

Session 5 - The Fasted Lifestyle: Embracing Voluntary Weakness

1. Introduction

- a. One of the issues regarding the subject of prayer is that the meaning of word remains mysterious and ambiguous to many believers. We have never thought through the simple question, “What is prayer and what is not prayer?”
- b. Although this seems like an easy question it is quite difficult because of the vastness of the topic. However this should not deter us because how we define prayer will largely determine how we approach prayer and how we actually pray.
 - i. Similarly to how we define success in life (see session 3) determines how we actually live. If success is amassing wealth than we will become work-a-holics but if success is the First Commandment (Matthew 22:37-38) than we will orient our life around our pursuit of loving God wholeheartedly.
 - ii. Our definition of anything becomes our north star by which we navigate through the journey of life. It is the same with prayer.
- c. For example, we said if someone defines prayer as simply our way of obtaining blessings from God than our prayer life will largely consist of us asking God for things. We will turn Him into the father that tries to buy his kids affection with things rather than a good father that desires and seeks a relational connection with his kids.
- d. To help us define prayer we said that prayer has two main purposes (in this order):
 - i. To know God
 - ii. To receive grace and obtain answers
- e. Therefore we defined prayer the following way:

“The connecting and exchanging of hearts between God and man primarily through the speaking of words.”

- f. The primary purpose of prayer must be, and remain, knowing Jesus and growing in love for Him as we receive of His love for us. It is the Holy Spirit’s number one priority in your life to connect your heart with the heart of Jesus.
- g. This heart connection is the foundation of our faith and our prayer life. Without it we are simply strangers speaking shallow words to each other rather than lovers sharing our very selves with each other.

- h. Out of this heart connection the Holy Spirit will make known to the desires of God and invite us to partner with Him to bring them to pass on earth. This partnership, where we lay down our own will for the will of God and we give up our selfish dreams for the dreams of Christ, is what we call intercession.
- i. This is the exchanging spoken of in our definition of prayer. Intercession is more about joining the very core of your being to the revealed will of God than it is about binding demons, casting down strongholds, and praying in tongues.

2. Voluntary Weakness

- a. This “exchanging” or surrendering that we spoke of last session is the topic we will focus on in this session. Prayer involves our entire being, body, soul, and spirit and it involves the surrendering and consecration of our entire being.
- b. Prayer is far more than words prayer is a way of life. When Isaiah speaks about the suffering of the Messiah he says that Christ will literally become intercession for humanity (Isaiah 53:12). He not only “makes” intercession as something He does but He will “become” intercession as someone that He is. The same reality is true for us.
 - i. And again this goes back to the foundation of prayer being a heart connection. If intercession remains only something we say and not part of who we are than we will not see the power of God move through us like we could or should.
- c. So the question becomes how does this “exchanging” take place in our lives? How do we surrender who we are so that we can better partner with Christ in the place of prayer?
 - i. Ultimately this is what Christ wants, a bride that will partner with Him to accomplish His purposes on the earth. Prayer is primarily about a love fueled partnership.
- d. The idea that the New Testament writers continually use to convey this surrendering in partnership with Jesus is “weakness”. Specifically the idea that is portrayed is that as followers of Jesus Christ we are to voluntarily embrace a lifestyle of weakness so that Christ in and through us can show forth His strength.
 - i. This is not speaking of physical weakness in regards to fitness, exercise, or physical brute strength but of an inner posture of complete brokenness, humility, and surrender that will manifest itself outwardly through various actions in our life.
- e. As human beings we hate weakness. Everything in us hates being weak, feeling weak, and being called weak by others. Especially in the west we hate the idea of weakness because the weak have no control, no power, no say about anything.

- f. The weak get taken advantage of and are preyed on by the strong. The weak get used and abused by those in power. Our culture has taught us to never show our weakness but in all we do be as strong as we possibly can be so that others don't take advantage of us.
- g. This becomes a massive point of contention in the Kingdom of God because Jesus not only demands that we weak but that we voluntarily embrace it in every area of our life.

"Then Jesus said to His disciples, 'If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me. For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it.'" - Matthew 16:24-25

- h. And the opening of the Sermon on the Mount is laced with promised blessing for those the embrace a life of weakness, humility, and brokenness.

"Blessed are the poor in spirit...Blessed are those who mourn...Blessed are the meek...Blessed are those who hunger and thirst...Blessed are the merciful...Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake...Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake." - Matthew 5:3-11

- i. Do we see how Christ defines blessing? When we think of blessing or confess, "I am blessed" what we typically have in our mind is an easy, comfortable, pain free life. Yet Jesus here calls the hungry, thirsty, mourning, poor, and persecuted blessed.
 - i. Think of Mary the mother of Jesus. She was called blessed and highly favored of the Lord yet for the next three decades everyone thought she was adulterous women.
 - ii. John the Baptist was called the greatest man born of a woman in the Old Testament and yet He spent most of his life in the wilderness, had a short 6-9 month ministry, and then was beheaded because the King's daughter didn't like him.
- j. Why are these descriptions of voluntary weakness called blessings from God? Why are the Christians fleeing from ISIS right now blessed according to Christ? Why are our brothers and sisters in Africa who meet in church building with a tin roof and dirt floors blessed?
- k. Blessing from God is not the accumulation of natural things leading to comfort but the accumulation of Christ likeness leading to eternal reward.

- i. The persecuted are blessed because Christ was persecuted and therefore in their persecution they are able to partner with Christ, remain faithful to Christ, and suffer like Christ, so that one day they will reap an everlasting reward for their suffering just like Christ did.
 - ii. The opportunity to become like Christ and receive an eternal reward for it is a far bigger blessing than 80 years of comfort here and now.
- l. Christ's own incarnation, suffering, and death speak to the fact that voluntary weakness is an integral part to how the Kingdom operates. The fact that Christ had all things in the glory of His Father's house yet left it all to take on human flesh is the greatest example of voluntary weakness in all of Scripture.

"For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich." - 2 Corinthians 8:9

"For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin." - Hebrews 4:15

- m. Christ voluntarily embraced a life of weakness so that the Father could show forth His strength and it was that life of weakness that became intercession for us so that we could be reconciled back to God.
- n. Paul embraced and modeled this lifestyle as well and talks extensively about it in 2 Corinthians 11-13 among other places.

"...in labors more abundant, in stripes above measure, in prisons more frequently, in deaths often. From the Jews five times I received forty stripes minus one. three times I was beaten with rods; once I was stoned; three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I have been in the deep; in journeys often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils of my own countrymen, in perils of the Gentiles in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren; in weariness and toil, in sleeplessness often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness - besides the other things, what comes upon me daily: my deep concern for all the churches. Who is weak, and I am not weak?" - 2 Corinthians 11:23-29

- o. And again when Paul was struggling with the Lord over his "thorn in the flesh" Jesus encounters Paul to encourage to embrace a life of voluntary weakness and humility.

*“Concerning this thing I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me. And He said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for **My strength is made perfect in weakness.**’ Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me.” - 2 Corinthians 12:8-9*

- p. Both the life of Jesus and Paul show us that there are two types of weakness that can beset us.
 - i. Things we can't control - In Paul's list of suffering were many things he couldn't control such as shipwrecks, beatings, and stonings.
 - ii. Things we can control - however both Jesus and Paul purposefully did certain things that they could control in order to embrace weakness, such as fasting often.
- q. Yet in both the things we cannot control and the things we can control we are called to embrace a humble heart and a lifestyle of weakness so that God can show forth His power.
 - i. This does not mean that we simply accept every bad thing that happens to us or that we simply take every card we are dealt but it does mean that in every situation, whether good or bad, whether in our control or out of our control, we go low and seize the opportunity to partner with Christ through humility and trust.
- r. Paul sums up his thoughts on a life of voluntary weakness by ultimately point back to Christ.

“For though He was crucified in weakness, yet He lives by the power of God. For we also are weak in Him, but we shall live with Him by the power of God toward you.” - 2 Corinthians 13:4

*“But what things were gain to me, these I have counted loss for Christ. Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my lord, **for whom I have suffered the loss of all things,** and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in Him...**that I may know Him** and the power of His resurrection, and the **fellowship of His sufferings,** being conformed to His death, if, by any means, I may attain to the resurrection from the dead.” - Philippians 3:7-11*

- s. The of prayer and intercession is a life of voluntary weakness. It is the embracing of our inability to change anything so that Christ can show forth His power.

3. The Fasted Lifestyle in the Sermon on the Mount

- a. This life of voluntary weakness is also referred to as the “Fasted Lifestyle”. This is the life that Christ has called every believer to live in so that they can see the power of God move in and through their lives.
- b. And while Paul’s stories of being beaten, shipwrecked, and stoned seem grandiose and unrealistic for us Jesus clearly lays out what a life of voluntary weakness looks like in normal everyday life.
- c. If we are going to grow in prayer and in intercession you are going to live a fasted lifestyle. And when you embrace the seeming weak living that Jesus lays out in Matthew 6 we are promised to see God’s power move in and through us. Our hearts will become more connected to His, we will become more like Him, and we will be positioned to partner with Him in bringing His desires to our family, city, and region.
- d. The Sermon on the Mount as told in Matthew 5-7 is the constitution of Kingdom living. Every major realm and sphere of life is talked about as Jesus clearly lays out what life in the Kingdom of God looks like.
- e. In the heart of the Sermon on the Mount Jesus expounds upon the fasted lifestyle in which we embrace voluntary weakness for the sake of God power being show in and through us.
- f. Matthew 6 lays out the 4 (some say 5 but I lump two together) primary ways we embrace weakness in our everyday life. Again, prayer is more than speaking words it encompasses our entire being therefore we must broaden our scope of prayer to include a lifestyle.
- g. The four components of the fasted lifestyle are:
 - i. Charitable Deeds/Serving (Matthew 6:1-4)
 - ii. Prayer (Matthew 6:5-15)
 - iii. Fasting (Matthew 6:16-18)
 - iv. Money (Matthew 6:19-34)

4. Charitable Deeds

- a. The first area where Jesus invites us to embrace weakness is in our charitable deeds towards other people. In our serving of others we are giving up our time, our strength, and possibly our resources for the sake of someone else.
- b. Rather than using that time, energy, and money to further our own dreams and desires we voluntarily partner with Jesus’ heart of servanthood to help other people.

- c. This is what it means to have a “servant heart”. Rather than seeking something for ourselves, which we have every right to do, we sacrifice for the sake of others with no guarantee of any reciprocation.

*“After that, He poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples’ feet, and to wipe them with the towel with which He was girded... **For I have given you an example**, that you should do as I have done to you. Most assuredly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than he who sent him. If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them.” - John 13:5, 15-17*

- d. By doing this we are trusting the Lord in two ways:
 - i. We are trusting Him to use our efforts to further His kingdom and help people in ways that we couldn’t do on our own.
 - ii. We are trusting Him to take care of our needs and desires that we laid aside so that we could serve others.

“And whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave - just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.” - Matthew 20:27-28

5. Prayer

- a. Prayer itself is the next facet of the fasted lifestyle in Matthew 6. Prayer is one of the weakest things you could ever do in the natural. This is one reason why so many Christians struggle with it and why most non-believers think it is clinically insane.
- b. The seemingly foolishness of taking our requests, needs and desires to an invisible God to the mind is absolute foolishness.
- c. Prayer is an element of the fasted lifestyle of embracing voluntary weakness because when we pray we are giving up our time, energy, and our emotions.
- d. Again, rather than spending time “working” or “being productive” we are spending time alone singing and speaking to a God that we cannot see or hear with our natural senses. For many people this means sacrificing sleep in the mornings or other entertainment options at night.
- e. We could be doing anything else with our time and energy yet we are giving it to God. And rather than spending our time and energy trying to fix our problems or accomplish our dreams in our own strength through prayer we openly admit that we cannot accomplish what we want on our own and that we need help.

"I am the vine you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing...If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, you will ask what you desire, and it shall be done for you." - John 15:5 & 7

- f. We also fast our emotional energy when we take up other people's needs. Many times in prayer we spend no time praying about our own needs or desires but we cry and weep over the condition of someone else's life. We sew our tears and emotions into someone else rather than ourselves.

***"Likewise the Spirit also helps in our weaknesses.** For we do not know what we should pray for as we ought. but the Spirit Himself makes intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered." - Romans 8:26*

6. Fasting

- a. The third component of the fasted lifestyle is fasting food. Fasting from food is the single fastest way to get in touch with your inner and outer weakness.
- b. The hardest thing about fasting, in my opinion, is not the hunger, that leaves in a few days. It is the weakness you feel in your mind and in your body.
- c. When we fast from food we are giving up our natural source of strength and energy in order to seek spiritual strength and vitality. We embrace literal physical and mental weakness in order to position ourselves to receive from God.
- d. In fasting the foolishness of the Kingdom is on full display. While fasting we believe that not eating food and spending more time speaking to an invisible God is going to release supernatural power in our lives to change physical situations. To the world this is foolishness.
- e. Fasting is the outward statement of our absolute dependence upon Jesus to break into our hearts, minds, and situations because we realize that we can do nothing at all in our own strength.

7. Living Simply and Giving Generously

- a. The last component of the fasted lifestyle is living simply in order to give generously. I find it interesting that Jesus spends the most time on this aspect of the fasted lifestyle, possibly because it is the most difficult for us to walk out consistently.
 - i. Jesus Himself said that it is difficult for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven (Luke 18:24-25).

- b. It is a simple fact of life that those who have more money have more influence and more power. Wealth opens up doors for people. Money is powerful.
- c. Yet Jesus warns us to not trust in the strength of riches but rather to forgo that strength and pursue the strength of Christ as we embrace weakness.

“Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal; but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” - Matthew 6:19-21

- d. By giving generously we are embracing material weakness in order to see God's strength manifest through our giving. We relinquish our rights to a certain luxury or comfort for the sake of the gospel touching someone's life.
- e. Money is powerful because it is so tangible. When we pray many times we don't feel the impact of it on our lives immediately. But when we refuse certain things and live a simple life so that we can give generously we immediately feel the consequence of our decision.
- f. It is my conviction, that although riches are not bad and are biblically a blessing from God, that the Church of Christ is meant to live basic and simple lives so that we can use the financial blessings of God for the sake of gospel.
 - i. Again this does not mean its wrong to have nice things or that it is a sin to wealthy. On the contrary God promises wealth to those who follow His commandments but Jesus here invites us to not use that blessings on ourselves but rather embrace weakness to see the strength of God work through our finances and touch others. “Is life not more than food and the body more than clothing?” (v.25)
- g. My dream is for the entire church of our city to give up the dream of lavish living and live a content simple life in order to give radically for the furtherance of the gospel.
- h. In the same way that Christ was rich and became poor for our sakes He invites us to take our riches and give them away for the sake of others (2 Corinthians 8:8-14).