



Brethren in Christ U.S.



WEEK OF PRAYER AND FASTING

JANUARY 7-14, 2024

WEEK OF PRAYER AND FASTING **2024**

Identity in Action: Practicing the Core Values of the BIC

In May of 1999, fifty-one people from throughout the Brethren in Christ of North America gathered to answer one simple yet critical question: what are our most central beliefs and values and how do we articulate them? After three days of lively discussion and Spirit-filled debate, they emerged with the ten Core Values.

Our identity in Christ precedes every other aspect of who we are and what we are called to do as God's people. This Christ-centered identity impacts how we interact with the world and our fellow brothers and sisters in the faith. The ten Core Values help guide us in that pursuit, and all point to Jesus as the author and perfecter of our faith (Hebrews 12:2).

This year's Week of Prayer and Fasting theme – Identity in Action – invites us to take a closer look at these Core Values. Since there are ten, we split them up between 2023 and 2024. This year, we are covering the second half of the Core Values plus three additional topics to fill out the week.

We hope that as you prayerfully reflect on these values over the course of these eight days you will find yourself drawn closer to Christ and continue to become more like him.

Fasting Guide

New this year, our fasting guide by Bishop Rob Patterson offers some of the key biblical principles behind the spiritual practice. Based on three decades of regular fasting, Bishop Rob shares insights and stories from his experience to guide you in your own fast. Read an excerpt below:

For more than 30 years, I've incorporated fasting as an integral part of my spiritual formation. One day per week, one week per month, and one month per year, I abstain from things that I would otherwise enjoy. Additionally, I fast sometimes for very specific purposes as I sense the Holy Spirit directing. Those occasions might be for a day, forty days, or longer. They're often private, but occasionally they are public. As could be expected, three decades of regular fasting has provided several insights, as well as some great stories. I'd like to share just a few.

FASTING IS A WEAPON OF SPIRITUAL WARFARE.

In the Bible, it is often paired with prayer. Somehow, somehow, in God's economy, fasting enhances our prayers. The point I want to stress, however, is that the enemy fights back. When Jesus entered the wilderness following his baptism to fast and pray, the enemy was also there. When I began my fasting pattern, on the very first day, someone knocked at my door and delivered one of my favorite desserts – nice gesture, awful timing. That brings me to my second observation.

FASTING IS NOT NATURAL OR EASY

Scripture never lists it among the gifts. Like other types of exercise or practice, intentionally abstaining from satisfying our appetites and desires requires discipline. The easy path in life (or so it seems) is to eat, sleep, and pursue happiness. Of course, if that's all that we do, the consequences are inevitable because we reap what we sow. A healthy and productive spiritual life will always include a variety of spiritual exercises to make us fit for the good fight. When I casually asked a pastor what he was giving up during the denomination's annual Week of Prayer and Fasting, he replied, "Fasting isn't my gift." Whereupon I informed him that it's a discipline that he would do well to embrace.

FASTING IS A SPIRITUAL STRENGTH BUILDER

Winning the good fight occurs in the small battles before the big ones. God is aware of that. The created order is his design, correct? In the New Testament,

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our spiritual life is compared to a wrestling match. I was not a successful wrestler, but that only applied to other wrestlers of equal weight or heavier. Our college 118-pound wrestler was great. Yet, terrible as I was, at 177 pounds I could shake him off me like a flea. I've learned that God matches us with spiritual opposition roughly equal to our capacity. Master a weight class and the next match is with something heavier. Fasting can serve as a reality check in that regard. Often, our self-assessment is inaccurate as far as our capabilities.

One year, during the days approaching the Week of Prayer and Fasting, I was feeling strong and self-confident. I prayed, "Lord, show me what you would like me to fast this year." In my mind I was sure that he would ask for something big and significant. In my heart I heard, rather clearly, "Mt. Dew." Long story short, I found myself arguing with God about his response. Three times, though, I clearly heard Mt. Dew. It was then that I realized I wasn't prepared to deal with weightier matters while I was caught in sugar's grip. Intentional fasting helped in identifying and overcoming something that had enslaved me without my recognition. The good news is, I gained my freedom and moved up a few weight classes.

FASTING IS A SACRIFICE

Along with its benefits as a discipline, fasting is an offering. To be a worthy sacrifice, it must actually cost us something, and our motivation needs to be pure. We should give our best. Abstaining from food to lose weight or avoiding intimacy because we're upset with our spouse are not examples of fasting. God weighs the intent of our hearts.

I really blew it one time, and God let me know it – in his own loving, but firm way. A Sunday School teacher called me and asked to meet. He recommended Pizza Hut. I was fasting food at the time, but I rationalized that I was not under the law. Fasting was my personal choice, and I could begin and end as I saw fit. So, I went to Pizza Hut. We had a productive meeting, and I enjoyed the buffet lunch. However, as soon as I returned to my office, I noticed my Bible lying open on the corner of my desk. I didn't remember leaving it there, let alone open. My eyes fell directly on these words: "You cannot fast as you do today and expect your voice to be heard on high." (Isaiah 58:4) Lesson learned.

To read the full guide, scan the QR code to access the guide online or visit <https://bicus.org/2023/02/what-is-fasting>



January 7th – Rooted in our History and Doctrine

By Bishop Lynn Thrush, Great Lakes Conference

Scripture meditation: Deuteronomy 6:4-9

I chair the board of directors of Mile High Ministries, two camps (Mile High Pines Camp and Alpine Retreat and Camp) situated in the mountains of Southern California. At our most recent board meeting I requested time to address the matter of identity. Since Alpine Retreat and Camp is a recent addition, we now have new staff and board members on our leadership team, and I wanted to talk about the identity of Mile High Ministries and its Brethren in Christ theological heritage.

I began my board session by tracing our theological heritage through the key beliefs of Pietism (experiencing life-change), Anabaptism (God first: God's kingdom over the world's kingdom), and Wesleyanism (filling of the Spirit that leads to taking responsibility for serving the world). We Brethren in Christ also include Evangelicalism in our publications describing who we are. That movement galvanized us to practice communicating our faith to others, and in so doing linked us to the evangelistic histories found in Pietism, Anabaptism, and Wesleyanism.

Sharing with these new leaders was a significant reminder that we cannot assume that the people, agencies, and congregations of the Brethren in Christ will know our identity. Our identity must be taught, repeatedly as part of the catechizing and membership processes.

Not only must identity be taught, but identity must be recognized and appreciated, especially by pastoral leaders. Proverbs 22:28 counsels, "Do not move an ancient boundary stone set up by your ancestors." All of us stand on the shoulders of those who have gone before, and that includes theologically informed actions of faith. In my role as bishop, I have witnessed leaders who, in my view, "move ancient boundary stones," by believing that they somehow can ignore historical identity, leave that history of faith, and unilaterally establish a new identity.

The call to know and teach identity is not a call to "keep farming with horses rather than tractors," as once was BIC practice. However, it is a recognition that failure to teach identity leads to institutions and movements that gather around least-common denominators. Further, leaders who step away from matters of identity perpetuate "one and done" leaders: those leaders who follow will have been catechized similarly as the founding leader who embraced independence and shepherding toward a different identity.

It was identity that was on the mind of the Lord when he instructed in Deuteronomy 6:4, that we are to impress matters of identity (anchored, of course, in the truth of God) on our followers; talk about them regularly and make them visible in such a way that they inform what we do and how we think.

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Our Core Values are rooted in our history and doctrine. I call us to regularly teach our theological roots. That's identity in action!

PRAYER - *Father, I pray that Brethren in Christ people would embrace the scriptures, honor ancient boundary stones, and catechize new persons in the stewardship of our identity. Amen.*

January 8th - Core Value: Witnessing to the World

By Bishop Ron Bowell, Midwest Conference

Scripture meditation: Isaiah 43:12, Acts 1:8

In 1980, Universal Studios released a movie called "The Blues Brothers." In it, the late John Belushi played a semi-sane ex-convict named Jake Blues, who was convinced that he and his brother Elway were "on a mission from God." Obviously, Jake didn't understand what it really meant to be "on a mission from God," but as disciples of Jesus, we certainly should.

God spoke through the prophet Isaiah and reminded the Israelites that he had revealed himself to them, saved them, and proclaimed truth to them. (Isaiah 43:12) Now, they were called to be witnesses to the world that there was only one true God. They were on a mission from God.

In the book of Acts, we see a similar call from the risen Christ as he issues a final command to his followers. (Acts 1:8) He tells them that God's Holy Spirit would soon be coming to infuse them with power so they could be his witnesses in their hometowns, in the cities and states near them, and in nations all over the earth. They were now on a mission from God.

As Brethren in Christ, we too have been saved and set apart to be his witnesses. We are on a mission from God. When we believe God, and genuinely give our lives to Jesus, we receive the Holy Spirit as the disciples did on Pentecost. This power is given so that we can be his witnesses and attract others to his Kingdom. We are called to display the one, true living God in our lives through our words and conduct. We are called out to lift up the name of Jesus to those down the road and across the street. We are commissioned to find ways to share the Gospel with those in other nations and across the sea. The mandate is clear: we are his witnesses, and we are on a mission from God!

During this week of fasting and prayer, ask the Lord to examine your "mission progress." If you are unclear about your mission, ask God for clarity. Ask a trusted pastor for guidance. Consult with brothers and sisters in the church.

PRAYER - *Father, speak to my heart and help me to both discern and fulfill the mission that you have assigned to me. Help me in witnessing to the world. Amen.*

January 9th – Core Value: Serving Compassionately

By Bishop Aner Morejon, Southeast Conference

Scripture meditation: Matthew 15:32

I had the privilege of being born into a Christian home. My father, a pastor, often said, “Never preach Christ to someone if they’re hungry; first give them food, and then you can share the love of God.”

Throughout Jesus’ ministry, he spoke the word compassion on various occasions. Compassion is part of the character of the Son of God and should also be an essential characteristic of his disciples. Compassion is not only expressed by feeding the hungry but also by visiting the sick, the widow, the prisoner, and, above all, by sharing the message of salvation with that wonderful ingredient of kindness.

During my time in the ministry, a wonderful woman (my wife) has accompanied me. She is a true example of what it means to serve with compassion. She has always been attentive to the needs of the church members and pastors to whom we minister. The greatness of her service lies in the fact that she never seeks recognition, expressing that she does it for her Lord. This too should be something that makes us stand out from the rest of the world. We desire to serve as unto the Lord and not for mere human recognition.

It is not a secret that humanity is living without compassion towards others. What’s sadder is that many who claim to be disciples of Jesus lack this characteristic of compassion in their lives. At the end of his earthly ministry, the Master spoke of the day we will stand before him, where we will have to give an account of our compassionate service. All who know his words in Matthew 25:31-46 understand that his final judgment is: “Whatever you did (or did not do) for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.”

In contrast, a silent enemy we must face is thinking that we’ve already served enough. Hence, the Lord warns us, “When you have done everything you were told to do, say, ‘We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty.’” (Luke 17:10) If we think we’ve done well, let’s strive to do better.

Let’s reflect on this principle at the beginning of this year, recognizing it as an opportunity from God to examine our compassionate service.

PRAYER - *Father, I ask for forgiveness if you have seen a lack of compassion in my service to you. Help me rise today, and, with the assistance of your Holy Spirit, infuse everything I do with the ingredient of compassion. Amen.*

January 10th - Core Value: Pursuing Peace

By Becky Owen, World Missions

Scripture meditation: Matthew 8:23-27

One night, anxiety kept me from peacefully drifting off to sleep. I couldn't turn it off. It consumed my heart, mind, and body. I felt a storm within me. The song "Calm Me, Lord" pointed me to the story in Matthew 8 where a furious storm threatened the disciples. Naturally, they reacted in fear. In fact, they even woke Jesus, begging him to save them. But Jesus asked them, "Why are you so afraid?"

A curious question amid such turmoil, but a fair one, considering who was asking it.

Leaving them to reflect on his question, Jesus turned and rebuked the wind and waves, and they became calm. I too pleaded with Jesus to calm the storm controlling me. I surrendered to him. God granted me peace. I slept. Anxiety has a way of creeping back in, though, so each day, I renewed my pursuit of peace.

Peace must be pursued because the opposite of peace pursues us. Life circumstances—a medical diagnosis, a natural disaster, disagreements, or even a problem with a car or house—can instantly cause personal insecurity that ripples out to relationships around us. Although these relationships may have nothing to do with what is influencing us, they will reap the fruit we bear.

A life dominated by anxiety, fear, second-guessing, and anger is not the result of God's Spirit at work in us. These restrict our love, patience, joy, and other spiritual fruit. They draw us away from God and the peace he wants us to experience and pass on to others.

Pursuing peace means:

- Reaching over a relational fracture to extend forgiveness
- Seeking deeper understanding before making judgments
- Attempting to reconcile, even though it may take more than one try
- Finding creative solutions to resolve conflict without physical or emotional violence

If we do not approach each interaction with the power of peace, it is easy to drop baskets of rotten fruit into even our dearest relationships. How much verbal and physical violence has its roots in hearts and minds that are not at rest in Jesus?

When our hearts are at peace, we are set free to value others as God does. When we live life in light of who God is, and rest in him, it reshapes our emotional experience and changes even our physical reactions. We begin bearing fruit that comes from the Spirit.

PRAYER - *Father, you are always with me, but often I forget. Help me to remember that you know each detail of my life, and that you can handle it all. Calm my heart and teach me to trust in you. Let that peace overflow in love and grace toward others. Amen*

January 11th - Servant Leadership

By Bishop Bryan Hoke, Atlantic Conference

Scripture meditation: Mark 10:35-45

An argument ensues. It begins with a question but leads to much more. Finally, Jesus redirects wandering visions with clarity for how leadership takes shape in the Kingdom. *“You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant...”*

In Jesus’ day, just like ours, the common understanding of leadership or influence is power, getting to the top positions so one could get her or his way. Jesus flips that thinking upside down and shares that in God’s Kingdom this is how we influence: Servant Leadership.

The first time I met Chuck, he was mopping the floor of a rental unit of a strip mall. I needed an internship and was there to speak with the pastor of a new church plant meeting in that space. There was no one else around, and I quickly learned that Chuck was the pastor. That was 25 years ago, and I have never forgotten that first interaction with the pastor of my first formal church experience. Chuck preached, lead, cared for people, modeled generosity, and when needed, mopped the floors of a place the church didn’t even own.

According to Ken Blanchard and Phil Hodges in their book *The Servant Leader*, leadership is “influencing the thoughts and actions of others toward goal accomplishment in either their personal or professional life.” We all lead because we all have influence. Whether at home, church, or the workplace, servanthood is how that influence should be shaped to be a part of where Jesus rules and reigns. For not even Jesus came to be served but to serve.

When we lead and influence, do we reflect the ways of this world or the ways of King Jesus? Will our hearts and attitudes be focused on what we can get or what we can give? Do you desire to lead? Serve. Do you desire to have influence? Sacrifice, give yourself away.

PRAYER - *Father, shape our hearts in such a way that who you are naturally flows from them. May how we lead reflect your priorities carried out in your ways. Amen.*

January 12th – Core Value: Living Simply

By Bishop Rob Patterson, Allegheny Conference

Scripture meditation: 2 Timothy 2:4, Matthew 13:1-23

I hate greenbrier. Nasty stuff. Native to eastern North America, the vine symbolizes the word entanglement. For years, my efforts to improve my property were heavily impeded by its Velcro-like thorns that would grab me, scratch me, and slow my progress to a crawl. What I most love about greenbrier is cutting it off, pulling it out, piling it up, and watching it burn.

According to the Bible, thorny plants like greenbrier are fit only for the fire. They're the enemy of vitality, freedom, and fruitfulness. Unchecked, they choke out life. But keeping them in check is an ongoing challenge. They're tough. They're persistent. It's annoying and frustrating to clear an area, and then clear it again just a few years later.

Such is life. Life is filled with various types of thorny vines that entangle us. Jesus is very succinct in saying that those things are the "cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches." (Matt 13:22)

But succinct does not mean narrow. "Cares and riches" encompass a lot of territory. And the entanglements can be quite complex. Like greenbrier, only part of the entanglement is visible. The root network below the surface is every bit as intertwined as the vines in the trees and bushes above ground.

The Brethren in Christ value controlling the power of cares and riches. We want to avoid getting entangled with worldly "trappings." By God's grace, we hope to keep our lives simple. The intricacies of this value cannot be fully unpacked in a short devotional, but examining how we use our time and money can be a good place to start.

Time and money are resources like any physical possession. Our schedules and budgets – how we use those resources – are reflections of our personal priorities. If we look at how we expend those two resources, we get a picture of how free or how captive we are as citizens of the two kingdoms in which we live.

Take this opportunity to do a check-up. Among the many activities that compete for my time and money, which ones are for the King and his kingdom? Are there any that have me in their grip and are hindering my service to the King? Invite God to detangle your life from the grip of those vines.

PRAYER - *Father, show me my heart through your lens. Grant me insight, wisdom, courage, and strength to maximize my fruitfulness by cutting out of my life whatever entangles and hinders. Amen.*

January 13th – Core Value: Relying on God

By Becky Knight, Pacific Conference

Scripture meditation: Philippians 4:4-7

One of my morning rituals is to turn on the news so I can keep up on what is going on in the world. However, recently I've been questioning whether this is a good practice or not. As images of wars and atrocities fill my thoughts, it is easy to lose sight of the real power we have as believers in Christ Jesus our Lord! As I listen to the reports, I find my spirit becoming increasingly anxious, and before I know it, I am robbed of the peace I am promised in God.

Philippians 4:4-5 tells us to "Rejoice in the Lord always..." When are we supposed to rejoice? Only when we have a good reason? No. We are to rejoice always. Rejoicing is a call to joy and joy is not based on our circumstances or on our feelings. It is an attitude that we adopt because of the hope we have in the Lord Jesus Christ. When we choose to rejoice, we are promised that "the Lord is near," and we become more acutely aware of his presence.

How do we do this practically? The key is in the next verses. Phil. 4:6-7 says, "Do not be anxious about anything but in every situation, by prayer and petition with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God ... will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus."

It is so easy to say not to be anxious about anything, but so hard to do. Paul was writing these words from a prison cell to the church at Philippi that was being persecuted for relying on God. He himself had been beaten close to death for his own faith. If anyone had reason to lose hope and feel abandoned, it was Paul. Yet, he gave thanks because even in prison he saw the opportunity to touch people he otherwise would not be able to reach.

The part of this verse that speaks to me as I consider the news today is the "thanksgiving" part. When we reorient our time with the Lord to remember God's past faithfulness to us, it changes our perspective. We serve a God who always shows up for us. The world offers us anxiety, but Jesus offers us peace. He doesn't say all will be well or that circumstances will change, but he promises himself. I can't think of a better partner in this world, can you?

Today I am reminded that the source of my strength is Jesus, and that I will find strength as I rejoice in his presence. And maybe, it would help if I turned off the TV too.

PRAYER - *Father God, thank you for your faithfulness in all my life's circumstances. Help me to rely on you so when trouble comes, I know you are near and that I can count on your peace. Amen.*

January 14th - Enacting our Values

By Bishop Heather Beaty, Susquehanna Conference

Scripture meditation: John 15:1-17

“Daddy, teach me to catch a big fish!” Our pixie girl begged with an upturned face and bright eyes. Of course, her daddy was pleased to pull her close and teach her how to catch fish. He offered some verbal instructions followed by an invitation, “Watch how I do it, first,” as he casted out and reeled in, casted out and reeled in.

“Your turn, now!” He drew her in again and helped her handle the rod and reel, just as he had moments before. Much to everyone’s surprise, our little learner was the first to pull in a keeper that day, and she (with her daddy’s help) proudly held up the largest catch that anyone would bring to dinner on that fishing trip.

Quite honestly, I am still uncertain about who was more filled with joy that day – our sweet girl or her delighted daddy. Hundreds of years ago, a man came walking along the shore and called to some weary fishermen: “Come, follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.” Immediately, upon hearing the invitation, these men left their nets to learn a new way of fishing and living.

In the days that followed, Jesus drew twelve disciples close and invested in them with time, instruction, and hands-on teaching about how to live, serve, and bring in fish in the way of the Master Fisherman. He sent them out two-by-two to practice what he was teaching them; they celebrated victories together and processed frustration and failure with the teacher they were growing to love.

A few short years later, when Jesus told them he was leaving, he also entrusted to them the future of his Kingdom work here in the world – assuring them that his Spirit would continue guiding, empowering, and reminding them of everything he had taught them. With the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, these men continued the Kingdom revolution that still impacts lives and history today.

During this Week of Prayer and Fasting, we reflected on a few of the values that Jesus taught and modeled for us – some of our BIC Core Values. These values will never produce fruit, however, unless we continue to walk closely with Jesus, to rely on his Spirit, and to put into practice what he has taught us. Just like our little girl and these disciples, the only way for us to learn to live like Jesus is to draw close, to listen intently, and to practice what he teaches us. I am convinced that our heavenly Father is just as delighted as any earthly daddy to see his children embrace his ways and experience the joy of living in his likeness.

PRAYER - *Father, thank you for your invitation to follow you, to learn from you, and to work with you. Thank you for teaching us and transforming us. Help us to faithfully do what you have taught us to do, and may we know joy with you today. Amen.*



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