

## PRAYER AND FASTING

The elders and staff of Steele Creek Church of Charlotte have declared a season of prayer and fasting every Wednesday from June 12, 2002 until August 28, 2002. As you know, we believe that the Lord has directed that this be a “Year of Maturity” for the church body here. One characteristic of maturity is discipline; whether in our natural or our spiritual maturity, we must learn to exercise discipline over our affairs, our actions, and our appetites. Prayer coupled with fasting was a spiritual discipline vital to the life of the early Church.

We realize that many modern Christians are not familiar with fasting, and that some may even be afraid of it. **Please be assured that the leaders of this church have no intention of “pressuring” anyone or becoming legalistic about this practice.** At the same time, we do need to teach the body on this very important, but unfortunately neglected practice that both Old- and New- covenant saints embraced. Jesus expected that his followers would fast. In His instruction to the disciples that they should fast discreetly, He said “*But you, when you fast, ...anoint your head and wash your face, so that you do not appear to men to be fasting, but to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly*” (Matthew 6:17). There was never a question about whether Jesus’ disciples would fast, and scripture does not ask us whether we will fast. Rather, the scriptural instruction about this discipline is concerned with fasting in a way that honors the Father. Though we do not fast to gain merit from God, or to “impress” Him with how serious we are about the things we are asking for, He does promise to reward us when we fast, by empowering, leading, and speaking to those who petition Him in this manner. Our reward for fasting is that we achieve His purposes!

### *What is fasting?*

Derek Prince, a Christian teacher and author, defines fasting as “voluntarily abstaining from food for spiritual purposes”<sup>1</sup> and states that “...the essential nature of fasting is renouncing the natural to invoke the supernatural.”<sup>2</sup> The Biblical purposes of fasting include the expression of repentance, humility, and mourning (*Psalms 35:13, Jonah 3:7-8*) petitioning God for direction and protection (*2 Chronicles 20, Ezra 8:21*) healing, deliverance, and power (*Isaiah 58, Esther 4-5, Matthew 17:21, Luke 4:1-14, Joel 1-2*). Take some time to study these references to see why God’s people fasted, and how God responded. May we all begin to pursue this powerful aspect of our walk in Christ!

### *In the Bible, who fasted?*

The Bible is full of examples of fasting, in both Old and New Testaments. David the King fasted to petition the Lord for the life of his son (*2 Samuel 12:16*). Jehoshaphat called on the entire nation of Judah to fast when he heard that a great and powerful army was coming against him (*2 Chronicles 20:3*). Anna’s service to the Lord consisted entirely of fasting and prayer in the temple (*Luke 2:37*). The leaders and elders in the early Church fasted before choosing Barnabas and Saul (Paul) as apostles, and again before sending them out on their mission (*Acts 13:2-3*); Paul and Barnabas fasted after they appointed church elders in Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch, and commended them to God (*Acts 14:23*). Paul expected that periodic fasting with prayer would be part of every Christian’s spiritual life (*1 Corinthians 7:5*) and Paul himself fasted often (*2 Corinthians 6:4-10*). Jesus fasted for forty days and nights before beginning His active ministry (*Matthew 4:2*). Historical evidence indicates that the early church made a practice of fasting each Wednesday and Friday.<sup>3</sup>

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1 Derek Prince – Fasting © 1986 Derek Prince Ministries International, p. 5.

2 Ibid, p. 16.

3 Derek Prince – How to Fast Successfully, © 1976 Derek Prince Ministries International, p. 12.

## *Why are we fasting at SCCC?*

As we have said before, the Lord has directed that this be a year of Maturity here at Steele Creek Church of Charlotte, and in general we believe that fasting, both individually and corporately, is a discipline that will both demonstrate and encourage that maturity. There are also decisions critical to the life of the body here at SCCC that must be made over the next several months, and we want to declare our dependence on the Lord for wisdom and direction. As we fast and pray together, we will be:

—asking God to mature us in our faith as a corporate body. We will ask that our maturity be manifested in the specific areas of Worship, Communion, Home Fellowships, in the exercise of the spiritual gifts to build up and minister to each other, and in our passion for evangelism and missions both locally and around the world.

—seeking His direction for our future. As SCCC continues to grow numerically, we need to hear from the Lord whether to pursue planning additional services, expand the facilities on our current property, or move to another, larger facility in this area. Any decision we make with regard to our facilities is based on our Lord's command that we are to make disciples. To do this we need room to make and equip disciples to have an impact here in the Charlotte area and around the world. We also need financial resources to support Kingdom work in places where we cannot go personally. We believe that these two areas do not need to be in conflict; as He speaks and leads our desire is to respond faithfully to the whole vision for ministry that He has given, and to be good stewards in the allocation of the resources He provides.

## *How should we fast?*

While we cannot be exhaustive on all the spiritual and practical considerations of fasting, we can offer the following suggestions:

— Fasting is a choice in the physical realm that serves a purpose in the spiritual realm. When we fast, we set our mind on things above and place our body under subjection... but it is not natural to pursue self-denial, and we should not be at all surprised when we become hungry! Though we become hungry, we are "serving notice" to our body that we are under the control of the Spirit of God and not subject to our appetites. We should set our wills to honor God by fasting, and purpose to press through the hunger. The hunger pains that accompany our usual mealtimes will subside (the first several meals are the most difficult to skip) and as we press on, we will find that our bodies become subject to discipline.

— Be aware of the enemy's tactics- the lack of physical food can weaken our bodies and our will, and even affect us emotionally. Feeling "depressed" or "touchy" is not uncommon. Though we are engaged in a spiritual exercise, we will not necessarily be spiritually "overwhelmed" or constantly aware of the glorious presence of God. Do not listen to the enemy's discouraging words, or give in to his temptation to break your fast just because you are not hearing from God or because "your heart's not in it." Remember Paul's experience of physical weakness- the Lord told Him "*My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness.*" (Romans 12:9)

— Particularly if you have never fasted before, START SLOWLY! A limited length of time- maybe one day at most- is recommended to begin learning about this discipline. You may even need to start by fasting for one meal. As you become familiar with the physical (and spiritual) aspects of fasting, it may be appropriate to fast for longer periods of time. The most common period of a fast is from one to three days; though there are scriptural examples of fasts that lasted

as long as forty days. We must understand however that a fast of more than three days is a very serious undertaking!

—While you are fasting, at mealtimes nourish your soul by feeding on God's word and spending time in communion with Him, instead of eating as you normally would. It isn't just coincidental that Jesus made a very direct statement about feeding on God's word after He had fasted for a very long time. In Matthew 4:4, He said "It is written, 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.'" God's word is food for our souls, and nourishment for our spiritual life!

—Remember that there is grace available in this area. If you are unable to continue fasting, do not allow the enemy to condemn you because you have "broken your fast." However, when you are tempted to eat during a fast, remember that while there is grace available if you choose to eat, there is also grace available to press on through the temptation, and continue your fast, as the Lord leads you. As a note of exhortation, remember that Anna, who served the Lord in the temple by fasting and praying was eighty-four years old! If she could fast, surely most of us can fast successfully as well!

### *Some very practical notes on fasting:*

— As we have said, choosing not to eat has some significant effects on our bodies, some of which are as follows: hunger pains in the abdomen, headache, physical weakness or lethargy, dizziness, and difficulty concentrating, or even a mildly "euphoric" feeling. You may experience all of these symptoms, or none, but unless they become very severe, they are probably not serious, and often subside after the initial stages of a fast (18-24 hours).

—Make sure to drink plenty of water or fruit juice throughout the day while you are fasting. Though we have a biblical example of fasting without either food or drink, (see Esther 4:16) this fast was limited in length (3 days) and was under extraordinary circumstances. Modern medicine also indicates that while the body can do without food for a considerable length of time, there is a potential for serious injury or even death if the body does not receive sufficient fluids. Water will help calm the body's appetite for food. DO NOT drink fluids with caffeine (coffee, tea, sodas) during a fast- caffeine without food will cause shaking, headaches, etc. and actually removes essential fluids from the body.

— Though fasting is for a spiritual purpose, it does have a cleansing effect on our bodily systems, and lots of water will help maximize the physical benefits of fasting. Fasting is NOT a recommended way to lose weight!

— If you have problems such as diabetes or low blood sugar, we urge you to consult a physician before fasting. While fasting is a spiritual discipline, it has very noticeable physical effect, and it may not be medically appropriate for some people to fast completely from food. If this is true for you, you may be able to fast partially (choosing not to eat desserts or "gourmet" foods, for instance -see Daniel 10:3) or in other areas of your life (entertainment, etc.) where you can fast effectively.

— If someone notices that you are not eating regularly during a period of fasting and presses you for a reason, simply tell them the truth, with humility- we are seeking God together as a church through fasting and prayer. Do not bring attention to yourself- remember Jesus' exhortation from Matthew 6:17- but we are free to share the reasons for not eating if someone else brings it up. We are to share the truth in love, not from spiritual pride.

*For this season of fasting at SCCC:*

—If you have not fasted before, consider beginning by skipping lunch on Wednesday. If possible, take these lunchtimes to pray for the issues outlined above, and to listen for the Lord to speak. It may be helpful to write down anything that you believe the Lord has spoken to you during this time. If the word applies to the SCCC body, please write it down and give it to an elder during our evening prayer service.

—If you are able to fast from lunch on the first Wednesday, try fasting from breakfast as well on the second Wednesday. Again, drink plenty of fluids throughout the day.

— When you are fasting, ask the Lord to reveal to you where you are personally in the areas of Worship, Communion, Home Fellowships, in the exercise of the spiritual gifts to minister to others, and passion for evangelism and missions both locally and around the world. Pray specifically for the SCCC issues we have outlined above, and pray for wisdom and clarity from the Lord for the elders as they make stewardship decisions and lead the body here.

— Come to the SCCC sanctuary at 6:30PM on Wednesday evening. We will pray and listen to the Lord individually from 6:30-7:30PM. At 7:30PM we will worship and pray corporately, concluding our time together by 8:00PM.