

# **Prayer and Fasting for Overcomers**

*Colin McDougall, Jr.*



# **Prayer and Fasting for Overcomers**

This booklet is printed as a ministry of  
**Church of the Open Door**  
**701 West Sierra Madre Avenue**  
**Glendora, CA 91741**

*Copyright 2004 by Colin McDougall, Jr.*  
*Up to 5 copies may be made without written consent.*

# Overcoming the Obstacles to Persevering Prayer

## *Jesus' encouragement to us*

There is no hope for our country in the years ahead except if God will answer the prayers of His people for revival and a spiritual awakening. More than this, all of the things we most desire to accomplish for the sake of the kingdom of God in Christ are beyond our ability to bring about in our own power. Therefore, whenever I am asked to participate in leading the people of God, I remind them to pray for the repentance of their friends and family and for the repentance of our country. I have every confidence that God is already at work to respond to our smoldering coals of prayer, but I wish that persevering prayer in all the churches would blaze up into a holy fire among our people, a fire that would spread.

Wherever I go to encourage the saints and call them to prayer, I find that there are theological misunderstandings that hold them back from effectual (on-target) fervent prayer. The chief error that holds back the people of God from effective intercession is our preoccupation with rejection. When we are challenged to pray, our first impulse is to list the reasons why our prayers might not be answered. Our attitude becomes the fatalistic: "Let God's will be done in the situation."

If my own heart is any indication, this is usually laziness and cowardice masquerading as noble sentiment. We hide behind theological obstacles, because we are afraid to believe the promises of God and to act upon them with no other support but His. Then our human and worldly logic begins to tinker with God's promises to build backstops, firewalls, and escape hatches so that we can have "solid theological reasons" for never entrusting ourselves to God in prayer.

God has made His will known and we must be about His business, applying His revealed will to the situations we find on earth and supplying specifics for the general prayer

“Let your will be done on earth as in heaven.” When Jesus taught us to pray it was with the expectation that we would abide in Him, that we would discern His will, and that we would get what we ask for.

So I say to you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened. (Luke 11:9-10)

Most assuredly, I say to you, he who believes in Me, the works that I do he will do also; and greater works than these he will do, because I go to My Father. And whatever you ask in My name, that I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask anything in My name, I will do it. (John 14:12-14)

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 15:7)

Most assuredly, I say to you, whatever you ask the Father in My name He will give you. Until now you have asked nothing in My name. Ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full. (John 16:24)

Jesus’ occupation is to look about Him for opportunities for the will of God and to do the works of His Father. When we share His outlook, we are praying according to the will of God and able to achieve even greater works by prayer. If instead of being occupied with these opportunities we begin to become preoccupied with the possibility that God may answer “No”, we will not be praying in the way that Jesus desired. Jesus’ every teaching on prayer leads His disciple to expect to receive what he requests for the sake of the Kingdom.

As we consider several “theological” obstacles to persevering prayer, I hope you will allow the Holy Spirit to cast down worldly logical arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God through prayer, and that you will see how to bring all of your fearful thoughts into captivity to obeying Jesus’ instruction and example in prayer. Where our fear has driven worldly logic to fabricate strongholds against trusting God, I pray that a

growing faith will draw you into a deeper relationship with God as you trust Him to keep His word in the scripture.

Here are a few obstacles God has had to tear down in my mind:

**Concerning turmoil of heart: *But didn't God answer "No" to Jesus in the garden?***

Sometimes when we are tempted to doubt whether God will answer our prayers, we try to find a way to let Him off the hook. "Well," we might say, "God answers all my prayers, but some prayers He answers with a no." Someone may point to Jesus' prayer in the garden that God would "take this cup away from Me, nevertheless, not what I will but what You will (Mark 14:36)."

Let us be clear about Jesus' prayer in the garden—He already knew what the will of God was, and He had already predicted three times (Mark 8:31; Mark 9:31; Mark 10:34) that He was going to die. This is an example of how we should pray when we *know for sure* that our desires are *not* according to the revealed will of God. Jesus expected a "No" answer to His prayer in the garden because He knew that His desire was not in the will of God—He still expressed His honest heart to the Father, but His prayer was that the will of God would prevail.

Because Jesus expressed both His honest feelings ("I don't want to suffer this way") and His deepest desire ("I want your will"), Hebrews 5:7-8 says this about His prayer in the garden:

in the days of His flesh, when He had offered up prayers and supplications, with vehement cries and tears to Him who was able to save Him from death, and was heard because of His godly fear, though He was a Son, yet He learned obedience by the things which He suffered.

The scripture teaches that Jesus' prayer in the garden was answered, He proved His obedience by suffering an agony He would rather have avoided, and He was given victory over death through His powerful praying.

**Concerning the desires of our heart: *God is omniscient***

***and knows what I want, so why should I pray?***

This is an entirely logical conclusion, but entirely false. It assumes the premise that the reason for prayer is so that we can inform God about our needs. Review Jesus' instruction about prayer in Matthew:

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. Therefore do not be like them. For your Father knows the things you have need of before you ask Him. (Matthew 6:7-8)

Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened. (Matthew 7:7-8)

Jesus makes the point that God knows what we need before we ask Him. This truth does not lead Jesus to tell us not to bother to pray—in fact He instructs us to pray regularly for our daily provision (6:11). He warns us not to substitute mechanical and rote repetition in place of pouring out our heart to Him. Our Father wants to hear our heart, and He wants to hear it often and repeatedly; but He is not waiting upon us for information.

***Concerning the lost: God is omniscient and knows whether my neighbor is going to believe and be saved, so why should I pray?***

We have all heard people speaking of prayer for the lost as though our prayers would somehow save them. We know that we cannot save anyone, nor can our prayers save anyone, but we are also instructed to intercede for unbelievers.

Therefore I exhort first of all that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks be made for all men, for kings and all who are in authority, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and reverence. For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus, who gave Himself a ransom for all, to be testified in due time (I Timothy 2:1-6,

emphasis added).

Notice what Paul says he wants us to do for all people, what God wants to do for all people and what Jesus did for all people. Without trying to fully comprehend God's omniscience, why is it "good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior" for us to intercede for the unsaved people we know? Perhaps the following quote will help you think through your answer to this question.

Can we believe that God ever really modifies His action in response to the suggestions of men? For infinite wisdom does not need telling what is best, and infinite goodness needs no urging to do it. But neither does God need any of those things that are done by finite agents, whether living or inanimate. He could, if He chose, repair our bodies miraculously without food; or give us food without the aid of farmers, bakers, and butchers, or knowledge without the aid of learned men; or convert the heathen without missionaries. Instead, He allows soils and weather and animals and the muscles, minds, and wills of men to cooperate in the execution of His will... It is not really stranger, nor less strange, that my prayers should affect the course of events than that my other actions should do so. They have not advised or changed God's mind -- that is, His overall purpose. But that purpose will be realized in different ways according to the actions, including the prayers, of His creatures. -- C. S. Lewis, "The Efficacy of Prayer"

***Concerning freewill: I can't ask God to overrule freewill and change their minds.***

This objection becomes less compelling when we consider that we attempt to change people's minds every day by force of logic; why does it seem strange that where logic can never prevail we should seek to change men's minds by prayer?

No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up at the last day. And He said, "Therefore I have said to you that no one can come to Me unless it has been granted to him by My Father." (John 6:44 and 6:65)

Jesus makes it clear that none of us would naturally

choose Him if it were not for God's work in our lives. We know regarding ourselves that we were "dead in trespasses and sins" before God made us alive together with Christ (Ephesians 2:1-7). The only way we could have grasped the truth of the gospel is that God literally *changed our minds*. Before that, the things of God were foolishness to us, being spiritually discerned (I Cor. 2:14).

Meditate on this spiritual logic: My neighbor who is unsaved seems like a nice guy but he is incapable of grasping the gospel of Christ on his own. I am not capable in my own wisdom of convincing him of his need for a savior, but my sufficiency is in Christ who made me an able minister of the new covenant. Let me now pray Christ to enable me, and pray God to draw my neighbor, and pray the Holy Spirit to convince him of sin and of righteousness and of judgment (John 16:8).

**Concerning disappointment: *I tried praying and it didn't work.***

Most of us are too embarrassed to put this objection into words, but in our hearts it is a significant obstacle to us that some of the people we most desire for adoption into the family of God are still outside. We feel that it is a waste of breath to keep on praying: either they will repent and be saved or they won't, but in our hearts we despair that continued prayer will not affect the outcome. To this the scripture replies:

Continue earnestly in prayer, being vigilant in it with thanksgiving (Colossians 4:2).

Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed earnestly that it would not rain; and it did not rain on the land for three years and six months. And he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain, and the earth produced its fruit. (James 5:17-18)

Then Elijah said to Ahab, "Go up, eat and drink; for there is the sound of abundance of rain." So Ahab went up to eat and drink. And Elijah went up to the top of Carmel; then he bowed down on the ground, and put his face between his knees, and said to his servant, "Go up now, look toward the sea."

So he went up and looked, and said, "There is nothing." And seven times he said, "Go again."

Then it came to pass the seventh time, that he said, "There is a cloud, as small as a man's hand, rising out of the sea!" So he said, "Go up, say to Ahab, "Prepare your chariot, and go down before the rain stops you.'" (I Kings 18:41-44)

Elijah's prayer for rain is held up for our example, but we often forget how hard he had to work at his praying. Notice Elijah did not say, "I tried praying six times and it didn't work!" Notice how his attitude reflects the pleasing prayer of Colossians 4—persevering and watchful.

### **Concerning the sovereignty of God: *God does whatever He purposes, so why should I pray?***

For many years this was the single greatest stumbling block in my prayer life. God brought me under conviction through Jesus' command to disciples in Matthew 9. It remains mysterious to me why the sovereign Lord of the harvest should ask to be petitioned to send out laborers to bring in His own harvest, but I had to humble myself and begin to pray.

Then He said to His disciples, "The harvest truly is plentiful, but the laborers are few. Therefore pray the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into His harvest." (Matthew 9:37-38)

When the sovereign Lord brings in the Firstborn Son and declares His decree in Psalm 2:7-8, note carefully what precondition is placed on the Son's inheritance. Jesus had only to ask, but He did have to ask nonetheless. "You do not have, because you do not ask" (James 4:2b). Who knows what blessings we are missing simply because we do not ask?

Our family served a tribe of African nomads for many years and they always wanted to pray for rain. Whenever I had a long trip planned I would suggest that we should ask God to delay the rain so that I could have a dry road. My African brothers found this thinking disgraceful; they served the sovereign God, why shouldn't they pray for both abundant rain and a dry road? In time I came to learn the truth

that they held intuitively, that the sovereign God can be trusted to accomplish His purposes and also give us the blessings we desire. Many were the safaris that began with heavy rain and mud but cleared away to a firm roadbed half an hour down the track. Our God is of power to do abundantly more than we ask or imagine, so let's ask!

A few days ago my youngest son helped me to replace the brake booster on my car. In order to encourage him about the value of his work I told him that we were saving \$100 in labor costs on the job. He immediately replied, "That's great Dad, let's split it!" I told him that that was not what I had in mind, but as he good-naturedly persevered in making his request, I offered to buy him lunch at his favorite taco stand. Here is what I know: I have three kids for whom we always provide lunch, and on that day all three kids got lunch. But on that day, one child got tacos at his favorite place with his dad while the others ate peanut butter at home, simply because he was with his father and because he asked and kept on asking.

God's sovereignty as He also personally interacts with me over my prayers is a deep mystery. On the other hand, why would I expect with my limited capacity to be able to understand everything about His way of dealing with me? I serve the God who does whatever He purposes, but who also values and responds to my prayers. This mystery is great.

**Concerning misplaced priorities: *I am too busy.***

Every honest Christian has found himself in the position of being too busy to pray. It comforts me a great deal to read in Luke 11:1 that Jesus prayed and then that "He ceased" praying. This helps me to realize that what the Scripture (I Thessalonians 5:17) means by "pray without ceasing" is not that I should never do anything but pray, but that I must never give up on prayer or drop it from my schedule. There is a proper time to each activity: Jesus prayed and then He ceased praying and began to teach. It seems, however, that the greater spiritual administrations are granted

only to those who recognize the priority of prayer over all else. The sailors in Acts 27 were intent on doing all they could to save their ship and were so busy that they did not take time even to eat, but they were saved not by *their* valiant efforts but because one member of their company was actively seeking the Lord for their welfare. Paul was God's agent to save all hands on board that ship, not because he was busy but because he was in prayer.

The business of feeding the poor was appropriate and good but it had overwhelmed the spiritual leaders of the Jerusalem church (Acts 6:3-4). They wisely asked for Spirit-filled men to take over the business so that they could be devoted to prayer. The daily distribution was a spiritual ministry requiring spiritual men, but the more necessary administration was intercession and the Word of God. The wise spiritual leader will prioritize, eliminate, and delegate and make time to intercede for those in his care.

**Concerning pride and an independent heart: *I don't see why I need prayer partners.***

If prayer is powerful and if God hears me when I pray, how could it be more powerful to have many people praying with me? I would prefer to make my request known to God alone without involving others.

Jesus also places a high value on private prayer in His sermon on the mount (Matthew 6:6). He says that public prayer with the purpose of impressing others is completely valueless with God. But many people are reticent about sharing personal prayer requests with others simply because of pride—a lot of our desire for privacy is really reluctance to admit we have problems. The Bible answers this objection from two perspectives: ours and God's.

From our perspective we know that God answers our prayers but He will answer the prayers of many even more powerfully than He answers the prayers of one. Hebrews 13:18-19 says in part “Pray for us...that I may be restored to you the sooner.” The apostle was in prison and had every confidence that his prayers for deliverance would be an-

swered, but he wanted all of his partners to pray along with him so that he would be delivered even sooner.

From God's perspective we realize that God prefers to answer the prayers of many people because it results in more thanksgiving. Second Corinthians 1:11 says that since "you also are helping together in prayer for us, that thanks may be given by many persons on our behalf for the gift granted to us through many." The Scripture confirms that prayer partners "help" in the work of prayer and also that one reason for recruiting help in praying is so that when God answers there will be joy and "help" in the thanksgiving.

**Concerning fear of rejection: *I might pray for something good and not get it; that would embarrass me.***

This is the objection that Jesus especially wanted to answer in the parable of the friend at midnight:

And He said to them, "Which of you shall have a friend, and go to him at midnight and say to him, 'Friend, lend me three loaves; for a friend of mine has come to me on his journey, and I have nothing to set before him'; and he will answer from within and say, 'Do not trouble me; the door is now shut, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot rise and give to you'? I say to you, though he will not rise and give to him because he is his friend, yet because of his persistence he will rise and give him as many as he needs. (Luke 11:5-8)

If a son asks for bread from any father among you, will he give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will he give him a serpent instead of a fish? Or if he asks for an egg, will he offer him a scorpion? (Luke 11:11-12)

God may require you to ask repeatedly and for a period of time but He will not deny you something good in order to give you something less. Even pagan fathers feed their children with food they believe is wholesome; they do not always give the child the food he asks for, but they do not substitute a rock in place of good food. In the same way our heavenly Father responds to our requests, not always giving us the very things we mention, but always giving a better and more appropriate gift. It is His character to give liberally and

not to reproach us when we ask for good gifts (James 1:5).

We often have to confess that we do not know what to pray for as we ought (Romans 8:26) and we often have to confess that we did not get what we thought we wanted (2 Corinthians 12:8); but this should not embarrass us, since it places us in the good company of Paul the apostle! One thing we never need to prepare for is that we will ask God for a good gift and be denied outright. He is our Father and He is good.

**Concerning responsible leadership: *I might pray for something in public and not get it; that would embarrass God.***

This is the great inhibition of the spiritual leader. The spiritual leader who is enabled to overcome this inhibition will have no limit to his potential for ministry. The difficulty here is that we are called to “ask in faith without any doubting” (James 1:6).

It is certainly wrong for us to publicly call upon God for a response that we do not believe it would be possible or pleasing to Him to answer. Leaders who lead their people in praying faithless prayers or carnal prayers are destroyers rather than edifiers of the church of Jesus. But a leader who is able to take the needs of the people and bring those needs before the Lord publicly, asking for a public response that is directly in line with the revealed will and character of God—that is a pleasing shepherd. Let us simply be as sure as we can be that we are praying in accordance with God’s will and character as revealed in the Bible and then let Him take care of His reputation. We are assured that He will always act for the glory of His name.

Try this test as you formulate your prayer. Does the Scripture lead me to believe that this is the kind of prayer God would desire to answer? Does my burden for this need continue to grow so that I cannot get it off my heart? Discuss your request with a spiritually minded believer; can we agree together to seek God for this request? If I pray this prayer in public and God answers it publicly, will my faith

be glorified or will God be glorified for His response? If I pray this prayer in public and God chooses to answer it other than the way I envision, will it bring reproach to Him or to me? This test prevents me from glorying in my faith when I should be praying in Jesus' name for the benefit of His kingdom.

The command "You shall not tempt the Lord your God" (Deut. 6:16) speaks directly to public prayers of unbelief that are intended to test whether the Lord is faithful. This is the kind of prayer that embarrasses our Father, and we must be careful never to speak this way (as the Israelites did in the wilderness). But when we publicly take our stand upon the iron-clad promises of God and call upon Him to act in accordance with His word, how can He fail to be glorified among us?

Let us ask God to increase our faith so that we may ask the more!



## Overcoming Confusion About Fasting

If the perceived obstacles to persevering prayer are primarily theological barriers, the objections to prayer with fasting are mostly experiential. Christians say, “I just don’t understand fasting. When I fast I don’t seem to make spiritual progress; all I get is hungry!” I think that more Christians would be willing to fast and would be more pleasing to God when they do if they could cut through the confusion about the purposes for fasting.

Let me say right from the outset that if you are a new Christian, this article is probably not going to be very helpful for you. Fasting is a spiritual tool to mature and deepen experienced Christians and is also a means that God has given to spiritual leaders to build unity in the church. If you are a young person or a young Christian you should not be surprised if fasting comes hard to you and if you sense little profit—keep on following the Lord Jesus and He will teach you the lessons of fasting at the right time.

If, however, you are a spiritual leader or have been a Christian for several years and still have not learned the power of prayer focused by fasting, you are missing an important blessing. Jesus will teach you many valuable lessons and will interact with you in deep and intimate ways as you seek Him out through prayer with fasting. Let’s begin to break through some of the barriers of confusion.

### **Concerning power: *I don’t feel any increased spiritual power when I fast.***

People who are just beginning to learn the lessons of fasting sometimes “bite off more than they can chew.” Fasting just means abstaining from food and sexual relations for a period of time. Everyone fasts during the night while they sleep—that is why we call the first meal of the day “breakfast,” because it is the meal that breaks our daily fast. A good way to begin the practice of fasting is to choose a day and on that day to delay eating breakfast until after you have had a time of prayer and seeking the Lord. As you gain

experience with the Lord in this, you may decide to take a whole morning for prayer and for seeking Him and go without any morning meal at all.

The spiritual power does not come from the fasting but from the time spent with the Lord. However, the quality of the time that you spend with the Lord will be enhanced as you focus your prayer with fasting.

People who are fasting in order to get some kind of spiritual power may be disappointed. The power that comes to a Christian who is regularly exercised by fasting is increased faith to trust God during trials. When Jesus was about to be tested in a one-on-one match with Satan in the wilderness, He spent forty days in prayer and fasting. His physical power was at its lowest level that could still sustain life, but His trust in the Father was unshakeable.

It is very difficult for Satan to overcome the prayer of faith that is focused by fasting. When Jesus' disciples were unable to cast out a deaf and dumb spirit from a young boy, He explained to them that some demons could only be overcome "by prayer and fasting" (Mark 9:29, Majority Text). He did not mean that only someone who was praying with fasting could cast them out (since He Himself cast the demon out without a prayer) but that only those whose faith has been exercised by prayer with fasting would be able to persist until the evil spirit is overcome.

**Concerning unity: *how can I join a fast and still keep it secret?***

Jesus spoke very powerfully against hypocritical fasting, warning us not to fast so as to appear religious to others, "because they disfigure their faces [so] that they may appear to men to be fasting" (Matthew 6:16). Because of Jesus' strong words, many Christians are afraid to join a fast in case they will be "doing it wrong."

As with all worship, Jesus enjoys the worship of our true hearts and He hates hypocrisy. This does not mean that we should be afraid to worship Him, but rather that we should always focus our attention and praise upon Him ra-

ther than upon ourselves. Fasting pleases the Lord Jesus if it is practiced to focus attention upon Him, but it displeases Him if we are trying to get attention for ourselves.

The first time fasting is mentioned in the Bible is Judges 20:26. The people of Israel fasted together in the house of God because they wanted to inquire for guidance as a nation. When the people of God in a church or in any large group need corporate guidance from God, it is appropriate for their leaders to call them to prayer and fasting. It is not necessary to keep the fact of the fast secret—everyone will be fasting, so no one will look especially religious just because he is going without food. Fasting together promotes unity in prayer when the people of God share a common need.

In our church we call for times of fasting when we have a prayer request that concerns the whole church. All who are able will miss at least one meal on the appointed day, and we usually fast through the hour of the evening meal so that during the hour we would normally be eating, we are praying together in a public meeting. Sometimes we unite with other churches to pray for needs that are common to us all, and by fasting together the Holy Spirit is able to unite churches that are hundreds or thousands of miles apart.

Fasting can be private but in the Bible it is often public in nature, especially when it involves repentance for a period of rebellion against God. In Joel God commands the people three times to consecrate a public fast (Joel 1:14; 2:12; 2:15) in the anticipation that God would recognize their repentance and forgive their sins. In such cases it is good for the fasting to be public so that the repentance can be public, but again, the purpose in these corporate fasts is to unify the people around a common prayer request. United prayer focused by fasting is very powerful.

**Concerning urgency: *I enjoy eating (and sex) and hate to give it up even for a day.***

There are certainly a few illnesses (like anorexia or diabetes) that make fasting an unwise practice, but for most of us we are only limited by our own sense of urgency. We feel our physical appetites very keenly while our spiritual appetite prompts us only faintly. Fasting is good for us because we are sharpening the urgency of our spiritual hunger.

I know that I need to be more urgent about the things of the Lord, and one of the ways I do this is by de-prioritizing my urgency about food. When men of God become very serious with Him about their prayer requests, it seems to come naturally to them to stop eating. You can witness this in David's life when he prayed for the life of his newborn son (2 Samuel 12:16-23) and in Daniel's life when he begged the Lord for the fulfillment of His promises (Daniel 9:3 and 10:3). Now and then (probably more often than I do) it is good for me to become more urgent about my deepest needs and less concerned about my physical ones. Fasting focuses my prayer on those deeper needs.

Another benefit that comes with this heightened urgency about the things of the Lord is a nearer sense of His presence. Jesus gave us some indication of this when He was asked why His disciples were not fasting (Mark 2:18ff). Jesus said that those who love Him could not fast while He was with them—they were too busy celebrating—but that when He was taken away from them, they would fast. Jesus' friends who deeply long to see Him, fast as a natural expression of this longing.

This aspect of fasting is very personal and individual between Jesus and His intimate friends. Jesus Himself is fasting today as an expression of His longing to have us with Him in His Father's house. He told us, "I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in My Father's kingdom" (Matthew 26:29). Fasting not only focuses our praying but it gives expression to our desire to be with Christ Jesus and in some unexplainable way draws our hearts to Him.

**Concerning consecration: *I am busy and I feel that my service honors the Lord more than “monkish disciplines”.***

It is hard for me to take seriously the objection “I am too busy to fast,” because fasting actually saves time. While I am fasting I don’t have to prepare food for myself and I don’t have to take the time to eat it. Instead of eating and fellowshiping with people, I fast and fellowship with the Lord Jesus. It saves time, and the time I save I invest in my relationship with Him.

The other objection that practical service is more valuable to the Lord than spiritual worship was the philosophy of Martha, a philosophy that Jesus directly rebuked. But the practical truth about fasts (that last more than 18 hours or so) is that physical energy stores are depleted and ability to concentrate or to work hard is diminished. Fasting is a radical choice to reduce our practical effectiveness in order to give our attention to worship—it is one of the clearest ways in which we give our bodies as living sacrifices of worship.

Besides all this, the Lord does not think of fasting as a passive spiritual exercise. Jesus fasted in order to train for spiritual battle. The Lord directed that while believers are fasting they should make decisions and take actions that will benefit others (Isaiah 58), and it is particularly pleasing to the Lord when we give the food we would have eaten to feed those who are in need (Isaiah 58:7). It is not passive Christians who need to fast, but those who are serious about doing battle against spiritual forces and taking practical action against unrighteousness. Prayer that is focused by fasting is not a passive or monkish exercise, but is a means of spiritual warfare. “We do not war according to the flesh; for the weapons of our warfare are not carnal but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds” (2 Corinthians 10:3-4).

**Purposeful fasting.** Fasting is not recommended for the discipline of the body or for losing weight, and it is especially not advisable for making other Christians think you are special. But when a group of believers desire to draw together in united prayer, or when a disciple of Jesus sets apart a day to seek the Lord, fasting is the natural and commendable way to focus our attention and unite our hearts together.



