

The ministry of prayer

While almost all Christians understand the basic truths about prayer, most of us find great difficulty in devoting time to it every day. It is true that a close personal walk with the Lord is impossible without that daily "quiet time"...a time of listening and speaking to our Heavenly Father. None of us would expect to maintain a good relationship with our spouse or a close friend if we never spoke to that person. How much more important is it to seek to be near the One who made us and whose will and work we desire to do?

Likewise, it is impossible for the Body of Christ-the Church-to stay on course if we do not faithfully and regularly unite our hearts and voices in prayer for the guidance of the Holy Spirit in our decisions and actions. We pray because Jesus told us to pray. We pray because it changes us, and we pray because it brings about the will of God in our church and in our society. Pastor is leading us to a new level of commitment to prayer. Every member is being asked to pray on their own, with their families, and to join in on the corporate times of prayer with the entire Body of Christ. You are being asked to pray, but you are also being asked to fast.

The ministry of fasting

Biblically, prayer and fasting go together. However, in our day, the biblical principle of fasting has been almost forgotten. Throughout history, God's people have made fasting an important part of their worship and prayer. Fasting is God's way of helping us focus on matters of the Spirit; it enables us to gain control of our appetites so that we can direct our mental and spiritual energies toward Him. Those who have experienced the power and blessing of fasting testify that it is far more than a religious exercise or discipline. Dr. Bill Bright, founder of Campus Crusade for Christ, says, "I believe the power of fasting as it relates to prayer is the spiritual atomic bomb that our Lord has given us to destroy the strongholds of evil and usher in a great revival and spiritual harvest around the world."

What a statement! It was written after Dr. Bright engaged in a 40-day personal fast, during which time God gave him the vision to call churches and individuals to times of fasting and prayer on an unprecedented scale. Dr. Bright stated:

"This proved to be the most important forty days of my life. As I waited upon the Lord, the Holy Spirit gave me the assurance that America and much of the world will, before the end of year 2000, experience a great spiritual awakening. But before God comes in revival power, the Holy Spirit will call millions of God's people to repent, fast and pray in the Spirit of II Chronicles 7:14:

"If my people, who are called by My name, will humble themselves, and pray and seek My face, and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and will heal their land."

The scope of this revival depends on how believers in America and the rest of the world respond to this call.

What is fasting?

"To fast" means primarily "not to eat." Biblical fasting always centers on spiritual purposes. Fasting normally involves abstaining from all solid food for a determined amount of time with specific spiritual goals. But it is important to consume fruit or vegetable juice and water.

A thorough definition might be: "The fast is an act of the will through which the individual Christian exerts spiritual control over the flesh (through not eating) with a determination to have a more personal and powerful experience with God in prayer." It involves giving up the physical to attain greater spiritual insights.

Is fasting Biblical?

The list of biblical characters who fasted includes such greats as:

Moses, David, Elijah, Daniel, Anna, Paul and Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

Many well-known Christians throughout church history also fasted and gave testimony to its value and power. Among them were: Martin Luther, John Calvin, John Knox, John Wesley, Jonathan Edwards and David Brainerd.

Which scriptures support fasting?

Fasting has solid scriptural roots. Here are several examples:

- In the book of Joel, God called His people to fast and to pray for a time of repentance, personal commitment, and revival among the people. Joel called a national fast at the beginning of a locust plague.

"Consecrate a fast, call a sacred assembly; gather the elders and all the inhabitants of the land into the house of the Lord your God, and cry out to the Lord..."

-- Joel 1:14

We may never see a plague of locusts, but we are seeing a plague of unrighteousness; abortion, pornography, violence and lawlessness show the rebellion of people against God's Word.

- The people of God faced national extinction in the days of Queen Esther. Esther called for her own people to respond with a fast (Esther 4:16). God called His people to pray and to fast during a major crisis and God delivered His people.
- Ezra proclaimed a fast for protection as the people returned to the land following the rebuilding of the walls. God heard, and He answered by giving them supernatural protection (Ezra 8:21).
- When Daniel was faced with spiritual battles, he fasted and prayed: "In those days I, Daniel, was mourning three full weeks. I ate no pleasant food, no meat or wine came into my mouth, nor did I anoint myself at all, till three whole weeks were fulfilled..." (Daniel 10:2-3)

Is fasting appropriate today?

Yes, it is! Our nation is in need of revival. The world is in desperate need of salvation from bondage of unrighteousness. Our church is in need of protection, direction and power as we strive to do great things for the Kingdom of God in this world.

How do you fast?

Fasting should be a response to the prompting of the Holy Spirit, not to a current fad, and certainly not to please others. It will most likely come because the Holy Spirit has shown you a specific need that calls for intense, focused and uninterrupted praying on your part.

Because all fasting must be God-inspired and God-ordained, our prayer is that the Holy Spirit will initiate within us a desire to pray and to fast on behalf of all that God is doing and wants to do in our world, our church and in our lives.

What is your physical condition?

There are some people who should not fast (diabetics and those with other conditions), a physician will be able to advise you on whether any condition you have makes it unsafe for you to fast. If you have a concern because of your physical condition, be sure to consult your physician before beginning a fast. But a healthy person of any age should be able to fast. What we call "hunger" is really appetite. The healthy body can withstand long periods without solid food; however, liquids-water and juices-should be consumed. There are books, such as Dr. Bill Bright's "The Coming Revival," which contain information concerning the physical aspects of fasting.

What is your spiritual condition?

Preparation for a meaningful fast begins with repentance and confession. Do not expect God to violate His own stated will concerning the prayers He can hear. If you have unconfessed sin in your heart, He will not hear you (Psalms 66:18; Isaiah 59:2). Iniquity is unconfessed sin. Don't waste time fasting and praying if you have decided not to confess all known sin to Him.

What kind of fast should you do?

Pastor Steve has called the church to a week of Prayer and Fasting. We would like to corporately commit to a 5 day fast, from Sunday Night after dinner till Friday Dinner time. If you cannot do so for one reason or another, then perhaps one day out of the week, or one meal a day during the week. Whatever you feel God is challenging you to do, do so with a willing obedient heart.

How to prepare your heart for fasting

- Ask God to help you make a comprehensive list of your sins.
- Confess every sin that the Holy Spirit calls to your remembrance and accept God's forgiveness (1 John 1:9).
- Seek forgiveness from all whom you have offended and forgive all who have hurt you (Mark 11:25; Luke 11:4; 17:3-4).
- Make restitution as the Holy Spirit leads you.
- Ask God to fill you with His Holy Spirit according to His command in Ephesians 5:18 and His promise in 1 John 5:14-15.
- Surrender your life to Jesus Christ as your Savior and Lord. Develop utter dependence on Him with total submission and humility. (John 5:15)
- Study the attributes of God.
- Begin your time of fasting and prayer with an expectant heart (Hebrews 11:6).
- Hunger and thirst after righteousness (Matthew 5:6).
- Do not underestimate spiritual opposition. Satan sometimes intensifies the natural battle between body and spirit (Galatians 5:16-17).

What to do on the days you 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 received 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... (Matthew 6:6-18).

On the day you fast, you should put yourself on a schedule that will allow you to receive the maximum spiritual benefit. Set aside ample time to be alone with the Lord. Listen for His leading. The more time you spend with Him, the more meaningful your fast will be. A suggested schedule for your day of fasting could be as follows:

Another good suggestion: when possible, begin and end each day on your knees with your spouse for a brief time of praise and thanksgiving to God. Longer periods of time with our Lord in prayer and Bible Study are better spent alone.

Morning:

- Begin your day in prayer and fasting.
- Join us at the church for a corporate time of prayer, if possible.
- Read and meditate on God's Word, preferably on your knees.
- Invite the Holy Spirit to work in you to will and to do His good pleasure (Philippians 2:13).
- Invite God to use you. Ask Him to show you how to influence your world, your work, your family, your church, your country and beyond.
- Pray for His vision for your life, for our church and for His empowerment to do His will.
- Spend the morning outwardly performing the regular duties of your day, but inwardly, you will be in prayer and adoration, song and worship. Cause every task to be done as "unto the Lord," as a beautiful service and ministry to Him.

Noon:

- Return to prayer and God's Word.
- Join us at the church for a corporate time of prayer. If possible.
- Take a short prayer walk.
- Spend time in intercessory prayer for our church, our city, our nation and the world. Pray for the leaders of our nation, our pastor, and our staff. Pray for the lost, for the Gospel to go forth in every nation. Pray for your family and any special needs.

Evening:

- Seek a quiet place alone with the Lord.
- Join us at the church for a corporate time of prayer, if possible.
- If others in your Sunday School Class, Bible Study, or accountability group are fasting, you may want to meet together for a time of prayer.
- Avoid television or any other distractions that may dampen your spiritual focus.

Can you confuse fasting and dieting?

Fasting is not dieting. Though you will experience some physical benefits from fasting, the focus of the fast is on God, not on any benefits that may be derived from the fast. In fact, if our fast is not unto the Lord, then it has failed. The center of the fast must be God. If anything replaces God as the

center of the fast, then we have missed the purpose. Our focus and our attention during a fast must be fixed on God. That is the only way we will be saved from seeking and loving the blessing more than the one who blesses.

What are the results of fasting?

Fasting allows us to experience God through a more intense and productive prayer life. This is true of the individual and the church. The fast will have no purpose if it is seen as only an interlude in an otherwise worldly-centered life-style. It must be a step toward a deeper commitment to know God and His will for our lives.

- Fasting results in us being more attentive to God and the things of God.
- Fasting results in us being more aware of our inadequacies and His adequacy.
- Fasting results in believers being changed in ways so they are empowered to change the world!
- Fasting results in God moving powerfully in our lives and the church in ways that allow Him to show Himself to this generation.
- Fasting brings results. When believers fasted in the Bible, things happened.
For example:

The fast released people from the bondage of sin and addiction (Matt. 17:21).

The fast answered problems and gave Godly wisdom and direction (Ezra 8:21-23).

The fast broke negative mental and emotional habits (I Kings 19).

The fast brought about healing and wholeness (Daniel 1:1-21).

The fast can expand and increase our witness and testimony for Christ (Isaiah 58:6-8; Matthew 5:14-16).

The fast can provide unusual power and protection from the evil one. (Esther 4:16).

The fast brought revival for the saved and salvation for the unsaved (I Samuel 7:2-11).

Because of our fasting, God will do something supernatural in our lives, in the lives of others, in the life of our church and in our world. Fasting will allow the Spirit of God to take us from our present state of spiritual awareness and responsiveness and lift us to a higher level. Only then can He do with us and through us what He desires to do.

Conclusion

The disciples of John the Baptist (noted for their practice of fasting) once asked Jesus why His disciples did not fast. In Matthew 9:15, Jesus stated, "Can the friends of the bridegroom mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them?" The answer is obvious. As long as Jesus was present with His disciples, they did not fast. Then Jesus said, "The days will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them, and then they will fast."

The Bridegroom is no longer present on the earth in His physical body. Jesus assumed after He ascended that we, as His followers, would fast. Now is the time to fast. Here at Eastridge Church, Pastor Steve has called us to pray and to fast. The time is Now! We have been given a God-sized assignment at a time when our world needs to see the power, grace and love of Jesus Christ. We need God to direct, protect, empower and use us to accomplish His purpose and plan for our lives.