

SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES: Start the New Year With Extraordinary Prayer

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Every year our entire congregation at Free Chapel participates in a 21-day fast. The reason we fast corporately at the beginning of the year is based on principles that have been adapted from Bob Rogers' book *101 Reasons to Fast*.

There are three reasons starting the year with a fast is a good practice. First, by doing so, you set the course for the rest of the year. Just as beginning your day with prayer sets the course for the rest of the day and covers anything that may happen, the same is true of beginning the year with a fast.

You set the course for the entire year by what you do with those first few days of each new year. You can carry that even further to give God the first part of every day, the first day of every week, the first portion of every dollar and the first consideration in every decision.

Second, blessings will happen for you and your family throughout the year because you fasted in January. Even in April, June and August and into November when you have Thanksgiving goodies on your mind, blessings will still be finding their way to you because of your sacrifice to the Lord at the beginning of the year.

In fact, around Thanksgiving one year I got a call to go to

the bank. When I arrived, a man and his wife met me and said, "Here is \$1 million for the building program."

I had forgotten about the fast we had done 10 months before, but God hadn't. He sent us not only someone with a \$1 million gift but also people with a \$500,000 gift, a \$250,000 gift and a \$50,000 gift, as well as cumulative millions that came in regular gifts all in that same year.

This third point is so powerful. When you fast at the beginning of the year and pray, you release the principle found in Matthew 6:33: "'Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you'" (NKJV, emphasis added). If you seek Him first in the year, get ready for all these "things" to be added to your life throughout the rest of the year!

What Is Fasting?

In addition to knowing why you should fast, you must know what the practice is. Because there are so many misconceptions about fasting, I first want to clarify what biblical fasting is not. Fasting is not merely going without food for a period of time. That is dieting—maybe even starving—but fasting it is not.

Nor is fasting something done only by fanatics. I really want to drive that point home. Fasting is not to be done only by religious monks alone in a cave somewhere. The practice of fasting is not limited to ministers or for special occasions.

Stated simply, biblical fasting is refraining from food for a spiritual purpose. Fasting has always been a normal part of a relationship with God. As expressed by the impassioned plea of David in Psalm 42, fasting brings one into a deeper, more intimate and powerful relationship with God.

When you eliminate food from your diet for a number of days, your spirit becomes uncluttered by the things of this world

and amazingly sensitive to the things of God. As David stated, "Deep calls unto deep" (Ps. 42:7).

David was fasting. His hunger and thirst for God were greater than his natural desire for food. As a result, he reached a point at which he could cry out from the depths of his spirit to the depths of God, even in his trial.

After you've experienced even a glimpse of that kind of intimacy with our God—our Father, the holy creator of the universe—and the countless rewards and blessings that follow, your whole perspective will change. You will soon realize that fasting is a secret source of power that is overlooked by many.

Why Fast?

During the years that Jesus walked this earth, He devoted time to teaching His disciples the principles of the kingdom of God, principles that conflict with those of this world. In the Beatitudes, specifically in Matthew 6, Jesus provided the pattern by which each of us is to live as a child of God. That pattern addressed three specific duties of a Christian: giving, praying and fasting.

Jesus said, "*When you give*" and "*When you pray*" and "*When you fast.*" He made it clear that fasting, like giving and praying, was a normal part of Christian life. As much attention should be given to fasting as is devoted to giving and to praying.

Solomon, when writing the books of wisdom for Israel, made the point that a cord, or rope, braided with three strands is not easily broken (see Eccl. 4:12). Likewise, when giving, praying and fasting are practiced together by a believer, they combine to create a type of threefold cord that is not easily broken.

In fact, as I'll show you in a moment, Jesus took it even further by saying, "'Nothing will be impossible'" (Matt. 17:20).

Could we be missing our greatest breakthroughs because we fail to fast? Remember the thirtyfold, sixtyfold and hundredfold return Jesus spoke of? (See Mark 4:8,20.)

Look at it this way: When you pray, you can release that thirtyfold return, but when both prayer and giving are part of your life, I believe that releases the sixtyfold blessing. But when all three—giving, praying and fasting—are part of your life, that hundredfold return can be released!

If that's the case, you have to wonder what blessings are *not* being released. What answers to prayer are not getting through? What bondages are not being broken because we fail to fast?

Matthew tells the story of a father who had a demon-possessed son. For years he watched helplessly while his son suffered with severe convulsions.

As the boy grew older, the attacks became so severe that he would often throw himself into an open fire or a trench of water. A suicidal spirit tormented him constantly, and his situation became life-threatening.

Having exhausted every attempt to cure the boy—even taking him to the disciples with no avail—the father almost gave up. Then he heard that Jesus was near.

Going to the Master, he cried, “‘Lord, have mercy on my son, for he is an epileptic and suffers severely; for he often falls into the fire and often into the water. So I brought him to Your disciples, but they could not cure him’” (Matt. 17:15-16).

When the boy was brought to Jesus, He “rebuked the demon; and it came out of him; and the child was cured from that very hour” (v. 18).

But what made the difference? After all, Matthew 10:1 records

that Jesus had already given the disciples power to cast out evil spirits and to heal every disease. So why couldn't the disciples cast out the demon and cure the boy?

That's what they wanted to know, too, so later that night, when they were alone with Jesus, they asked Him. Jesus replied, "'Because of your unbelief; for assuredly, I say to you, if you have faith as a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you. However, this kind does not go out except by prayer and fasting'" (Matt. 17:20-21).

Each time I've read that passage, I've focused on the statement "and nothing will be impossible for you." I think a lot of people stop right there, but Jesus didn't because He knew there was more—much more.

See, that one little word "however" is the connection—it's the key that unlocks the power in the statement "nothing will be impossible for you." Jesus told the disciples they needed faith, even faith as small as a tiny seed.

But that wasn't all. Long before this incident, the Holy Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness, where He spent 40 days and 40 nights and ate nothing. "'However, this kind does not go out except by prayer and fasting.'" For Jesus, casting out that stubborn demon wasn't impossible.

If Jesus could have accomplished all He came to do without fasting, then why did He fast? The Son of God knew there were supernatural things that could only be released through fasting. How much more should fasting be a common practice in our lives.

Fasting Is for Everyone

Perhaps you're thinking, *I still don't know how fasting can really be for me.* According to the words of Jesus, it is the duty of every disciple and every believer to fast.

When addressing the Pharisees regarding why His disciples did not fast, Jesus replied, “‘Can you make the friends of the bridegroom fast while the bridegroom is with them?

‘But the days will come when the bridegroom will be taken away from them; then they will fast in those days’” (Luke 5:34-35).

Then they will fast. Jesus didn’t expect His disciples to do something He hadn’t done as well. Jesus fasted, and according to the words of Peter, Jesus is our example in all things (see 1 Pet. 2:21).

The apostle Luke confirms this truth: “‘A disciple is not above his teacher, but everyone who is perfectly trained will be like his teacher’” (Luke 6:40).

There’s another vital point that I want you to see in Matthew 6: God delights in giving rewards. Not only that, but He says that when giving, praying and fasting are practiced in your life, He will “reward you openly.”

A good example of such open reward can be found in the book of Daniel. While in Babylonian captivity, Daniel’s fasting—even partial fasting of certain foods—brought about the open reward of God, who blessed Daniel with wisdom beyond that of anyone else in the empire.

In Chapter 10 Daniel records that he was grieved and burdened with the revelation he had received for Israel. He ate no choice breads or meats and drank no wine for three weeks.

Then he describes the angel that was sent to him—which had been *delayed* by the prince of Persia for 21 days—with the answers Daniel sought. His fast broke the power of the delayer and released the angels of God so that God’s purposes could be revealed and served.

This is just one example of how powerful fasting is. As part of the threefold cord, it can impact every area of your life.

Do you desire to know God's will for your life, whom you should marry or what you should do in a critical situation? Fasting can bring you to a place of being able to clearly hear God's will.

Fasting also causes God to target your children. In addition, it brings health and healing to your body, as well as financial prosperity and the blessings of God. You would be amazed at all the testimonies we have heard about fasting!

Whether you desire to be closer to God or are in need of great breakthroughs in your life, remember that nothing shall be impossible to you. Fasting is truly a secret source of power.

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