

## **Fasting In Secret**

### **Matthew 6:16-18**

This morning we are looking at what the Lord Jesus has to say about fasting in the life of his followers. Fasting is not something that a lot of Christians do, or even consider. Yet in the one sermon of Jesus that we have on record he mentions it as something that will be part of the lives of his followers.

Let me give you a definition of fasting: Fasting is a temporary withholding of food in order to prayerfully draw near to God.

The idea is not that we fast to really convince God that we're serious. You remember the prophets of Baal in 1 Kings 18? They were cutting themselves to show how earnest they were, to sort of manipulate Baal into giving them what they wanted. That's not why we fast. Jesus has already said that God knows what we need before we ask so this isn't to manipulate God into giving us what we want.

We fast to draw near to God. Richard Foster says this about fasting: "More than any other discipline, fasting reveals 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 of us with food and other things." (Piper, John. *A Hunger for God*. Page 19)

What he's getting at is that rarely can we discern what's going on with our heart when we're comfortable. When we're healthy, well-fed, financially stable and things are going well in life. Remove any of those and our true colors show. Our true dependence on God shows. A lot of people are really godly when they have plenty of money, but get really cranky when the cash is gone. We'll see that next week.

But here, Jesus says there's a spiritual discipline that we can take part in regularly that also gives us an insight into our true desires: intentionally withholding food. Because when you're hungry it shows what you're really trusting in. It shows what you really desire and who you're really serving.

When your car is acting up you take it to the mechanic and he hooks it up to a machine and checks the vehicle codes for the problem. Between that and the description of the problem he can usually diagnose what's going on. That's fasting. It's a diagnostic discipline.

How does withholding food help us diagnose our heart? If you think about it, we spend a huge part of our day either eating food, preparing food, or working so we can purchase food to eat. Eating is almost second nature. And we probably don't even recognize how much it controls our lives, our decisions, actions, our mood and even our relationships with people & the Lord.

If we intentionally take away food, things in life tend to get clarified. The things we could normally cover up with Cookie Dough ice cream or double fudge brownies are now fully exposed.

People talk about getting hangry - angry when they're hungry. It's the same idea. It's not that hunger makes you angry, it's that hunger exposes the sin in our hearts that is already there and often covered by food.

So fasting takes determination & self-control. In the OT you'll often see the phrase that the Israelites "afflicted themselves" - usually that means they were fasting (**Lev. 16:29, 31**). I like that translation because fasting is hard, it doesn't feel good.

So let's just walk through this passage and then I want to give you some practical steps for fasting.

#### 1) Should Christians Fast?

Well, let's let Jesus answer that. **Read 16-18**

Jesus doesn't say **if** you fast, does He? What's He say? When you fast - He says it twice. The issue is not if but when.

Now, we'll see in a little bit that the disciples didn't fast while Jesus was with them. But they resumed once He ascended into heaven. So Jesus assumes that we will be fasting.

Now, remember that the context of Matthew 6 is that our acts of righteousness before God earn us a reward. But we're only rewarded if we do them in secret and not for the praise of men.

**Vss. 1-4:** We don't give to the needy to put on a show.

**Vss. 5-6:** We don't pray in such a way as to put on a show.

**Vss. 7-15** is a brief summary of how to pray.

**Vss. 16-18:** We don't fast to put on a show.

**Vss. 19-24:** We don't invest money in the kingdom to put on a show.

All of these things are to be done in secret so that only God sees us & only then will he reward us.

## 2) Christians Shouldn't Advertise Their Fasting. Read 16-18

So these guys would make themselves up so that people would see how holy they were for fasting. Jesus says don't do that. If you're fasting don't wander around going: "Man, I'm sooo hungry. I'm about to faint away." Or, "Sorry I can't have lunch with you today, I'm fasting and I'll be in deep prayer this afternoon." Well, aren't you a saint. If you're going to fast, don't advertise it.

Don't go to places where there's going to be food where people who are going to ask you a million questions about why you're not eating & are you okay. Don't draw attention to yourself.

If I fast I usually tell my wife so she knows I won't be having dinner that night & she doesn't worry. I've even fasted with other people for specific things, so obviously other people can know. We see group fasts in the Bible. So it's not as though absolutely no one else can know.

It's when you desire for people to praise you for your "godliness" in fasting that it becomes a problem.

## 3) Carry on with your normal routine as much as you can. Read 17-18

So get up, take a shower, shave, go about your normal day. You're not going to faint or pass out or die. You'll be fine; people have been fasting for thousands of years. The only difference between a regular day & fasting day is that when you would normally be eating or preparing a meal, use that time to pray instead.

Now, I should answer an obvious question at this point: Why do we fast **& pray**? Why not just fast? The answer is because prayer & fasting are linked together in the Bible - we usually see them together.

**Neh. 1:4** says that when Nehemiah heard that Jerusalem's walls were broken down & its gates were destroyed by fire, "sat down and wept and mourned for days, and I continued fasting and praying before the God of heaven." He was in great distress so he cried out to God in fasting & prayer.

When Daniel realized that the time of the 70 year exile in Babylon was coming to an end, he said, "Then I turned my face to the Lord God, seeking him by prayer and pleas for mercy with fasting and sackcloth and ashes." (**Dan. 9:3**) He then went on to pray one of the most amazing prayers of repentance recorded in the Bible. He was grieved by the sin of his people so he prayed & fasted.

We often complain about our country. But really, rather than complaining about the moral depravity of our nation, we should go the Lord in prayer & fasting. God doesn't want to hear our sinful complaining. What He does want to hear are genuine pleas for mercy.

Frankly, I wonder if some of our prayers for healing wouldn't be answered more often if we went to the Lord not just in prayer, but in fasting as well. Again, not because we're trying to manipulate God but because the act of fasting instills in our own hearts an earnestness and sincerity and reliance on God to sustain us.

In **Judges. 20:26** Israel fasted during a time of war because they had already lost many people in battle. They asked if God wanted them to continue in battle despite all the losses.

In both **1 Sam. 31:13**, **2 Sam. 1:12** the people of Israel mourned & fasted when & prayed when King Saul had been killed by the enemy.

Mind you, Saul was literally a demon-possessed king - he was a mad-man. But he was still an authority over the people & they mourned & fasted for 7 days.

You remember when David committed adultery with Bathsheba, she gave birth to the child. And God afflicted the child. The Bible says “David therefore sought God on behalf of the child. And David fasted and went in and lay all night on the ground. And the elders of his house stood beside him, to raise him up from the ground, but he would not, nor did he eat food with them.” (2 Sam. 12:15-23)

There’s no more earnest time of prayer than when a little one’s life is on the line. Sadly, the child died. After the child died David cleaned himself up & ate & went to the Tabernacle to worship God. But here’s what he said about the fasting: “While the child was still alive, I fasted and wept, for I said, ‘Who knows whether the Lord will be gracious to me that the child may live?’ But now he is dead why should I fast?” David petitioned the Lord in the most powerful way he could & yet the Lord’s answer was no. David didn’t mourn forever, he trusted that the will of the Lord had been done.

David prayed and fasted and the child still died. Fasting doesn’t guarantee our prayer will be answered, but it does show our utter reliance on God to help.

There’s also fasting for political change in the Bible. In **Esther 4:16** Esther asked that all the Jews fast on her behalf as she was getting ready to approach the king about wicked Haman & his plot to destroy the Jews. She told them to not eat or even drink for 3 days & nights. Of course, God heard that prayer & saved the Jews.

Ezra fasted & prayed for safe travel from Persia to Jerusalem. (**Ezra 8:21-23**) Prayer & fasting go hand in hand all thought the Bible.

So we are to fast, we don’t advertise our fasting, and we are to act normal when we do fast,

**Look at Luke 2:36-38** for a minute. Let’s look more at what the NT has to say. This is where the infant Jesus is presented at the Temple. A little over a month after a baby boy was born, the parents in the Old Covenant were to offer sacrifices for the son. So Mary and Joseph are at the Temple to do that & they meet a lady named Anna who has essentially given her life to prayer & fasting. **Read 36-38**

Now, to be sure she didn’t fast every day. She prayed night and day - all the time. And that prayer was joined by regular fasting. This was the way in which she served the Lord - this was a very noble & God-honoring ministry she had. Luke portrays Anna as being a very faithful woman in ministry precisely because she is dedicated to prayer & fasting.

By the way, how old was she? 84. Just because you get older doesn’t mean you can’t serve people. Prayer and fasting is one of the greatest ways we can serve the body of Christ.

Some people say, “Well, all we can do is pray.” No, the best thing we can do is pray. “We should view prayer as another revolutionary tactic, *not* a passive resignation to a situation. In prayer, we enlist the aid and ear of “the Lord of Hosts” (recall 5:4), our God who is more than capable of righting our wrongs and helping us in our pain.” (Blomberg, James, note on 5:14)

**Turn to Luke 5:33-39.** This is an interesting exchange with Jesus about the issue of fasting. **Read 33-35**

So Jesus’s disciples didn’t fast - they ate & drank. That was very unusual. Fasting was known to be an essential part of Jewish religious life. So when Jesus comes on the scene not fasting & His disciples don’t fast either, this is a big deal.

What’s Jesus’s answer to that? Hey, right now, it’s like being at a wedding. They are excited & glad that the bridegroom - Jesus - is here. Jesus also says there will be a time of fasting - when is that? When the Bridegroom leaves. When Jesus returns to heaven, fasting will resume.

Why fast when Jesus is gone but not when he’s there? Have you ever been homesick? You’ve been somewhere where you were far from home and you didn’t really even want to eat because you missed home? Or maybe you were away from your family or your wife or husband for a time and you really missed them and didn’t feel like eating?

Fasting touches on the sentiment. It helps remind us of the longing we should have for Jesus. The way we long for food is the way we should long for our Savior. So that feeling of hunger and desire that we have after

a day without food is the longing we should have for Jesus. We fast because we long of the presence of Jesus.

That's why the disciples don't fast while Jesus is there with them: fasting is an act of longing to be near to someone. Well, for the disciples he was right there. But there would come a time after his death and resurrection that he would be gone. Then the fasting would begin again.

Jesus goes on to give a parable about the fact that He didn't come to patch up Judaism. Judaism & the sacrificial system is gone, He's bringing in something completely new. **Read 36-39**

So if you try to patch up something old with something new it breaks. Or if you try to reuse something old - in this case wineskins - it makes a mess. Jesus didn't come to revamp Judaism. He came to give us the new covenant in his blood. The death and resurrection of Jesus becomes the turning point in history and that's seen even in how and why people fast.

And although there would be some similarities, the reality is that there would be major differences. And in **Vs. 39** many people wouldn't be willing to accept the change. **Read 39**

If you're hooked on the old way - the old wine of the old covenant, you won't accept Jesus. So there are some differences, but also some similarities: specifically in fasting. And the early church caught on to this. The early church picked up fasting without missing a beat.

Not only did they pray for their enemies, but they fasted for their enemies. New Christians fasted before they were baptized. And they fasted twice a week on Wednesdays and Fridays. (Didache 1:4, 7:4, 8:1)

We also see Christians fasting when a big decision was to be made. Specifically in appointing leaders. (Parsons, Mikeal *Acts*, note on 13:4) **Look at Acts 13:1-3.**

This is right before the first missionary journey of Paul, maybe 13 years after Jesus's ascension. So very early on. The church has already spread from Jerusalem to Judea and Samaria & it's getting ready to go international. And the question is: who is going to be sent to spread the gospel?

This isn't something to take lightly. Just because someone wants to go, doesn't mean they should go. Just because someone has some skills, doesn't mean they are qualified in the biblical sense. Who we send into the mission field is very important. Our financial resources are limited & testimony of Christ is vital. We want to make sure the person or team we are financially supporting is meets the qualifications of **1 Tim. 3:1-7**. And to make that decision we need to devote ourselves to prayer & fasting for God's wisdom. **Read 1-3**

Think about this. God the Holy Spirit audibly says, "Set aside Paul and Barnabas" for this work. God tells them that. **And** Paul and Barnabas are both apostles. If this were in our church, we'd be thinking "no brainer - send them" without thinking twice about it. What does the church do?

They pray & fast some more, then lay their hands on them - which is more prayer - and only then do they send them. Do you see how sensitive their consciences are to important decisions? How earnestly they seek God's wisdom and guidance for the leaders in ministry?

We see this again with leaders in **Acts 14:19-23** - **look** there for a minute. This is toward the end of the first missionary journey that we just saw prayer & fasting for. Paul has planted some churches & now the time comes to appoint elders. Guess what happens? Prayer & fasting. **Read 19-23**

So again, Paul & Barnabas, these great men of God empowered by God, set apart by God to plant churches, appoint elders only through prayer and fasting. I think it's safe to say if the apostles are spending time in prayer and fasting before appointing men as elders, we should do the same.

Let me touch on some side benefits of fasting, aside from the fact that it should help our prayer life, and then I want to address some practical steps to consider when fasting.

#### A) Fasting develops Self-Discipline

If we can control this one area of appetite we can control other areas of appetite as well. I don't know about you, but prayer is hard for me to be disciplined in. There are a variety of reasons for that, but fasting is one way we can develop self-discipline.

B) It also develops Earnestness.

This isn't just giving up a meal & trying to forget about the fact that you're hungry. This is giving up a meal, embracing that hunger, using the hunger pains to remind you to pray. I find I am much more urgent in prayer when I'm without food.

C) Fasting also reminds me how limited I am.

There's something that happens about hour 23 where I realize that I'm not sure I could go a long, long time without food. We could if we had to, I guess - but I don't want to. It reminds me that I am really reliant on God to sustain me in absolutely every way.

D) Another benefit is that it develops a true thankfulness for food.

I usually say thanks for my food before every meal, but there is something amazing about that first slow bite of food after fasting for 24 hours. I find my thankfulness for food heightened after I've been without it for a while. And slowly eating & enjoying that first meal after a fast is a special act of worship & thankfulness.

Okay, let me touch on 6 practical considerations to keep in mind when - not if - but when you fast. These are just things I've found helpful or good to keep in mind.

1) First, the purpose isn't to make fasting as hard as possible.

It's to encourage you to seek the Lord and aid your prayer life. So whatever you do, make sure it's driving you to prayer, not distracting you from it. So, if fasting works better on a weekday than Saturday, do a weekday. Certain days of the week just don't make sense for me because of what's on my calendar.

Some Christians take part in fasting for Lent - that's fine. There's nothing that says we have to do that, but usually people fast from something they can sustain for a while. But again, the point is not to just not have things. The point is to draw near to God. So fasting for fasting's sake isn't the point. Fasting to draw near to God is.

2) Second, pick a time line & stick with it - don't cheat, you won't die.

When it comes to food, my fasts usually go from 8pm to 8pm the next day. If I go to bed hungry I don't sleep well. So a snack just before 8pm gets me through the night, I can pray more throughout the next day & I've started early enough that I can eat a late dinner after 8pm. Midnight to midnight fasts don't work for me because I won't get to bed until 1am the following evening & it messes up my whole schedule.

3) I usually drink water and juice or coffee when I'm fasting.

This is a personal preference. I fast with food, though there are biblical examples of fasting food & water. You can fast water as well, but there's no command or principle that says the fasting is negated by drinking.

4) Start slow.

Fasting doesn't have to be 24 hours. It often is 24 hours, but it doesn't have to be. It could be a meal, it could be 2. It could also be fasting from television for a while and instead of watching TV go for a walk and pray. But set a time and stick with it.

Biblically, it seems that people fasted for at least 24 hours, often longer. But start small & go from there.

5) Be realistic.

Some of you, medically speaking, shouldn't fast unless you ask your doctor. If you're diabetic, hypoglycemic, pregnant or have some other issue it might not be medically advisable for you to fast. For you, seeking the Lord in earnestness might simply mean setting aside more time in one day to pray.

On the other end of the spectrum, if you struggle with eating disorders on any level this spiritual exercise could easily fuel those sins. Fasting can easily become a cover for fleshly desires. For you maybe you need to spend time in prayer **while** you eat, remembering that the food you eat - every bite - is good.

**1 Tim. 4:1-4** says God created all foods to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth. For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, for it is made holy by the word of God and prayer.

Fasting is not forbidding of food, or even saying that food is bad. Fasting is simply saying that food is not king - Jesus is king - and I want to spend a day with Jesus & I'm willing to give up a few meals to do that.

6) Fast for a purpose.

That's really the theme we see throughout the Bible. People fast for a variety of reasons, but usually when it happens they've got one thing on their mind. And the majority of the time, we see group fasts in the Bible. They're not trying to impress each other, they're earnestly seeking God together on a certain issue.

I want to encourage you to fast this week. If you've never done it, try it. If it's been a long time, it's time to go again. The early church fasted twice a week so I think we can incorporate this into our lives. Just try it. If you're still at home talk to your parent first.

Pray for our country.

Pray for our leaders.

Pray for opportunities to share the gospel during this crazy time.

Remember, fasting doesn't guarantee God will answer your prayer the way you want Him too. But hopefully it guarantees you're striving to see to it that His will is done.

**Pray**