



## Pray & Fast

Today I want to encourage you individually, as a part of the church or even if you're not a part of the church and you're here today exploring Christianity. I realize there are people here today who are not yet followers of Jesus. You've come with a friend or family member who invited you, or maybe you've come on your own. You may be wondering, "What is the point of prayer? How does it work?" Some of you who are followers of Jesus may actually wonder, "What is the point of prayer and how does it work?"

Most Christians recognize and accept, at least intellectually, the need for and the importance of prayer. We know we need to pray. We ask people to pray for us. We say we'll pray for other people. But for many and maybe even most Christians, there's not really what we would call a vibrant prayer life. So my aim today is to help you take one step forward in your understanding and experience of prayer in your life. That's a modest aim—just one step forward. If you pray every once in a while or really not that much at all, maybe before meals or at random times, I trust that after today you'll decide to spend five to ten minutes each day in prayer. That would be a step forward. Others of you may be at other points in your prayer life. Some of you may even say you have a very healthy, vibrant, powerful prayer life. My hope is that you will be able to say after today, "Here's one step forward I can take."

And not just with prayer, but also with fasting. I'm guessing that fasting is even more of a rare reality in many of our lives. I want us to see what the Bible says about fasting. Jesus talks about it right after He talks about prayer. I want to encourage you today to take a step forward—for many of you, to take a first step forward when it comes to fasting as part of your relationship with God.

Let's start with God's Word, in Matthew 6:5-17. This is actually Jesus speaking, in the middle of the Sermon on the Mount.

*<sup>5</sup> And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. <sup>6</sup> But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.*

*<sup>7</sup> And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words. <sup>8</sup> Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. <sup>9</sup> Pray then like this: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. <sup>10</sup> Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. <sup>11</sup> Give us this day our daily bread, <sup>12</sup> and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. <sup>13</sup> And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. <sup>14</sup> For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, <sup>15</sup> but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.*

*<sup>16</sup> And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. <sup>17</sup> But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, <sup>18</sup> that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.*

There's so much here and we're not going to be able to cover it all. We're going to ask two questions about both prayer and fasting, looking at this text. The first question is why do we pray, or why should we fast? The second question is how. That's where I want to give some practical encouragement to take a step forward in prayer and fasting, wherever you are in your life and relationship with God.

## **Why do we pray?**

First, we pray to express the depth of our need for God. Look at the way Jesus taught us to pray in Matthew 6, in what is known as the Lord's Prayer. I'm guessing some of you who are not Christians have even heard this prayer: "Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name..."

I remember growing up in a public high school and our baseball team would quote this prayer together before every game. Guys who were not followers of Jesus knew the Lord's Prayer and said it every game. I won't a correlation between that and the reality that we were a very bad baseball team. One could say we needed prayer; the other could say it didn't seem like it was working. Don't draw that correlation—this is not Jesus giving some magic words to quote so you win games. I can testify: that is not true. It's not just, "Say these words and everything will go well for you."

Let's look at how Jesus is teaching us to pray here. The Lord's Prayer is filled with requests for help from God. We'll talk more about this in a moment but look at the words. "Give us..." (verse 11). "Forgive us..." (verse 12). "Lead us...deliver us..." (verse 13). The attitude of our hearts in prayer is clear. We need God to do things for us. This is why we pray. Prayer is an expression of our need for God.

In football, remember the pass the team throws when they're losing by a touchdown and they have one play left. What's it called? The "Hail Mary." So why do we bring Mary in at the end of a football game? As a reminder. It's an unbiblical prayer, but what's the reason for naming a play after a prayer? The whole idea is that you work according to your plan the whole game, but when you don't have anything left and you can't turn anywhere else, you need a miracle. So you call Mary in to see what can happen.

Let's be clear. We don't pray to Mary. We do pray to God and the reason why we pray to God is because we are desperate. We need Him. We don't just need Him when we're in a desperate situation, when all of our planning has not gotten us anywhere, so now we turn to God. No, we live in desperate need for God. We live needing Hail Marys all the time, at every moment. There's no activity in our lives that doesn't require and necessitate a prayerful attitude, a dependence on and desperation for God's help.

Personally, I cannot be the husband calls me to be to my wife and the dad God desires and calls me to be to my kids. I can't be the man, the witness, the pastor you need and that God calls me to be, apart from God's help. I can't breathe apart from God's help—and neither can you. You need God for everything good in your life.

I pray God opens your eyes to for the first time, or maybe in a deeper way through His Word right now to this massive realization. You cannot carry out your marriage, parenting, grandparenting, your life as a single, your job. You cannot make wise decisions. You cannot get up out of bed. You cannot love and serve as God has called you to. You cannot be the man or woman or student God has designed you to be, nor experience the life God has created you to live, apart from daily divine intervention. Every moment of every day is a Hail Mary in that sense. We need God. That's why we pray.

Prayer is probably the most central, clear, critical expression on a daily basis of the reality that we need God. We need God's grace. We need God's strength. We need God's wisdom. We need God's sustenance. We need God's peace, joy, provision for everything we do throughout every single day. Prayer is an expression of that.

So if you turn that around for a minute, if we are not praying, then what are we saying? If we're not praying, we're saying we don't need God. This is where we realize that prayerlessness at its root is pride. If we're not a praying people, that means without question we're a prideful people, because we have convinced ourselves that we can do this on our own. It's not true.

There was a season in my life, years ago, when I had written a book and it was getting a lot of attention. I was getting asked to preach in all kinds of places. The church I was pastoring was growing. Really exciting things were happening. There was a long season when my time in prayer alone before God was what I would call inconsistent at best. Truth be told, most days it was non-existent. I'd pray before meals, but that was about all.

It frightens me how successful I could be as a pastor in the eyes of the church world but do it totally apart from intimacy with God. I praise God for His grace in my life. I think of all the different directions that I could have gone then. Don't get me wrong—I wasn't lazy. I was working hard. I was staying up all night. I was getting up early in the morning, running from one responsibility to the next. So many things were going on in the church and other places. There were all kinds of activities, but no intimacy with God. I share this because I can praise God now for His grace in how He used some people circumstances—most notably my wife—to help me come out of that season.

I'm just going to assume that if pastors struggle with this, then every follower of Christ is likely going to struggle with this. Some of you are there. I know in a gathering this size there are many people who are followers of Jesus, but right now there's very little to no real intimacy with God. Some of you may have hardly ever experienced that. Some of you have at one point, but you're just in a season where you're not. So I just want to encourage you that God has brought you here at this moment to remind you that He loves you and He desires intimacy with you. You need Him. He is opening your eyes right now to

the reality that you cannot do this on your own and He doesn't want you to. That's part of the beauty of prayer. Not only are we expressing our need for God, but He is showing His provision for us.

This leads in to our second point about why we pray.

Second, we pray to explore the mystery of intimacy with God. Our greatest need is not just to get stuff from God—daily bread, forgiveness, leadership, deliverance, these things Jesus teaches us to pray for. Our greatest need is actually to know God. We miss this, though. We limit prayer to asking for things: “God, I need this. God, I need that.” We see prayer as just asking for things.

The problem is sometimes we don't get what we ask for, causing us to wonder, “Why pray in the first place?” Have you ever thought that? “What's the point of praying? It didn't seem to do anything, so why pray?”

I heard one person describe our approach to prayer like a snack machine. You're trying to put in the right amount of change to get something out, but it doesn't work, So you shake the snack machine.

Seriously, if you've prayed for something important in the past, maybe for somebody to be healed but they weren't, then you wonder what the point was. God didn't do what you thought God should do. Or you wonder why sometimes God seems to answer other prayers, but not this one? Is it just a big flip of a coin? Is there some combination we need to figure out and plug in to make it really work?

I want to ask a question at this point. Even though your questions are honest, what if that kind of thinking actually misses the whole point of prayer to begin with? What if the point of prayer is not actually about just getting God to do stuff? Did you notice what Jesus said in Matthew 6:7-8? *“When you pray, do not heap up empty phrases...for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.”* God knows what you need!

If God already knows what you need before you even ask, what's the point? He already knows, so why are you asking? You might think God is up in heaven taking notes: “Oh, yes, I hadn't thought about that. That's a good one. Oh, yes, keep going. Please, inform Me.” No. He already knows what you need. This causes people to wonder what's the point? As soon as we ask that question, we're on the verge of an incredible break-through in prayer, because that's when we realize, “Wait a minute. So the primary point of prayer is not actually to get something, but to know Someone.” Yes! God is omniscient!

That realization will change your prayer life. The primary point of prayer is not to get something—it's to know Someone. The heart of what happens in prayer is when you're in a room alone with your heavenly Father and you realize there's intimacy to be found with Him. That's what Jesus is saying. Go in your room, close the door, pray to your Father unseen, and there is reward waiting for you. The heart of prayer is what happens when you're in a room alone with the Father.

Please hear this. This is going to sound like a bold statement—because it is a bold statement—but I stand behind it 100% based on what Jesus is teaching here. The most important thing in the world for you is not your family. It's not your husband, your wife, your kids. It's not your job. It's not your

finances. It's not your health. Keep going on and on—none of those things. The most important thing in the world is your personal intimacy with God, because that affects everything else.

Your family life is dependent on personal intimacy with God in your heart. Your marriage depends on it. Your kids need that from you. Dads, Moms, your kids need that from you more than they need you to put food on the table today for them. That will change the way you parent. Your job needs this from you. The people around you need this from you. Your finances...everything flows from this.

That's why Jesus says, "Go in your room and close the door." Set aside a time. Find a place. Get alone with God. That one practice will revolutionize your life. Where's your place? When's your time? If you don't have an immediate answer to those questions, then find an answer immediately.

That's your step forward today: a place and a time, where you get alone, just you and the Father in heaven, and He rewards you. There is reward just waiting for you. If you knew there was treasure to be found somewhere tomorrow, you'd be asking, "Where is it?" Here's the map: Set aside a time, go to a specific place and just be alone with God. This is Jesus saying, "The Father has so much for you. If you want to experience all God has for you, then this is how you pray."

He begins, "*Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name...*" Though the first part of this prayer is a request, notice it's a request for God to be hallowed, honored, worshiped. It's a cry for His Kingdom to come and His will to be done in our lives and other people's lives. It's a prayer that's seeking after God, His Kingdom and His will in the world. We want God. We need God.

Get this: the God of the universe is inviting you into relationship with Him that is marked by intimacy. It's the kind of thing that happens behind closed doors between you and God. It's not just you and some random person. It's you and the Creator of the universe! I long for you to experience this kind of intimacy with God. If that seems so far off, then I want to help you take a step forward in this. It will start with setting aside a time, going to a place and getting alone with Him.

The third reason why we pray is to experience the power of being used by God. Suffice it to say, we're going to see this as we read through the Bible together this year. Prayer is a means God has given us to participate with Him in what He is doing in the world. When we pray, it actually matters. When we pray, God uses our prayers as the means by which His purposes are accomplished in the world. When we pray, "*Your Kingdom come, your will be done...*" God answers those prayers.

Let me give you just a quick illustration from Scripture from Exodus 32. It's one of the most baffling pictures in Scripture. Moses is meeting God on the mountain and receiving the Ten Commandments. The people of God are at the bottom of the mountain, worshiping a golden calf. God says to Moses, "They're worshiping a golden calf, they're indulging in all kinds of sexual immorality and idolatry, so they are under My judgment. I'm about to pour out My holy wrath upon them." So Moses stands in the gap. He starts praying. God has basically said He's going to destroy His people, but Moses starts pleading for them. He says to God, "Remember Your promises to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob." That's a bold thing to say to an omniscient God. "Maybe You need to remember." But that's what Moses

does. He says, “Remember Your promise to save this people, to preserve them for Your glory. So show Your faithfulness to Your promises. Show Your mercy. Yes, they deserve judgment, but show Your mercy.” What happens after Moses pleads with God? The Bible says God relents His wrath. He doesn’t enforce that judgment on His people. There are other places in Scripture where God acts according to Moses’ word.

We’re supposed to act according to God’s Word, but God actually acts according to our word in prayer. This is an awesome thought. You might wonder, “Does that mean God changes His mind? Is God’s will in fluctuation?” No, no, no. That’s why I wish we had time to study that passage. God’s will and purposes are just as fixed there as they are anywhere in Scripture. But the whole point is that God ordains not just the ends, but also the means.

Remember the story of Jonah? Nineveh was under God’s wrath and was about to experience God’s judgment. But God appointed a prophet to go and proclaim grace there so that His wrath would be averted and Nineveh would be saved. It’s the same thing with you and me. In our sin, we deserve judgment before a holy God. But God appointed an Intercessor named Jesus to stand in the gap on the cross for us, and by His mercy we are saved from our sins.

So in Exodus 32 God has raised up Moses as an intercessor. He has ordained that Moses’ prayer would be the means by which the mercy of God would be made known among His people. He could have done that totally on His own, but He chose to involve Moses in that.

Think about that in your life and my life. I just got back from a conference this week with over 7,000 young adults, talking about getting the gospel to unreached people in the world—those who have never heard it. I was saying to them, “God has ordained our lives, our praying, to be part of the means by which His gospel is made known to them.” So we were praying for the Kurdish people in central Iraq And I was telling them, “Guys, realize that as we pray for God’s mercy, we’re going to say to Him, ‘Remember, You love this people. Jesus, You died for them. It says in Revelation 5 that You died to purchase people for God from every tribe, tongue and nation. Well, here are the Kurds in central Iraq, where there are few if any Christians. God, change that right now. Show Your mercy. Cause the gospel to go there. We are going to believe as we pray that You have ordained our prayers to be the means by which Your purposes are accomplished among the Kurds in Iraq.’”

You have an opportunity to do that all day long. Not just for unreached people groups around the world, but for your coworkers, neighbors, family members. “God, please save them. You love them.” Keep pressing in through prayer. We’re going to trust that God is using our prayers in all kinds of different ways for the accomplishment of His purposes. We can experience the power of being used by God.

## **How do we pray?**

I want to bring this down to a practical level, so let me give you an acrostic for the PRAY and later I'll give you one for FAST. Some of you are thinking, "Okay, I'll go in a room, I'll close the door and sit—now what do I do?" Here's a starting point. How do you pray? The acrostic I want to encourage you with starts with...

P – Praise. Worship God for Who He is. "*Father in heaven...*" Prayer starts with fixing your eyes, heart, attention and affections on God. Just start here. Start by praising God. Remember, the primary point is not to get something but to know Someone.

So don't start right in saying, "I need this, this and this." God is honored by our asking for things, but let's remember Who we're speaking to, because that will actually change what we ask for and how we ask for it; it will change our hearts as we ask. It's all shaped by our understanding of Who He is. So just start by saying, "God, I praise You for this and thank You for this." Spend time thanking Him and expressing your desire to know Him more. I would encourage you if it's physically possible, have a regular time when you're on your knees before God. Or maybe it's sitting in silence just thinking about the greatness of God. Just pause from the busyness of life and think about His greatness. Maybe turn on a worship song and sing with it. That's the beauty of being in a room alone—nobody else can hear you, except for God, and He's pleased no matter what you sound like. Sing and worship God for Who He is. Start there with Praise.

Then R – Repent. Confess your sin to God and acknowledge your need for Jesus. It's obviously part of how Jesus teaches us to pray in Matthew 6:12: "Forgive us our debts, our sins..." Say, "God, I need Your grace." It is good to pause when you come before God, asking Him to show you what is not honoring and pleasing to Him in your life. If you ask Him, He will show you. Examine your heart and confess your sin. We'll talk about this more next week, but I would encourage you to write out your confession. Think through intentionally, "What in my mind, thoughts, desires, words or actions is not pleasing to You?"

You might be tempted to think, "Well, that's depressing—dwelling on my sin, thinking about the specific ways I've sinned against God." But this is not depressing when you realize God your Father in heaven delights in forgiving and restoring you. Repentance leads to restoration of relationship. More than being depressing, this is delightful, because your sins have been paid for by Christ. You can know that repentance leads to a deeper rest in Jesus, a deeper understanding of the gospel.

Praise, Repent and then A – Ask. Intercede for specific needs in your life and other people's lives. Don't miss this part of prayer—asking for specific needs, however our asking looks a lot different when we pray like Jesus teaches us to pray. Instead of coming to God with a list of what we want, we're actually fixing our eyes on Him and asking for what He wants, because we trust Him far more than we trust ourselves.

How does "*Hallowed be Your name...*" affect our prayers? "God, I ask for Your name to be honored in my life. I ask for Your name to be honored in this person's life and in this situation. Cause

Your name to be known as good and right and holy.” This is a prayer that is totally pleasing to God. You know He wants to answer that and He will answer that. Ask for God’s name to be hallowed in this country, this culture, that people group and this current event.

“God, I’m praying for the glory of Your name in this and this and this. Your Kingdom come, Your will be done—may Your will be done in my life. I’ve got this decision and I want to do Your will. This person is walking through this—may Your will be done in his life. Help him walk in step with Your Spirit. May Your will be done in this church.”

“*Give us this day our daily bread...*” Pray, “God, I need You for everything today. I need You for food today. This person needs You for this or that.” Ask God for these things.

There are all kinds of ways we can approach asking like this. I would encourage you in two particular ways: planned and spontaneous. I think it’s good to plan to regularly ask things from God. I have a prayer journal—actually, journal is probably not the right word to use. It’s almost like a list, but I don’t love the word list. On Monday through Friday, I have specific things from God’s Word that I pray for my life, for Heather’s life and my kids’ lives. There are a million things I want to pray for my kids. So I’ve split it up into five days and pray for different things each day.

I also pray specifically for our church for different things on Monday through Friday. I pray for specific people—friends and family members. I take my extended family and split them up from Monday through Friday. I pray for those who are without Christ in different ways on different days. I pray for various people in my sphere of influence that I have an opportunity to share the gospel with. I’ve got different ways I pray for the spread of the gospel throughout Washington, DC. I split that up over five days. I do the same for issues in the world—everything from peace in Syria and Yemen to world leaders to the persecuted church. I try to pray for unreached people groups every day.

That’s just me sharing a little glimpse into what I mean by planned prayer. If we’re not careful, that can become kind of rote—like we’re just reading names—but I think it’s actually good to intentionally pray for certain things for my kids, for certain things in my life, as well as for you. There are some things I want to make sure I pray for. That’s planned.

Then spontaneous prayer—that’s when you let the Spirit lead and guide you. God will bring things to your mind while you’re praying, so instead of thinking of that as a distraction, think, “Okay, I need to pray for that.” There’s nothing God will bring to your mind that you can’t pray about. This is actually interaction with God. By His Spirit, He’s leading you in this time. This is communion with God. That’s when it’s spontaneous. And the beauty is that this lays a foundation for...well, we’ll get to that in a second.

Pray, Repent, Ask—this leads to Y – Yield. You must yield and surrender your life to follow Jesus wherever and however He leads you. Matthew 6:13 says, “*Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil...*” “God, lead me, please. Guide me, direct my life.” It makes sense that this would be last. You’ve prayed, you’ve repented, you’ve asked for things in your life and in others’ lives, then as a result,

your life will be different. If you've prayed for forgiveness, it makes sense to extend forgiveness to others, just as Jesus says here. You've prayed, "Let Your will be done in my life just like it is in heaven," so it makes sense now to pray what Jesus taught: "Lead me. Guide me away from temptation, away from evil. I want to walk with You."

For another glimpse into my time with God, in the morning I pray through every detail of my day as best I know it. I obviously know things aren't going to go the way I planned. But as best I know, I tell God, "I've got a meeting with this person. I'm going to be doing this," and I pray for that person, for that time. "God, lead that time." I pray for my time with my family at home that evening. Then I say, "God, I don't know what's going to come up that I don't have planned, so give me sensitivity to Your Spirit. Help me be ready for anybody I meet, especially for opportunities and boldness to share the gospel."

We see in Jesus' life, as well as other places in the Scripture that concentrated times with God in prayer, particularly in the morning, set the stage for continual prayer time with God all day long. The Bible says, "*Pray without ceasing...*" (1 Thessalonians 5:17), and for me personally, when I have concentrated time with God in the morning, then I'm much more open and sensitive to be praying all day long. If I don't have that time in the morning, if I start off without focusing on God, it really produces a lack of praying throughout the day. That's why I recommend morning, although I can't go to a verse that says it has to be in the morning.

There's no question that if we set aside a specific time and go to a specific place where we can spend concentrated time, it will fuel continual prayer. If you don't have the concentrated time, it's going to hinder your continual time in prayer. There's so much more we could talk about—and we will in the days to come. My prayer is that you will experience communion with God, trusting that if you're a follower of Jesus, you're going to want that. If you don't want that, I would ask if you're really a follower of Jesus. Maybe you are and you just need to ask God to give you the desire to pray.

I do worry that some people go throughout their Christian lives going through motions without a real desire for God. That's not Christianity. If you don't have a desire for God, you really need to do some examination of your heart. If the Spirit of God is in you, He wants intimacy with you. You might say, "David, you were a pastor and Christian when you didn't have that desire." But I know that was pride. It was sin and I needed somebody to help wake me up from that—and by God's grace, I did.

## **Why do we fast?**

Jesus says in Matthew 6:16, "*When you fast...*" Notice that He doesn't say, "If you fast..." but "*when you fast...*" I dare to guess that for many followers of Jesus, there's not a pattern of regular fasting at all in your lives. Maybe you've never fasted at all. This is glaring across our church culture. We as pastors have not talked about this as we should. This is a basic as praying. When you look at the beginning of Matthew 6, "When you give, give like this... When you pray, pray like this... When you

fast, fast like this...” We don’t ask, “Should we give?” We know we should give. “Should we pray?” We know we should pray. “Should we fast?” Jesus says it’s just as basic as prayer and giving. So why is it not basic among us today?

Fasting is the practice of physically putting aside food, maybe even food and drink for a time, as a physical expression of a spiritual reality. It’s basically saying, “More than our bodies are dependent on food, our souls and lives are dependent on God.” When we fast, we set aside a meal when we don’t eat—breakfast, lunch or dinner. Maybe we set aside a day not to eat, or maybe longer than that—a few days, a week or more.

When we do this, what we’re saying is, “There’s something more important in my life than physical nourishment. More than I need food, I need God.” Fasting is a physical reminder of that spiritual reality. I know this is a foreign concept among many, so I want to give you a quick overview of why we do it. We’ll find this at different points as we read through the Bible this year, and actually, Secret Church this year in April is on prayer, fasting and the pursuit of God. That’s where we’ll dive in deep.

Why do we fast? We fast to express our delight in God’s goodness. Think of Psalm 63:1: “*God, you are my God; earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you.*” My soul thirsts for You more than water and is satisfied in You. My soul is satisfied in You as with the richest of foods. If You give me an incredibly rich meal, my soul is more satisfied in You than in this. What we’re saying in fasting is that we delight in God’s goodness. More than we enjoy food, we enjoy God.

Fasting is a physical statement that says, “More than I want lunch right now, I want God.” We put aside lunch for a day, then instead of eating a sandwich, we pray and read the Word. In so doing, we’re saying, “More than I want a sandwich, I just want You.” That’s what I love about Zechariah 8:19: “*Thus says the Lord of hosts: The fast of the fourth month and the fast of the fifth and the fast of the seventh and the fast of the tenth shall be to the house of Judah seasons of joy and gladness and cheerful feasts.*” Fasting is feasting. It’s not like starving—it’s like feasting on God instead of food. It’s better. We express our delight in God’s goodness and we confess our need for God’s grace.

Often in the Old Testament, in places like Joel 1 and 2, we see fasting associated with times of confession and repentance for sin. Fasting is saying that more than we need a meal, we need God’s mercy to cover over our sin. We fast when we are confronted with our sin. If we’re struggling with a particular besetting sin, our impulse should be to fast, to set aside food for a time, saying, “God, help me in this battle with this sin. I need Your mercy more than I need a meal.”

Third, we fast to seek and submit to God’s will. Often people in Scripture fasted when a decision needed to be made, when they were seeking to know what God desired them to do. We think of Ezra 8, Nehemiah 1 and Daniel 9. They either needed to know God’s will, or they knew God’s will but they needed help following it. What we’re saying when we fast is that more than we want our hunger to cease, we want God’s Kingdom to come and His will to be done in our lives.

I remember spending a weekend fasting before asking Heather to marry me. I went aside for some concentrated time, seeking God's face, submitting to His will. "God, do You want me to marry this woman?" As I prayed and read the Word, it became clear in my mind that it was indeed what God was leading me to do. [By the way, I am extremely thankful for the result of that weekend

Finally, we fast to anticipate the return of God's Son. Turn to Matthew 9:14. This is Jesus' teaching on fasting: "*Then the disciples of John came to [Jesus], saying, 'Why do we and the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?'*" The disciples weren't fasting. "*And Jesus said to them, 'Can the wedding guests mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them? The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast.'*"

Jesus was saying that when the bride and bridegroom are together—a picture of Him and His disciples—you don't fast then. You celebrate. Then when they're apart, that's when you fast. Fasting is an expression of an aching, a longing, a hunger inside of you because Christ is not here. He's coming back, but He's not here right now, so we long for His return. Fasting is a physical expression that says more than our stomachs long to be full, our souls long to see Christ.

We are tired of sin and suffering in this world. We're tired of the injustices around us. We're tired of pain and cancer and diseases and tumors and death. We long for Jesus to come back and bring an end to that and fasting is an expression of that longing. So if we're not fasting, then what are we saying? We're content with being apart from Christ. Not fasting is an expression of a lack of desire for Jesus to return. More than our stomachs long to be full, our souls long to see Christ.

## **How do we fast?**

Here's another acrostic. First, F is for focus on God. I mean to emphasize two things here. Based on what Jesus taught us in Matthew 6, we don't fast so that others will think we're spiritual. We do this to honor God. That doesn't mean nobody else can know we're fasting. We see throughout Scripture where fasting is something corporate. Sometimes we fast with others. But the reason for fasting is to focus on God, not to draw attention to ourselves. It's also feasting on God. More than we long for anything in this world, even the basic daily necessity of food, we need and long for God.

Next, A—Abstain from food. You might ask, "Well, can't you fast from other things, like technology?" I'm not going to say that's bad. If the Lord leads you to do that, go for it. But I don't think it really hits at the heart of what Jesus is teaching on fasting, what the Bible says about fasting.

Think what it means to put aside food. Food is actually a God-given addiction. He's addicted us to food—He created us that way, with stomachs that need to be filled. So He's given us a spiritual practice that involves taking something we actually must have—at some point our bodies are going to need food—and we put even this basic daily necessity aside in order to seek Him instead. We're saying our food is Him, rather than the most basic things in this world. Feel free to fast from other things, but when you think of fasting, think primarily of food. If there is no way physically or medically for you to

fast from food—not just you don’t think you can—then I would encourage you to think of the best substitute, a God-given addiction, something you’re wired to have and need.

As you abstain from food, all day long you’re reminded of that need. The longer you fast, the more it will kick in, then things like Chapstick will look appetizing to you. Abstain from food.

Then S—Substitute eating time with prayer and study. It’s not just deciding you’re not going to eat and feel bad all day. No, you take the time you were going to be eating lunch and you spend it in prayer and in the Word. Feast on God in the morning or afternoon. It’s not just, “Oh, I forgot to eat lunch today,” so you call that fasting. That misses the point.

What happens is this concentrated time then fuels the continual time of focusing on God, because it won’t just be at lunch that you’re hungry. It’s 2:00, 3:00, 4:00, 9:00, 10:00 and every time you feel the hunger pang—“I would really like a sandwich right now”—that can trigger you to say, “I want that, but God, I want You more.” That’s a good discipline to build into your life. “I need to eat right now, but I need You more.” It fuels continual praying all day long, because the hungrier you get, the more you’ll pray.

All that leads to T—Taste and see that God is good. It’s a direct quote from Psalm 34:8: “*Oh, taste and see that the Lord is good!*” Verses nine and ten in Psalm 34 are also great: “*Oh, fear the Lord, you his saints, for those who fear him have no lack! The young lions suffer want and hunger; but those who seek the Lord lack no good thing.*” God will show Himself sufficient to us as we fast—and not just sufficient but satisfying.

Here is my encouragement as we close, first to those who are exploring Christianity and then to followers of Christ. For those of you who are exploring Christianity, prayer and fasting represent two of the greatest privileges that followers of Christ experience. Just think about prayer—how is that possible for sinners? This is a church full of sinners, and we’re talking about being in the presence of the holy God of the universe, Whose holiness requires justice toward sinners. Yet we are welcome in His presence. How is that possible?

That is only possible because of Jesus Christ, because God came to us in the Person of Jesus, lived a life with no sin, then—though He had no sin for which to die—Jesus died on a cross for our sin. He paid the price. He took the judgment of God we deserve, then three days later He rose from the dead in victory over sin. And all who trust in Jesus, who follow Jesus, are forgiven of their sin and brought into relationship with God. So we can pray any time, any day.

If you read through the Old Testament, the saints only could long for this. Only a few people got to go into the presence of God once a year, and that was with fear and trembling. You and I get to do it before we get out of bed in the morning. This is a privilege Christians have and I want you to know that privilege is available to you. God desires a relationship with every single person in this gathering right now. He’s made it possible through Jesus. We invite you today to turn from your sin, confessing that

you're a sinner before God, asking Him to forgive your sin and give you life to trusting in Him. If you do that, He will reconcile you into a relationship with Him so you can enjoy Him in these ways.

Then, for followers of Christ, let's enjoy God in these ways. Here's the question: what step forward is God leading you to take? The last thing I want to do is talk about this, then just move on. So find something to write on and I'll give you a couple minutes to write down the step forward that you can take in prayer and fasting. Maybe for prayer it's something like, "I want to spend a certain amount of time—or this much more time—in prayer this week." Or think about how you spend your time in prayer. God might be leading you to do all kinds of different things.

What's a step forward in prayer, then what's a step forward in fasting? Maybe you'll fast for one meal this week and then build on that. Maybe you'll be able to take a full day this week. I promise, you can do it. I don't know everybody's medical condition, so maybe I should not say that. But the average person can take a day or maybe more than a day.

Write down a step forward—then after you write that down, I encourage you to share that with somebody else this week. It's one thing for God to do something in your own heart, but this is what the church is about. Share it with somebody else who can encourage you in that way. Maybe in a quick text or email, or in a conversation, "Hey, God is leading me to do this. Can you pray for me that I'll be able to do it this week?"

I'm going to give you a couple minutes to write down your steps forward, then we'll pray and close our time together...

Let's pray.

O God, I trust that You are speaking in all kinds of different ways right now and You're probably just beginning to do so. Whether it's five minutes or longer this week when we can have concentrated time alone with You, I pray that You would continue to speak and draw us into deeper intimacy with You. Teach us to pray, Jesus. Make us individually and as a church the church You desire us to be, knowing You in prayer and seeking You in fasting. You are better than anything this world offers us. Teach us to pray. Thank You, thank You, thank You for this privilege of prayer, O God. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

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