



Group Discussion Guide

For group meetings from June 13 afternoon through June 20 morning

The Sermon on the Mount, Week 9

Matthew 6:16–18

“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.”

As with his teaching about giving to those in need and prayer, Jesus focused on the importance of motives regarding the practice of fasting (going without food for a period of time). He instructed his audience to avoid following the example of the religious leaders, who made sure their faces looked tired and dirty so that other people would know they were fasting. Jesus taught that those who fast should instead take care to continue regular hygiene so they would look no different while fasting than they would any other day. This would prevent others from knowing that they were fasting and allow their focus to be solely on the Lord. While the religious leaders only received the reward of other people knowing about their religious practices, those who fasted with pure motives received a reward from God the Father.

There was only one annual fast prescribed by the Mosaic Law, and this is communicated in Leviticus 16:29-31. This was to be practiced on the Day of Atonement, which is described in detail in the rest of that chapter. However, by the time of Jesus' earthly ministry, many additional days of fasting had been added by religious leaders. Pharisees who considered themselves to be in strict adherence to tradition fasted twice a week (Luke 18:12). Thus, this practice was just as common as giving to the poor and spending time in prayer.

Fasting is still practiced by some today but is less common in modern day Christianity. Our church has one day of fasting each year: the Thursday before Easter (otherwise known as Maundy Thursday, which is the day that Jesus initiated the Lord's Supper and gave his disciples a new command to love one another). On this day, everyone is encouraged to forego food, drink water, and spend additional time in prayer. This is not an activity that is commanded in New Testament writings, but it was a practice of the early church during times of seeking the Lord (Acts 13:2-3, Acts 14:23). Certainly, there is nothing that prevents believers from fasting more frequently. We can conclude that there is liberty in how fasting is practiced by those of us who follow Jesus.

The point of Jesus' teaching in Matthew 6:16-18 is the same as it was earlier in this chapter: motives matter. The believer is to be concerned with the motivation of the heart as it relates to doing good works. It is possible to have an outward appearance of righteousness while inwardly being selfish and sinful.

Other Scriptures from this week's reading:

- **Isaiah 58:1-10** (the prophet shares God's message to Israel that their religious practices are meaningless because they continue to oppress others)
- **Matthew 9:14-17** (Jesus tells John's disciples there is no reason to fast while he is present on earth)
- **Acts 13:1-3** (the Antioch church worshiped and fasted before God revealed to them that Barnabas and Saul should be set apart for a new work)
- **Acts 14:21-23** (Barnabas and Saul led a time of fasting and praying as they appointed elders in each church that had been planted)

Discussion Questions

1. After several weeks of focusing on Jesus's teachings about motives, how has God moved in your heart concerning this?
2. Have you fasted before? If so, share your experience with the group. If not, share a reason you've chosen not to fast.
3. In Isaiah 58, God issues an indictment of the Jewish people because they attempted to follow religious practices but were inwardly selfish and neglected to care for the people around them. Do you see this same problem in the church today? If you do see it, how do you think the church can do better at caring for people and emphasizing this as much as any religious practice?
4. What does Jesus's teaching in Matthew 9:14-17 teach you about fasting? How is fasting connected to times of mourning and intensely seeking God?
5. How can we as believers follow the examples of the early church leaders as they spent time in worship, fasting and prayer when they were seeking to set apart people for ministry (Acts 13:1-3, Acts 14:21-23)?
6. Sadly, we still battle our human nature and sometimes we put on an outward appearance of righteousness while remaining selfish and sinful inside. How do we fight against this? How would it transform our families, our churches, and our communities if we were more focused on being honest and open with our struggles against sin?