

# **Part 3**

start the journey

# Day One

## Fasting and Prayer according to Jesus

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### **Today's reading: Matthew 6: 1 -18**

**In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus addresses several topics related to living a godly life. Fasting and prayer is one of those topics. His take on the subject must have shocked the crowds and annoyed the religious elite.**

If you read the Gospels carefully, you will easily notice that Jesus often came into conflict with the religious establishment of His time. The point of conflict was the man made tradition (the Talmud) that had been added to the commands of God and treated as divine. These traditions of men had been embraced while the commands of God discarded.

Jesus, as a teacher, was different. He spoke with power and authority and was able to relate to people's needs. His preaching came accompanied by miraculous deeds.

Jesus also had love and compassion for the crowds. The religious leaders of the time were cold and distant. Their teaching was often irrelevant and filled with burdensome requirements.

The Good News of Jesus was a simple but powerful message. He called on people to repent and turn away from their sins. He also announced the imminent arrival of God's kingdom. His teaching was practical and answered real questions. Unlike the teaching of the Pharisees, the words of Jesus were bringing freedom.

Jesus used the Pharisees, the religious elite of the time, as an example of what spirituality should not be like. This is true, especially in the area of prayer. In Matthew 6, Jesus talks about prayer and fasting by attacking the hypocrisy of the Pharisees. He is loud and clear: "do not pray or fast like them."

Jesus begins by focusing more on the importance of private prayer. The Pharisees were addicted to pious displays of religiosity, by seeking public places to pray so everyone could see them. Jesus is not belittling the importance of public prayer. He simply states the fact that public prayer must come out of your private prayer.

His emphasis is on the prayer closet, the hidden and private time with God, which will be rewarded publicly. Jesus challenges us to be on our own with the Father.

*"When you pray, don't be like the hypocrites who love to pray publicly on street corners and in the synagogues where everyone can see them. I tell you the truth, that is all the*

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*reward they will ever get. But when you pray, go away by yourself, shut the door behind you, and pray to your Father in private. Then your Father, who sees everything, will reward you. - Matthew 6: 5 - 6*

There is no point in displaying great piety and spirituality in the public arena if our private prayer is non-existent. In fact, our public prayer should be a reflection of our private prayer.

In private, we can pour out our heart to God in a way that is nearly impossible in public. But if we grow in our relationship with God, by private prayer, we will be ready and willing to unite with others in public prayer.

### Pray like this ...

Jesus goes on to give us a model prayer. It is not a prayer that we should repeat over and over again. That would go against His specific instruction: *"When you pray, don't babble on and on as the Gentiles do. They think their prayers are answered merely by repeating their words again and again. Don't be like them, for your Father knows exactly what you need even before you ask him!" - Matthew 6: 7 -8*

The model prayer gives us a structure on which to build. It is more a pattern rather than a substitute for our own words. Warren Wiersbe gives a wonderful explanation on how this prayer could be used: *"The purpose of prayer is to glorify God's name, to ask for help to accomplish His will on earth. This prayer begins with God's interest, not ours: God's name, God's kingdom and God's will. We should not ask God for anything that will dishonour His name, delay His kingdom, or disturb His will on earth. Note that this prayer contains no singular pronouns; they are all plural. It begins with "Our Father". When we pray, we must remember we are part of God's worldwide family of believers."*<sup>3</sup>

Once we put God's interests first; seeking His glory, His kingdom and His honour; we can then bring our own needs to Him. These personal needs cover our daily bread, the forgiveness of our sins, the potential to be tempted and fall and ultimately our desire to be rescued from the evil one.

At the end of this section, Jesus links prayer with forgiveness. He makes our forgiveness conditional. There are times when we all pray for the forgiveness of our sins. Jesus makes it clear that our forgiveness depends on the way we forgive those who sin against us. This aspect, on its own, should cause us to think more about the impact of unforgiveness in our lives. We cannot entertain the thought of approaching God in prayer without the acknowledgement that our forgiveness is closely linked to the way we forgive those who sin against us.

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<sup>3</sup> Warren Wiersbe, Transformation Study Bible, "Pray like this" page 1612, David Cook, Supplementary material 2009

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Fasting and prayer is meant to shape our character and attitudes. Especially the attitude towards those who sin against us. When we fast and pray for such situations, with all honesty and openness of heart, we are empowered to forgive.

Our character must catch up with our calling. It is part of the the making of every man and woman of God. This calling is a mighty and great privilege. It comes with an awesome responsibility. God's calling requires a godly character. When we forgive our fellow men and women, our character is shaped and we are sanctified. When we forgive, we become more and more like Jesus.

### **Fast like this ...**

Prayer and fasting are not new concepts for Jesus. Historically, Israel has been used to "solemn assemblies" (Judges 21: 5; Nehemiah 8: 18), when the whole nation would be called to fast and pray. The religious leaders of the time were encouraging people to fast and pray regularly. The Pharisees were proud of their weekly fasting and their generous giving.

However, Jesus' teaching on fasting and prayer is different because it is not focused on the visible form of the activity itself but on the heart-reason behind it. It's not whether we fast and pray. It's more about why we fast, pray and when we decide to do it. We cannot pray, fast or give for personal glory or to be seen and appreciated by others. We must do all these things to the glory of God.

### **Chapter Summary**

Fasting and prayer, according to Jesus, is a matter of the heart. It is an act of worship to God who can see in secret and will reward publicly. Fasting and prayer, therefore, begins in the private space. Out of that intimacy with God comes great joy.

That is why Jesus doesn't want us to look miserable and disheveled when we fast. We should be filled with joy and peace. Meeting with God in private is the most important aspect of our fasting. The expressions "when you pray" and "when you fast" clearly reflect the expectation Jesus had for us His disciples. It is not "if" you fast and pray, but "when" you fast and pray.

Remember that when Jesus taught His disciples to fast and pray, He wasn't creating a new idea. He was building on a timeless practice. A practice the Pharisees had abandoned for the sake of public honour and false religiosity.

Our fasting and prayer must be different. According to Jesus, we must not do it for show or spiritual pedigree. It must be done for the glory of God and with joy.

# Day One

## **Personal Focus**

Set some time aside to reflect on the words of Jesus in Matthew 6: 1- 18. Allow His words to adjust and correct the way you see fasting and prayer. Maybe you need to come up with a plan, a place and a time for regular private prayer.

Use the space below to note down your reflections and your plan:

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## **Public Focus**

Prepare to fast and pray, as a church. Take some time to discuss with one another the place of public prayer in the life of the church. Jesus said His house must be *“a house of prayer for all nations.”* It may be that we as a church, must recommit to give ourselves to fasting and prayer for the spiritual vitality of the church.

I’ve always believed that church must be led from the prayer room and not the board room. Take some notes as you pray and discuss the role of prayer in the church.

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