experience medical problems when they fast. Therefore, it is good to consult a physician before you fast (especially if you are going to be involved in a lengthy fast).

Who should be careful?

- Pregnant women and women who are breast-feeding.
- Children and teenagers.
- Seniors.
- Anyone who is recovering from surgery or an illness.
- Anyone with extreme weight loss issues.
- Anyone who has any type of eating disorder.
- Anyone with chronic medical problems like diabetes, heart problems, liver disease, or kidney disease.
- Anyone who taking medication that might be effected by a change in diet.
- Anyone with serious mental health issues.

While fasting, it is common to experience discomfort. Besides experiencing hunger pains, you might also experience dizziness, fatigue, headaches, muscle aches, and weakness. If your body is used to sugar and caffeine, then you will experience withdrawal symptoms from sugar and caffeine. In the early stages of the fast, these symptoms will be more severe. Over time, you will be able to push through these discomforts. During my twenty-one day fast, I found days three to five to be the most painful due to withdrawal symptoms from sugar and caffeine. During days seven through ten, I felt enormous hunger pains. During these days, I tried to feel a sense of solidarity with the three-quarters of a million people on the earth who are lucky to get even one meal in a day. After day ten, the hunger pains abated and I started feeling great. During the last week of the fast, I feel weakness and fatigue. All of these pains taught me to rely upon God. They reminded me of the constant battle between the spirit and the flesh. I was reminded of verses like 2 Corinthians 9:8 where Paul writes, “God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work.”

Not everyone should try a twenty-one day fast. You have to consider your body type and how much fat is stored in your body. When you fast, your body lives off the fat that has been stored in your body. Once the body depletes the fat that has been stored, the body then begins to burn muscle for fuel. Remember, your heart is a muscle. Therefore, you must be careful to monitor how much weight you are losing during your fast. If you ever feel like you are going to far, then be wise and stop the fast. As I’ve said before, it is best to

check with a health professional before you begin a long, protracted fast. People have died from fasting.

Focus

Know why you are fasting. Is it to get closer to God? Are you seeking an answer to one of life's questions? Is it to make a wise decision concerning a career move? Is it to accompany repentance in your life? Is it to help you focus on a character change? Know the mountain that you want God to move. Name the mountain. Ask other people to pray for you during this time. While you are fasting spend time in God's word reading about your mountain and listening to God for an answer. Spend time in prayer and meditation. Fast from anything that would be a distraction upon your concentration on God during this time of fasting. For me, I love music. All kinds of music. But I decided that during my fast I would not listen to any music. I could sing hymns myself. That helped my focus. But I didn't want to allow anything to enter my life that might cause me lose my focus on God.

When is fasting inappropriate? When you do it thinking of it as a meritorious act that will gain you favor with God. Also, when it is done with a sense of punishment for the wrongs of the past or present. Fasting is not to be used as whip across a guilty conscience. Francis of Assisi wrote of fasting:

Some of you can sustain life with less food than others can, and therefore I desire that he who needs more nourishment shall not be obliged to equal others, but that everyone shall give his body what it need for being an efficient servant of the soul for as we are obliged to be on our guard against superfluous food which injures body and soul alike, thus we must be on the watch against immoderate fasting, and this the more, because the Lord wants conversion and not victims.³⁷

A Few Practical Guidelines

1. If you are new to fasting, begin with a short fast. Perhaps fast from morning to evening for your first fast, then add to the length of the fast over time. Move to a full day. Then move to two full days. Better to start with a shorter fast and accomplish the goal, than to set a lofty goal and fall short.
2. As you fast, spend extra time in the Word. When we eat, we spend time preparing the food, sitting down to eat, and cleaning up after the meal. Use this time that was spent for the meal feasting upon God's Word.
3. Don't wait for an emergency to drive you fast. Fast while you are strong. Allow your fast to give you more strength in the Lord.

³⁷ Marcia Ford, p. 205.

4. Know why you are fasting. Fast to draw closer to God. Fast to allow God to shape your character. Fast with a purpose.
5. Before you fast, check with your physician and make sure he or she approves the fast.
6. When you fast, you might experience dizziness, headaches, fatigue, or lightheadedness. This is normal. During the fast, your body cleanses itself of toxins. If you eat sugar or drink coffee, the body will miss those drugs and long for them. In time, these symptoms will pass.
7. You will get hungry. Fight the hunger with prayer and time in the Word.
8. Gradually break the fast. If it is an extended fast, then you will want to eat very lightly when you break the fast.

A Prayer by Slavko Barbaric³⁸:

Father,

I present this day of fasting to you. Through fasting I want to listen to and live your Word more. I want, during this day, to learn to be turned more toward you, in spite of all the things that surround me. With this fast that I take upon myself freely, I pray to you for all who are hungry and who, because of their hunger, have become aggressive.

I present you this fast for PEACE in the world. Wars come because we are attached to material things and are ready to kill each other because of them. Father, I present to you this fast for all those who are totally tied down to material things so that they are unable to see any other values.

I ask you for all those who are in conflict because they have become blind in what they possess. Father, open our eyes, through fasting, to what you give us, to what we have!

In Jesus,
Amen

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