

When You Fast

Matthew 6:16-18

April 14, 2019



Please read Matthew 6:16-18 before you begin reading this transcript.

Many godly people have fasted over the ages. You're probably familiar with some of these names:¹ John Calvin, Martin Luther, John Wesley, Charles Finely. From the Old Testament: Moses, King David, Elijah the Prophet, Queen Esther, Daniel (as in the lion's den). From the New Testament: Anna the Prophetess, Paul the Apostle, Jesus Christ. Many of God's people in the Bible fasted. Many of God's people throughout church history report that fasting played a meaningful role in their personal discipleship growth and development. But, does this necessarily mean that Christ-followers today still need to fast? In his classic book, "Celebration of Discipline," author Richard Foster, begins his chapter on fasting by saying: "In a culture where the landscape is dotted with shrines to the Golden Arches and an assortment of Pizza Temples, fasting seems out of place, out of step with the times."² John Wesley once said: "Some have exalted fasting beyond all Scripture and reason; and others have utterly disregarded it."³ Where do you and I fall on that spectrum this morning? Do we make too much of fasting or too little of it? If you and I were to practice fasting as part of our Christian faith, we'd want to make sure that we knew WHY we were fasting. In other words, what is the purpose of fasting? Besides just making us REALLY hungry, is there a greater, spiritual purpose? Many nutritionists actually say that fasting can boost our physical health. It's a way to cleanse toxins and shed a few pounds. But there must be some greater purpose that God has in mind. Today's passage will serve as a springboard to get us thinking about the purpose of fasting.⁴

Spiritual Fasting can simply be defined as: choosing to go without food or something else for a godly purpose. Matthew 6:16 begins, "When you fast...." Jesus did NOT say "IF you fast." Just as Jesus did NOT say back in verse 2 "IF you give to the needy." Nor did He say in verse 5, "IF you pray." In other words, there seems to be an expectation from Jesus Himself that His followers will give to the needy, that they will pray, AND that they will fast. But what if we don't fast? As a Christian, do I really HAVE to fast? Jesus' repeats His assumption again in Matthew 6:17, "But when you fast..."⁵ However, even though Jesus seems to be making an almost unconscious assumption that fasting is "part of Christian devotion," His words do not necessarily "constitute a command. Jesus was giving instruction on the proper exercise of a common practice of his day.... Although Jesus does not say 'IF you fast,' neither does he say 'You MUST fast.'"⁶ Well, rather than debating whether fasting is

¹ See Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, Hodder & Stoughton, London, 2008, p. 60.

² Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, Hodder & Stoughton, London, 2008, p. 59.

³ Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, Hodder & Stoughton, London, 2008, p. 59.

⁴ We are smack dab in the middle of Jesus Sermon on the Mount from Matthew 5, 6, and 7. And yet, in one sense, today's Scripture passage is part 3 of 3. We began part 1 with a warning from Jesus back in Matthew 6:1, "Be careful not to practice your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them..." Be careful! This opened up a discussion of 3 things to be careful with: Be careful when you give. Be careful when you pray. Be careful when you fast. Each one of these three Christian behaviors is a wonderful opportunity to bring God glory and to grow in Christian maturity. And each one comes with the danger of hypocritical, fake spirituality, performed as a show for others to see. We need not assume, that Jesus selects these particular 3, as a comprehensive list, but rather as samples of various acts of righteousness. (See D. A. Carson, *Jesus's Sermon on the Mount and His Confrontation with the World*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 1987, p. 72.) In other words, as we consider these 3, we can apply these principles to many other acts of righteousness. Therefore, we should also recognize the ability to bring God glory or to bring ourselves glory, with other things as well. Things such as Bible reading, church attendance, going on a mission's trip, and so on. Any righteous behavior can become hypocritical when we are motivated to do the right thing for the wrong reason. Jesus' teaching outline, on each of these 3 topics follows a very similar pattern:

Hypocrisy: Don't practice a hypocritical righteousness.

Secrecy: Practice your righteousness in secret.

("Generosity is not enough, however. Our Lord is concerned throughout this Sermon with motivation, with the hidden thoughts of the heart." John R. W. Stott, *The Message of the Sermon on the Mount*, IVP, Downers Grove IL, 1978, p. 128.)

Reward: Then, God will reward you.

Two weeks ago, we noted that we are not given any detail regarding specifically what this reward is or even when we get it.

"Reward" may very well refer to the immediate reward of feeling God's pleasure in the here and now. Or, "reward" may also refer to a future reward, when we stand before God to give our final account, of how we have lived our lives for Him.

⁵ In fact, a few chapters later, Jesus refers to Himself as the bridegroom, and we learn from Matthew 9:15 that, "Jesus answered, "How can the guests of the bridegroom mourn while he is with them? The time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them; **then they will fast.**" "The most natural interpretation of the days when Jesus' disciples will fast is the present Church age, especially in light of its intricate connection with Jesus' statement on the new wineskins of the kingdom of God which follows immediately (Matt. 9:16, 17)." Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, Hodder & Stoughton, London, 2008, p. 65.

⁶ Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, Hodder & Stoughton, London, 2008, p. 65.

something that we “HAVE to do” or “DON’T HAVE to do,” let’s consider that it is something good to do, even spiritually beneficial to do. ***Fasting is an opportunity to deepen in our own spiritual maturity.*** By not fasting, we may very well be starving ourselves of an incredible opportunity to deepen in our own spiritual growth and development. In Matthew 6:16-18, Jesus teaches His followers not to fast as a way of showing off how spiritual they are. But He DOES expect that they will fast. If fasting is indeed part of God’s plan for us, then He must have a spiritual purpose for it. In some way, it must bring Him glory and be for our good. There are many ways that fasting has the potential to deepen our spiritual maturity. Let’s consider 4 of them together this today.

Fasting deepens our spiritual maturity by:

1. Increasing our empathy for the suffering of others. Fasting gives us a tangible way to find solidarity with the needy. It helps us to appreciate the importance of justice and charity for people around the world who are hungry, poor, marginalized, and persecuted. Back when I was a Youth Pastor, World Vision began promoting a youth event called the 30-Hour Famine. I remember thinking 2 things when I first heard about this event: What a great way to help students understand world hunger and to begin helping them learn about spiritual fasting. 2. If we offer this event, will any students actually come? After all, who wants to attend a youth event where there’s no pizza? Can we even call this a “youth event?” Well, we put the event together with the proper permission slip and health warnings. We made some exceptions for a few students with diabetes or other health concerns, creating more of a limited fast for them. And then, we went for it; we spent 30 hours without food. We spent those hours praying, doing Bible studies learning about God’s heart for the poor and needy, and doing service projects in the community. We served at the Food Shelf, we packaged meals for Kids Against Hunger, and so on. Even though attendance was lower than many other events that we put on, it was a powerful event. It was not only eye-opening but also spiritually impactful in many ways.⁷



One of my most poignant memories is the time when we decided to end our 30 hours with a meal together consisting of the rice that we had packaged for Kids Against Hunger. Kids Against Hunger is one of the wonderful ministries that packages simple, healthy, rice-based meals, that can be shipped anywhere in the world and easily prepared in boiling water. That particular year we had about 20 people doing the 30-Hour Famine. We decided to end our fast based on some global statistics which basically meant that a certain percentage of us would get the 20 cent rice meals and just two of us would get a \$20 steak dinner from Applebees. This was meant to demonstrate the disparity between what people eat in wealthy countries and what people eat in the more impoverished areas of the world. The idea was that we would put everyone’s name in a hat and then draw out only 2 who would get the Applebee’s steak. The other 18 would get rice. I delegated the project to one of the students. They collected all the names written on little scraps of paper and then threw them into a hat. But, before drawing the 2 names, the student told me, “I only have 19 scraps of paper, someone didn’t put their name in the hat.” I quietly took them aside and said, “just go with 19, I didn’t put my name in because I don’t want to be the one to win the steak dinner.” Well, they INSISTED that I had to put my name in too. So, after trying to convince them otherwise, I gave in and wrote down my name. Well, you can probably guess who one of the winners was? Yeah, it was me. So, there I was munching on a delicious Applebee’s steak, sitting at a table where just about everybody else was eating rice. That was the worst steak I’ve ever eaten. Not because it was poorly prepared but because this object lesson met its intended purpose. I realized in that moment how well fed I was, not just that day, but every day in comparison with much of the rest of the world. As a Youth Pastor, there were many ways I could have tried to teach a devotional on thankfulness and on the importance of feeding the hungry and caring for the poor, but that day of steak and rice had a particularly strong impact. It helped each one of us, not only to be thankful for how blessed we are, but also to be engaged in helping those

⁷ We also had some fun with it. I remember one year, on our way back to church from a service project, Dan Norvold pulled his truck into the Burger King drive through and ordered only water. He also rolled is window down and fanned the smell of the charbroiled burgers into the truck cab. All of his students moaned and complained “Dan, stop it! We’re SO hungry!” Another time, at the end of the 30 hours, when it was time to break our fast, I challenged our group to walk a mile, outside, up the road to Lueken’s South. I had them try to buy a meal for \$1. It was fascinating to see their decision-making process. Some of them just grabbed a candy bar while others, pooled their money together to make a collective meal. All of them, came to better appreciate what a gift it was to go home to a pantry full of food in their parents’ kitchen.

who have so much less than we do. Fasting is an opportunity for us as Christians, to increase our empathy for the suffering of others. Sometimes the best thing for our souls, is to spend some time getting a small taste, of what it's like for those around the world who are forced to spend a majority of their days under a lifelong "compulsory fast."⁸

A 2nd way that fasting deepens our spiritual maturity is by...

2. Reminding us to depend on God. Christ-followers are given a helpful reminder that we are jars of clay in 2 Corinthians 4:7, "But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us."⁹ It's easy for us to embrace a worldview of SELF-sufficiency. Living life on our own strength and using just our own resources, can keep us from embracing the Christian value of dependence on Christ. He is the vine; we are the branches. Apart from Jesus, we can do nothing.¹⁰ Denying ourselves food is very humbling. The hunger pains, occasional headaches, and other discomforts serve as real reminders of our human frailty. We are not so invincible as we might sometimes think. "...it is a constant temptation for us to rely on human strength, wisdom and resources. We forget the supernatural enabling.... And when we forget, we slip toward sin and foolish self-sufficiency."¹¹ When we fast and go without the energy and nutrients of food, it makes us keenly aware of our need to lean into God for His strength.

Right after Jesus was baptized, and just before He began His public ministry, the Bible tells us that the HS led Him into the wilderness to be tested: "After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry."¹² (Matthew 4:2) This is not only a good reminder for us, that Jesus was fully human, but it also teaches us that Jesus Himself fasted.¹³ "Here at the beginning of his ministry Jesus is subjected to a [time of testing]"¹⁴ and He reveals His understanding in Matthew 4:4 that, "...Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God."¹⁵ Fasting reminds us to depend on the spiritual nourishment that comes from God.¹⁶

Another way that fasting deepens our spiritual maturity is by...

3. Helping us to focus on seeking God. We live in a world where it is very easy to be distracted by almost anything other than God. It's often difficult to slow down, to zero in, to focus on spiritual things, because everything else is moving at 100 miles/hour. It's challenging to set aside time for extended, meaningful prayer. But there are times, when we become keenly aware of our urgent need to ask God for help and direction, with a particular need that we have. Fasting has a way of getting us focused and slowing us down. Back in 2 Chronicles 20, King Jehoshaphat had a lot on his mind. He was distracted by all kinds of things; not the least of which was an impending attack from foreign countries. He had people coming to him, warning him about a vast army that was approaching quickly. There are many ways that Jehoshaphat could have responded. There were many things he could have focused on to get ready for this battle. Consider how he responds in 2 Chronicles 20:3-4, "Alarmed, Jehoshaphat resolved to inquire of the LORD, and he proclaimed a fast for all Judah. The people of Judah came together to seek help from the LORD; indeed, they came from every town in Judah to seek him." God's people cry out to God in their distress. You'll need to read the rest of chapter 20 if you want to hear the whole story, and see how it ends. But I promise you, it's well worth reading. My main point in sharing this story is to illustrate that fasting helps us to focus on seeking God.

⁸ Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, Hodder & Stoughton, London, 2008, p. 75.

⁹ Consider also Philippians 3:3-4.

¹⁰ John 15:5.

¹¹ *EFCA Pastor's Service Manual*, Lee Eclow, Editor, 2000, p. 35.

¹² "We are feeding on God and, just like the Israelites who were sustained in the wilderness by the miraculous manna from heaven, so we are sustained by the word of God." Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, Hodder & Stoughton, London, 2008, p. 68.

¹³ In fact, it seems likely that Jesus fasted often. Growing up in a Jewish home, there were as many as 5 yearly fasts that were practiced. "In the Mosaic law only the fast of the Day of Atonement was required.... After the Babylonian exile four other yearly fasts were observed by the Jews." See Zechariah 8:19 and notes in *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, pp. 1553 and 1656.

¹⁴ *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1595.

¹⁵ As John Stott puts it, "The incarnate word reverently submits to the written word." (source book unknown)

¹⁶ Matthew 5:3 reminds us that blessed are the poor in spirit. "Just as God gave the Israelites manna in a supernatural way...., so also people today must rely on God for spiritual nourishment." P. 1597 of *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011.

But also note that in Matthew 4:4, Jesus is quoting from Deuteronomy 8:1-3, which focuses on keeping God's commands.

Another example is the story of Queen Esther.¹⁷ What an amazing woman of God. A key part of her story involves fasting. Her cousin Mordecai warned her regarding the evil plot of a man named Haman. Haman wanted to annihilate the Jewish people. This of course caused great concern among God's people. Consider how the Queen responds in Esther 4:15-16, "Then Esther sent this reply to Mordecai: "Go, gather together all the Jews who are in Susa, and fast for me. Do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my attendants will fast as you do. When this is done, I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish." John Stott notes that "special [initiatives] need special prayer, and that special prayer may well involve fasting."¹⁸ Fasting helps us focus on seeking God.

The 4th way that fasting deepens our spiritual maturity is by...

4. Teaching us SELF-denial. Richard Foster rightly notes that, "Fasting helps us keep our balance in life. How easily we begin to allow nonessentials to take precedence in our lives. How quickly we crave things we do not need—until we are enslaved by them."¹⁹ Later on, Jesus will lay out a clear directive for His followers. Matthew 16:24-26 says, "Then Jesus said to his disciples, "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it. What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul?" This life is not about us. Fasting can serve as a helpful reminder and demonstration of this. As we voluntarily deny ourselves food, it helps us to meditate on our call to deny ourselves of other things as well. Fasting by definition requires SELF-denial. And that SELF-denial can be a healthy safeguard against our human tendency toward our own greed and entitlement. SELF-denial guards our very souls from the appetites of this world which seek to consume us.²⁰

Fasting deepens our spiritual maturity by: 1. Increasing our empathy for the suffering of others. 2. Reminding us to depend on God. 3. Helping us to focus on seeking God. 4. Teaching us SELF-denial.

One of the classic stories we read about Jesus was when He spoke with the Samaritan woman at the well. There is a part in this story where this woman leaves and goes to tell the people from her town that she thinks that she may have found the Messiah. About that same time Jesus' disciples return from town where they had gone to buy food. They urge Him to eat something but Jesus says something interesting in response in John 4:34, "My food," said Jesus, "is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work." Jesus was fully human. He needed physical food and He felt physical hunger just as you and I do. But here Jesus "used physical needs to instruct others in spiritual realities."²¹ Just as He had used the physical water to get the women at the well to think about living spiritual water, so also, He now uses physical food to make His followers think about the spiritual food of doing God's work. In other words, for Jesus, it was more satisfying to do God's will than to satisfy His own physical hunger. We might be asking ourselves, "Can't God use something other than fasting to teach us spiritual truths?" Perhaps He could and sometimes He does, but what you and I need to realize is that fasting is one of the tools that God uses in our own spiritual formation. This is part of His good design. In His wisdom, God gives us the gift of fasting as an effective means by which to teach us what we need to learn. **Therefore, rather than avoid fasting, let's embrace it! Let's recognize that fasting is another one of our Heavenly Father's good gifts!**

*This sermon was preached at the Evangelical Free Church of Bemidji
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¹⁷ "HAY muhn" "ESS tuhr" "MAWR duh kigh" Consider also Acts 13:2-3, 14:23, and Judges 20:26-28.

¹⁸ John R. W. Stott, *The Message of the Sermon on the Mount*, IVP, Downers Grove, IL, 1978, p. 137.

¹⁹ Richard J. Foster, "The Purpose of Fasting," online article at <https://renovare.org/articles/the-purpose-of-fasting>

²⁰ **SELF-denial is closely related to self-control.** Learning to control our eating can often help us learn to control other areas of our lives: anger, lust, gluttony, laziness etc. "More than any other single discipline, fasting reveals the things that control us. This is a wonderful benefit to the true disciple who longs to be transformed into the image of Jesus Christ. We cover up what is inside us with food and other good things, but in fasting, these things surface. If pride controls us, it will be revealed almost immediately.... Anger, bitterness, jealousy, strife, fear—if they are within us, they will surface during fasting." Richard J. Foster, "The Purpose of Fasting," online article at <https://renovare.org/articles/the-purpose-of-fasting>

²¹ Tabletalk magazine, March 2018, p. 44.