

The Fundamentals of Fasting # 16

Matthew 6: 16-18

Tonight we come to a portion of Scripture that is little discussed in our day. I don't think I have ever heard this passage preached or dealt with at length. The focus of this portion of the Sermon on the Mount is fasting.

That may be something that the average Christian is unfamiliar with, but it was common in Jesus' day. In fact, there are many references to fasting within the Bible. The Jews were expected to fast on the Day of Atonement, [Lev.16:31](#). Fasting was often used as an expression of repentance. The entire nation fasted after the civil war with Benjamin, [Judges 20:26](#). Samuel called for a fast among the people after they had sought after Baal, [1 Sam.7:6](#). The Jews at Jerusalem fasted because of their sin, [Nehemiah 9:1](#).

Fasting was also seen as a means of preparation or devotion. Moses fasted for forty days in order to prepare himself for the revelation of truth from God, [Ex.34:28](#). We are also aware that Jesus fasted for forty days also as He prepared for the wilderness temptation, [Mat.4:2](#).

Fasting is something that creates uncertainty and anxiety in the minds of many. I think if we will take the time to consider what our Lord has to say and seek to understand fasting, we will become more comfortable with it. Let's see if we can discover the [facts](#) our Lord reveals as we consider: [The Fundamentals of Fasting](#).

I. The Discipline of Fasting (16a) – **Moreover when ye fast...** This draws our attention to a couple of important aspects concerning fasting. Consider:

A. The Principle of Fasting – Now in Jesus' day the Jews were very familiar with fasting. He had no need to explain the principle to them, but few in our day are familiar with fasting. The practice of fasting literally has the idea of "*abstaining as a religious exercise from food and drink: either entirely, if the fast lasted but a single day, or from customary and choice nourishment, if it continued several days.*" It involved abstaining from eating altogether for a short period of time, or forsaking the most desirable foods for an extended period of time.

- Fasting was always associated with prayer and communion with God. Fasting must be done with prayer. We must use common sense when we fast. If you have health concerns that require eating at specific times, I would suggest you spend some time in earnest prayer before abstaining from eating altogether. Fasting doesn't have to have an "all or nothing" aspect. It is simply depriving ourselves of usual pleasure in order to draw nigh to God.

B. The Purpose of Fasting – The practice of fasting was done for a particular purpose. If done in a way that pleased the Lord, the people did not fast just to be fasting. It was done in order to focus upon the spiritual things of God. It allowed them to get beyond the desires of the flesh so that they could devote themselves entirely unto the Lord. Rather than devoting time or thoughts to physical pleasures, they devoted their time and thoughts to spiritual growth and enrichment.

- I can assure you that fasting is not popular in the Baptist church. Many begin to watch the time at about 11:45 on Sunday morning. They are more concerned with getting home for lunch than receiving what they need from the Lord. However, Monday is an entirely different aspect. Many will work through or even skip lunch to meet a deadline at work. We don't have to fast in order to serve the Lord, but I fear most of us would be unwilling to give up much of any pleasure to seek the Lord.

C. The Participation in Fasting – *Moreover when ye fast...* It is apparent that Jesus assumed they would fast. I would not be so dogmatic to say that we are commanded to fast, but it is something that our Lord encouraged. As we've discussed, fasting should be done in an attitude of prayer and with common sense, but it should not be written off as an outdated and ridiculous practice. The idea is self sacrifice in order to hear from the Lord and prepare ourselves for His service. How long has it been since you genuinely sacrificed in order to develop a closer relationship with the Lord?

I. The Discipline of Fasting (16a)

II. The Distortion of Fasting (16) – As we've grown accustomed to in our study, Jesus addresses those who may practice a particular behavior associated with service, but many times it is carried out in the wrong way or with faulty motives. There were those who distorted the practice of fasting. Consider:

A. Their Portrayal – *Moreover when ye fast, be not, as the hypocrites, of a sad countenance: for they disfigure their faces, that they may appear unto men to fast.* There were those who participated in fasting, but put on a sad face while they were doing it. They **disfigured** their faces, literally "*to deprive of luster, render unsightly.*" These sought to appear so committed to fasting that they had actually become weak and sickly due to their continued fast. They were not seeking to draw near to God but to be recognized of men. They wanted to appear pious and holy. They sought to portray that there was no happiness at all in them.

- As with much we have discussed in our study, we must ensure that our motives are right. We must never engage in any act of service to receive the recognition of men. Jesus compared these to [hypocrites](#) as well; those who were literally play acting, hidden behind a mask to conceal the truth. They sought to portray one thing while their hearts revealed something else.

B. Their Pride – [that they may appear unto men to fast](#). Here we discover the sole reason for their fasting. They wanted to appear as one who was genuine and sincere in their efforts to seek the Lord. There was no desire of preparation for service, or even to be used of God. They simply wanted others to think they were really committed to the Lord. They wanted to be noticed and acknowledged of men.

- God is never pleased when we use acts of service in order to be seen of men rather than to be used of him. Fasting or any other self sacrifice will be of little benefit if it is done in pride. [Is.58:3-4 – Wherefore have we fasted, say they, and thou seest not? wherefore have we afflicted our soul, and thou takest no knowledge? Behold, in the day of your fast ye find pleasure, and exact all your labours. \[4\] Behold, ye fast for strife and debate, and to smite with the fist of wickedness: ye shall not fast as ye do this day, to make your voice to be heard on high. \[5\] Is it such a fast that I have chosen? a day for a man to afflict his soul? is it to bow down his head as a bulrush, and to spread sackcloth and ashes under him? wilt thou call this a fast, and an acceptable day to the Lord?](#)

C. Their Payment – [Verily I say unto you, They have their reward](#). As before, these have received what they desired and that is all they will get. They wanted the praise of men and they got it, but they need not expect God to further bless them.

- Isn't that a tragedy? These fasted and sacrificed and yet it was all in vain. Their efforts could have been very beneficial to their spiritual lives and yet it was wasted on vain pleasure, the praise and recognition of men. We are considering the practice of fasting, but this truth relates to all aspects of service and sacrifice. Many have been blessed with great gifts and ability and yet their efforts are all in vain because they crave the praise of men. Pride and the desire for self glory will hinder spiritual growth and worship of the Lord.

I. The Discipline of Fasting (16a)

II. The Distortion of Fasting (16)

III. The Discretion in Fasting (17-18) – As with much before, Jesus doesn't point out man's error without offering direction for our lives. If we are to please the Lord and benefit from our efforts, we must use discretion and seek His ways. Let's consider what Jesus reveals about proper fasting. It involves:

A. A Proper Appearance (17) – **But thou, when thou fastest, anoint thine head, and wash thy face;** The hypocrites wanted to appear sad and weak. They wanted to portray that they had genuinely "suffered" for the Lord.

- To fast in a way that pleased God, we must show the proper appearance. We are not to appear sad or discouraged. We are not to appear sick and weak. We are to show the strength and help of the Lord. We are to convey our joy in serving Him and the blessedness that He gives those who genuinely seek Him.
- I have seen those whom I doubt were fasting, but they sure appeared that way. Have we not all met those who seemed to be weary of serving the Lord? There are those who appear as if it is such a burden to attend the house of God. There seems to be little, if any, joy in their lives. Serving the Lord is not a burden; it is a tremendous blessing. We get to serve the Lord. We have the privilege of giving of ourselves in order to worship Him and grow in our faith!

B. A Proper Appeal (18a) – **That thou appear not unto men to fast, but unto thy Father which is in secret:** Those who fast in a beneficial way will be noticed of the Lord and not of men. Fasting should be done in an effort to secure the recognition and help of the Lord and not men. Genuine fasting reveals an eagerness and desire for the help of the Lord. We are appealing to Him, the Almighty God, not frail and weak humanity.

- Those things which appeal to God will be the only ones to last or be of benefit. If we seek to appeal to men, we may gain their attention and praise, but we will still be lacking that which we so desperately need. Humanity doesn't have what we need, nor the power to provide it. Our need can be supplied by God and God alone!

C. A Proper Awareness (18b) – **and thy Father, which seeth in secret, shall reward thee openly.** Jesus reveals the purpose for fasting, so that one might receive the touch of God. Fasting for any other reason would only create hunger. The hypocrites suffered physically with no spiritual benefit. Those who sought the Lord would receive His reward.

- There is a great truth here that we need to comprehend. I fear much that is being accomplished in the average church is all in vain. There are a lot of things being done, but they are misguided. If our desire is to serve the Lord and please Him, we can rest assured that He will notice. Whether we are fasting, praying, singing, preaching, witnessing, or just serving others, we must do all with a heart for the Lord.

I pray that you have been enlightened on the practice of fasting. I think we clearly see the benefit of it as well as the proper way to practice fasting. I am convinced that this is as much an attitude as it is a physical practice. Fasting doesn't necessarily have to be limited to food consumption. We could fast in other ways as well. The point is making necessary sacrifices in order to draw nigh to God and hear from Him.

I desire a closer walk with the Lord than what I currently have. I know that I will never achieve that if I am unwilling to pay the price and seek the Lord. What about you? Do you sense the need for a closer walk with Him? Are you willing to make the sacrifices necessary to achieve that? Why not come and seek the Lord in an effort to receive His touch?