

Feasting in Fasting  
Matthew 6:16-18

Please open your Bible's to Matthew 6:18. In chapter 6, Jesus has been teaching about us how a kingdom disciple is to live in the public eye as it relates to their religious life. Jesus has given three examples to illustrate a broader point. We've talked about these broader principles throughout this study but I want to summarize and review them again as we look at the last of the three examples Jesus gives.

Each of the examples, and the examples Jesus gives of religious life lived in a public venue are alms giving, giving to the poor, what we called benevolent giving; payer; and the example we'll spend some time with today – fasting.

Each of the examples have four characteristics that a follower of Jesus is to be mindful of. First, there is an **expectation of engagement**. In verse 2, 5, and 16 – as Jesus is introducing the three examples, the refrain is “*when you*”. There is an expectation that for a follower of Jesus, these practices, these spiritual disciplines, along with others will be a part of a Christians life. The frequency or intensity is not addressed, but Jesus has clear expectation that His followers will be engaged in practicing spiritual disciplines, those activities, like giving, praying, and fasting, along with others like bible memorization, bible reading, worship (private and corporate), spiritual disciplines, spiritual practices that promote spiritual growth.

Secondly, there is a warning attending each of these examples, and therefore broadly applied to any spiritual discipline or practice we would engage in that **hypocrisy be harangued**, hypocrisy should be strongly scolded and abandoned. To use good things to our own ends is always the sign of false religion. To use giving to the poor as an opportunity to puff myself up, or to use prayer as an occasion to illicit the audience of men is to demonstrate the opposite of what I'm looking for. If in my practice of spiritual disciplines I am seeking to bring honor, attention, glory to myself, I am demonstrating a lack of understanding the purpose of these spiritual disciples, and placing myself in a position that God alone deserves.

And this leads to the third principal Jesus gives that is characteristic of the three examples he cites, **motive matters**. We need to consider our motives, and as best as possible seek motives as we practice our spiritual disciplines that are God-honoring, God-centered, and God-glorifying motives. It is a good thing to examine our hearts, to repent when our motives are self-serving, and to align the motives of our hearts with motives that seek God's exaltation and praise.

Finally, Jesus emphasizes that in practicing our spiritual disciplines, practicing our righteousness, there is a **reward from God for secrecy**. The repeated refrain is, “*and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.*” The rewards are many; the satisfaction of pleasing God; a reward of growth as a Christian and in my sanctification; a reward of fulfilment that God uses me to accomplish His purposes, to name a few. If our desire is for the praise of men, then we will practice our spiritual disciplines for men to know, but Jesus says if we want true reward, true praise then we will practice spiritual disciplines for the audience of God alone. That's the key principle Jesus gives, practice spiritual disciplines for God's audience and not others.

Look with me at Matthew 6:16, Jesus gives as a final example of practicing spiritual disciplines secretly in public the spiritual discipline of fasting. I don't know about you, but in a culture with gothic shrines to golden arches, preserves created for pizza palaces, and temples to tacos – the spiritual discipline of fasting is at best avoided because of misunderstanding or at worst ignored because of inconvenience. I must admit that this topic was not one I was looking forward to because I know that I know about fasting and the Bible's teaching on fasting, but regularly ignore it as a part of my spiritual diet and practice, that is said to my shame and something that in this study has brought me a good to deal of conviction. But as I trust we will see this morning, that is tremendous value in practicing he spiritual discipline of fasting as Christians and followers of the Lord Jesus Christ.

As a direct teaching, Jesus says this about the spiritual discipline of fasting. Verse 16, *“And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your father who is in secret. And your father who sees in secret will reward you.”*

Jesus assumes much of the understanding of fasting and so doesn't address details and mechanics other than those things we should avoid as we practice fasting that would bring attention to ourselves rather than to God. And we see them right away. Jesus says, listen, when you're fasting don't go walking around with a sour face, or acting like your starving or the like – wash up, dress regularly, don't make a show to others, your audience is the Lord, fast with Him and His purposes in mind. But for many of us this begs the question, what is fasting, how do we understand it, where does it come from, what are its purposes, if I wanted to practice it how would I do it and why?

Let's look at some fast facts about fasting. By most counts, there are some 70+ references to fasting in the Bible. But, in all of the Bible, Old and New Testaments, there is only **one commanded fast – the Day of Atonement**. Leviticus 16:29 says, *“And it shall be a statute to you forever that in the seventh month, on the tenth day of the month, you shall afflict yourselves and shall do no work, either the native or the stranger who sojourns among you. For on this day shall atonement be made for you to cleanse you. You shall be clean before the LORD from all your sins. It is a Sabbath of solemn rest to you, and you shall afflict yourselves; it is a statute forever.”* This is the only commanded fast, and the Day of Atonement has been fulfilled in the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, so no longer a Law that is applicable to us.

Another fact about fasting is that fasting as we find it more broadly in the Bible is **often accompanied by grief, or sorrowful penitence**. Fasting is often spoken of in the Bible as an individual is repentant for sin, or as the nation of Israel is repentant of sin or seeking God's deliverance from a significant threat or problem. There is often a solemn, and very serious nature to the scenes of fasting we see in the Bible.

However, by the time of the New Testament, fasting as a practice had been co-opted by the **Pharisees as a show of their piety to the people and been mandated as occurring twice weekly** for those who truly wanted to be religious. This attitude and practice is what Jesus I coming against here in the sermon on the mount, and is what we as followers of Jesus are being taught to avoid.

In the New Testament we also see that **Jesus fasted occasionally, but it was infrequent enough that He was called out by the religious leaders of His day for not fasting as often as they did**.

Finally, **fasting is spoken of in the New Testament, but not by way of command**. There is no command to fast, nor a command on the frequency of fasting; there is simply the assumption that there will be times that a Christian will fast, and there does seem to be an encouragement to fast as a means of growing in our spiritual lives.

So how do we understand what fasting is? Fasting, from a biblical perspective, is **abstaining from food for spiritual purposes**. It may seem a bit pedantic or nitpicking, but it's really important to understand that biblical fasting always involved the abstaining from food for spiritual purposes, and not the abstaining from anything other than food as a substitute for the same purpose. What do I mean? I routinely come across things where people will say that they are fasting from Facebook, or fasting from Netflix, or fasting from technology generally, or fasting from whatever you want to put in the blank rather than food. And frankly, I applaud the spirit behind this, but it really is missing the point. The Bible teaches us to fast from food, to abstain from food for spiritual purposes for one simple reason – I need food. See, I don't need Facebook, I don't need Netflix, or my mobile phone, or football, or whatever. I don't need any of those things; I do need food. And one of the primary purposes of fasting, as we'll see in a moment, is that in abstaining from food I give opportunity for God to reveal the things that truly control my appetites.

There are several types of fasts the Bible talks about that are helpful for us to understand. The most common type of fast is the **normal fast: this is abstaining from all food except for water**. When Jesus fasted for 40 days and nights prior to beginning His public ministry it was this normal fast that he practiced.

Another type of fast we find in the Bible is the **partial fast, this is a restriction of diet but not a total abstention from food**. In Daniel 10, the prophet Daniel receives a very troubling word from the Lord and says in verse 3, “*I ate no delicacies, no meat or wine entered my mouth*”. Fasting like this might be because of a loss in your life, or a particularly difficult situation you are facing in which you are looking to seek God’s intervention or guidance as Daniel was.

Another type of fast in the Bible is what’s called an **absolute fast, this is an abstention from all food and water for a very short time**. The human body can go roughly three weeks without food, but only three day without water. So entering an absolute fast should be done with great care and caution. The Apostle Paul enters into this kind of fast following his conversion experience in Acts 9. For three days, we read, Paul was “*without sight, and did not eat or drink*”.

The last type of fast we find in the Bible is called a **corporate fast; this is fasting with others, could be members of a church, could be a nation, could be within your small group, but as with all fasting is done for spiritual purposes**. As the priest Ezra is leading the Israelites out of Babylon following Israel’s 70 year exile from the land, Ezra, “... *proclaimed a fast there, at the river Ahava, that we might humble ourselves before our God, to seek from him a safe journey for ourselves, our children, and all our goods.*” Corporate fasts seek to bring the people of God together to collectively humble themselves before God and seek His direction, or His protection, or His forgiveness, or any number of spiritually centered activities.

So what? Why all this talk about fasting? Why does Jesus mention it but not command that we do it? How in the world could fasting, could abstaining from food in any way provide us with a sense and reality of spiritual growth? Let me ask you a question, how many of you would say we should not give to the poor, Christians should not care about being benevolent with our material wealth? I would suspect none of us would truly hold to that line. Or what about prayer, how many of us as Christians and followers of Jesus would say prayer is passé, it’s a relic of another time, and not really all that important. No true Christian and follower of the Lord Jesus Christ would say that. We are all likely convinced on the importance of prayer, as we should be, and I think we are also on the whole recognizing the importance of giving money to the poor as an expression of our discipleship, but why so divided or unsure or apathetic towards fasting? Certainly we have ample evidence in the bible for fasting, as we do say for giving. But could it be that we do not fast because in our affluent, and well fed society, fasting would actually involve a far larger sacrifice for us than say, the giving of money? I want to encourage you to consider and even experiment with the spiritual discipline of fasting; and as you do so, give you four purposes for fasting to consider and bring into your life as a follower of the Lord Jesus Christ.

At the heart of fasting, as with any spiritual discipline, it must **forever center on God**. God is our audience, God is the One we are seeking to know, the One we seek to please, the One we seek to worship, glorify, and praise. Whatever the spiritual discipline might be: prayer, benevolent giving, Bible reading, scripture memorization, and as we’ve been learning today – fasting; at the heart of all spiritual disciplines is a centering on God, to know Him, to honor Him, to exalt and adore Him. Centering on God is the first and primary purpose of fasting.

A second purpose that can be very specific to fasting is that **fasting reveals the things that truly control us**. You know we cover up a lot of things with food. Sometimes we eat because we are bored, sometimes we eat for social acceptance, sometimes we eat to cover over loneliness or anger, sometimes we eat to cover over a hurt, or sometimes we eat simply because we are a glutton. The point is in fasting, we expose things that truly control us. For example, if anger controls us, it’s interesting that in fasting we will grow angry as the hunger pangs increase, which is a way to see what is within us that truly needs to be dealt with before God, confessed or repented of.

Another purpose of fasting is that **fasting reminds us as Jesus says, that we “... shall not live by bread alone”**. As Jesus has fasted for 40 days and nights in the wilderness, the scripture simply says, He was hungry. And when Satan comes to tempt Him, what is the first temptation he brings, turn these stones into bread. Jesus replies, Man shall not live by bread alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of God. In fasting, while we are abstaining from food, one of the purposes is to feast upon God – to feast upon Him in focused prayer, to feast on Him by coming to His sustaining and nourishing word. To easily we get caught in patterns of life as Christians that focus us on the things we can control and monitor; in fasting we relinquish control and are reminded again as Jesus says in John 4:32, that there is food to eat you do not know about. That “*my food is to do the will of Him who sent me and to accomplish His work.*”

Finally, **fasting helps us to keep our balance in life**. This, for me has been the most convicting thought. I to quickly allow nonessentials to take precedence in my life. I to quickly give in to the cravings of things I don't need until I am enslaved by them. Obviously this can be in the form of food, but it can also be in the form of pride, or anger, or lust, or gossip, or entertainment – there is no end to the things in our world that seek to tantalize and stimulate our appetites. But as Richard Foster writes in his book *The Celebration of Discipline*, “Our human cravings and desires are like rivers that tend to overflow their banks; fasting helps keep them in their proper channels.”

Friends, I would call you to take seriously Jesus' challenge to fast, and to do so with an eye towards the redemption we find in the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. To fast to manipulate God or impress God is to miss the point of what Jesus teaches us in fasting. We are to fast to know our Father, humble ourselves, give ourselves to dedicated prayer, or listen for God's guiding to name a few reasons to fast. But I would encourage you to consider fasting that you might grow in your spiritual life, becoming more like our Lord Jesus Christ.