

## Prayer and Fasting in Biblical Perspective

“A Call to 70 Days of Fervent Prayer“

Matthew 6:5–18

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I want to start by reading from a very familiar passage, The Sermon on the Mount, in the middle of it. We will be look at prayer and fasting in this coming season for the next ten weeks, seven days a week, with a Biblical theme on each day with specific requests. I hope this study will be helpful in answering why and how we are doing this. Let's look at God's Word together.

Matthew 6:5–18 says [5] “*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.* [6] *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.*

[7] “*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.* [8] *Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.* [9] *Pray then like this:*

“*Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. [10] Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. [11] Give us this day our daily bread, [12] and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. [13] And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. (For Thine is the Kingdom and the power and the glory forever, Amen.)*

[14] *For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you,* [15] *but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.* (In other words, your intimacy with the Lord is evidenced by your desired intimacy with others which you are willing to forgive as freely as you have been forgiven.)

[16] “*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.* [17] *But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, [18] 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.*

The grass withers, the flower fades, the Word of God abides forever and by His grace and mercy may His Word be preached for you.

So why have our elders called us to 70 of fervent prayer? The word fervent is drawn from a theme verse from James 5:16b which says [16b] *The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much* (KJV). It wasn't just 70 days for Elijah but it was three and half years and he was utterly devoted to this matter of prayer. Also why are we asking you to consider in addition to prayer, the Biblical practice of fasting?

As I was thinking through this, the text I was initially drawn to was in the book of Esther where Mordecai prayed and fasted and then he called upon Esther. Mordecai said to her ‘Have you not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?’ Clearly the fervency of his prayer and fasting was directly related to the challenges facing God's covenant people in their captivity of the Medo-Persian Empire. Perhaps this Jewish woman (Esther) who was now in the marital relationship with the King who oppressed these people was the reason she was there for such a time as this. That phrase ‘for such a time as this’ is at the root of this.

Throughout the nation where we serve, now not for days, hours, weeks or even a month but for months, cities with extraordinary means and resources lay paralyzed, aflame, rioting, looting, we're in a nation of political division which perhaps hasn't been seen in greater extent than at the founding of the nation or in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century that led to a civil war. We have extraordinary divisions. We have economic tensions. We have racial tensions and divisions – vestiges on the sins of racism. We are confronted with violence every single day. I woke up this morning to deputy sheriffs that were ambushed last night and lay on the verge of death in the intensive care this morning. We are overwhelmed with a pestilence of a pandemic and the fear of the pandemic seemingly grips people. As fear often does it paralyzes.

In the midst of 'such a time as this' is it not right to call for prayer? That is not all that God's people do but it is the best thing they can do and the first thing they should do. I hear people say many times 'I can't do anything for you but I can at least pray.' Prayer is never the least thing you do and it may not be the only thing you can do. I don't even have time to go through all I could go through to describe such a time as this but even more gripping to my soul and our need to pray could perhaps be summed up in a survey I went through over two weeks ago. My friend Chris Larson from Ligonier's Ministry sent it to me.

Ligonier every other year does a study and this is from the 2020 study, the most recent survey and what it reveals is astonishing. What it reveals about evangelical theological ignorance's are overwhelming. I'm not talking about theological liberal churches. I am talking about professing evangelical churches. One third of their membership says that God created Jesus. Almost 45 percent believe in universal salvation and an equal number do not believe in the doctrine of hell or the reality of it. I don't have time to recite for you all of the findings. It is startling but in a way it's not surprising because probably for the last 30 to 40 years under the influence of church growth principles, churches have been much more concerned to be accepted by the culture and so modified their mission and message that now they do not produce people who think counter to the culture but like the culture.

It really doesn't surprise me when the world acts like the world with violence, confusion and hatred. The reason the world is going into its death spiral is because the church is not doing its work or salt and light – the salt is not salty and the light is not shining. It shouldn't amaze us that total depravity inevitably moves to absolute depravity but what is to restrain it is the redeeming grace message of the Gospel in word and deed from God's people into society and the common grace blessing of how God's people affects society with their decorum, civility and the way they engage society with the message of life and hope, instead of that of death and destruction.

The reason we're seeing what we are seeing is not that the world is doing anything different than what is should do but because the church has not been doing what it ought to do and we desperately need revival, because we need a spiritual awakening. We need a Gospel awakening in this nation and from this nation to all the nations of the world. Thank God for what is happening in many of the nations of the world but a Gospel awakening to the unbelieving world comes through the instrumentality of the church in its vitality. Sadly, now the church in this nation is spiritual impotent and Biblically illiterate. All that is needed is a ten question test and it becomes evident. Then watch our lives – how different are we Monday through Saturday and what are we hearing on the Lord's Day from pulpits? Is it the imbecility of the prosperity gospel that Jesus died on the cross to make you rich or the forlorn hope of a therapy gospel that is all about your self-esteem or the Biblical 100 percent true, 16 ounces to the pound Gospel that Jesus saves sinners? Has the church lost its mission and when it loses it loses its message?

We need a Gospel Awakening but to get that from heaven then from heaven requires the power, presence and precision of God's Word to be at work in Christ's church – a revival in His church. God's means is not a program. God's means is the desperate, unfettered, undeterred, insatiable, incessant calling upon the throne of grace and mercy by His people and then the heavens are opened and God comes down. If you just want a little bit of religion to get you through the night then this isn't it but if you know that you need Him every hour and desire Him, then I thank God for our elders calling us to fervent prayer, because we are in a spiritual war.

Some call it a cultural war and I have called it that but I haven't called it that for a long time. The culture just provides the battlefields and the real battlefields are for the hearts and souls of men. We are in a spiritual war for these are heart issues. We either need God's common grace to restrain the unbelieving heart or God's redeeming grace to change the heart. That's the message and mission that has been given to us. We're the ones that are supposed to step forward with that with the power of the Spirit of God. But spiritual warfare, while there is an overlap in the metaphor of physical warfare, they are not the same.

In a physical war people demonize the enemy, but we don't for we love them and we pray for them. We'll demonize every thought raised in opposition to Christ but not the thinker. We'll give an account of the hope that is within us but we would pursue the hearts and souls of those who would be against us because they are really against Him who gave Himself for them while they were yet enemies, just as He did for us. We don't fight with the weapons of death. The Bible is clear for we have the weapons of the Spirit divinely designed for life to rescue men from death unto life. These weapons take every thought captive unto the obedience of Christ in life. We don't put on the armor of Saul, we put on the armor of God. It is an armor that is fashioned by the hand of God. There are two instruments that stand out premiere and paramount when you look at these divinely designed weapons of the Spirit. That is prayer and the Word. The sword of the Lord is His Word and through the prayers of His people we are an army that marches on its knees.

It is not my purpose today to talk about the weapon of the ministry of the Word. I have done that many times. I will make some references to it but I do want to deal with this matter of prayer – 70 days. Why 70 days? Have you heard of 70 times seven, that's where we are. There will be ten weeks with seven days a week and each one of those days have a Biblical theme. You can pray for more than just the theme given for that day but I'm hoping that at the end of 70 days you don't quit, so that what you have embraced becomes a way of life. There will be other big prayer gatherings going on during these 70 days and we'll let you know about them. I praise the Lord for them.

Here's where most of are. We'll either go to that big event in person or we'll zoom into that day of prayer and we think we have committed to prayer by doing that. I'm not opposed to that and I believe there are times for such events but I believe they are built on the closet of prayer. They don't take the place of the closet of prayer. We begin with our personal prayer time and then our marital prayer time with our spouse. I love 7 o'clock every morning with my wife, Cindy to pray. Then perhaps in the evening your family time. Then into your small group and then perhaps whatever ministry you are involved in, etc.

Why are we going to November 22<sup>nd</sup>? November 22 is the Sunday before Thanksgiving. What a wonderful time to have communion together with a lifestyle of praying into the future. This isn't about just an election so we're not ending it around Election Day. As important as the election is and the battles that are taking place politically, economically, and socially, this is even more than that. That's why I think it has to be something bigger that is built into our life in

which we call upon the Lord, not just for such a time as this but that God would bring a time for His glory. So as I was thinking of prayer and fasting I decided to go to what God says about prayer.

Right in the midst of the Sermon on the Mount is the Lord's Prayer and I know some are thinking that it's really the Disciple's prayer and I would say, Who is the One who put this prayer together for the Disciples to learn the prayer? The Lord did so I have no problem calling it the Lord's Prayer. This prayer is given two times in the Bible. I think Jesus probably did this prayer more than two times in His three years of ministry on earth but we know He did at different times. One is here in Matthew 5 which is one of six recorded sermons Jesus gave with five of them being in the book of Matthew and one in John. In the first recorded sermon of Jesus called the Constitution of God in the Sermon on the Mount, right in the middle He dealt with prayer and then right after that He dealt with fasting. The second time He gave this prayer was when an unnamed disciple came to Him and said 'Jesus teach us to pray (Luke 11).' So He not only gave it in a sermon but He gave it in a discipleship endeavor. When He gives this prayer He says 'Pray this way.' What is this way?

Here are seven things about 'this way' that I'd like for you to think through in the coming 70 days from the Lord's Prayer. Here is the first one in prayer is that it is focused and directed. Where is prayer focused? It is focused to the Triune God – Our Father. Our Christianity needs to be demonstrably and functionally Trinitarian. God saved you - The Father authored you, the Son accomplished you and the Spirit applies. God created you – Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Worship is Trinitarian. Jesus says in John 4:23–24, [23] *But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him.* [24] *God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.* In other words, we worship the Father through the Son in the Spirit. Can you worship Jesus? Yes. Do we worship the Holy Spirit? Yes, but the weave of worship is Trinitarian. The Spirit of God moves us to Christ and then through Christ to the praise of the Father. In other words, worship is the reverse of our salvation. The Father sent the Son who sent the Spirit, now the Spirit sends us to the Son and back to the praise of the Father.

The same thing is true in prayer for we pray to the Father, through the Son in the name of Christ and then by the power of the Holy Spirit, who leads us. And we pray focused and directed to God, not to prayer. Harry, do you believe in prayer? No. I believe in praying because I believe in God. It is not the prayer I put my trust in for I can give you prayer after prayer that is condemned in the Bible. It is not simply trusting in prayer. God designed prayer. With His Word He speaks to me, then He designed prayer for me to speak to Him in the name of Jesus, led by the Spirit believably. I don't have the bumper sticker that says 'Prayer changes things.' I would like to have a bumper sticker that says 'God changes things through praying people.' He says 'You have not because you ask not.'

Here is an illustration. The last four vacations for me have been a temptation that I haven't had for about 40 years. That temptation is to take my shirt off when I go to the pool with some amount of pride, because I now have half of a six pack. This was due to heart surgery four years ago where I now have this wonderful scar that runs down the front. The thing tans up great but there are other parts of the six pack that are missing. I do thank the Lord that surgery was successful as far as I know. When it came time for my heart surgery I didn't go looking for a scalpel, I went looking for the doctor. When it was over I didn't go thank the scalpel, I went and thanked the doctor. Prayer is the divine instrument and I thank God for it. I go looking for God

and that is what prayer allows me to do. I need Him and Jesus with His blood has made a way for me.

Secondly, prayer is reflexive and learned. In other words, everybody prays. I have been with atheists and they pray until they catch themselves. I can even help them pray if I ask them to put their hand out and I strike their hand with a hammer. Believe me, they will give a prayer when that happens. It won't be a good prayer or an answered prayer but it will be a prayer. People pray. People were made to pray. I heard a golfer the other day who had just won a tournament say 'I just want to thank my lucky stars.' That may not be a great prayer but it's a prayer. Notice in our text of Matthew 6:5 that it doesn't say 'if you pray' but it says 'when you pray...' The Bible also tells us in James 4:2b–3, [2b] *You do not have, because you do not ask.* [3] *You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions.* We have to learn to pray.

Every one of us will pray, it's just who, how and what when we pray, because every one of us will pray wrong unless God teaches us from His Word right. That is why Jesus taught us how to pray. He said 'When you pray, pray this way...' I have yet to meet a Christian who is fully satisfied with their prayer life. They want to pray and they want to pray prevailingly and fervently so God help me and that is what the Lord is doing for us here in this Matthew 6 text.

Thirdly, Jesus teaches us in this prayer to pray simply with priorities. I didn't say prayer is easy. I promise you that every single day Satan will give you a reason not to pray with fervent prayer to Jesus for the very things we should be praying about. Satan does not want you to pray and he doesn't want you to pray rightly. Jesus not only calls you to pray but He tells you to pray very simply. Look how simple this prayer is in Matthew 6 and it's prioritized where we see the vertical before the horizontal.

Matthew 6:9–13 says [9] *Pray then like this:* (starts with the vertical) "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. [10] Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. (Then goes to the horizontal) [11] Give **us** (it's not all about me) this day our daily bread, [12] and forgive **us** our debts, as **we** also have forgiven our debtors. [13] And lead **us** not into temptation, but deliver **us** from evil. (For Thine is the Kingdom and the power and the glory forever; Amen.)

This prayer is very much like the law of God. The first commandments are how to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and mind which is vertical and then comes the horizontal when it speaks of how we love our neighbor as ourselves who is made in the image of God. Now you can do the vertical and not move to the horizontal but you can't do the horizontal without doing the vertical first for that's the priority. Even within that are priorities like worship (hallowed be Thy name), then effectiveness (Thy Kingdom come Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven), then we're down to simple things like daily nourishment that is needed – physically and spiritually. I know your refrigerator is full but one good storm and it won't be full tomorrow. Do we learn to thank God and call upon Him for our daily nourishment? What about spiritually, this isn't accusatory but rhetorical – have you ever prayed about the sermon that is coming the next Sunday that it will be faithful and effective to Christ because you want your soul nourished that day? Do you pray for the person who is discipling you that they will be effective in their mentoring of you? Do you pray that your church will be on mission, on message and in ministry or do you assume they will be that way? Satan is trying to get you not to do it and to do anything and everything else.

Praise Your name Father. God give me my daily nourishment and forgive me of my sins. God, You have so freely forgiven me here is the evidence of my forgiveness for I freely forgive

others. Then God for the future, I don't want to be led into temptation and sin, I want to be led into the path of righteousness with Christ. (Then end it the way you started it. You start with praise and end with praise.) I praise You for giving me Your Spirit through Your Son.

The prayer life is foundationally, personal and private but ultimately it's corporate and public. In this Matthew 6 text Jesus is not condemning public prayer. What He is condemning are people who did their private prayers and their private fasting publically to be seen by others. Jesus prayed publically. In the overall work of the ministry – Word and prayer in your life – the ministry of the Word starts public with preaching and then works privately in and on the person. The Berean Christians were more noble-minded than the Thessalonians because they one they heard the Word with eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if these things were so (Acts 17:11).

Yet prayer does the opposite for prayer starts personally – personal, marital, family, small group, congregational community, ministry, corporate prayer – the overall flow is from the personal and private to the public. In the ministry of the Word it's from the public to the private. I don't believe it strong enough to tell you that you are sinning if you don't do it though. I believe whether it's personal or public that it ought to be out loud. I'll speak practically to this. Maybe you're not like me for when I pray personally in silence my focus lasts somewhere between 17 and 19 seconds. Then my thoughts wander to what the rest of my day will be like. I have to pray out loud when I pray personally to stay focused on what I'm praying about. Some of you have even seen me when I'm driving in my car but perhaps you thought I was singing, but I wasn't.

Did Jesus have a personal prayer life? Absolutely. I think He prayed out loud. Here's why I think this. Whenever I read about His personal prayer life in the Bible the Disciples nearby tell us what He prayed. Now I know the Holy Spirit could have revealed it supernaturally but I really think they heard it. We see this when Jesus took Peter, James and John to the Garden and has a time of personal prayer a short distance away from them (Luke 22:39–46). So I would at least recommend strongly to pray out loud, not mandate.

Number four is that praise and petitions go together. You start with praise and end with praise. It starts with 'Hallowed be Thy name' and ends with 'Thine is the Kingdom, the power and the glory forever, Amen.' In between there are six petitions, three being vertical and three being horizontal with each being built upon the others.

Number five prayers are informal and formal. Number six prayers are also spontaneous and can be written out. I want to recommend some books to you. One of them is on fasting by John Piper titled Hunger For God. Another book is Donald Witney's book Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life, and chapter 9 deals with fasting. On prayer, I highly recommend Richard Pratt's book Pray With Your Eyes Open and another prayer book is The Valley of Vision: A Collection of Puritan Prayers & Devotions edited by Arthur Bennett. The prayers of the Puritans can be used and owned in the life of a believer.

Number seven, prayer then led to fasting. The hand maiden of prayer is fasting. There are many accounts in the Bible of people praying and not fasting but I find no accounts of people fasting without praying. Whenever people pray there is the Word on one side and sometimes it's joined to fasting. Why do we fast? Fasting is doing two things. In the Old Testament there was a lot of fasting going on and then comes Jesus. You don't find fasting in the Gospels except for the disciples of John the Baptist. We see this in Mark 2.

Mark 2:18–20 says [18] *Now John's disciples and the Pharisees were fasting. And people came and said to him, "Why do John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but your*

*disciples do not fast?" [19] And Jesus said to them, "Can the wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them? As long as they have the Bridegroom with them, they cannot fast. [20] The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast in that day." They didn't fast while Jesus was with but when He leaves them then they will fast. This is where we are now.*

Prayer and fasting have two elements to it. It is lament over the consequences of sin with the hope of the Gospel of grace that is greater than all our sin. It is not lament hopeless. Secondly, you find prayer and fasting when they consecrated people with anticipation of God's blessing. Paul and Barnabas were set apart for the first and second missionary journeys with prayer and fasting (Acts 13:2–3). Prayer and fasting was done also with the elders in the churches they had set up. We see this in Acts 14:23 which says *[23] And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed.* Prayer and fasting is not only lament but anticipation of what God can do and will do and yet do for His glory.

Have you noticed all the corrections in the Bible on the wrong things in prayer? We are corrected by getting the doctrine of God right. Jesus says in Matthew 6:7–8, *[7] "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. [8] Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask Him."* I want to relieve you of a burden. God is not up there waiting for you to give Him some information He does not yet have. Who has become His counselor or His teacher? No one. The church is Biblically illiterate and spiritually impotent in America and do you think God doesn't know this? He knows before you know but oh how He loves for you to come to Him.

You kind of experienced this as a parent when your child came to you and said 'Daddy, did you know 2 plus 2 is 4?' Yes, but wasn't that a great moment? As children come who say "we hate sin, we love You, would You come be with us that we can walk and bear witness of Your heart to this world" and you go to Him with simplicity yet priorities. You go to Him with your heart yet led to Him by His Word and His Spirit.

You may be wondering how long to fast and that varies. It could be 12 hours, one day, three days, one week or a meal. I agree with Martin Lloyd Jones where fasting doesn't have to be just food, it could be something else that God has given you that you enjoy that you give up for a period of time. It's not 'God I'm giving this up so will You love me?' No, for food and drink are not evil. Eating and drinking are not evil. Now you can eat and drink sinfully but that's a gift from God. I Corinthians 10:31 says *[31] So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.* You are telling God 'You, the Bread of Life, are more important than me or any bread of this world – my soul hungers for You' and when I feel that physical hunger I'm going to feed my soul. I don't know what you might fast from but I know one thing – don't go advertise. We don't need to let people know. It's between you and the Lord. Just bring it to Him.

I remember all the distortions that were happening in this country in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and Jonathan Edwards and Gilbert Tennent gave us a call to unite us to extraordinary prayer, a humble attempt. Out the Great Awakening a revival came from 1735 to 1765 and this nation was birthed from that, even with its imperfections. I am praying and I am certainly no Jonathan Edwards, with humility of our hearts, calling upon the Lord through the extraordinary blessing of prayer as ordinary people in an ordinary church with other ordinary Christians in other ordinary churches God will yet do an extraordinary thing and yet send another Gospel Awakening to this

nation. That is where our great need is. These are heart issues and we need God's heart surgery on us.

So here is the takeaway. Biblical prayer and fasting does not line God up with our hearts but when we Biblically pray, fast and call upon God from dependent and undistracted hearts, God lines our hearts up with His heart so that the world will see and hear from us and through us the heart of God which is to save sinners through Christ our Lord. That is what I'm praying for. I invite you to join. I call you to fervent prayer for these next 70 days. I invite you to consider the Biblical gift of fasting but I ask you, let's unite and seek the Lord from the closets of prayer into the throne room of God. He sits not only on the throne of glory, He sits on the throne of mercy. Let's pray.

#### Prayer:

Father, thank You that we can walk through these absolutely astounding moments from Your teaching on prayer and asking that the Holy Spirit would come and lead us. God, Your leadership here has called us but we are asking You to lead us. Father there are some reading this that need to begin with this prayer; 'Jesus, be merciful to me for I'm a sinner. I acknowledge I'm a sinner and I put my trust in Jesus alone for salvation this day.' O the glory of being in the forever family of God that now you can pray 'Our Father in heaven...' If you prayed that prayer and would like to talk with someone about this prayer of salvation in commitment to Christ, please call us at Briarwood at (205) 776-5200. You can make that prayer right now right where you are. Then God would You lead us, who have been saved from the glorious throne of grace to the throne of mercy, but a sweet, sweet place? May we be there daily in this coming season and God, from the throne of glory, will You rend the heavens and come down with revival power and a Gospel Awakening, in Jesus' Name, Amen!

#### Power Point

##### A Call to 70 Days of Fervent Prayer

- I. Focused and Directed
- II. Reflexive and Learned
- III. Simple and Prioritized
- IV. Foundationally Personal and Private, yet Ultimately Corporate and Public
- V. Praise and Petition
- VI. Informal and Formal
- VII. Prayer and Fasting

#### Life Takeaway

*A Call to United Extraordinary Prayer; A Humble Attempt – Jonathan Edwards*

*Biblical Prayer and Fasting does not line God up with our hearts. But as we call upon God from dependent and undistracted hearts, God aligns our hearts with His Heart, so the world will see and hear from us the Heart of God to save sinners through Christ our Lord.*