

Hungering for God: A Life of Prayer & Fasting

Matthew 6:16-18

Do you remember a teacher, or coach, that was so special and encouraging to you? Do you remember how much they meant to you? Do you remember how you rose to their expectations of you as they coached or taught you? What type of response do we have to someone we love, respect, and deeply admire? Usually, when they express their expectations or desires, we do everything to try to meet their expectations, right?

That experience that many of us have had have shared is really a key to understanding our passage of Scripture this morning in Matthew 6:11.

We are looking at the Lord's Prayer's seven petitions, and have arrived at the middle, or fourth. The words are simple: "Give us this day our daily bread". The meaning is also simple, but the message Christ conveys in both the context of this petition to the entire prayer, and the entire prayer to the context in the Sermon on the Mount is profound. Watch what I mean.

POINT ONE: JESUS SHARES HIS EXPECTATIONS OF HIS FIRST DISCIPLES IN MATTHEW 5-7

Here are the plain truths we would all agree upon.

The Sermon of the Mount was given directly, and primarily to Christ's disciples. Look at Matthew 5:1 with me for a moment. The crowds around may have listened, and we through the inspiration of the Bible can also now hear this message. But, the first responders were intended by Jesus to be His disciples. So, Matthew 5-7 was initially communicated directly to the Twelve, His first disciples.

In Matthew 6 Jesus expresses some expectations or desires of His disciples, not commands. Notice that Jesus never commands these disciplines or choices, He just states them as assumptions that these are things they would be doing. In other words, Jesus says this is what I expect you are already doing as my disciples.

What were those expectations?

JESUS ASSUMED HIS DISCIPLES WOULD GIVE, PRAY & FAST

Notice the way Jesus introduced these three areas of spiritual discipline:

Giving to the Poor: In Matthew 6:1-4 Jesus assumes that they would be giving to the needy. It was His expectation that any disciple of His would be concerned and engaged in giving to the poor and needy. Follow along as I read His words, and notice how He describes the giving of alms or gifts to the poor.

Matthew 6:1-4 (NKJV) “Take heed that **you do not do your charitable deeds** before men, to be seen by them. Otherwise you have no reward from your Father in heaven. 2 Therefore, **when you do a charitable deed**, do not sound a trumpet before you as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may have glory from men. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward. 3 But **when you do a charitable deed**, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, 4 that your charitable deed may be in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will Himself reward you openly.

Praying: In Matthew 6:5-14 Jesus assumes that they would be praying. It was His expectation that any disciple of His would be concerned and engaged in staying closely connected to God the Father by prayer. Follow along as I read His words, and notice how He describes the praying.

Matthew 6:5-9 (NKJV) “And **when you pray**, you shall not be like the hypocrites. For they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the corners of the streets, that they may be seen by men. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward. 6 But you, **when you pray**, go into your room, and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly. 7 And **when you pray**, do not use vain repetitions as the heathen do. For they think that they will be heard for their many words. 8 “Therefore do not be like them. For your Father knows the things you have need of before you ask Him. 9 **In this manner, therefore, pray:**

Fasting: In Matthew 6:16-18 Jesus assumes that they would be fasting. It was His expectation that any disciple of His would be concerned and engaged in some form of fasting. Follow along as I read His words, and notice how He describes the fasting.

Matthew 6:16-18 (NKJV) “Moreover, **when you fast**, do not be like the hypocrites, with a sad countenance. For they disfigure their faces that they may appear to men to be fasting. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward. 17 But you, **when you fast**, anoint your head and wash your face, 18 so that you do not appear to men to be fasting, but to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly.

So basically we can say that we are looking right at the middle of this teaching lesson with Christ's first disciples.

Jesus expresses some simple disciplines that He assumed they would be already doing, just as a part of their walk with God.

Then, Jesus amplifies each discipline with further teaching, correctively showing what God desires in each of these disciplines. Those assumptions or expectations of Christ for His disciples were that they would be:

GIVING TO THE POOR, PRAYING, & FASTING

Those seem to be so unconnected, yet in the mind of God they are not. This middle petition about God supplying our needs on a daily basis, actually ties into perhaps one of the most neglected topics among all of the spiritual disciplines that believers have practiced over the centuries. So first, we can say with much confidence from the text of Scriptures that: Jesus assumed that His first disciples would be giving to the poor, praying to their Father, and fasting.

Now Pause for a moment. As modern day followers of Jesus:

ARE WE GIVING, PRAYING & FASTING

We also are following Jesus today, right?

We also love the Lord today, don't we?

We also see Him as our Master, Savior, Lord, and King, right?

We also want to please Him, and do what he assumes and expects us to do, right?

Compassionate Giving:

Jesus just assumed those first disciples would be concerned enough about the poor (even though there were so many laws in the Old Testament that mandated how the poor were to be taken care of nationally, by the harvesting rules, the responsibilities of families, the forgiving of debts, and so on: *yet Jesus assumed that disciples would have a heart of compassion that prompted them to give (secretly He added) to the poor and needy.* I think we should each pause and examine our own heart and look to see if we have this type of compassion that draws us to give secretly to the poor and needy.

Regular Praying:

Jesus assumed that prayer was just a part of the fabric of every day life. So Jesus just added a pattern to those daily prayers, directed then towards God as Father, and laid out areas that would keep them in step with His plan. *I think we should each pause and examine our own heart and look to see if we have this type of need for God as our Father that draws us to pray, following the pattern Jesus clearly asked us to follow.*

Fasting:

Jesus assumed that fasting was just a part of the fabric of every day life. *So Jesus just added a few reminders about directing fasting to God in secret.* I think we should each pause and examine our own heart and look to see if we have considered what type of hungering after God in fasting we should practice.

Jesus says that these are His expectations that they would be, as a part of everyday life, involved in giving to the poor and needy, praying, and fasting. Just like that He lays down His assumptions about their lives. These were His expectations, and to the extent that they loved and wanted to please Him, they would give, pray, and fast.

So, Jesus assumed His first disciples would give, pray, and fast. What an interesting set of expectations dropped right here in the middle of this great, three chapter long message from Jesus.

POINT TWO: JESUS SHARES HIS EXPECTATIONS FOR HIS FUTURE DISCIPLES IN MATTHEW 9

Now, let's move to a second truth. As we turn onward to Matthew 9 we come to a startling prediction from Christ Jesus about His disciples in the future. This passage contains what may be **the single most important words in the Bible on fasting**. And these words can change your life if you understand them!

After Christ's death, burial, resurrection, and ascension back to Heaven, His future disciples will fast:

Matthew 9:14-17 (NKJV) Then the disciples of John came to Him, saying, "Why do we and the Pharisees **fast often**, but Your disciples **do not fast**?" 15 And Jesus said to them, "Can the friends of the bridegroom mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them? **But the days will come when the bridegroom will be taken away from them, and then they will fast.** 16 No one puts a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old garment; for the patch pulls away from the garment, and the tear is made worse. 17 Nor do they put new wine into old wineskins, or else the wineskins break, the wine is spilled, and the wineskins are ruined. But they put new wine into new wineskins, and both are preserved."

Matthew 9 introduces to us who live this side of Christ's Resurrection & Ascension, a spiritual concept that is foreign to most believers in Christ's church today: praying & fasting.

Now, if Jesus expected His future disciples after His ascension to fast, the question is: do we see them doing that in the New Testament? The answer is yes. Turn with me to Acts 13.

POINT THREE: THE EARLY CHURCH PRACTICED FASTING IN ACTS 13-14

As we open to Acts 13 we are more than a decade into the church after Christ's departure He promised. Jesus said when He the Bridegroom was gone they would fast. We see this portrayed in Acts 13. But what is amazing is the place that fasting had in the life of the church. Follow along with me as we read these verses:

Acts 13:1-3 (NKJV) Now in the church that was at Antioch there were certain prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. 2 **As they ministered to the Lord and fasted**, the Holy Spirit said, "Now separate to Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." 3 Then, having **fasted and prayed**, and laid hands on them, they sent them away.

FIRST, WHAT KIND OF CHURCH WAS AT ANTIOCH?

Just some observations on where we've come. The church at Antioch was the first beachhead in the invasion of the Gospel out into the pagan world. The church at Antioch was

the place where Barnabas mentored Paul, and this church became the missionary and discipleship hub for the Gentile world. Paul was sent out from here on his missionary journeys, and this church was so effective it is the place where the term Christian was first coined (Acts 11:26). Several observations:

1. The Church at Antioch was a healthy, functioning, model church. We are more than a decade after the Ascension of Jesus to Heaven. As you turn to Acts 11:25 you can see the key to the success of this church, they were deeply and closely taught God's Word:

Acts 11:25-26a (NKJV) Then Barnabas departed for Tarsus to seek Saul. 26 And when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch.

2. The Church at Antioch was a very well taught church, grounded in doctrine from God's Word. Paul and Barnabas spent a year gathering and instructing this assembly.

Acts 11:26b (NKJV) **So it was that for a whole year they assembled with the church and taught a great many people.**

3. The Church at Antioch was a very effective evangelizing, nurturing, and disciple-making church. In fact, so many pagans were saved that the city took notice and gave them a name that stuck:

Acts 11:26c (NKJV) **And the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch.**

4. The Church at Antioch was a missions-minded, outreaching church that fulfilled the Great Commission at home and to the ends of the earth. From within the congregation the Lord raised up and sent out, the first local church commissioned, course of the world changing missionary teams.

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The Church at Antioch was almost a blueprint for the type of church that grows when God's Word is carefully taught, lived out, and embraced.

We are looking at one of the healthiest, most in step with the Spirit churches of the New Testament.

We are looking at the place where evangelism and discipleship were deeply practiced.

SECOND, WHAT WAS THE NORM FOR THE CHURCH AT ANTIOCH?

So in this blueprint for an effective, missions minded, evangelistic and discipleship oriented church, what do we see as the norm? Ministry surrounded by Prayer & Fasting.

Look back how it is just mentioned. Like Matthew 6, and like Matthew 9, it is almost assumed that people who are devoted to the Lord and involved in ministry would fast.

Acts 13:1-3 (NKJV) Now in the church that was at Antioch there were certain prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. 2 **As they ministered to the Lord and fasted**, the Holy Spirit said, "Now separate to Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." 3 **Then, having fasted and prayed**, and laid hands on them, they sent them away.

Ministry that is surrounded by prayer & fasting is reflected in their hungering for God.

We fast to cultivate a hunger that grows stronger and stronger, until we hunger the most for Our Great God.

So, what does this fasting look like when we see it portrayed in Scriptures? Here is a brief overview of:

GRACE PROMPTED NEW TESTAMENT FASTING

First, Biblical fasting joined with prayer surrounded the ministry of this church and was part how they sought out and followed the GUIDANCE OF THE LORD.

Acts 13:2 As they ministered to the Lord **and fasted**, the Holy Spirit said, "Now separate to Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them."

Second, Biblical fasting surrounded all the planning and preparation for the church SENDING OUT MISSIONARIES.

Acts 13:3 Then, **having fasted and prayed**, and laid hands on them, they sent them away.

Third, Biblical fasting surrounded the prayers for the raising up and launching of the next generation, and was a part of APPOINTING SPIRITUAL LEADERS.

Acts 14:23 So when they had appointed elders in every church, **and prayed with fasting**, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed.

Finally, Biblical fasting was part of THE REGULAR LIFE OF SPIRITUAL MINISTRY in Paul's account of his life.

2 Corinthians 11:27 in weariness and toil, in sleeplessness often, in hunger and thirst, **in fastings often**, in cold and nakedness—

Pause and think.

WHEN DID YOU LAST PRACTICE BIBLICAL FASTING & PRAYER?

Not for medical reasons, not for weight loss, not because you were too busy to make a meal, no, when was the last time you practiced the Biblical Discipline of fasting & prayer.

Jesus commended fasting as part of an amazing two-part set of tools: prayer & fasting. Those two go together. Jesus even said that some things won't happen without BOTH tools.

WHY NOT EXPLORE PRAYER & FASTING?

Would you like to revitalize your spiritual life?

Would you like to heighten your awareness of God?

Would you like to experience God in such a deep and intimate way that you find yourself absolutely satisfied and contented in a way God's Word calls perfect peace?

Start longing for Christ's return so much that it draws you to deny other good things, so that you may focus more and more of your life upon seeking, knowing, enjoying, and pleasing Christ!