

**Understanding Fasting**  
**Matthew 6:16-18**  
**Gerry Andersen**  
**Valley Bible Church Adult Sunday School**

The Gospel of Matthew opens with a series of proofs that Jesus is the Christ, the King of the Jews. This led to the calling of His disciples and His instruction to them through the Sermon on the Mount in chapters 5-7. These chapters are the first of five long discourses by Jesus that Matthew recorded in his Gospel.

In Matthew 6:1-18, we will find three examples of giving, prayer and fasting that demonstrate the flawed motivation of self-service by the hypocrites and instruction of how to avoid their sinful practices. Similar to giving and prayer, fasting is a practice that Jesus identifies as being used by hypocrites to exalt themselves.

The practice of fasting has been a matter of confusion for churches. Many infuse secular ideas such as diet, or religious traditions of special holy days. Fasting is sometimes directed by churches and church-goers can be led to view it as a means to enhance the effectiveness of prayer. Therefore, this topic of fasting requires more analysis.

**Fasting defined**

When we survey fasting in the Bible we can see that it is the voluntary refraining from eating food for spiritual purposes. This definition provides three characteristics of fasting.

1. Fasting is voluntary. This means that the reason you are not eating is a conscious choice not to do so rather than not eating because external circumstances prohibit you from doing so. It is not the result of lack of food or being forced through some external pressure.
2. Fasting involves refraining from eating food. Yet there is no amount stated that defines this abstaining from eating, which leaves room open to abstaining from food for just a meal, or maybe a meal a day, or all meals for a day or two. The point is not the length of fasting but rather that to some extent you are abstaining from eating food.
3. Fasting is for spiritual purposes. This means that in fasting we are not abstaining from the eating of food for some other purpose such as dieting or a busy schedule, etc. Instead, fasting is to free up time for spiritual purposes, which in most cases in the Bible is prayer.

## Fasting in the Old Testament

There are two basic reasons for fasting in the Old Testament. The first is fasting during a time of repentance and the second is fasting during a time of imminent threat or persecution.

### 1. Examples of fasting during repentance

2 Samuel 12:1-23 describes the aftermath of David's sin with Bathsheba. Upon David's confession, Nathan told David that due to this sin the child that would be born would die (12:14). When the child became sick, David sought the Lord and fasted. After the servants told him the child had died, David worshiped the Lord and explained that he ended his fast and took food because the child had died.

Joel called the priests to repent and bring the nation together in repentance and fasting. *"Consecrate a fast, Proclaim a solemn assembly; Gather the elders And all the inhabitants of the land, To the house of the Lord your God, And cry out to the Lord. Alas for the day! For the day of the Lord is near, And it will come as destruction from the Almighty."* (Joel 1:14-15, cf. 2:15).

Other Old Testament verses that point to fasting in the context of repentance include 1 Samuel 7:5-6; Nehemiah 1:4; 9:1; Daniel 9:3; and Jonah 3:5.

### 2. Examples of fasting during imminent threat

In 2 Chronicles, the Moabites and Ammonites came against Jehoshaphat.

*"Jehoshaphat was afraid and turned his attention to seek the Lord, and proclaimed a fast throughout all Judah"* (2 Chronicles 20:3) as the nation joined to plead with the Lord for deliverance.

In Esther when Haman plotted to annihilate the Jews (Esther 3:12-15), the people responded under Mordecai's leadership by fasting with sackcloth and ashes (Esther 4:1-3). Other examples of this can be seen in Psalm 69:10 and 109:24.

Over time, fasting became a part of Jewish life, particularly after the exile (Zechariah 7:3-5; 8:19) with the nation fasting as a practice of the assembly of the people. Yet we can see that this prescriptive practice resulted in wrong motives, *"When you fasted and mourned in the fifth and seventh months these seventy years, was it actually for Me that you fasted?"* (Zechariah 7:6).

## **Fasting in the New Testament**

There are fewer instances of fasting in the New Testament than there are in the Old Testament. The New Testament references to fasting includes instructions about fasting, such as Jesus taught in Matthew 6:16-18, and occurrences of fasting, of which there are five.

1. The fasting by Jesus in the wilderness (Matthew 4:2; Luke 4:2).
2. The fasting by Ana in the temple when she gave thanks to God for Jesus being brought to the temple as a young child (Luke 2:36-38).
3. The fasting by Paul after his conversion (Acts 9:8-9).
4. The fasting and prayer by the leaders of the church in Antioch as they send Paul and Barnabas off on the first missionary journey (Acts 13:2-3).
5. The fasting and prayer by Paul, Barnabas, and the elders of the churches of Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch as Paul and Barnabas committed them to the Lord prior to their departure (Acts 14:21-23).

Specific instructions in the New Testament regarding fasting include:

1. Not fasting to be honored by men (Matthew 6:16-18).
2. Jesus' explaining why His disciples do not fast while the Pharisees and John's disciples do (Matthew 9:14-17; Mark 2:18-20; Luke 5:33-35). This is because the Lord is with them. In the days when the Lord is taken from them, His disciples will fast (Luke 5:35).

## **Principles of fasting**

As we look at what the Scripture teaches and describes about fasting we can draw the following conclusions:

1. Fasting occurs when people are in distress. Either their lives are threatened, they suffer some despair or anguish, they are burdened with sin and are repenting, they are enduring a trial or temptation, or are at a very significant moment in the history of God's work on earth. In other words, this is not a commonplace occurrence. Indeed, the negative example of the Pharisee who fasted twice each week communicates that such religious observance is not a sign of spirituality (Luke 18:9-14).
2. Fasting is described, not prescribed in the Bible. It is very notable that the New Testament epistles that instruct the lives of believers contain no mention of fasting.

Since fasting is not commanded, we are free to practice fasting as we feel the need. Fasting should be the natural result of personal difficulty rather than a scripted plan. Certainly there are times in our lives when circumstances arise and food is not a pressing concern. If anyone chooses to fast and pray in light of their relationship with the Lord this is a fine thing to do.

3. Fasting is not described in such detail that we can draw hard conclusions regarding its practice. Did Jesus drink when He fasted forty days and nights (Matthew 4:2)? Did He completely refrain from all types of food? We should be careful in describing the details of what fasting consists of since the Scriptural examples might be only in a general sense.

4. When we fast we must have the proper attitude (Matthew 6:16-18). The motive behind our act of fasting was the point that Jesus introduced. Not only did the Pharisees take the denial of food as a means to glorify their flesh, Jews in the Old Testament did likewise (Isaiah 58:1-7; Jeremiah 14:12; Zechariah 7:5-6). It is our sinful human nature that seeks to leverage our religious practices into a means of self-exaltation.

### **The practice of fasting**

Matthew 6:16-18 provides us with Jesus' description of how not to fast. Jesus taught us *"do not put on a gloomy face as the hypocrites do"* (Matthew 6:16a). This is an interesting description since we find external signs that at times accompanied fasting in the Old Testament, such as sackcloth, ashes, and torn garments (Daniel 9:3; Jonah 3:5). While there is no reason to believe that these Old Testament instances were insincere, it does appear that Jesus taught His disciples to avoid external manifestations of fasting that might cause those fasting to be noticed by others.

Certainly the sinful reason that these religious hypocrites would adopt a countenance of gloom was because *"they neglect their appearance so that they will be noticed by men when they are fasting"* (Matthew 6:16b). As with the examples of giving (Matthew 6:1) and prayer (Matthew 6:5), they sought the recognition of people. Giving, prayer and fasting to be noticed by men results in us receiving our reward in full (6:2, 5, 16).

Rather than be noticed by men, we ought to take steps to ensure that we are not noticed by men. *"But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face so that your fasting will not be noticed by men"* (Matthew 6:17-18). The reason we should refrain from allowing anyone to notice our practice of fasting is so that our Lord will reward us.

Obviously, the practice of fasting in the New Testament was not completely hidden or there would be no mention of it. The issue is not so much hiding what we are doing as much as it is the heart attitude of desiring the respect of others by our practice. But nevertheless, we should seek to avoid attention being drawn to ourselves in our spiritual service to God. This internal attitude that does not seek to be honored by men will lead to our external actions that will lessen the likelihood of being honored by men.

### **Lessons for our religious conduct from Matthew 6:1-18**

Jesus focused upon giving, prayer and fasting as three examples of hypocrites serving themselves in the practice of religion. These three examples are certainly common but the very same principles that Jesus taught transfer to all religious conduct. Other areas of our Christian life are potentially ways that we might seek to be honored by men. Our attitude must be to please the Lord by doing His will or we will forfeit our reward in self-gratification.

Like with the practice of fasting, when we are making some religious sacrifice we must avoid projecting ourselves in a sacrificial manner. When we serve in ministry we might become weary and perhaps want people to know how much we have done in our service to the Lord. Perhaps we could refrain from adopting a tired countenance and ensure we are refreshed so as not to draw attention to ourselves?

In similar fashion, we might want others to know the burden that our ministry causes to things like our family, our finances, our job, our free time, etc. While we ought to serve happily, sometimes we can be led to lose heart in doing good (Galatians 6:9-10). If we are not sufficiently thanked or valued we might struggle with endurance.

Rather than desiring to be exalted or appreciated for our efforts in ministry, the Lord has told us to say *"We are unworthy slaves; we have done only that which we ought to have done"* (Luke 17:10).

In the days of social media, sounding a trumpet before us in our service of the Lord has never been easier or more common. The norm for many is to post their doings on the internet for all to see. People can "like" or "retweet" noteworthy activities, great and small, for more people to see. While one could say that the motivation is not to gain honor for ourselves, it may fall short of the repeated principle of doing our religious acts *"in secret and your Father who sees in secret will reward you"* (Matthew 6:4, 6, 18). The

information age has brought us additional opportunities, along with additional temptations to serve ourselves.

As the hypocrites stood out on the public street corners (Matthew 6:2, 5), some Christians today seek to stand out to be noticed in their practice of religion. The Scripture calls us to be set apart for holiness (cf. 1 Peter 1:15-16), not set apart as religious. Our desire for personal righteousness and to share the love of Christ with others makes us different. But when we parade our religious practices in public we may stand out but as people who think they are “holier-than-thou” and are considered to have an air of moral superiority. This results in barriers to the gospel.

As the hypocrites stood out in the religious synagogues (Matthew 6:2, 5), some Christians today seek to stand out at church to be noticed in their practice of religion, which may result in a degree of separation among believers. We see this in the clergy/laity distinction that exists even in Bible-teaching churches where people are honored uniquely for their occupation.

This temptation not only exists for individuals, it also exists for churches. Churches can seek to publicize their good needs so the people of the community will honor them. Like people, churches should seek to exalt the Lord in humility so as not to be noticed by men. It is the Lord that builds His church and the marketing of ministry is at best unnecessary and possibly even self-serving.

## **Conclusion**

The desire to be recognized and honored by others is a deeply human characteristic. Our flesh glories in the praise of men. The remedy for this is faith in God. Our Father sees in secret and knows the heart and His praise is not fleeting.

If we truly believe, we will embrace these words of Jesus and eschew any form of self-aggrandizement. Our sole interest will be the approval of the Lord and our desire will be in accordance with 1 Corinthians 10:31, “*whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.*” The desire to please others will be only for the purpose of serving others spiritually. “*Just as I also please all men in all things, not seeking my own profit but the profit of the many, so that they may be saved*” (1 Corinthians 10:33).

May the Lord give us eyes to see the ways that we might be prone to practice our righteousness before men to be noticed by them.