

Sermon preached at Woodbury Community Church, Woodbury, MN on Sunday,
November 20, 2011, by Rev. Brian D. Schulenburg

MATTHEW 6:16-18

16 "When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. 17 But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, 18 so that it will not be obvious to men that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

**WHAT'S THE DEAL WITH . . . BIBLICAL ANSWERS TO EVERYDAY QUESTIONS #3
PRAYER AND FASTING**

In 2004, US News and World Report magazine partnered with Beliefnet.com to conduct a survey on what Christian, Jewish and Muslim Americans believe about prayer. Here are some of the questions and the results of the survey:

How often do you pray?			
	Christians	Jews	Muslims
More than once each day	68.1%	36.9%	91.6%
Once a day	16.1%	22%	3%
A few times a week	12.1%	27.3%	2.4%
Once a week	0.7%	4%	0%
A few times a month	1.9%	5.4%	1.8%
Once a month	0.2%	0.2%	0%
Every few months	0.6%	3.3%	0.6%
Not at all	0.2%	1%	0.6%

When your prayers relate to <u>health</u> , what kinds of things do you pray about?			
	Christians	Jews	Muslims
Help with specific diseases, like cancer, chronic pain	72.2%	74.2%	59.5%
Mental health or depression	64.8%	63.8%	68.6%
Addiction	28.5%	14.3%	20.9%
Accidents	28.6%	22.7%	35.9%
Birth defects	8%	8.2%	12.4%
Fertility	7.2%	8.4%	14.4%
Pet illness	11%	17%	6.5%

In the last six months, my prayers have related to: (those answering "often" or "all the time")			
	Christians	Jews	Muslims
Health & safety	78%	74%	73%
Personal finances or work	55%	36%	51%
Relationships	68%	54%	63%
General strength	75%	66%	78%
Comforting the bereaved	42%	40%	42%
Pets	12%	18%	6%
God's forgiveness	76%	42%	92%
God's guidance	93%	74%	94%
Lost souls	44%	20%	46%
Victims of tragedies	50%	40%	54%
Improving the world	48%	57%	59%
The president/world leaders	37%	22%	18%
Stronger faith	74%	44%	91%
Giving thanks	91%	84%	90%

I most often pray for:			
	Christians	Jews	Muslims
Myself	30.1%	31.9%	41.6%
Friends	9.3%	9.6%	2.4%
Family	57.7%	56.2%	52.4%
Strangers	2.9%	2.3%	3.6%

The most important purpose of prayer is:			
	Christians	Jews	Muslims
To improve your own life	2.9%	6.7%	7.8%
To help others	4.7%	8.8%	0.6%
To express your intentions	1.5%	4%	0.6%
Intimacy with God	41.9%	26.7%	22.2%
To seek God's guidance	28.7%	25.8%	41.9%
To thank God for your blessings	20.3%	27.9%	26.9%

Are your prayers answered?			
	Christians	Jews	Muslims
Never	0.6%	2.9%	1.2%
Rarely	2.6%	6.7%	2.4%
Sometimes	26.3%	44.5%	22.2%
Often	43%	33.1%	44.3%
Always	27.5%	12.7%	29.9%

When your prayers don't come true, you believe the most important reason is:			
	Christians	Jews	Muslims
God is punishing you	1.2%	3.4%	1.8%
It's not in God's plan	79.4%	50.3%	72.6%
Your faith isn't strong enough	8%	3.8%	9.8%
God helps those who help themselves	6.6%	18.6%	13.4%
God doesn't respond to specific prayers	4.8%	24%	2.4%

Where do you pray most often?			
	Christians	Jews	Muslims
At a house of worship	4.4%	14%	7.2%
At home	79.5%	75.8%	89.2%
While traveling	9.8%	4.5%	1.8%
In nature	2.1%	4.5%	0.6%
At work	3.8%	1%	1.2%
On the Internet, through online prayer circles	0.3%	0.4%	0%

The words I use are:			
	Christians	Jews	Muslims
Based on sacred texts or written prayers	2.3%	13.8%	26.9%
My own	52%	36%	13.2%
A mix	45.7%	50.2%	59.9%

When you pray do you:			
	Christians	Jews	Muslims
Light candles	12.2%	31.6%	1.2%
Use beads	9.1%	0.4%	21.1%
Kneel	29.1%	2.7%	57.8%
Use incense	3.2%	2.5%	4.8%
Chant	2.8%	10%	12.7%
Say prayers out loud	47.4%	43.2%	43.4%
Say prayers silently	90.9%	90.4%	95.2%
Use the Internet	8.4%	3.9%	3%

In the past six months, have other people prayed for you?			
	Christians	Jews	Muslims
Yes -- Friends & family	81.7%	56.7%	84%
Yes -- My religious community	39.4%	20.4%	26.4%
Yes -- "Prayer warriors" or others I don't personally know	28%	8.1%	11.7%
No	9.2%	35.3%	14.7%

If someone prayed for you, did you feel as if it helped?			
	Christians	Jews	Muslims
Yes	75.8%	44%	67.5%
No	1.9%	6.7%	1.9%
Not sure	22.2%	49.3%	30.6%

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So, what do you pray for? Is prayer a part of your daily life? Have you seen God answer your prayers? The answers are going to be different for each one of us. I'm constantly amazed at the diversity of ways in which I see Christians pray, and the way that I see God at work in our prayers. Prayer is best defined as communication with God. It's something that is demonstrated in Scripture from the Old Testament to the New Testament. Jesus modeled prayer and taught His disciples on multiple occasions how to pray. In Jesus we see a model for prayer in His personal time with the Father, in His prayers for His disciples and for us, in His prayer with the disciples, and in the Lord's

¹ <http://www.beliefnet.com/Faiths/Faith-Tools/Meditation/2004/12/U-S-News-Beliefnet-Prayer-Survey-Results.aspx>

Prayer, where He taught the disciples how to pray. So, what do you think of when you think about prayer?

When I was a kid, growing up at the Wheaton Evangelical Free Church, I remember dreading the pastoral prayer. It was the part of the service where the pastor would get up and pray for the needs of the congregation, and to my six-year-old mind the prayer just went on forever and ever. My pastor used these big words that I didn't understand. His voice even changed during the pastoral prayer. As he bellowed words in his deep voice I fought yawns and head bobs. I think there were several times that I actually fell sound asleep during his prayers. And, as a Senior Pastor now, I wonder if that happens to children and some adults when I pray.

I went to Google this week and did an image search on "asleep in church." I've got to show you some of those pictures. How many of us haven't felt like these people from time to time? I remember one time when my dad was taking the offering in church. Our pastor prayed for a super long time before the offering and I fell asleep. I was on the end of our pew and my dad had to shake me to wake me up. I had fallen asleep, mouth wide open, just like these guys.

Maybe you've seen the episode of the British sitcom, Mr. Bean, where he is in church and struggling to stay awake. Maybe it's because I'm a pastor, but I love that episode. He finally succumbs to the sleepiness and falls asleep next to the proper British man sitting next to him. Did you know that falling asleep in a church service is in the Bible? It's true. In Acts 20:9 a young man named Eutychus falls asleep in a service. I love how under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the Apostle Luke records the incident.

9 Seated in a window was a young man named Eutychus, who was sinking into a deep sleep as Paul talked on and on. When he was sound asleep, he fell to the ground from the third story and was picked up dead.

But, it's not just sleepiness that can distract us from prayer. I remember prayer time in the youth ministry that I grew up in. We'd end youth group each week by getting together in a huge circle. All the guys wanted to stand next to the prettiest girl, because it meant that you got to hold her hand. And, if certain people prayed, it would mean that you'd get to hold her hand even longer. Corporate prayer when I was child was boring and when I was a teenager was about anything but praying.

And then God called me into ministry. And prayer was . . . mysterious. For years I have battled in this area of my life. I remember when Cyndi and I first got married and we would pray before bed. She'd pray and I would fall asleep. There is something about the discipline of prayer that can be so difficult for people. It's not a surprise that when preparing for this series, I received many questions about the spiritual discipline of prayer. I was having lunch this past week with a friend who has made some really terrible choices in his personal life. We spent a lot of time talking about his spiritual life; and one of the things he specifically told me that he had always struggled with was

understanding prayer. He struggled with the concept that God wanted him to pray. He wondered if his prayers mattered. He wondered if God really cared.

Today's questions deal with the subject of prayer. How does prayer work? Why does God want us to pray? If God already knows the future, why should we pray? What about fasting . . . is it even relevant for today? Is fasting dangerous? Why would God want His children to fast? Are there different types of fasting and prayer?

So let's start with the first question.

1. How does prayer work?

That's a very open ended question. And, I suppose it requires some background information.

Did you know that prayer, as we understand it today, wasn't God's preferred method for speaking to His children? When God created Adam and Eve, they communicated with Him daily. But, it wasn't through prayer. They communicated with God face-to-face. In Genesis 2-3 we see God communicating with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. In Genesis 2, God communicates with Adam prior to sin's entrance into the world. It's very different than the interaction in Genesis 3, after Adam and Eve's sin, where they in their shame hide from God. Open and honest, face-to-face communication with God has been hindered, and God restores communication. Even though Adam and Eve sinned, God desired to talk with them. They were hiding in their sin, and God found them. Amazing, isn't it?! God found them when they were hiding in sin. He does the same thing today.

The consequences of their sin created a gap between man and God. And, in Genesis 4:26 we have the first recorded instance of people praying.

26 Seth also had a son, and he named him Enosh. At that time men began to call on the name of the LORD.

No longer was God walking and talking with men. Adam's son Seth, and his grandson Enosh were the first people that we have record of praying to God.

The Bible doesn't say how they prayed. It doesn't tell us if they prayed long or short. It doesn't say if they used eloquent words. It doesn't say much. Throughout the Old and New Testaments we have hundreds of examples of people praying. People pray standing, with arms stretched out towards heaven, on their knees, bowing, prostrate with their faces low to the ground, with their eyes open and with their eyes closed. People pray in their closets, in their bedrooms, in the synagogue, in the public square, in their homes, at their tables, on the beach, in boats, in prisons, on crosses, before being martyred, prayers of praise, prayers of confession, prayers of petition, prayers of thanksgiving and so much more.

The bottom line is that people throughout Scripture followed the words of the Apostle Paul in 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18, “16 Be joyful always; 17 pray continually; 18 give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.”

People ask me all of the time, “Pastor, how do you pray?” I don’t typically pray long prayers. I pray many times every hour. When I walk through my day, I pray. It’s what Christians have done throughout the centuries. I ask God how I should approach people. I ask Him for guidance. I ask Him to intercede in different situations. There are times that I pray at great length. There have been times that I have spent an entire evening in prayer, or hours in prayer. But, those times are unique.

Jesus said in Matthew 6:7, “7 And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words.”

Prayer is not about the number of words you use. It is about coming to God with a heart of dependence. I read an interview with Rick Warren this week, where he said, “To me, prayer in essence, is a declaration of dependence. It’s saying, God, we’re gonna do our best, but you’re gonna have to take it the next step and make it happen. And that I find that when I pray, I find a greater sense of strength, a greater sense of power, a greater sense of intelligence; I find that I get ideas when I pray that I would have never thought up on my own. Prayer to me is a constant, as I said, a constant conversation with God.”²

I would say that prayer doesn’t so much change God, it changes us. It helps us submit ourselves to the will of God.

Just after telling people not to be like the pagans who think that they will be heard because of their many words, Jesus taught His disciples how to pray. We studied this prayer this summer. If you weren’t with us, I’d encourage you to visit our website and download our series on the Lord’s Prayer. Jesus said in Matthew 6:9-13:

9 “This, then, is how you should pray:

“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 today our daily bread. 12 Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. 13 And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.”

Prayer essentially works when we communicate our love and adoration to God. It works when we seek to live as citizens of His kingdom, submitting our will to His. It works when we confess our sins, knowing that He is faithful and just and will forgive us of our sins. It works when we honestly share what is on our heart and pray for the needs of others. It works when we pray with an expectation that answered prayer often times involves action on our part. It works when we recognize that it is continual prayer, throughout the day. It works when we find ourselves in temptation and pray for a way

² http://www.duncanentertainment.com/interview_warren.php

out. It works when we leave it in God's hands. Prayer is not a guarantee that what you want will happen. Often times the opposite happens, but prayer prepares us for how we will respond if God's will and our will are not in alignment. Prayer changes us, and strengthens our faith in an unchangeable God. Which leads to our second question:

2. Why does God want us to pray?

I love Ecclesiastes 5:2, for it says in plain language something that all of us need to understand.

2 Do not be quick with your mouth, do not be hasty in your heart to utter anything before God. God is in heaven and you are on earth, so let your words be few.

When we pray, we are approaching God. We need to approach Him with respect and reverence. The Bible calls it "fear and trembling." We need to recognize the role that He has in our lives, but not just our lives, but in the lives everyone on planet earth. When we approach God, we are approaching the throne room of heaven. Recognize that, and think before you speak.

God wants us to pray because it develops our relationship with God. Those of you who are married know that communication is vital to a healthy relationship. The average couple in America spends at least 15 hours per week in meaningful communication before they get married. Within a year of marriage that communication time decreases to less than 20 minutes per day. As such, most marriages in America could use communication refresher course. Just as communication is important in marriage, it is important in our relationship with God.

In Zechariah 13:9 we read, "9 This third I will bring into the fire; I will refine them like silver and test them like gold. They will call on my name and I will answer them; I will say, 'They are my people,' and they will say, 'The LORD is our God.'"

Prayer acknowledges that we are God's people. It says that we recognize God's lordship in our life. It acknowledges our dependence upon Him.

Rick Warren says, "You know, over 20 times in the New Testament, Jesus commands us to ask. He says, ask and it shall be given, seek and you'll find, knock and the door will be open; He says, whatsoever you pray for, believe that you receive it and you'll receive it; He says, ask in my name. And over and over He tells us that God wants us to ask.

Now, prayer is conversation with God, it doesn't have to be fancy language, it's simply talking to God in your heart. In fact, God likes it when we pray passionately. He wants to hear our emotions. And when you read the prayers of the Bible, particularly the Psalms, David, many times he's mad at God, he says, God, I don't like this. Life sucks, life stinks right now. And God can handle that. He made us emotional people because God has emotions. Many people don't realize that. And prayer is an emotional response to God.

It can be thanksgiving, it can be, panic, it can be anger, it can be joy, every emotion known to man can be actually seen in prayer.”³

In John 15:5-9 we read about Jesus being the Vine, and us being connected to Him as the branches. Jesus said, 5 “I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. 6 If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. 7 If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you. 8 This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.

9 “As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love.

Okay, question number 3.

3. If God already knows the future, why should I pray?

Boy, this is one of those tough questions. Scripture clearly teaches that God is omniscient. It is one of the attributes of God, or those things that we know to be true about God.

There are several passages that affirm God’s omniscience. 1 John 3:19-20 says, “19 This then is how we know that we belong to the truth, and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence 20 whenever our hearts condemn us. For God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything.”

God speaking in Job 37:16 says, “16 Do you know how the clouds hang poised, those wonders of him who is perfect in knowledge?”

Psalms 147:5 says, “5 Great is our Lord and mighty in power; his understanding has no limit.”

We pray precisely because we have a God who knows the future. We pray because that knowledge should produce a trust and a faith that His plans for us our good.

Hank Hanegraaff puts it this way in his book, *The Prayer of Jesus: Secrets to Real Intimacy With God*, “As the father of nine, I can tell you that I sometimes know what my children need before they ask. However, what I as an earthly father only sometimes know, our eternal Father always knows. Which inevitably leads to the question: If God knows what we need before we even ask, why bother asking at all?”

First, it is crucial to recognize that supplication (or asking God for stuff – my words, not Hank’s) should not be seen as the sole sum and substance of prayers. Far from merely being a means of presenting our daily requests to God, prayer is a means of pursuing a dynamic relationship with him.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

Furthermore, God ordains not only the ends but the means. Thus, to ask, ‘Why pray if God already knows what we need?’ is akin to asking, ‘Why get dressed in the morning and go to work?’ For that matter if God is going to do what he is going to do anyway, why bother doing anything? God has ordained that the work we do and the prayers we utter both produce results. The fact that God knows the future does not imply that our futures are fatalistically determined any more than our knowledge that the sun will rise causes the sun to rise.

Finally, while our heavenly Father knows what we need before we even ask, our supplications are in and of themselves an acknowledgement of our dependence on him. And that alone is reason enough to pray without ceasing.”⁴

In his fantastic work *Systematic Theology*, which is required reading for many a seminarian, Wayne Grudem writes about this mystery.

He writes, “

1. **Prayer Changes the Way God Acts.** James tells us, “You do not have, because you do not ask” (James 4:2). He implies that failure to ask deprives us of what God would otherwise have given to us. We pray, and God responds. Jesus also says, “Ask, and it will be given you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For every one who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened” (Luke 11:9–10). He makes a clear connection between seeking things from God and receiving them. When we ask, God responds.

We see this happening many times in the Old Testament. The Lord declared to Moses that he would destroy the people of Israel for their sin (Ex. 32:9–10): “But Moses besought the LORD his God, and said, ‘O Lord. . . . Turn from your fierce wrath, and repent of this evil against your people’ ” (Ex. 32:11–12). Then we read, “And the LORD repented of the evil which he thought to do to his people” (Ex. 32:14). When God threatens to punish his people for their sins he declares, “If my people who are called by my name

humble themselves, *and pray and seek my face*, and turn from their wicked ways, *then I will hear* from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land” (2 Chron. 7:14). If and when God’s people pray (with humility and repentance), *then* he will hear and forgive them. The prayers of his people clearly affect how God acts. Similarly, “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9). We confess, and then he forgives.”⁵

If we were really convinced that prayer changes the way God acts, and that God does bring about remarkable changes in the world in response to prayer, as Scripture repeatedly teaches that he does, then we would pray much more than we do. If we pray little, it is probably because we do not really believe that prayer accomplishes much at all.

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I don’t understand it completely. It’s one of those Bible mysteries that I need to be content to live with this side of eternity. God, who knows everything, including the future, is somehow moved by prayer. And, somehow knowing that makes me more in awe of Him. It’s part of what makes God, God.

This leads to our next question.

4. What about fasting – is it even relevant for today? Is it dangerous?

⁴ http://www.equip.org/bible_answers/why-pray-if-god-already-knows-what-we-need-

⁵ http://books.google.com/books?id=he-Ax9CoYpIC&printsec=frontcover&dq=Systematic+Theology&hl=en&src=bmrr&ei=k5DITsaIFazhsQL88Yw9&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=1&ved=0CEAQ6AEwAA#v=onepage&q=Systematic%20Theology&f=false

Okay, we're running short on time. The short answer here is, "Yes. Fasting is both relevant and an important discipline in the life of the believer."

Some of the most clear teaching on fasting in all of the Bible comes just after Jesus' teaches the Lord's Prayer in the Sermon on the Mount. Look at Matthew 6:16-18.

16 "When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. 17 But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, 18 so that it will not be obvious to men that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

In Jesus' day, religious people made a big deal about their fasts. They wanted everyone to know about what they were going through in order to be closer to God. Fasting is a spiritual discipline that is taught in the Old and New Testament. It normally involves altering your diet by eliminating food and or drink for a biblical purpose accomplished with prayer. And, I have seen fasting yield incredible results.

There are probably as many different ways to fast as there are different ways to pray. And, like prayer, fasting can help a Christian grow deeper in his or her walk with Christ. We don't fast to make a big deal about our spiritual lives. We fast to know God more intimately, and Scripture actually records many different purposes for prayer.

Is fasting dangerous? It can be. But most people can fast for a day without any issues. Two years before I entered college, the entire student body at my school fasted for the Dean of Students. He was a popular Dean who had acquired cancer and was told he had only months to live. 5,000 students prayed for Vernon Brewer, that God would miraculously heal him. That was in 1985. Vernon is still alive today, running one of the largest mission organizations in America. God miraculously healed him. The doctors were absolutely stunned. To this day, Vernon speaks all around the country about the power of God.

I know some people who fast from certain activities, rather than food. I've talked with teenagers who have given up the time they spend playing video games to spend a concentrated time with God in prayer. God loves when His people pray.

I'm going to combine our last two questions today.

5. Why would God want His children to fast? Are there different types of fasting and prayer?

Isaiah 58:6-8 is perhaps the greatest passage about fasting in the entire Bible.

6 "Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? 7 Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—

when you see the naked, to clothe him, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood? 8 Then your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear; then your righteousness will go before you, and the glory of the LORD will be your rear guard.

I was in a seminar on fasting recently with Dr. Elmer Towns. He wrote the fantastic book, *Fasting for Spiritual Breakthrough*, which is available in our church library. In his seminar and in this book, Towns teaches at least nine biblical fasts that are found in Scripture.

The Apostles Fast, found in Matthew 17:21 is a fast to free ourselves from addiction to sin.

The Ezra Fast, found in Ezra 8:22 is to help us solve problems.

The Samuel Fast, found in 1 Samuel 7:6 is to bring evangelism and revival. The first great revival in the Bible happened in this chapter.

The Elijah Fast, found in 1 Kings 19:8 is to help solve emotional and mental problems.

The Widow's Fast, found in Isaiah 58:7 is to provide for the physical needs of others.

The Saint Paul Fast, found in Acts 9:9 is to make life-changing decisions.

The Daniel Fast, in Daniel 1:12 is to bring physical health and healing.

The John the Baptist Fast in Luke 1:15 is a fast for your testimony.

And, the Esther Fast, in Esther 4:16 is for protection from the evil one.

I could give you great examples of each of these fasts. I wish we had more time today. I want to encourage you to pick up Dr. Towns' books on fasting. I will put a link on our church website to a spot where you can download two free e-books on fasting.

I want to end by going back to Isaiah 56:6-8. When you think about the nine biblical fasts I just shared with you, you'll see what is so cool about this verse. If you are not opposed to circling in your Bible, I want to encourage you to do so eleven times in these verses.

6 "Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen:

to loose the chains of injustice
and untie the cords of the yoke,
to set the oppressed free
and break every yoke?

7 Is it not to share your food with the hungry
and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—

when you see the naked, to clothe him,
 and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?
 8 Then your light will break forth like the dawn,
 and your healing will quickly appear;
 then your righteousness will go before you,
 and the glory of the LORD will be your rear guard.

First circle the word “chains” in verse six. This represents the fast to break free ourselves from addiction to sin. The King James Version has the words, “loose the bands of wickedness” here. Second, circle the words, “untie the cords” in verse six. This represents the fast to solve problems. Now, circle the word, “free” in verse six. This is the fast to evangelism or revival. Now circle the words, “break every yoke” in verse six. This represents the fast to help solve emotional and mental problems. In verse seven circle the words, “hungry,” “shelter,” and “clothe.” This represents the three major needs of ever person, food, shelter and clothing, or the fast to pray for the physical needs of others. In verse eight circle the word “light.” This represents the fast for wisdom or understanding as we seek God’s light to shine upon us. Now circle the word “healing.” This represents the fast for physical healing. Next circle the word righteousness. This is the fast for our testimony. And finally circle the words “rear guard.” This is the fast for spiritual protection.

Amazing that three verses in the Old Testament book of Isaiah would cover nine biblical fasts. Again, I wish that we could go further today.

I want to end today with a question for you. How is your prayer life? Maybe you are like my friend, who just struggles with prayer. Maybe you are new Christian and the thought of prayer is just kind of weird to you. Maybe you have been a Christian for years and prayer is something you are still afraid to do in front of others, and it is not something you do very much of on your own either. This is a great day to start fresh. Let prayer be something you practice continually. God somehow revels in the prayers of His children.

We ended our Annual Meeting last week by encircling this entire sanctuary, hand-in-hand, like I prayed in high school, praying for this church body. So many told me this week how much that time of prayer meant to them. Prayer unifies the body of Christ. Jim Cymbala is the pastor of the Brooklyn Tabernacle, a church whose amazing prayer testimony is told in the book *Fresh Wind, Fresh Fire*. It’s our further reading book of this week. In the book he says, “No matter what I preach or what we claim to believe in our heads, the future will depend upon our times of prayer.”⁶

That is what I know about prayer today – I know that anything that we accomplish of eternal significance will be accomplished because of prayer and our dependence upon God. God craves the prayers of His children. Let’s be people who please Him, commune with Him and become more like Him through our time on our knees!

Amen!

⁶ http://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/148248.Jim_Cymbala