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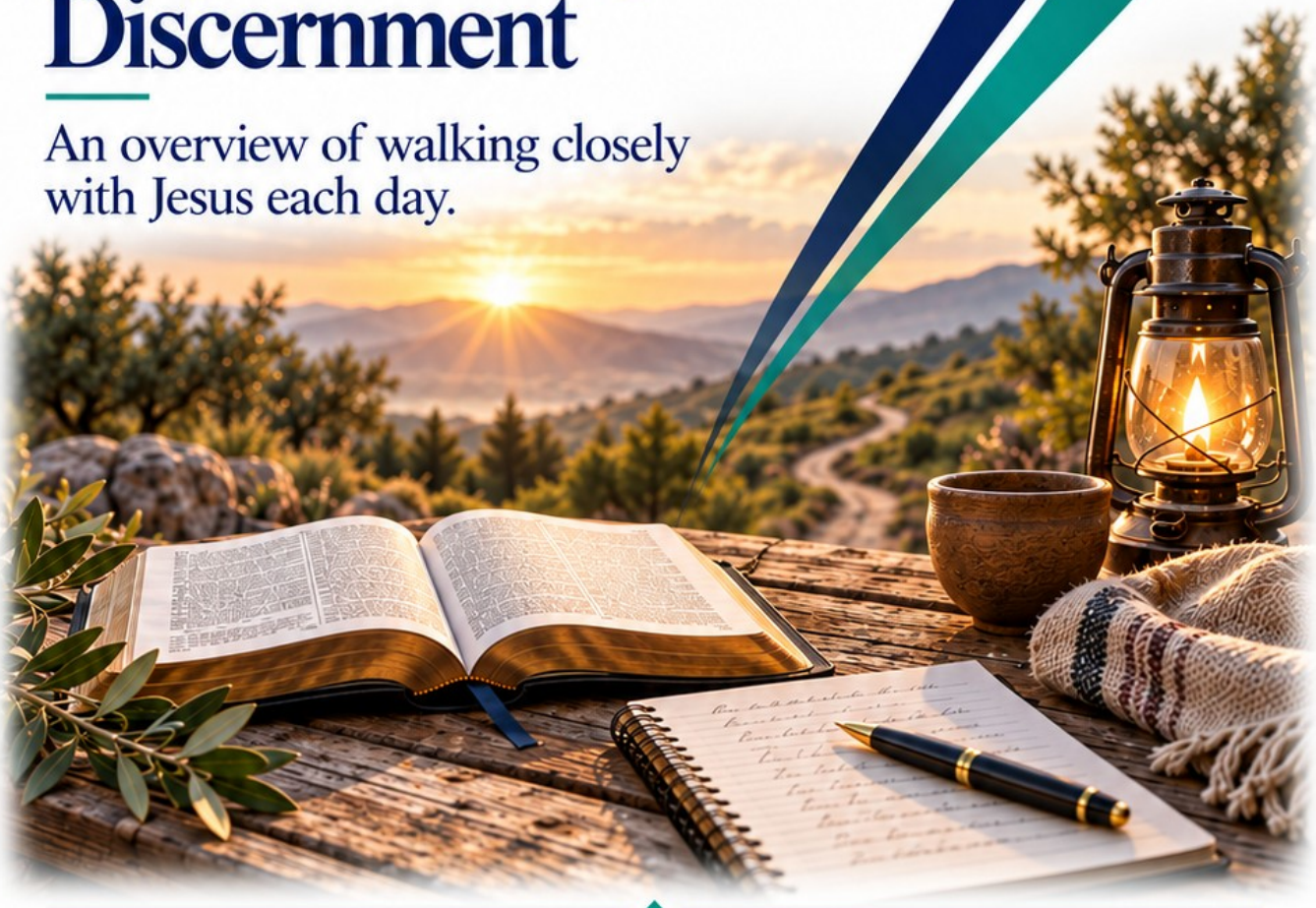
STUDY GUIDE 14

Foundations *of* Discipleship

STUDY GUIDE 3 OF 7:

Prayer, Fasting and Discernment

An overview of walking closely with Jesus each day.



Equipping and empowering for effective service

2 Timothy 2:2

INSTRUCTIONS FOR THE STUDENT

My Study Plan

Preparing a Study Plan before starting this Study Guide will assist you in completing it within a designated timeframe. It also helps in developing the discipline required for studying God's Word effectively.

Proverbs 16:3:

> *Commit thy works unto the LORD, and thy thoughts shall be established.*

My Study Guide Journal

Keep a record as you progress through your Study Guide, including the Personal Responses for each section, for future reference and goal setting.

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Important Points

- COGMA does not claim to be infallible or the authority.
- Infallibility and authority belong only to God and His Word.

COGMA therefore strongly advises that you prayerfully study the content of each Study Guide with the heart of a Berean (**Acts 17:10–12**).

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PREFACE

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The Foundations of Discipleship module has already established that the disciple begins with new life in Jesus Christ and then grows through the Word of God and faith. The next foundation is learning to live in continual fellowship with Him through prayer, fasting and spiritual discernment.

Prayer is not simply a religious duty or a list of requests. It is the disciple's communication with God, bringing worship, thanksgiving, burdens, needs and intercession before Him.

James shows that prayer should be active and effective. He wrote in **James 5:16**:

> *"Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed. The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much."*

The disciple must also learn that prayer is connected with dependence upon God. We do not have wisdom within ourselves for every decision or circumstance, so we need His direction, strength and understanding.

Fasting can also have a place in the disciple's life when it is joined with prayer, humility and a sincere desire to seek God. It is not a ritual or a way of forcing God to act, but a means of setting aside natural distractions and giving greater attention to spiritual matters.

Discernment is equally important because the disciple must learn to distinguish truth from error. We need to recognise what agrees with the Word of God and avoid being deceived by outward appearances or false teaching.

In this Study Guide, we will consider how prayer keeps us in fellowship with Jesus Christ and how fasting can help focus the heart upon Him. We will also consider how spiritual discernment grows through the Word of God and the indwelling Spirit.

The purpose is not to depend upon spiritual practices themselves, but to remain dependent upon Jesus Christ in every part of life. Prayer, fasting and discernment must continually direct the disciple towards greater dependence upon Him.

Personal Response

Key Truth

How do prayer, fasting, and discernment together express dependence on Jesus Christ?

Personal Reflection

Have you treated prayer, fasting or discernment mainly as duties rather than expressions of fellowship with Jesus Christ? Why?

Action Step

Which of these practices has become a religious routine for you? Explain what needs to change in your heart, and how you will use it to deepen your dependence upon Jesus Christ.

INTRODUCTION: PRAYER AND THE LIFE OF A DISCIPLE

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Prayer is essential to the life of every disciple of Jesus Christ. It is not an occasional religious activity to be used only when difficulties arise. Prayer is part of the continuing fellowship of the born-again believer with Jesus Christ.

The disciple has received new life in Christ, is nourished through the Word of God and learns to walk by faith. Prayer now becomes an important part of that daily walk. Through prayer, we speak with God, seek His wisdom, bring our burdens before Him, give thanks, worship and intercede for others.

James wrote in **James 5:16**:

> *"Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed. The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much."*

James describes prayer as *"effectual fervent."* Prayer should therefore have purpose and sincerity. It is not simply repeating words or following a religious routine because the disciple prays from a real dependence upon God and a genuine desire for His will to be accomplished.

Prayer is also closely connected with righteousness. James does not say that the prayer of any person automatically has power, but speaks of *"the prayer of a righteous man."*

The disciple who walks in Jesus Christ and desires to live according to His Word can approach God with confidence. Prayer therefore belongs naturally to a life that is centred in Jesus Christ.

Prayer Reveals Our Dependence Upon God

Human beings were never designed to direct their lives independently from God. We need His wisdom, guidance and understanding.

Jeremiah wrote in **Jeremiah 10:23**:

> *"O LORD, I know that the way of man is not in himself: it is not in man that walketh to direct his steps."*

The disciple recognises this truth and therefore learns to seek God in prayer. Instead of depending only upon personal reasoning, experience or natural understanding, we bring our decisions and concerns before Him.

Prayer acknowledges that we need the wisdom and direction of Jesus Christ. It recognises that we cannot walk faithfully while attempting to live independently from Him.

This dependence is not weakness because it recognises the true source of our life. Jesus Christ is our life, and His wisdom is greater than our own.

Prayer Brings Our Cares to God

Prayer also provides a way for the disciple to bring burdens, needs and anxieties before God instead of carrying them alone. We can bring every part of life before Him with confidence.

Paul wrote in **Philippians 4:6-7**:

> *"Be careful for nothing; but in every thing by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God. And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus."*

Paul tells believers to bring *"every thing"* to God in prayer. Nothing affecting the disciple's life is too small or too great to bring before Him.

Notice also that prayer includes thanksgiving. Prayer should not become only a continual list of problems and requests because the disciple also remembers the goodness and faithfulness of God and gives thanks for what He has already done.

Prayer therefore includes both bringing our needs before God and recognising His goodness. The disciple learns to trust Him with present concerns while remaining thankful for His continuing faithfulness.

As we continue through this Study Guide, we will examine prayer more closely, including how and when we should pray, communion, petition and intercession. We will also consider fasting and the importance of spiritual discernment.

The foundation, however, must remain clear throughout the study. Prayer is not a religious performance because it is the continuing communication and dependence of a disciple whose life is centred in Jesus Christ.

Personal Response

Key Truth

Why does prayer grow from the disciple's new life and continuing fellowship with Jesus?

Personal Reflection

When do you usually turn to Jesus Christ in prayer? What does that pattern reveal about your dependence upon Him?

Action Step

Do you speak to Jesus Christ only when a problem arises? What will change in your attitude towards fellowship with Him, and how will you bring an ordinary decision before Him today?

PRAYER IS FELLOWSHIP WITH GOD

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Prayer is much more than asking God for things. It is fellowship with God, through which the disciple speaks with Him, worships Him, gives thanks, seeks His wisdom and listens for His direction through His Word and Spirit.

The born-again believer has received the Spirit of Christ. Jesus Christ is not distant from His people, but dwells within them, and prayer therefore grows out of the relationship that already exists through the new birth.

John wrote in **1 John 1:3**:

> *"That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you, that ye also may have fellowship with us: and truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ."*

True fellowship with God is spiritual. It is not dependent upon being in a particular building, standing in a certain place or following a religious form.

The disciple can speak with God wherever they are because Jesus Christ dwells within. Prayer is therefore part of the continuing relationship of the believer with Him.

Prayer Is Communication With God

Every healthy relationship involves communication. If two people never speak with one another, that relationship cannot develop as it should. In the same way, prayer is an important part of the disciple's continuing relationship with God.

Prayer allows us to bring before Him our joys, concerns, questions, needs and burdens. It also allows us to express worship, thanksgiving and love.

David wrote in **Psalm 62:8**:

> *"Trust in him at all times; ye people, pour out your heart before him: God is a refuge for us. Selah."*

The words *"pour out your heart before him"* describe the honesty that should characterise prayer. We do not need to speak to God with religious language or carefully prepared words because we can speak openly and sincerely before Him.

God already knows the heart, so there is no need for pretence. Prayer is honest communication with the God who knows us completely.

Prayer Includes Worship and Thanksgiving

Prayer should not become only a list of things we want God to do. Fellowship with God includes recognising who He is and giving thanks for what He has already done.

David wrote in **Psalm 100:1-5**:

> *"Make a joyful noise unto the LORD, all ye lands. Serve the LORD with gladness: come before his presence with singing. Know ye that the LORD he is God: it is he that hath made us, and not we ourselves; we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture. Enter into his gates with thanksgiving, and into his courts with praise: be thankful unto him, and bless his name. For the LORD is good; his mercy is everlasting; and his truth endureth to all generations."*

Thanksgiving changes the direction of prayer. Instead of focusing continually upon ourselves and our problems, we remember the goodness, mercy and faithfulness of God.

The disciple should therefore learn to bring more than requests into prayer. We can praise Jesus Christ, thank Him for salvation, remember answered prayers and acknowledge His continuing goodness.

Worship and thanksgiving direct our attention towards God rather than continually towards ourselves. They remind us of who He is and strengthen our confidence in His faithfulness.

Personal Response

Key Truth

How do worship and thanksgiving keep prayer from becoming only a list of requests?

Personal Reflection

Has concern about your own needs crowded thankfulness out of your prayers? What is missing?

Action Step

When prayer becomes a list of needs, what does that reveal about your attention? How will you deliberately express gratitude to Jesus Christ before presenting your next request?

Prayer Includes Listening

Communication is not one-sided. Prayer includes speaking to God, but the disciple must also be willing to listen.

This does not mean that we should expect an audible voice every time we pray. God has already given us His written Word, and His Spirit works within the born-again believer to bring truth to remembrance, give understanding and guide according to that Word.

Jesus said in **John 14:26**:

> *"But the Comforter, which is the Holy Ghost, whom the Father will send in my name, he shall teach you all things, and bring all things to your remembrance, whatsoever I have said unto you."*

Prayer should therefore include times when we stop speaking and become quiet before God. We may reflect upon a Scripture, consider what God has already shown us or wait before making a decision.

David wrote in **Psalm 46:10**:

> *"Be still, and know that I am God: I will be exalted among the heathen, I will be exalted in the earth."*

Being still allows the disciple to turn attention away from the noise and pressure of daily life and towards God. It gives us opportunity to consider His Word and become attentive to the truth He has already given.

Listening must always remain in agreement with Scripture. The Spirit of God will not guide the disciple contrary to the Word of God.

Prayer Deepens Fellowship

As the disciple spends time in prayer, fellowship with God becomes increasingly important. We begin to understand that prayer is not simply something we do when we need help, but part of our continuing walk with Jesus Christ.

Paul wrote in **1 Thessalonians 5:17-18**:

> *"Pray without ceasing. In every thing give thanks: for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you."*

To *"pray without ceasing"* does not mean that we must speak words every moment of the day. It means living with an ongoing dependence upon God and being ready to turn to Him in every circumstance.

The disciple learns to speak with Jesus Christ throughout the day, giving thanks, asking for wisdom, bringing concerns before Him and seeking His direction. Prayer therefore becomes part of the ordinary daily life of the disciple.

Prayer is not limited to a particular place, time or religious ceremony. It is the privilege of the born-again believer who has received the Spirit of Christ and now walks in fellowship with Him.

Prayer is fellowship with God through honest communication, worship, thanksgiving and careful attention to His Word and Spirit. The disciple learns to live in continuing dependence upon Jesus Christ throughout each day.

Personal Response

Key Truth

Why does listening in prayer remain attentive to the Bible and the Spirit rather than an expected audible voice?

Personal Reflection

Have you sought an impression while overlooking something already clear in the Bible? What might this reveal about your attitude?

Action Step

Have you sought an impression while overlooking a clear word from the Bible? What decision will you now examine more carefully, and how will you respond to the truth already given?

WHY SHOULD I PRAY?

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Prayer is essential because the disciple was never intended to live independently from God. We need His wisdom, direction, strength and peace throughout our daily lives. Prayer is one of the principal ways we acknowledge our dependence upon Jesus Christ and bring every part of life before Him.

The prophet Jeremiah understood this dependence. He wrote in **Jeremiah 10:23**:

> *"O LORD, I know that the way of man is not in himself: it is not in man that walketh to direct his steps."*

Human understanding is limited. We do not always know what lies ahead, what decision will be best or how circumstances will develop.

The disciple therefore learns to seek God rather than relying entirely upon personal judgment. Prayer acknowledges that we need wisdom and direction beyond our own understanding.

Pray for Wisdom and Direction

There will be many occasions when we need wisdom. Some decisions may appear simple, while others can affect our lives for many years. In every situation, the disciple should learn to seek God's direction.

James wrote in **James 1:5**:

> *"If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him."*

The instruction is simple: *"Let him ask of God."* The disciple does not need to pretend to have wisdom that is not there.

Prayer acknowledges that God's wisdom is greater than our own. We may seek counsel from others and consider the facts before us, but our confidence must remain in Jesus Christ.

David expressed this dependence in **Psalm 37:5**:

> *"Commit thy way unto the LORD; trust also in him; and he shall bring it to pass."*

To commit our way to the LORD means placing our plans, decisions and direction into His hands. Prayer helps the disciple do this honestly and deliberately.

Bring Your Burdens to God

Life brings burdens that can become heavy if we attempt to carry them alone. Prayer gives us a way to place those burdens before God and depend upon Him for strength.

David wrote in **Psalm 55:22**:

> *"Cast thy burden upon the LORD, and he shall sustain thee: he shall never suffer the righteous to be moved."*

The word *"cast"* gives the picture of placing the burden upon another. God does not ask us to pretend that problems do not exist, but invites us to bring them to Him and trust Him to sustain us.

Peter gave a similar instruction. He wrote in **1 Peter 5:6-7**:

> *"Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, that he may exalt you in due time: Casting all your care upon him; for he careth for you."*

Prayer is therefore an act of humility. We admit that we cannot control everything and that we need the help of Jesus Christ.

The reason we can bring our cares to Him is found in the words *"for he careth for you."* We bring our burdens to Jesus Christ because we know that He cares for us.

Personal Response

Key Truth

What do **James 1:5** *and* **1 Peter 5:6–7** *teach about asking for wisdom and casting burdens on God?*

Personal Reflection

What concern are you trying to control by yourself? Why is it difficult to entrust it to Christ?

Action Step

Which present concern are you trying to control without depending upon Christ? What will you surrender to Him in prayer, and what responsible step will you take in faith?

Prayer Brings Peace

Prayer does not always remove a difficulty immediately, but it can change the way the disciple carries that difficulty. Instead of allowing anxiety to control the heart, the burden can be brought before God.

Paul wrote in **Philippians 4:6-7**:

> *"Be careful for nothing; but in every thing by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God. And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus."*

Paul does not tell believers to ignore their concerns. He tells them what to do with those concerns through the words *"let your requests be made known unto God."*

Prayer moves the burden from anxious thought into trusting dependence upon God. The circumstances may not change immediately, but the heart can be kept in peace through Jesus Christ.

Notice again that Paul includes thanksgiving. Prayer should not be filled only with worry because, as we remember what God has already done, faith is strengthened and our attention is drawn back to His faithfulness.

Prayer Keeps Us Dependent Upon Jesus Christ

One of the greatest dangers in the Christian life is becoming self-reliant. A disciple may begin by depending completely upon God and later become confident in personal experience, knowledge or ability.

Prayer continually reminds us where our help comes from. It keeps the disciple conscious of the continuing need for Jesus Christ.

Jesus said in **John 15:5**:

> *"I am the vine, ye are the branches: He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without me ye can do nothing."*

The words *"without me ye can do nothing"* should remain before every disciple. Whatever experience or understanding we gain, we remain dependent upon Jesus Christ.

Prayer keeps us conscious of this truth. We need Him for wisdom, strength, guidance, peace and fruitfulness.

Pray About Everything

Paul told the Philippians to bring *"everything"* before God in prayer. This means that no part of life needs to be kept outside our fellowship with Him.

We can pray about family, work, relationships, decisions, ministry, difficulties, needs and concerns for others. Prayer should become a natural response rather than a last resort.

The disciple does not wait until every human solution has failed before speaking to God. We learn to bring matters to Him from the beginning and allow His Word and Spirit to guide our response.

Prayer is therefore necessary because we need God in every part of life. We need His wisdom and direction, and we have burdens that we cannot carry alone.

We pray because Jesus Christ cares for us, and because He remains the source of our wisdom, strength and peace. Prayer keeps the disciple consciously dependent upon Him throughout daily life.

Personal Response

Key Truth

How can prayer bring peace while circumstances remain difficult and keep you dependent on Christ?

Personal Reflection

When circumstances are difficult, what is your first response: anxiety, self-reliance or trust in Jesus Christ? Why?

Action Step

Consider how anxiety or self-reliance affects your response to difficulty. What will you bring to Jesus Christ with thanksgiving, and how will you allow trust in Him to govern your next decision?

WHEN AND HOW SHOULD I PRAY?

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Prayer should become a regular part of the disciple's daily life. It is not something reserved for emergencies, fellowship meetings or moments when every other option has failed. Because prayer is fellowship with God, the disciple should learn to speak with Him continually and sincerely throughout the day.

Paul wrote in **1 Thessalonians 5:17**:

> *"Pray without ceasing."*

This does not mean that the believer must remain on their knees every moment or speak aloud without stopping. It means that prayer should become a continuing attitude of dependence upon God.

The disciple remains ready to turn to Jesus Christ for wisdom, help, thanksgiving, direction or intercession whenever the need arises. Prayer becomes part of the continuing walk of the disciple.

Give God Your Best Time

The Bible gives examples of people who made prayer an established part of their daily lives. Daniel continued to pray even when doing so placed him in danger.

Daniel wrote in **Daniel 6:10**:

> *"Now when Daniel knew that the writing was signed, he went into his house; and his windows being open in his chamber toward Jerusalem, he kneeled upon his knees three times a day, and prayed, and gave thanks before his God, as he did aforetime."*

Daniel did not begin praying because trouble suddenly appeared. Prayer was already part of his life, and the words *"as he did aforetime"* show that he had an established habit of seeking God.

The exact time of day may differ from one person to another. Some disciples may find the early morning best, while others may have a quieter period later in the day.

The important principle is that we deliberately make time for prayer rather than giving God only the moments left over after everything else has been done. Regular prayer requires us to make fellowship with God a priority.

Pray Throughout the Day

Dedicated times of prayer are valuable, but prayer should not be limited to those times. The disciple can speak with God throughout the day and bring each circumstance before Him.

We may pray before making an important decision, while travelling or before beginning work. We may also pray when someone comes to mind, when temptation appears or when we suddenly recognise something for which we should give thanks.

This is part of what it means to *"pray without ceasing."* Prayer becomes a natural response because the disciple is living in continual dependence upon Jesus Christ.

Personal Response

Key Truth

What does Daniel's established habit show about giving God time for prayer?

Personal Reflection

Have you given prayer only the time left after other demands?

Action Step

What repeatedly takes the place of prayer in your day? Decide what will change in your priorities, then establish a realistic pattern of personal fellowship with Christ rather than a duty to complete.

Pray From the Heart

A common mistake is to compare our prayers with the prayers of other people. Some may pray with eloquent words, while others may speak very simply. God is not impressed by the length, style or vocabulary of a prayer because He looks at the heart.

Jesus illustrated this through the Pharisee and the publican. He said in **Luke 18:10-14**:

> *"Two men went up into the temple to pray; the one a Pharisee, and the other a publican. The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, God, I thank thee, that I am not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican. I fast twice in the week, I give tithes of all that I possess. And the publican, standing afar off, would not lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven, but smote upon his breast, saying, God be merciful to me a sinner. I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other: for every one that exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted."*

The Pharisee used more words, but his prayer was filled with pride. The publican spoke only a few words, yet he prayed with humility and honesty.

The lesson is clear because prayer does not need to sound impressive, but it does need to be sincere. God desires honesty rather than religious performance.

Pray With Humility

Humility is essential because prayer acknowledges our dependence upon God. We come to Him because we need His mercy, wisdom, strength and help.

Peter wrote in **1 Peter 5:6-7**:

> *"Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, that he may exalt you in due time: Casting all your care upon him; for he careth for you."*

The humble disciple does not approach God demanding that He follow our plans. We bring our desires before Him while remaining willing for His will to govern the answer.

Prayer therefore includes surrender as well as asking. We speak honestly about what we desire, but we also trust that Jesus Christ knows what is best.

Pray According to God's Will

Confidence in prayer does not mean assuming that God must give us everything we request. Biblical confidence rests upon knowing that He hears prayer that agrees with His will.

John wrote in **1 John 5:14-15**:

> *"And this is the confidence that we have in him, that, if we ask any thing according to his will, he heareth us: And if we know that he hear us, whatsoever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we desired of him."*

The important words are *"according to his will."* Prayer is not a means of bringing God into agreement with our will, but part of learning to bring our desires into agreement with Him.

This is another reason the Word of God is so important to prayer. Scripture helps us understand the character, purposes and will of God so that our prayers become increasingly aligned with His truth.

Pray With Thanksgiving and Faith

Prayer should also be offered with thanksgiving and faith. We remember God's past faithfulness while bringing present needs before Him.

Paul wrote in **Philippians 4:6**:

> *"Be careful for nothing; but in every thing by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God."*

Thanksgiving reminds us that the God we are speaking to has already been faithful. Faith then allows us to place the matter in His hands and trust Him with the answer.

The disciple therefore learns to pray regularly, sincerely, humbly and confidently. Prayer becomes part of daily fellowship with Jesus Christ rather than something used only when difficulties arise.

Make time for prayer, speak from the heart, pray throughout the day, seek God's will and trust Jesus Christ with the answer. As prayer becomes part of daily life, the disciple learns to live in continuing fellowship and dependence upon Him.

Personal Response

Key Truth

Why should prayer be sincere, humble, and aligned with God's will rather than an impressive performance?

Personal Reflection

Where have you sought the right words or your preferred answer more than honest surrender?

Action Step

Examine the motives behind a recent prayer. Were you seeking God's will or only your preferred result? How will you bring that need to Him with greater honesty and surrender?

COMMUNION, PETITION AND INTERCESSION

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Prayer can include many different thoughts, burdens and needs, but a balanced prayer life should contain more than requests for ourselves. Three important aspects of prayer are communion, petition and intercession, and together they help the disciple develop a prayer life that is centred upon God, honest about personal needs and concerned for others.

These three aspects can be understood simply:

- Communion directs our attention towards God;
- Petition brings our own needs before God;
- Intercession brings the needs of others before God.

Prayer is healthiest when all three have a place. They are not a rigid formula, but they help us understand the different ways in which the disciple can come before God.

Communion: Turning Our Heart Towards God

Communion is fellowship with God. It includes worship, thanksgiving, praise and quiet attention towards Him. Before becoming occupied with what we need, communion turns our thoughts towards who Jesus Christ is and what He has already done.

David wrote in **Psalm 95:1-2**:

> *"O come, let us sing unto the LORD: let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation. Let us come before his presence with thanksgiving, and make a joyful noise unto him with psalms."*

Thanksgiving helps lift our attention above immediate circumstances. Instead of beginning prayer only with a list of problems, we remember God's goodness, His salvation, His faithfulness and His previous help.

Communion therefore strengthens faith. When we remember what Jesus Christ has already done, it becomes easier to trust Him with what we are facing now.

David continued in **Psalm 95:6**:

> *"O come, let us worship and bow down: let us kneel before the LORD our maker."*

Communion is not simply speaking about God. It is directing the heart towards Him with reverence, gratitude and love.

Communion also includes quietness before God. There are times when the disciple should stop speaking and allow the mind to become settled before Him.

David wrote in **Psalm 46:10**:

> *"Be still, and know that I am God: I will be exalted among the heathen, I will be exalted in the earth."*

This stillness is not an attempt to empty the mind. It is an opportunity to turn away from distraction and give careful attention to God, His Word and what He has already shown us.

Personal Response

Key Truth

How do communion, petition, and intercession each direct prayer differently?

Personal Reflection

Which of these parts of prayer do you most often neglect?

Action Step

Which part of prayer do you tend to neglect: worship, your own needs or the needs of others? Why, and how will you deliberately include the neglected part in your fellowship with Jesus Christ?

Petition: Bringing Our Needs to God

Petition is the part of prayer in which we bring our own needs, burdens and requests before God. There is nothing selfish about honestly asking God for help because Jesus taught His disciples to ask, and Scripture repeatedly encourages believers to bring their needs before Him.

Paul wrote in **Philippians 4:6**:

> *"Be careful for nothing; but in every thing by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God."*

The words *"your requests"* show that personal needs have a proper place in prayer. The disciple does not need to hide personal needs or pretend that help is unnecessary.

Petition may include requests for wisdom, healing, strength, provision, guidance, protection or help in temptation. Whatever the need may be, we can bring it honestly before God.

However, petition should not become the whole of prayer. If prayer is only about what we want, our attention can become centred upon ourselves rather than upon Jesus Christ.

Jesus gave an important principle in **Matthew 6:33**:

> *"But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you."*

The disciple brings personal needs before God, but does so with the desire that His will and Kingdom remain first. Our requests are brought within a life that is centred upon Him.

Petition should also have purpose. Rather than praying without thought, we should understand what we are asking and bring the need honestly before God with faith.

James wrote in **James 1:5-6**:

> *"If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him. But let him ask in faith, nothing wavering. For he that wavereth is like a wave of the sea driven with the wind and tossed."*

Petition therefore combines need with faith. We ask because we need God, and we trust Him with the answer.

Intercession: Praying for Others

Intercession moves the focus of prayer away from ourselves and towards other people. It is one of the clearest expressions of love in prayer because we bring the needs and burdens of others before God.

Paul wrote in **Ephesians 6:18**:

> *"Praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, and watching thereunto with all perseverance and supplication for all saints;"*

The disciple should pray for fellow believers, especially when they are facing sickness, temptation, discouragement or other difficulties. We may not always be able to change their circumstances, but we can carry them before God in prayer.

We should also pray for those who labour in the Gospel. Paul himself recognised the importance of believers praying for the work of the Gospel.

Paul wrote in **2 Thessalonians 3:1**:

> *"Finally, brethren, pray for us, that the word of the Lord may have free course, and be glorified, even as it is with you:"*

Even Paul valued the prayers of other believers. Intercession is therefore not a lesser form of service, but a way of supporting others spiritually when we may not be able to help them in another way.

Intercession also reaches beyond the Church. We pray for those who are not yet saved because God's desire is that people come to repentance.

Peter wrote in **2 Peter 3:9**:

> *"The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some men count slackness; but is longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance."*

Our concern for the unsaved should become part of our prayer life. We can bring family members, friends, neighbours and others before God, asking that they respond to His drawing and come to Jesus Christ.

Intercession also includes those who oppose or mistreat us. Jesus taught His disciples not to respond only according to natural feelings.

Jesus said in **Matthew 5:44**:

> *"But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you;"*

Intercession therefore stretches the heart beyond personal concerns. It teaches the disciple to carry the needs of others before God, including those whom we might naturally find difficult to pray for.

A Balanced Prayer Life

Communion, petition and intercession work together to give balance to the disciple's prayer life. Each directs prayer towards an important part of our fellowship with God.

Communion reminds us who God is, petition brings our own needs before Him, and intercession brings the needs of others before Him. Together they help prevent prayer from becoming centred only upon ourselves.

Prayer should not become a rigid formula in which every prayer must follow exactly the same order. These three aspects are better understood as a balanced pattern that can help the disciple grow in prayer.

Some prayers may contain more communion as we worship and give thanks to God. At other times, an urgent need may require petition, while on another occasion the burden may be entirely for someone else.

The important point is that prayer should not remain centred upon self. As the disciple grows, prayer increasingly reflects love for God, dependence upon Him and concern for others.

A growing disciple learns to worship Jesus Christ, trust Him with personal needs and carry others before Him in prayer. Communion, petition and intercession therefore become natural expressions of a life that remains dependent upon Jesus Christ.

Personal Response

Key Truth

Why does balanced prayer include others instead of remaining centred on personal requests?

Personal Reflection

When have you overlooked a person needing prayer because your own concerns felt urgent?

Action Step

Who has received less of your concern because your own burdens felt greater? What attitude needs correcting, and how will you pray and offer appropriate care to that person this week?

PRAYING FOR OTHERS

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Prayer should never remain centred only upon our own needs. As disciples of Jesus Christ, we are called to carry the needs of others before God. Intercession is an expression of love because it causes us to look beyond ourselves and become concerned for the spiritual and practical needs of other people.

Paul repeatedly encouraged believers to pray for one another. He wrote in **Ephesians 6:18**:

> *"Praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, and watching thereunto with all perseverance and supplication for all saints;"*

The words *"for all saints"* show that prayer for fellow believers should have an important place in the disciple's prayer life. Intercession turns our attention towards the needs and burdens of others.

Pray for Fellow Believers

Brothers and sisters in Christ face trials, temptations, sickness, discouragement and many other difficulties. We may not always be able to help them directly, but we can pray for them.

Sometimes another believer may come strongly to mind. Rather than dismissing that thought, it can be a good opportunity to stop and pray for that person.

Paul understood the value of believers praying for one another. He wrote in **Romans 15:30**:

> *"Now I beseech you, brethren, for the Lord Jesus Christ's sake, and for the love of the Spirit, that ye strive together with me in your prayers to God for me;"*

Paul described their prayers as *"striving together"* with him. Though they might not have been physically present in his labour, they could share in it through prayer.

Intercession therefore becomes a form of spiritual service. Through prayer, believers can support one another even when they are separated by distance or unable to provide practical help.

Pray for Those Who Minister the Word

Those who teach, preach and serve the Church also need prayer. Paul regularly asked believers to pray that the Gospel would continue to move forward.

Paul wrote in **2 Thessalonians 3:1**:

> *"Finally, brethren, pray for us, that the word of the Lord may have free course, and be glorified, even as it is with you:"*

The purpose of this prayer was not simply that Paul would have an easier life. He desired that *"the word of the Lord may have free course"* and be glorified.

We should therefore pray for pastors, elders, teachers, missionaries and others who labour in the Gospel. We can pray that they remain faithful to the Word, have wisdom, receive strength and continue pointing people towards Jesus Christ.

Prayer for those who minister is therefore also prayer for the work of the Gospel. We desire that Jesus Christ be made known and that His Word continue to reach people.

Personal Response

Key Truth

How can praying for those who minister support the spread of the Word?

Personal Reflection

Have you treated Gospel workers' needs as separate from your own service?

Action Step

Have you viewed prayer for Gospel workers as someone else's responsibility? What will change in your concern for them, and whom will you begin supporting through specific prayer?

Pray for the Unsaved

The disciple should also pray for family members, friends, neighbours and others who have not yet been born again. Our concern for their spiritual condition should become part of our prayer life.

God's desire concerning lost humanity is clearly stated. Peter wrote in **2 Peter 3:9**:

> *"The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some men count slackness; but is longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance."*

When we pray for the unsaved, we can ask God to draw them and bring conviction to their hearts. We can also pray that His Word will be placed before them and that opportunities will arise for the Gospel to be shared.

Prayer for the unsaved should also affect our own actions. We should remain ready to speak about Jesus Christ, share our testimony and show His love when opportunities arise.

Pray for Those in Authority

Paul instructed believers to pray for those who hold positions of authority. The disciple's prayer life should therefore include those whose decisions affect the lives of others.

Paul wrote in **1 Timothy 2:1-3**:

> *"I exhort therefore, that, first of all, supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks, be made for all men; For kings, and for all that are in authority; that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty. For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Saviour;"*

The disciple should therefore pray for those who carry responsibility in government and society. The purpose is not to promote a political party or human cause, but to pray for conditions in which people may live *"a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty."*

Prayer for authorities also reminds us where our ultimate confidence belongs. God remains greater than every earthly position, and our trust must remain in Him.

Pray for Your Enemies

Perhaps one of the most difficult forms of intercession is praying for those who have hurt, opposed or mistreated us. Jesus specifically taught His disciples to pray for such people.

Jesus said in **Matthew 5:44**:

> *"But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you;"*

Praying for an enemy requires the love of God within. It moves the disciple away from bitterness, resentment and revenge and allows the life and love of Jesus Christ within to govern our response.

This does not mean that wrong behaviour becomes acceptable. It means that we refuse to allow another person's actions to produce hatred within us.

Prayer for those who mistreat us therefore also guards our own hearts. We place the person and the situation before God rather than allowing bitterness to control our response.

Intercession Is Love in Prayer

Intercession turns prayer outward and causes us to consider the needs of others. It teaches the disciple that prayer is not only about personal concerns.

We pray for fellow believers because we care for them, and we pray for those who minister because we desire the Word of God to prosper. We pray for the unsaved because we desire them to know Jesus Christ, and we pray for those in authority because their decisions affect many people.

We also pray for our enemies because Jesus has commanded us to love even those who mistreat us. A disciple who loves others will carry others before God in prayer.

Intercession is therefore one of the clearest ways prayer becomes service. We may never know how much God accomplishes through prayers offered quietly and faithfully for someone else, but we can continue bringing others before Him in love.

Personal Response

Key Truth

Why does intercession include the unsaved, those in authority, and even enemies?

Personal Reflection

For whom has resentment or indifference made prayer difficult?

Action Step

Is there someone you have found difficult to pray for because of resentment or hurt? What attitude must Christ's love govern, and how will you pray without excusing the wrong done?

FASTING AND PRAYER

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Fasting has an important place in the Bible, but it must be understood correctly. It is not a religious performance, a way of earning favour with God or a method of forcing God to answer prayer. Biblical fasting is an act of self-denial that helps the disciple give greater attention to prayer and spiritual matters.

Throughout Scripture, fasting is closely connected with seeking God. It is usually associated with a particular burden, need, decision or desire for greater spiritual focus.

Fasting Is Joined With Prayer

Fasting in the Bible is rarely presented as an isolated practice. It is normally joined with prayer and a sincere desire to seek God.

David wrote in **Psalm 35:13**:

> *"But as for me, when they were sick, my clothing was sackcloth: I humbled my soul with fasting; and my prayer returned into mine own bosom."*

David connected fasting with humility and prayer. The purpose was not to prove spiritual strength, but to humble himself before God.

Daniel followed the same pattern. He wrote in **Daniel 9:3**:

> *"And I set my face unto the Lord God, to seek by prayer and supplications, with fasting, and sackcloth, and ashes:"*

Daniel fasted because he was earnestly seeking God. His fasting was not the focus in itself, but accompanied prayer, supplication and a deep desire to understand and respond to the will of God.

This gives us an important principle: Fasting should direct the disciple towards God, not towards the act of fasting itself. The purpose is greater attention to Jesus Christ and the matter being brought before Him.

Fasting Involves Self-Denial

Fasting commonly involves setting aside food for a period of time so that attention can be given more fully to prayer and spiritual matters. The physical appetite is deliberately denied while the heart turns towards God.

This self-denial can remind the disciple that spiritual needs are greater than natural appetites. Jesus expressed the importance of spiritual nourishment when He was tempted in the wilderness.

Jesus said in **Matthew 4:4**:

> *"It is written, Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God."*

Fasting should therefore never become a contest to see how long a person can go without food. The purpose is spiritual, not physical.

The disciple sets aside something natural in order to give greater attention to Jesus Christ, His Word and the matter being brought before Him in prayer. The value is not in simply going without food, but in how that time is directed towards God.

Personal Response

Key Truth

Why must biblical fasting remain joined to prayer, humility, and attention to God?

Personal Reflection

Have you viewed going without food as the source of spiritual power?

Action Step

Have you looked to fasting itself as a source of spiritual power? What belief needs correcting, and how will you approach prayer and self-denial with humility rather than confidence in an outward act?

Biblical Examples of Fasting

The Bible contains many examples of fasting connected with serious spiritual purpose. Moses fasted during a significant time of receiving from God, Elijah fasted during a period of great difficulty, Esther called for fasting when her people faced destruction, and Jesus fasted in the wilderness before facing temptation.

The congregation at Antioch also fasted and prayed when Paul and Barnabas were being separated for ministry. Their example again shows the close relationship between fasting, prayer and seeking God's direction.

Luke wrote in **Acts 13:2-3**:

> *"As they ministered to the Lord, and fasted, the Holy Ghost said, Separate me Barnabas and Saul for the work whereunto I have called them. And when they had fasted and prayed, and laid their hands on them, they sent them away."*

Notice again the close connection in the words *"fasted and prayed."* Their fasting was connected with seeking God concerning the work before them.

They were not attempting to make God follow their plans. They were seeking to understand and submit to His direction.

Fasting Must Have the Right Motive

Jesus warned against fasting for the purpose of being noticed by other people. An outward religious action has little value when the heart is seeking recognition from others.

Jesus said in **Matthew 6:16-18**:

> *"Moreover when ye fast, be not, as the hypocrites, of a sad countenance: for they disfigure their faces, that they may appear unto men to fast. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward. But thou, when thou fastest, anoint thine head, and wash thy face; That thou appear not unto men to fast, but unto thy Father which is in secret: and thy Father, which seeth in secret, shall reward thee openly."*

The hypocrites wanted other people to see their sacrifice. Jesus directed His disciples away from outward display and towards sincerity before God.

Fasting should therefore not be used to impress others, prove spiritual maturity or gain recognition. The value of fasting is found in the heart that is sincerely seeking God.

Fasting Does Not Control God

It is important to understand that fasting does not make God obligated to answer prayer in the way we desire. Fasting does not increase God's power, change His character or place Him under our control.

Fasting changes our focus. The disciple may become less distracted by natural concerns and more attentive to prayer, Scripture and the burden being carried before God.

This is why fasting must always remain connected with surrender. Jesus Christ remains Lord, and we seek His will rather than attempting to persuade Him to adopt ours.

The purpose of fasting is therefore not to make God listen more carefully to us. It helps us give greater attention to Him.

Fasting Should Produce Humility

Isaiah shows that God was not pleased with fasting that remained outward while the lives of the people remained wrong. True fasting could not be separated from righteousness, compassion and obedience.

Isaiah wrote in **Isaiah 58:6**:

> *"Is not this the fast that I have chosen? to loose the bands of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, and to let the oppressed go free, and that ye break every yoke?"*

The fast God approved was connected with righteousness, compassion and practical change. Going without food had no spiritual value if the heart and conduct remained unchanged.

Fasting without obedience therefore becomes another empty religious action. If a person refuses to forgive, continues in wrong conduct or ignores the needs of others, going without food does not make the heart spiritual.

True fasting should help bring the disciple into greater humility, sensitivity and submission to God. It should direct the heart towards a life that agrees with His Word.

Fast With Purpose

A disciple should not fast simply because other people are fasting or because fasting is considered spiritual. There should be a genuine purpose for setting aside natural appetite and giving greater attention to prayer.

A person may fast while seeking God for:

- Wisdom concerning an important decision;
- A deeper burden in intercessory prayer;
- Help during a serious spiritual trial;
- Direction in ministry or service;
- Greater focus upon a particular matter before God.

Whatever the reason, fasting should remain centred upon Jesus Christ. The disciple is seeking Him rather than placing confidence in the practice itself.

It is not the absence of food that gives spiritual power because the power belongs to God. Fasting is simply one way the disciple may set aside natural distractions, humble the heart and give greater attention to prayer.

Biblical fasting is self-denial joined with prayer, humility and a sincere desire to seek Jesus Christ and walk according to His will. Its purpose is not to control God, but to help the disciple become more focused upon Him.

Personal Response

Key Truth

How do sincerity and surrender distinguish fasting from an attempt to control God?

Personal Reflection

Have you expected a particular answer because of a sacrifice you made?

Action Step

When have you expected God to act in exchange for something you sacrificed? How will you surrender that expectation and seek His will rather than a result you feel you have earned?

THE FAST GOD CHOOSES

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Fasting is not valuable simply because a person goes without food. God looks beyond the outward act and considers the heart, motive and conduct of the person who is fasting. The fast God chooses is connected with humility, righteousness, compassion and a sincere desire to walk according to His will.

Isaiah gives one of the clearest descriptions of the kind of fast that pleases God. He wrote in **Isaiah 58:6**:

> *"Is not this the fast that I have chosen? to loose the bands of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, and to let the oppressed go free, and that ye break every yoke?"*

God was showing that true fasting must reach beyond the physical act. A person may deny the body food while continuing to live selfishly, harshly or unrighteously, but such fasting has little spiritual value.

The fast God chooses should be reflected in the way the disciple lives. Outward self-denial must be joined with a heart that is willing to obey God.

Fasting Must Be Joined With Righteousness

Isaiah connected fasting with turning away from wickedness and relieving burdens. This means that fasting cannot be separated from obedience.

A person cannot knowingly continue in wrong conduct and expect fasting to make that conduct acceptable before God. Fasting is not a substitute for repentance, forgiveness, love or righteousness.

The disciple who fasts should therefore be willing to examine the heart and life. Several questions can help bring our attention towards areas that may need to change:

- Is there something in my life that needs to change?
- Is there someone I need to forgive?

- Am I treating others with love and mercy?
- Is there an area where I already know God's will but have not obeyed it?

These questions help keep fasting connected with genuine spiritual purpose. Fasting should bring the heart into greater submission to Jesus Christ, not provide a religious covering for disobedience.

The Fast God Chooses Cares for Others

Isaiah continued by connecting fasting with practical compassion. The person seeking God could not ignore the genuine needs of others.

Isaiah wrote in **Isaiah 58:7**:

> *"Is it not to deal thy bread to the hungry, and that thou bring the poor that are cast out to thy house? when thou seest the naked, that thou cover him; and that thou hide not thyself from thine own flesh?"*

The fast God chooses is not inward and self-centred. It should cause the disciple to become more aware of the needs of others and more willing to respond with compassion.

If fasting makes us proud, harsh or self-occupied, something is wrong. True spiritual discipline should produce greater love, greater humility and greater willingness to serve.

This agrees with the teaching of Jesus concerning practical care. He said in **Matthew 25:35-36**:

> *"For I was an hungred, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in: Naked, and ye clothed me: I was sick, and ye visited me: I was in prison, and ye came unto me."*

Fasting should therefore never be separated from the spirit of service. The disciple who sets aside food to seek God should also remain sensitive to those who may genuinely lack food, clothing, care or encouragement.

Personal Response

Key Truth

What does Isaiah 58 teach about fasting joined to righteousness and compassion?

Personal Reflection

Is there a wrong action or neglected person your outward practice has allowed you to ignore?

Action Step

Identify a need you have overlooked while attending to your own spiritual practices. What will you change in your heart and conduct so that compassion accompanies your desire to seek God?

Fasting Should Remain Private and Humble

Jesus warned against fasting in order to receive the attention of others. Fasting loses its proper direction when it becomes a way of displaying spirituality.

Jesus said in **Matthew 6:16-18**:

> *"Moreover when ye fast, be not, as the hypocrites, of a sad countenance: for they disfigure their faces, that they may appear unto men to fast. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward. But thou, when thou fastest, anoint thine head, and wash thy face; That thou appear not unto men to fast, but unto thy Father which is in secret: and thy Father, which seeth in secret, shall reward thee openly."*

The hypocrites wanted people to see their sacrifice. Jesus taught His disciples to remove the performance from fasting and seek God sincerely.

The purpose is not to appear spiritual because the purpose is to seek God. The disciple should therefore fast quietly and humbly, without using the practice to gain recognition.

The Promises of Isaiah 58

Isaiah also describes blessings connected with the fast God chooses. These blessings appear within the wider setting of people turning from wrong and responding to the needs of others.

Isaiah wrote in **Isaiah 58:8-9**:

> *"Then shall thy light break forth as the morning, and thine health shall spring forth speedily: and thy righteousness shall go before thee; the glory of the LORD shall be thy rereward. Then shalt thou call, and the LORD shall answer; thou shalt cry, and he shall say, Here I am."*

These verses should not be treated as a formula promising that every fast will automatically produce a particular result. The promises belong within the wider picture of people turning from wrong, caring for others and seeking God sincerely.

The emphasis is upon relationship and obedience. The disciple is not trying to purchase an answer from God by going without food.

Fasting is instead part of humbling the heart, removing distractions and seeking God more earnestly. The attention remains upon Him rather than upon the sacrifice involved in fasting.

Fasting Should Draw Us Towards Jesus Christ

The true value of fasting is not found in how long we fast, how difficult the fast becomes or whether anyone knows we are doing it. Its value is found in where it directs the heart.

Fasting should help the disciple become more attentive to prayer and more responsive to the Word of God. It should also encourage greater sensitivity to the needs of others and greater willingness to submit to Jesus Christ.

The fast God chooses therefore involves more than self-denial. It is a fast joined with righteousness, compassion, humility, prayer and obedience.

When fasting produces these things, it serves its proper purpose. The disciple fasts not to control God, but to humble the heart and seek Jesus Christ more earnestly.

Personal Response

Key Truth

Why should the fast God chooses draw attention to Jesus and to others' needs?

Personal Reflection

Have you valued the length or visibility of a fast more than humility and obedience?

Action Step

Think about whether you have wanted others to notice your spiritual discipline. How will you turn from that motive and quietly meet a genuine need through the love of Christ within?

SPIRITUAL DISCERNMENT

BACK TO CONTENTS

Prayer and fasting help the disciple remain attentive to God, but the Christian life also requires spiritual discernment. We live in a world filled with competing ideas, teachings, influences and claims about what is true. The disciple must therefore learn to recognise what agrees with the Word of God and what does not.

Discernment means being able to distinguish between things that may appear similar but are spiritually different. It is the ability to recognise truth and error, right and wrong, and what is genuinely from God rather than what only appears spiritual.

Paul warned believers that deception can sometimes appear righteous. He wrote in **2 Corinthians 11:13-15**:

> *"For such are false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into the apostles of Christ. And no marvel; for Satan himself is transformed into an angel of light. Therefore it is no great thing if his ministers also be transformed as the ministers of righteousness; whose end shall be according to their works."*

The danger of deception is that it does not always appear obviously wrong. Something may sound religious, use biblical language or be presented by someone who claims to represent Jesus Christ. Discernment is therefore necessary because outward appearance alone cannot determine spiritual truth.

Do Not Judge by Appearance

Human beings naturally tend to judge according to what can be seen. We notice appearance, personality, confidence, popularity and outward success, but God sees deeper.

When Samuel was sent to the house of Jesse to anoint a king, he initially looked at Eliab and assumed that he must be God's choice. The LORD corrected Samuel's judgment.

The LORD said to Samuel in **1 Samuel 16:7**:

> *"But the LORD said unto Samuel, Look not on his countenance, or on the height of his stature; because I have refused him: for the LORD seeth not as man seeth; for man looketh on the outward appearance, but the LORD looketh on the heart."*

Samuel was a prophet of God, yet even he could be influenced by outward appearance. God corrected him and showed that spiritual judgment must go deeper.

Jesus gave the same principle in **John 7:24**:

> *"Judge not according to the appearance, but judge righteous judgment."*

Discernment therefore does not mean refusing to make judgments. Jesus commanded His disciples to *"judge righteous judgment."*

The important question is whether our judgment is being formed by outward appearance, personal preference and emotion, or by the truth of God. Spiritual discernment looks beyond what appears impressive and seeks to understand what is true.

Personal Response

Key Truth

Why can spiritual deception appear righteous, and why is outward appearance insufficient for judgment?

Personal Reflection

When have confidence, popularity, or appearance persuaded you before you tested a claim?

Action Step

What claim has impressed you because of confidence, popularity or appearance? What will you examine in the Bible before accepting it, and how will you respond if it does not agree?

Discernment Protects the Disciple

Paul warned believers to be prepared against spiritual deception. He wrote in **Ephesians 6:11**:

> *"Put on the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil."*

The word *"wiles"* refers to schemes, methods and deceptive strategies. Falsehood does not normally announce itself as falsehood because deception works by making something wrong appear reasonable, attractive or even spiritual.

This is why spiritual discernment is not an optional ability reserved for ministers or mature leaders. Every disciple needs discernment because every believer can encounter ideas and influences that must be examined carefully.

A believer may encounter teaching that sounds convincing but contradicts Scripture. A respected person may give advice that does not agree with the Word of God, while a popular religious movement may attract large numbers and still promote ideas that are spiritually dangerous.

The disciple must therefore learn to ask questions such as:

- Does this agree with the Word of God?
- Does this lead me towards Jesus Christ or away from Him?
- Does this teaching produce righteousness and holiness?
- Is Scripture being handled in context?
- Is Jesus Christ being given the place that belongs to Him?

These questions help protect the disciple from accepting something simply because it appears impressive. Everything must be examined according to truth rather than outward appearance.

The Word of God Is the Standard

Discernment must always be grounded in Scripture. Feelings alone are not sufficient because feelings can change and can sometimes be influenced by fear, personal preference or previous experience.

The Word of God provides the standard by which teaching and spiritual claims can be examined. The disciple therefore needs a growing knowledge and understanding of Scripture.

Paul instructed Timothy in **1 Timothy 6:20**:

> *"O Timothy, keep that which is committed to thy trust, avoiding profane and vain babblings, and oppositions of science falsely so called:"*

Timothy had received truth and was responsible to guard it. He could recognise false teaching because he already knew the truth that had been committed to him.

This is why reading and studying the Bible are essential to discernment. The more clearly a disciple knows the Word, the easier it becomes to recognise something that contradicts it.

A person who rarely reads Scripture is more vulnerable to spiritual deception because there is no clear biblical standard established in the heart by which ideas can be measured. The Word of God is the measuring line for discernment.

Discernment Affects Daily Life

Discernment is not limited to identifying false doctrine. It also affects ordinary decisions and the way a disciple walks each day.

Paul wrote in **Ephesians 5:15-17**:

> *"See then that ye walk circumspectly, not as fools, but as wise, Redeeming the time, because the days are evil. Wherefore be ye not unwise, but understanding what the will of the Lord is."*

To walk *"circumspectly"* means to walk carefully and wisely. The disciple should not move through life without considering the spiritual effect of choices.

Discernment helps us consider:

- How we use our time;
- What influences we allow into our minds;
- Whose advice we follow;
- What teachings we accept;
- What relationships influence us;
- Whether our choices agree with the will of God.

Paul connects wisdom with *"understanding what the will of the Lord is."* Spiritual discernment therefore helps the disciple recognise the difference between what may be possible and what is actually pleasing to Jesus Christ.

Discernment Is Not Suspicion

Discernment should not make the disciple suspicious of everyone or constantly looking for fault. That is not spiritual maturity because biblical discernment is governed by truth, humility and love.

Biblical discernment is calm and careful. It does not judge motives without evidence, nor does it reject people simply because they are different from us.

Jesus said to *"judge righteous judgment."* Righteous judgment seeks truth rather than fault and examines teaching and conduct according to Scripture.

A discerning disciple also recognises that we ourselves can misunderstand something. We therefore remain teachable, allowing the Word of God to correct our own understanding as well as testing what we hear from others.

We test what we hear, but we also allow the Word of God to test us. True discernment therefore requires humility as well as conviction.

Seeing Through the Word and Spirit

True spiritual discernment grows as the disciple becomes established in the Word of God and learns to depend upon the Spirit of Christ within. Natural reasoning alone cannot provide the spiritual understanding needed to recognise every spiritual truth.

Paul wrote in **1 Corinthians 2:14**:

> *"But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned."*

Spiritual things must be spiritually discerned. The born-again believer has received the Spirit of Christ and therefore possesses the spiritual life necessary to understand the things of God.

However, the Spirit will never lead the believer contrary to the written Word. The Word and Spirit work together in true discernment, and what we believe to be spiritual direction must agree with Scripture.

The disciple therefore learns to examine everything carefully, pray for wisdom, compare teaching with Scripture and remain sensitive to the Spirit of Christ within. Discernment helps protect the spiritual life God has given us and keeps the disciple centred upon truth.

We do not judge by appearance because we are called to judge righteous judgment. We measure everything by the Word of God and depend upon the Spirit of Christ to guide us in truth.

Personal Response

Key Truth

How do God's Word and the Spirit of Christ work together in discernment without producing suspicion of everyone?

Personal Reflection

Have you judged a motive without evidence or treated an impression as above the Bible?

Action Step

Have you formed a judgement about someone without sufficient evidence? What must change in your attitude, and how will you test teaching fairly while refusing suspicion and personal prejudice?

GROWING IN DISCERNMENT

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Spiritual discernment does not develop automatically simply because a person has been born again. The new birth gives spiritual life, but the disciple must continue to grow in knowledge, understanding and maturity. Discernment becomes stronger as we learn the Word of God, know Jesus Christ more deeply and practise making decisions according to His truth.

The writer of Hebrews connects discernment directly with spiritual maturity. He wrote in **Hebrews 5:13-14**:

> *"For every one that useth milk is unskilful in the word of righteousness: for he is a babe. But strong meat belongeth to them that are of full age, even those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil."*

The contrast is clear. A spiritual babe is described as *"unskilful in the word of righteousness,"* while the mature believer has learned to use the Word and has developed the ability to *"discern both good and evil."*

Discernment therefore grows through spiritual maturity. As the disciple becomes more established in truth, the ability to recognise what agrees with God also becomes stronger.

Growing in the Word

The Word of God is essential to developing discernment. A disciple cannot consistently recognise truth and error without knowing the standard by which both must be judged.

The writer of Hebrews says that mature believers have their senses exercised *"by reason of use."* This shows that discernment develops through practice as the disciple reads the Word, studies it, applies it and learns from it over time.

As the Word becomes familiar, we begin to recognise more quickly when something does not agree with Scripture. False teaching becomes easier to identify because the truth is already established within the heart.

David understood the connection between knowledge and good judgment. He prayed in **Psalm 119:66**:

> *"Teach me good judgment and knowledge: for I have believed thy commandments."*

David did not depend upon natural ability alone. He asked God to teach him, recognising that good judgment and spiritual knowledge ultimately come from Him.

The disciple should have the same attitude. We continually ask God to teach us good judgment and knowledge as we become more established in His Word.

Knowing Jesus Christ

Discernment requires more than knowing verses. The disciple must also know the Person revealed through the Word because Jesus Christ remains the centre of spiritual truth.

Paul wrote in **1 Corinthians 1:30**:

> *"But of him are ye in Christ Jesus, who of God is made unto us wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption:"*

Jesus Christ is our wisdom. The purpose of studying Scripture is therefore not simply to become knowledgeable, but to know Him more clearly and understand His character, ways and truth.

As we grow in our knowledge of Jesus Christ, we become more able to recognise what does not agree with Him. His Word gives us the standard by which teaching, advice and conduct can be examined.

A teaching may sound impressive, but we must ask whether it agrees with His Word. An action may be popular, but we must consider whether it reflects His righteousness, while advice that appears reasonable must still lead us to walk according to Jesus Christ.

Discernment becomes stronger when Christ Himself remains at the centre. The disciple learns to measure spiritual claims by whether they agree with the truth revealed in Him.

Personal Response

Key Truth

Why does knowing Jesus Christ through the Bible strengthen discernment over time?

Personal Reflection

Where have you relied on another person's conclusion without examining the Word yourself?

Action Step

Recall an opinion you accepted without examining the Bible. What does the relevant verse actually say, and what will you correct in your understanding or conduct if necessary?

Depending Upon the Spirit of Christ

Spiritual truth cannot be understood by natural reasoning alone. The born-again believer has received the Spirit of Christ and therefore possesses spiritual life.

Paul wrote in **1 Corinthians 2:14**:

> *"But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned."*

Spiritual things must be spiritually discerned. The Spirit of Christ helps the believer understand the Word, brings truth to remembrance and helps us recognise things that do not agree with God.

However, we must remain sensitive to His working within. Paul wrote in **1 Thessalonians 5:19**:

> *"Quench not the Spirit."*

To quench means to suppress or resist. The disciple should therefore be careful not to ignore conviction, warning or direction that comes through the Spirit of Christ.

At the same time, every impression must remain subject to the written Word. The Spirit of Christ will never lead contrary to the Word of God, so spiritual direction and Scripture will always agree.

Asking God for Wisdom

There will be times when a disciple faces a situation and does not immediately know what to do. God invites us to bring those situations before Him and ask for wisdom.

James wrote in **James 1:5**:

> *"If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him."*

The instruction is direct: *"Let him ask of God."* The disciple does not need to pretend to have an answer when greater wisdom is needed.

Prayer therefore has an important place in discernment. We bring the matter before God, search His Word and ask Him to help us see clearly.

Sometimes the answer may already be plainly stated in Scripture. At other times, we may need wisdom to understand how a biblical principle should be applied to a particular situation.

Either way, the disciple does not need to depend entirely upon personal understanding. We can ask God for wisdom and remain attentive to His Word.

Discernment Grows Through Use

Hebrews 5:14 says that mature believers have their senses *"exercised to discern both good and evil."* Discernment therefore develops as it is used.

Each time we compare a teaching with Scripture, we are exercising discernment. Each time we refuse to judge only by appearance or pray for wisdom before making a decision, we are also exercising discernment.

Over time, spiritual understanding becomes stronger. The disciple becomes more familiar with the truth and more able to recognise what does not agree with it.

This growth also requires humility because a mature disciple must remain willing to be corrected. If the Word reveals that something we believed was wrong, we must be willing to change.

Pride weakens discernment because pride assumes that we cannot be mistaken. Humility allows the Word of God to correct us and keeps the disciple teachable.

From Spiritual Childhood to Maturity

God does not intend His children to remain spiritual babies. A new believer may not understand every issue clearly at first, but spiritual growth should continue.

The disciple progresses from milk to strong meat and from limited understanding towards greater maturity. Over time, the believer should become better able to examine matters personally through the Word of God rather than depending upon others for every answer.

This does not mean becoming independent from Jesus Christ. In fact, true maturity produces greater dependence upon Him because the disciple increasingly understands where true wisdom and spiritual understanding come from.

The mature disciple understands more clearly that wisdom comes from Jesus Christ, truth is revealed through His Word and spiritual understanding requires His Spirit. Discernment therefore grows as the whole life becomes increasingly established in Him.

The disciple grows in discernment by knowing the Word of God, knowing Jesus Christ more deeply and depending upon the Spirit of Christ. We also ask God for wisdom, practise righteous judgment and remain humble and teachable.

Spiritual maturity does not mean that we never make mistakes. It means that we are becoming increasingly skilled in recognising truth and walking according to it.

As the disciple grows in Jesus Christ, the Word becomes clearer, spiritual judgment becomes stronger and the ability to discern good from evil continues to mature.

Personal Response

Key Truth

How does **Hebrews 5:14** *connect discernment with repeated use, correction, and maturity?*

Personal Reflection

Have pride or fear of being wrong kept you from reconsidering a belief?

Action Step

Is pride or fear preventing you from reconsidering a belief? What will you examine carefully in God's Word, and how will you respond if your previous conclusion needs correcting?

CONCLUSION: WALKING CLOSELY WITH JESUS CHRIST

BACK TO CONTENTS

Prayer, fasting and spiritual discernment are important parts of the disciple's life, but none of them should become an end in themselves. Their purpose is to help the believer remain dependent upon Jesus Christ, attentive to His Word and responsive to His Spirit.

Prayer keeps the disciple in continual fellowship with God. Through prayer, we worship, give thanks, seek wisdom, bring our needs before Him and intercede for others.

Paul wrote in **Philippians 4:6-7**:

> *"Be careful for nothing; but in every thing by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God. And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus."*

Prayer reminds us that we do not have to carry every burden alone. We can bring our concerns to God and trust Him to give wisdom, strength and peace.

Fasting can also help the disciple give greater attention to prayer and spiritual matters. However, fasting has no power in itself because it must be joined with humility, obedience and a sincere desire to seek God.

Isaiah showed that the fast God chooses is connected with righteousness, compassion and practical change. Fasting that leaves the heart unchanged becomes only an outward act and has missed its spiritual purpose.

Spiritual discernment is also essential because the disciple must learn to recognise truth and error. We cannot judge spiritual matters only by outward appearances.

Jesus said in **John 7:24**:

"Judge not according to the appearance, but judge righteous judgment."

True discernment grows as we know the Word of God, know Jesus Christ more deeply and learn to depend upon the Spirit of Christ within. The disciple becomes increasingly able to recognise what agrees with God's truth and what does not.

The Word remains the standard by which spiritual matters are examined. Feelings, impressions, popularity and outward success cannot replace the truth of Scripture, and the Spirit of Christ will never lead contrary to the Word He has given.

As the disciple grows, prayer becomes more natural, fasting becomes more purposeful and discernment becomes stronger. These things do not make the believer more complete in Christ because the born-again believer is already complete in Him.

Instead, they help the believer learn to walk faithfully in the life already received. Prayer, fasting and discernment should therefore continually direct our attention back towards Jesus Christ.

The goal is not to become known as a person who prays much, fasts often or possesses unusual discernment. The goal is to walk closely with Jesus Christ, allowing every part of the disciple's life to remain centred in Him.

Prayer keeps us dependent upon Him, while fasting helps us seek Him with greater focus. Discernment helps us recognise what agrees with His Word and Spirit so that we can continue walking according to truth.

The disciple who walks closely with Jesus Christ will learn to pray with faith, seek Him with humility and judge all things according to His truth. These practices find their proper purpose when they help us remain faithful and dependent upon Him.

Personal Response

Key Truth

How should prayer, fasting, and discernment keep your life centred on Jesus Christ?

Personal Reflection

Which practice has become an end in itself instead of deepening dependence on Him?

Action Step

Of prayer, fasting and discernment, which has become an end in itself for you? Identify the change needed and one continuing practice that will keep your attention centred upon Jesus Christ.

SUBMISSION TO COGMA FOR APPRAISAL

Instructions

Complete this section after you have finished the Study Guide. It must be completed online.

The link is located at the bottom of the online Study Guide — https://cogma.com.au/study-guides/

Your answers should reflect your understanding, your personal response, and how you intend to live by the truth you have studied. Answer honestly and be specific.

1. Main Truth

How do prayer, fasting, and careful judgment grounded in the Bible express continuing dependence on Jesus Christ? Explain why none of them should become a religious performance.

2. Understanding

Why is prayer fellowship with God rather than a religious performance, and how do communion, petition, and intercession each contribute to a balanced prayer life?

3. Personal Reflection

Where have anxiety, self-reliance, or irregular prayer affected your fellowship with God? Give an example and explain what needs to change.

4. Response to Truth

How should praying for others change your response to a fellow believer, a person who does not know Christ, or someone who has mistreated you? Explain one response you will make.

5. Action Step

Who is one person you will pray for this week, and what need will you bring to God for that person? Say when you will begin.

6. Early Response

Have you already prayed for one person and brought that person's need to God? If yes, briefly explain what you did or what changed. If not, explain what prevented you from beginning.

7. Ongoing Practice

What continuing pattern of prayer and attention to the Bible will help you seek God sincerely when you fast and practise discernment in ordinary decisions?

8. Doctrinal Clarity

Why can fasting neither control God nor substitute for obedience and compassion, and how must the fast God chooses differ from outward religious display?

9. Living the Truth

When advice, a teaching, or a spiritual impression affects a real choice, how will you test it against the Bible? Explain how prayer and humility should shape your response.

10. Final Response

Bring together fellowship with God in prayer, humble fasting, and careful judgment grounded in His Word. How should these truths help you depend on Jesus Christ in a real decision?