

CHRIST CHURCH OF CENTRAL ARKANSAS

THE PURPOSE OF PRAYER AND FASTING IN A CHRISTIAN'S LIFE

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## Abstract

Prayer and fasting are fundamental aspects in the life of a Christian in order to build an intimate relationship with God. Jesus' model of prayer found in the Lord's Prayer in Matthew 6 and Luke 11, provide great insight into the purpose and proper practice of prayer in the lives of Christians today. In Mark 2 and Matthew 6, the purpose of fasting is revealed as it changed from a Jewish custom to a closer fellowship with God. The purpose of both prayer and fasting can be summarized from the first few lines of the Lord's Prayer which give honor to God's name, usher in the kingdom of God, and call for the accomplishment of God's will through Jesus Christ.

Prayer and fasting are essential aspects of a Christian's life in building a continuous and deeper relationship with God. The Old Testament principles of prayer provide a significant example to Christians today. Jesus's paradigm of prayer, found in Matthew 6 and Luke 11, provide a key outline to the purpose of prayer. The purpose of fasting shifts from the Jewish custom in the Old Testament to a closer fellowship with God in the New Testament. The purpose of this paper is to define, discuss and determine the relevance of prayer and fasting in the life of today's Christian by looking at Jesus's example found in scripture.

## PRAYER

Prayer is defined as communion<sup>1</sup> or personal communication<sup>2</sup> with God. There are many Greek words that were used in the New Testament to describe prayer, although prayer was also prevalent in the Old Testament. Two words, *aiteō* and *deomai*, denotes to beseech, beg or bring a need to God. The Greek word, *esperotao* carries a less demanding meaning of asking a question or making a request.<sup>3</sup> Another word for prayer *proskyneō* describes prayer as a conversation in which a person is silent to wait for Jesus's answer.<sup>4</sup> Geoffrey W. Bromiley describes two types of prayer comprising of a way to honor God and a way to express our needs, which both lead to bringing God glory and expressing thanksgiving to Him. He describes the connection by stating "Thanksgiving honors God by contemplating fulfilled needs."<sup>5</sup> There are many aspects of prayer that Wayne Gruden describes in his book *Systematic Theology*. Petition of our

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<sup>1</sup> Geoffrey W. Bromiley, *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1986), 931.

<sup>2</sup> Wayne Gruden, *Systematic Theology*, (Leicester, Great Britain: Inter-varsity Press and Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 376.

<sup>3</sup> Bromiley, 931.

<sup>4</sup> Colin Brown, ed., *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), 857.

<sup>5</sup> Bromiley, 937

needs to the Father should always be offered for the glory of God instead of the benefit of the man.<sup>6</sup> Intercession is petition on behalf of others.<sup>7</sup> Also, confession of one's sins is essential to approaching God in worship or prayer.<sup>8</sup> Bromiley also describes worship,<sup>9</sup> when one is only focused on God and his character, and adoration<sup>10</sup> of the Father, which describes more of a love relationship with him, as an aspect of prayer. Worship brings about adoration, and adoration brings about devotion, which shows a commitment to God.<sup>11</sup> Gruden presents praise and thanksgiving as a single aspect of prayer;<sup>12</sup> but Bromiley makes a clear distinction between praise, in which one focuses on what God has done, while thanksgiving brings about recognition of the works of God.<sup>13</sup> Communion is the final aspect of prayer, which is described as "the essence of prayer." Communion involves speaking to God, but also allowing Him, through the Holy Spirit, to speak to the one praying.<sup>14</sup> Throughout Scripture, Jesus was faithful to pray during many important events in his life including his Baptism, the Transfiguration, and before his crucifixion.<sup>15</sup> He provides us with many examples that He willingly prayed to show thanksgiving, intercede for others, and demonstrate submission to the will of God.

"Prayer is based on the revelation of the nature and attributes of God."<sup>16</sup> It is essential to recognize that we pray because God invites us to share in a relationship with

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<sup>6</sup> Gruden, 376; Bromiley, 937.

<sup>7</sup> Bromiley, 937.

<sup>8</sup> Gruden, 376, Bromiley, 937.

<sup>9</sup> 937

<sup>10</sup> Gruden, 376; Bromiley, 937

<sup>11</sup> Bromiley, 937

<sup>12</sup> 376

<sup>13</sup> 937

<sup>14</sup> Bromiley, 937

<sup>15</sup> Bromiley, 931

<sup>16</sup> Bromiley, 937

Him.<sup>17</sup> God takes the initiative in drawing us to Him.<sup>18</sup> Although petition is a way to express our needs, this cannot be the sole purpose of prayer. We present our needs to God as a way to express confidence in His ability to provide for us.<sup>19</sup> The effectiveness of prayer has no dependence on the length or eloquence in which we pray.<sup>20</sup>

### **Jesus's example of prayer**

In the New Testament, Jesus provides an example of how prayer can be most effective and why praying is essential in the life of a Christian. Jesus' life is a prayer that echoes his Father's actions and words.<sup>21</sup> Using Jesus's example, we can clearly know why it is necessary to pray. In Matthew 6 and Luke 11, Jesus presents his disciples with The Lord's Prayer, a model or outline of how to pray.<sup>22</sup> The differences in the Lord's Prayer presented in these two passages offer us an indication that a specific, rigid prayer is not necessary in our prayers today.<sup>23</sup> The Bible does not present rules or regulations to pray at a certain time or place.<sup>24</sup> Jesus would converse with God during a variety of times and in privacy as well as publicly.<sup>25</sup> Jesus's example in these two passages indicate that prayer is a continuous act of being in the presence of the Father and in conversation with Him, realizing our need for Him.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Bromiley, 937

<sup>18</sup> George Buttrick, *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962), 865.

<sup>19</sup> Bromiley, 939

<sup>20</sup> Bromiley, 934

<sup>21</sup> Buttrick, 865.

<sup>22</sup> Ben Witherington III, *Smythe & Helwys Bible Commentary: Matthew*, (Macon: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, Inc., 2006), 142.

<sup>23</sup> Brown, 857

<sup>24</sup> Buttrick, 865

<sup>25</sup> Bromiley, 935

<sup>26</sup> Brown, 857

## **Praying in the name of Jesus and in the Spirit**

Although no specific stance or time is indicated, the Bible is clear on praying in the name of Jesus and in the Spirit. God has given us the authority to pray through Jesus; it is not through our own authority.<sup>27</sup> When we pray “in Jesus’s name”, our prayers are heard by the Father because we have authority through Jesus and therefore can be confident that He is listening.<sup>28</sup> When one enters into a relationship with God, he is also given the Holy Spirit. Scripture teaches that the Holy Spirit takes part in our prayers with us<sup>29</sup> and makes our weak prayers effective.<sup>30</sup> The Spirit of God prompts us during prayer and then interprets the mind of God to help us discover from Him our true needs.<sup>31</sup> According to Bromiley, “the power of prayer is not found in prayer itself, but instead in the One to whom prayer is made.”<sup>32</sup>

### **The two types of prayer**

Matthew 6 and Luke 11 show that, of the two types of prayer, bringing honor and glory to God should be the primary focus.<sup>33</sup> In The Lord’s Prayer “Our Father who is in heaven” indicates a personal relationship since the intimate word Father is being used.<sup>34</sup> “Hallowed be your name” demonstrates that the honor of God’s name should be, first and foremost, the most important thing in one’s prayer,<sup>35</sup> followed by the fulfillment of his will and his glory to be established on earth<sup>36</sup>, which we see in the lines “your kingdom

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<sup>27</sup> Gruden 376

<sup>28</sup> Brown, 857

<sup>29</sup> See Romans 8:26

<sup>30</sup> Gruden, 381

<sup>31</sup> Buttrick, 865

<sup>32</sup> 937

<sup>33</sup> Bromiley, 937

<sup>34</sup> Witherington III, 143.

<sup>35</sup> Witherington III, 148; Bromiley, 937

<sup>36</sup> Witherington III, 148

come, your will be done”.<sup>37</sup> Our prayer should also increase God’s name and reputation.<sup>38</sup> Because God longs for the good of His creation, specifically for His redeemed, bringing honor to God in turn brings blessings to mankind.<sup>39</sup>

Only secondary to bringing honor and glory to God, should we be concerned with needs. Since one of God’s character traits is omniscience,<sup>40</sup> he knows our needs<sup>41</sup> before we can vocalize or even think of them.<sup>42</sup> Our prayer should be for the purpose of expressing our trust in God,<sup>43</sup> the only living God, from whom all things can be expected because nothing is impossible to him.<sup>44</sup> When we ask with faith,<sup>45</sup> knowing God hears our requests, we also demonstrate confidence in his wisdom, love, goodness, and power.<sup>46</sup> Matthew 6 acknowledges that God is a wise and loving father<sup>47</sup> and we depend on him for our needs, daily and during times of difficulty.<sup>48</sup> Also, prayer for the daily necessities of life suggest a daily dependence instead of a need for him only when times are difficult.<sup>49</sup> Since praying for his will and his kingdom are central in a prayer,<sup>50</sup> we are reassured that prayer, even about our “daily bread” or the daily things of life, can be about anything.<sup>51</sup> Luke 11:9-12 shows an expectation from God for us to come to Him in prayer.<sup>52</sup> In coming to him in prayer, we are becoming better acquainted with him, and

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<sup>37</sup> Bromiley, 937

<sup>38</sup> Bromiley, 939

<sup>39</sup> Bromiley, 937

<sup>40</sup> Bromiley, 939

<sup>41</sup> See Matthew 6:8

<sup>42</sup> Witherington III, 144

<sup>43</sup> Gruden, 376

<sup>44</sup> Brown, 857

<sup>45</sup> Buttrick, 864

<sup>46</sup> Gruden, 376

<sup>47</sup> Gruden, 376

<sup>48</sup> Brown, 857

<sup>49</sup> Witherington III, 146

<sup>50</sup> Witherington III, 148

<sup>51</sup> Brown, 857

<sup>52</sup> Gruden, 376

being brought into a deeper fellowship with him.<sup>53</sup> Fellowship and the love that grows for him is another reason He desires for us to pray. By developing a deeper relationship with him through fellowship, we know him better and can pray more wisely.<sup>54</sup> We have an “abiding”<sup>55</sup> relationship with Him, which signifies an intimate and continuing relationship.<sup>56</sup> We can share in a dialogue with God that enhances our relationship with him, by drawing closer to him, and allowing us to discern better His will in a specific situation.<sup>57</sup> God allows us to be involved in his kingdom and uses us to further his kingdom.<sup>58</sup>

### **Who does prayer change?**

Through prayer, we develop a deeper relationship with Christ and are changed by the very act of praying. Our prayers are not able to change the knowledge or will of God, but we still pray with the assurance that he welcomes and responds to our requests.<sup>59</sup> There are numerous examples in the Bible of God acting in response to prayer.<sup>60</sup> We are God’s creation and our choices deeply affect Him, whether he delights in us<sup>61</sup> or withdraws himself from us<sup>62</sup> due to choices we make.<sup>63</sup> One reason God is great is because He is unchanging. “A God bound by unchanging qualities of love and mercy must forgive a sinner who prays repentantly.”<sup>64</sup> Therefore, because God loves us

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<sup>53</sup> Gruden, 377

<sup>54</sup> Bromiley, 939

<sup>55</sup> See John 15:7

<sup>56</sup> Bromiley, 937

<sup>57</sup> Witherington III, 144

<sup>58</sup> Gruden, 377

<sup>59</sup> Bromiley, 939

<sup>60</sup> Philip Yancey, *Prayer: does it make any difference?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 132

<sup>61</sup> See Zephaniah 3:17

<sup>62</sup> See Hosea 5:6

<sup>63</sup> Yancey, 133

<sup>64</sup> Yancey, 134

unconditionally, he responds to our requests<sup>65</sup> out of love. God wants us to ask because it demonstrates to Him that we reciprocate the desire to have a relationship with Him.<sup>66</sup> His gracious act of “relenting” to our prayers originates from a desire to bless his people.<sup>67</sup>

## FASTING

Fasting is defined as “deliberate and generally prolonged abstention from eating (and sometimes drinking) as a means of humbling oneself before God.”<sup>68</sup> Although food is a common controlling factor in one’s life, the purpose of fasting is to remove anything that can be a substitute for God, not necessarily only food or drink.<sup>69</sup> John Piper in his book *A Hunger for God* describes Christian fasting<sup>70</sup> as “the hunger of a homesickness for God.”<sup>71</sup> Food is used as a great example because it is a necessity of life. In John 6:35 Jesus tells us that he is the bread of life. All things were created to bring glory to God,<sup>72</sup> including bread, so it should be treated one of two ways: eaten with gratitude for the goodness of God or given up out of hunger for God himself;<sup>73</sup> either way it points toward God. Many Hebrew terms referring to fasting carry the meanings “to inflict oneself,” “not to eat bread,” and “to humble oneself.”<sup>74</sup> The history of fasting, specifically in the Old Testament, reveals that it was done for a variety of reasons including, but not limited to, a sign of repentance, an accompaniment to prayer, or a way to prepare oneself to

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<sup>65</sup> Many verses refer to requesting in prayer: see Matthew 7:7-8, 21:22; Mark 11:24; Luke 11:9; John 11:22, 14:13.

<sup>66</sup> Yancey 143.

<sup>67</sup> Bromiley, 939.

<sup>68</sup> Allan C. Myers, ed., *The Eerdmans Bible Dictionary*, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1987), 377.

<sup>69</sup> John Piper, *A Hunger for God* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1997), 16.

<sup>70</sup> Throughout *A Hunger for God*, Piper differentiates “Christian fasting” from fasting for other religions purposes or reasons.

<sup>71</sup> 14.

<sup>72</sup> See Colossians 1:16.

<sup>73</sup> Piper, 21.

<sup>74</sup> Bromiley, 390.

receive divine revelation.<sup>75</sup> Other reasons that fasting was appropriate are: a private act of piety, acknowledgement of a disaster, emotional disturbance, mourning, and a form of public devotion.<sup>76</sup>

### **The celebration of Jesus**

A few key verses in the New Testament provide us with examples of fasting in the life of Jesus. In Mark 2:18-20, Jesus was questioned as to why his disciples do not fast like the disciples of John and the disciples of the Pharisees. Jesus's reply signifies a metaphor in which he saw Himself as the bridegroom, and the disciples are his groomsmen.<sup>77</sup> The bridegroom is present so it is a time of joy to fellowship with him. Witherington states that "[Jesus] saw himself as the focus of a celebration, as one who brought something new to the scene which made regular fasts inappropriate for His disciples."<sup>78</sup> The celebration of a wedding would not require a fast, but instead a feast. This is in direct contrast to the Old Testament's view of fasting as a mourning ritual, perhaps because of brokenness over sin or desiring something. Jesus has now come and a feast is suitable.<sup>79</sup> This period of Jesus's ministry is seen as the messianic banquet, which is also a celebration.<sup>80</sup> Jesus is the center of their joy that comes during a celebration. Mourning or sadness is appropriate during his absence. In Mark 2:20, Jesus says "But the days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast in that day." Once Jesus is crucified, resurrected, and seated at the right hand of God, He

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<sup>75</sup> Myers, 377.

<sup>76</sup> Bromiley, 390.

<sup>77</sup> Robert Guelich, *Word Biblical Commentary 34a, Mark 1-8.26*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998)

<sup>78</sup> Witherington, 201.

<sup>79</sup> Piper, 35.

<sup>80</sup> I. Howard Marshall, *The New International Greek Commentary: The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1978), 221.

will not physically be present so fasting will be appropriate.<sup>81</sup> A new hope is introduced in Matthew 25:6, when the bridegroom is physically with us again.<sup>82</sup> Then fasting again will no longer be necessary because we will be feasting at the banquet table with Jesus.

### **The new purpose of fasting**

Continuing in Mark 2, the parable of the old and new wineskins is introduced to bring about a better understanding of how fasting has changed with the coming of Jesus. The old wineskins represent Jewish fasting as a ritual; it is something they must do. The new wine represents the kingdom of God that is here now, the new reality that has come in the form of Jesus. The new wine, or kingdom of God, can no longer be contained or rely on the old rituals of fasting.<sup>83</sup> Piper states, “fasting is for times of yearning and aching and longing.”<sup>84</sup> The purpose for fasting as a custom, the old wineskins, was more as mourning over sin and a yearning for promised Savior, an emptiness that had not yet been filled.<sup>85</sup> Now that our Savior has come in the form of Jesus Christ, our new yearning is no longer from that emptiness because we have tasted the new wine and now hope in Jesus. The aching and yearning are now an expression of “the hunger of a homesickness for God.”<sup>86</sup> We have tasted the new wine brought by Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit, and we know now we “cannot now be satisfied until the consummation of joy arrives.”<sup>87</sup> We have a longing now for the “all-satisfying fullness of Christ”<sup>88</sup> and

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<sup>81</sup> Piper, 37

<sup>82</sup> Piper, 37

<sup>83</sup> Piper, 39

<sup>84</sup> 36

<sup>85</sup> Piper, 40

<sup>86</sup> Piper, 14; 41

<sup>87</sup> Piper 42

<sup>88</sup> Piper, 44

a hunger for God because of the work he is continually doing in us and drawing us toward him.<sup>89</sup>

### **Fasting to bring glory to God**

In Matthew 6:16-18, Jesus provided us with crucial information to use fasting as another way to bring glory to God. Jesus expects us to fast, and we find that in his words “*whenever you fast.*”<sup>90</sup> However, he does not specify certain times to fast or specific ways since the “ritual” of fasting is no longer necessary.<sup>91</sup> God is very careful also to remind us to check our motivations for fasting. If one fasts for the admiration of others, then he will receive that, but only that.<sup>92</sup> Fasting, like prayer, is a way to bring glory to God by longing for Him only.<sup>93</sup> It is also a well-defined way to reveal what controls us and guides our heart.<sup>94</sup> Fasting will assess the place of our hearts, whether in the wrong place desiring rewards God gives or in the right place with God himself.<sup>95</sup> We have to be careful not to idolize the rewards by loving His rewards rather than solely loving Him.<sup>96</sup> The motivation behind it should be a heart for God for the purpose of gaining Christ.<sup>97</sup> The reward we should want to gain by obediently fasting is God<sup>98</sup>. Being in intimacy with God greatly surpasses food or the blessings God gives.

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<sup>89</sup> Piper, 48

<sup>90</sup> Piper 69

<sup>91</sup> Gruden, 390

<sup>92</sup> See Matthew 6:16

<sup>93</sup> Piper, 18

<sup>94</sup> Piper, 19

<sup>95</sup> Piper, 45; 58

<sup>96</sup> Piper, 62

<sup>97</sup> Piper, 48

<sup>98</sup> Witherington III, 148

## The revealing nature of fasting

It will also reveal what controls us,<sup>99</sup> what we value most, and in whom we trust.<sup>100</sup> Its purpose is not to just give up or deny ourselves something we desire. The self-discipline practiced through fasting by abstaining from food can also carry over into refraining from sin.<sup>101</sup> However, when we allow it to be about our will power or self-control, the focus is taken off God.<sup>102</sup> Therefore, it is not our own feat in practicing self-discipline, but a fruit<sup>103</sup> that we receive when the Spirit is in us.<sup>104</sup> In denying ourselves, we are telling God we find more contentment in Him than in food.<sup>105</sup> In depriving ourselves of food, we become weak physically; therefore, we are humbled by the very act and are drawn to the realization of our dependence on God.<sup>106</sup> The more our actions show a desire to find our satisfaction in God, the more we bring glory to him.<sup>107</sup> Piper describes it beautifully when he says “Fasting is a periodic declaration that we would rather feast at God’s table in the kingdom of heaven than feed on the finest delicacies of the world.”<sup>108</sup>

Fasting has a great impact on our prayer life because it expresses urgency in our prayers. Depriving ourselves of food will result in death, so it symbolizes the desperation of a change in a situation or a possible fatal result.<sup>109</sup> Throughout history, many key

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<sup>99</sup> Piper, 19

<sup>100</sup> Piper, 58

<sup>101</sup> Gruden, 390

<sup>102</sup> Piper 45

<sup>103</sup> See Galatians 5:23 in which a fruit of the Spirit is self-control

<sup>104</sup> Piper, 45

<sup>105</sup> Piper, 33

<sup>106</sup> Gruden, 390

<sup>107</sup> Piper, 44

<sup>108</sup> 61

<sup>109</sup> Gruden, 390

leaders fasted for the purpose of revival.<sup>110</sup> When done with the right heart motive, fasting is appropriate when in prayer for the poor and hungry,<sup>111</sup> orphans, widows, and other people groups in need. Fasting is appropriate for a heart's desire for God to change a false worldview or belief that goes against God's teaching.<sup>112</sup>

Prayer and fasting are relevant in the life of today's Christian to deepen our relationship with our Father. Jesus's teachings call us to pray and fast while He is absent from God's creation. When the bridegroom returns, we will have direct communion with God and celebrate with an indescribable feast with God the Father and Jesus Christ. The purpose of prayer provided in the Lord's Prayer in Matthew 6- to bring honor to God, bringing his kingdom to earth, and longing for his will only- are the same reasons we fast.<sup>113</sup> If the purpose of our prayer and fasting is rooted deeply in these three things then our motives are true to the heart of God.<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> Piper, 110.

<sup>111</sup> See Galatians 2:20.

<sup>112</sup> For example, John Piper, in his book *A Hunger for God*, devotes almost a full chapter to fasting to end abortion.

<sup>113</sup> Piper, 78-79.

<sup>114</sup> Piper, 71.

- Bromiley, Geoffrey W., ed. *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1986.
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