

# Fasting

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## Key Scripture

Matthew 6:16-18 (ESV) "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."

## Sermon in One Sentence

Biblical fasting is a private, prayerful, and powerful spiritual discipline that aligns our hearts with God's will and deepens our dependence on Him.

## Introduction

I once heard a fascinating story about a group of seasoned mountaineers preparing for a grueling ascent of a formidable peak. One of the climbers, a young, ambitious man, boasted about his meticulously packed backpack, filled with every conceivable gadget and gourmet food item. An old, wise guide quietly observed him, then pointed to a solitary, worn Bible in his own pack and said, "Son, on this mountain, the less you carry around your waist, the more you carry in your heart." His words, though perhaps literal for mountaineering, hold a profound spiritual truth, especially when we consider the discipline of fasting. In a culture saturated with consumption and driven by instant gratification, the very idea of intentionally denying ourselves something good, like food, often feels foreign, even counter-intuitive.

Yet, throughout Scripture, from Moses and Elijah to Jesus and the early church, fasting emerges not as a mere religious obligation, but as a vital spiritual practice—a means of shedding earthly weight to gain heavenly perspective. Many Christians today either neglect fasting entirely, view it with suspicion, or practice it incorrectly, often focusing on the outward show rather than the inward transformation. This morning, we're going to dive into Jesus' teaching on fasting to understand its true purpose, its proper practice, and its profound rewards.

Our passage from Matthew 6 is part of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, a foundational discourse on righteous living for His disciples. He doesn't command *if* they should fast, but *when* they fast, implying it's an expected practice for those who follow Him. In these few verses, Jesus strips away the performative aspects of fasting, redirecting our gaze from outward appearances to the secret, intimate communion it fosters with our heavenly Father.

## Historical & Biblical Context

The Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7) is perhaps the most famous and foundational sermon ever preached. Delivered by Jesus to His disciples and a large crowd, it lays out the radical ethics and spiritual

principles of the Kingdom of God. In this segment, Jesus addresses three key acts of righteousness: almsgiving (6:1-4), prayer (6:5-15), and fasting (6:16-18). It's crucial to understand that Jesus does not introduce these practices as new concepts; they were already deeply ingrained in Jewish religious life. The Pharisees and other devout Jews regularly engaged in all three.

The problem Jesus addresses, however, is not the practices themselves, but the motivation and manner of their execution. He consistently confronts hypocrisy—performing religious duties for human applause rather than for God's glory. In the context of fasting, Jewish tradition mandated one annual fast on the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16:29). However, many devout Jews, particularly the Pharisees, would fast twice a week (Luke 18:12) to demonstrate their piety. Jesus' teaching here warns against reducing fasting to a mere external display, reminding us that God looks at the heart. For us today, in an age often marked by individualism and self-promotion, Jesus' words cut through the noise, urging us to seek genuine connection with God above all else.

## **Main Point I — Fasting is Expected, Not Optional**

**Scripture:** Matthew 6:16a (ESV) - "And when you fast..."

Jesus' opening words, "And when you fast," are pivotal. He does not say, "If you *choose* to fast," or "If you *feel led* to fast," but rather "when you fast." This seemingly small word choice implies an expectation, an assumption that fasting would be a regular and understood practice among His disciples. Just as He assumed they would give alms and pray, He also assumed they would fast. This isn't a legalistic command to fast a certain number of days or in a particular way; rather, it's an affirmation that fasting is a natural expression of a devout heart seeking God. It's part of the spiritual toolkit for believers.

This expectation is rooted in the Old Testament and continued throughout the early church. Moses fasted (Exodus 34:28), David fasted (2 Samuel 12:16), Ezra fasted (Ezra 8:21), and Daniel fasted (Daniel 9:3). When John the Baptist's disciples asked Jesus why His disciples did not fast, Jesus replied that they would fast "when the bridegroom is taken away from them" (Matthew 9:15), indicating that after His ascension, fasting would indeed be a part of their spiritual lives. The early church in Acts fasted when making crucial decisions, like sending out missionaries (Acts 13:2-3). Therefore, understanding Jesus' teaching means recognizing that fasting is not some esoteric or extreme practice reserved for the ultra-pious, but a normal, expected discipline for followers of Christ who desire to grow in their relationship with Him.

## **Main Point II — Fasting Must Be Secret, Not Seen**

**Scripture:** Matthew 6:16-17a (ESV) - "...do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others... But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face..."

Here Jesus delivers a sharp rebuke to the hypocritical practice of publicizing one's fasting. The Greek word for "hypocrite" originally referred to an actor, someone wearing a mask. The Pharisees Jesus describes were "acting" their piety. They would deliberately neglect their appearance, letting their hair be unkempt, their faces unwashed, and adopting a sorrowful countenance, all to loudly declare to everyone around them, "Look at me! I am fasting!" Jesus says they "disfigure their faces" – literally, they would make their faces unrecognizable or unattractive, emphasizing their outward suffering. Their reward, Jesus declares, is the

fleeting praise of man, nothing more.

In stark contrast, Jesus instructs His disciples to do the opposite: "anoint your head and wash your face." This was the customary practice for daily grooming, an act that would make one look normal, presentable, and well-cared for. The essence of this instruction is to keep your fasting private. Don't draw attention to it. Don't make a show of it. The spiritual power of fasting lies not in its public acknowledgment, but in its humble, hidden offering to God. When we fast, we are not performing for an audience; we are intimately engaging with the One who sees in secret. The true measure of our spiritual discipline is not how many people see us perform it, but how deep our communion with God becomes through it.

### **Main Point III — Fasting is Rewarded, Not Empty**

**Scripture:** Matthew 6:18 (ESV) - "...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."

This verse unveils the profound purpose and promise of biblical fasting. The ultimate audience for our spiritual disciplines is not human but divine. When we fast secretly, motivated by a desire for God alone, we are directing our worship and devotion exclusively to Him. Jesus emphasizes that "your Father who sees in secret" witnesses our sacrifice, our longing, our dependence. He knows our true motives, the wrestling of our flesh, and the earnest cry of our spirit.

And because He sees, He will "reward you." What is this reward? It is not necessarily material gain or immediate answers to prayer, though sometimes God graciously grants those. The primary reward of secret fasting is a deeper, richer relationship with God Himself. It's an increase in spiritual sensitivity, clarity of purpose, a heightened awareness of His presence, a greater capacity to hear His voice, and a deeper dependence on His power. Fasting helps us to loosen our grip on the things of this world—our desires, our comforts, our perceived necessities—and to tighten our grip on God. It refines our spiritual ears, enabling us to discern His will more clearly. The reward is God Himself, experienced more intimately, more powerfully, and more profoundly.

### **Illustration**

In the 16th century, during a period of immense spiritual revival and turmoil in England, John Knox, the fiery Scottish reformer, was praying fervently for his nation. He was so consumed by the spiritual state of his country and the threats against the fledgling Protestant movement that he would often fast for days. History records his famous prayer: "Give me Scotland, or I die!" This wasn't a casual request; it was a desperate, hunger-fueled cry of a soul deeply aligned with God's perceived will for His people. Knox wasn't fasting to impress his peers or gain personal benefit; he was fasting because his spirit was so burdened, so passionately consumed by God's kingdom agenda, that physical sustenance became secondary to spiritual intercession. His example reminds us that true fasting is born out of a profound spiritual burden and a deep longing for God's glory and His purposes to be established. And indeed, God used Knox's fervent prayers and fasting to significantly shape the spiritual landscape of Scotland.

### **Practical Application**

**1. Examine Your Motivations:** Before you consider fasting, honestly assess why you want to do it. Is it to impress others, to feel spiritual, or to genuinely draw closer to God? True biblical fasting is motivated by a desire for God and His will, not human applause.

**2. Start Small and Simple:** If you are new to fasting, don't attempt an extended fast immediately. Consider a partial fast (e.g., skipping one meal, or giving up certain foods like sugar or caffeine for a day). As you build spiritual muscle, you can explore longer or more restrictive fasts.

**3. Replace with Prayer and Scripture:** Fasting is not merely about *not* eating; it's about *replacing* the time and energy spent on food with focused prayer, Bible reading, and meditation. Have a plan for how you will use that intentional time with God.

**4. Keep it Private:** Follow Jesus' instruction: don't announce your fast on social media, don't complain about your hunger to others, and don't intentionally look gloomy. Your fasting is a personal offering to God, to be shared only if necessary or if it encourages someone else in their walk.

**5. Fast with a Purpose:** Don't fast aimlessly. Fasting is a tool to deepen your spiritual life. Fast for specific requests, for spiritual breakthroughs, for guidance on a decision, for greater self-control, or for a deeper encounter with God Himself.

## Discussion Questions

1. What preconceptions or past experiences have you had with fasting (positive or negative)?
2. Why do you think Jesus assumed His disciples would fast ("when you fast"), rather than making it an optional suggestion?
3. In what ways might our culture of instant gratification and consumption make biblical fasting a difficult discipline to embrace?
4. What "reward" from God do you think Jesus had in mind when He promised, "your Father who sees in secret will reward you"?

## Closing Prayer

Heavenly Father, we thank You for the wisdom of Your Word and for the example of Your Son. Forgive us when we have neglected the spiritual disciplines or practiced them with improper motives. Help us to embrace fasting not as a burden, but as a path to deeper intimacy with You. May our hunger for You outweigh our hunger for the world, and may our secret devotion draw us closer into Your glorious presence. Amen.

## Benediction

Go now, knowing that your Father sees in secret, and may your hidden acts of worship bring you into a richer and more profound relationship with Him.