

Rev. Dustin Daniels | River Bible Church

Matthew 6:16-18 | Fasting

March 12, 2023

WELCOME:

- Please turn your Bibles to Matthew 6.
- Bibles in the back—our gift to you.

REVIEW:

We continue our verse-by-verse study of Matthew's Gospel this morning.

We are in the section of Matthew's Gospel called the Sermon on the Mount.

This sermon is by far the greatest sermon ever preached by the greatest preacher ever—our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

For the past several weeks, ~~we studied temptation.~~

Jesus has taught us what prayer is and what prayer is not.

And last Sunday, ~~we looked at the previous part of the Lord's prayer as Jesus taught us about temptation.~~

We learned about a crucial Greek word—*peirasmos*.

Temptation is *peirasmos* in Greek.

Peirasmos is a fascinating word because it's a neutral word meaning...

LW KEYPOINT 1:

Peirasmós (Biblical temptation) is used as either a testing for good or a temptation for evil.

LW KEYPOINT 2:

We have to endure the temptation to pass the test.

LW KEYPOINT 3:

Pleasure is the reason sin is uncontrollable.

So that's a brief review of our study of temptation within the Lord's Prayer.

INTRODUCTION:

Today, it appears that Jesus abruptly changes the subject in His sermon.

As He makes the transition from prayer to fasting.

Fasting = Abstain from food for a spiritual purpose.

But many of us already know that prayer and fasting are two sides of the same coin.

So fasting is an effortless transition from the the subject of prayer.

Now, I realize we may want to tune out today because fasting is a subject matter in which we have little to no interest.

Today, fasting is seen as a mortification of our bodies.

If we do fast, it's mainly because of vanity—lose some weight.

However, as Christians, it's not wise to ignore or disregard a spiritual discipline in our lives.

We have much to learn from Jesus' teaching on fasting.

The big picture when it comes to fasting is that fasting is to simplify our life so that we may focus more clearly on our spiritual walk with the Lord Jesus.

Although Biblically speaking, fasting generally refers to denying ourselves food for a short period of time—

There are other things in our lives that we can deny ourselves of—for the sole purpose of maturing in Christ.

And we'll take a look at those things as well.

If you would, please stand for the reading and honoring of God's Word.

SCRIPTURE: Matthew 6:16-18 CSB

Matthew 6:16— “Whenever you fast, don't be gloomy like the hypocrites. For they make their faces unattractive so that their fasting is obvious to people. Truly I tell you, they have their reward.

Matthew 6:17— But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face,

Matthew 6:18— so that your fasting isn't obvious to others but to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

And dear friends, these are the very words from the inerrant, inspired, and infallible Word of Almighty God.

PRAY:

*I have sought you with all my heart;
don't let me wander from your commands. (Psalm 119:10)*

EXEGESIS:

Matthew 6:16— *“Whenever you fast, don't be gloomy like the hypocrites. For they make their faces unattractive so that their fasting is obvious to people. Truly I tell you, they have their reward.*

Nēsteia (**fast**) means not eating or abstaining from food.

Nestevo

Whenever we read about genuine fasting in Scripture, we'll see that it is always linked with prayer.

KEYPOINT 1:

You can pray without fasting, but you cannot fast biblically without praying.

Fasting is a physical response to a supernatural conversation.

During Old Testament times, many people fasted—Moses, Samson, Samuel, Hannah, David, Elijah, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Daniel, and many others.

There are many different reasons these people fasted.

- People fasted because of their sin (Lev. 16:29–34; 23:26–32; Num. 29:7–11; Deut. 9:18; 1 Kings 21:27; Neh. 9:1 ff.; Dan. 9:3, 4; Jonah 3:5),
- or because they were sick or ill,
- defeat in battle (Judg. 20:26),
- grief, loss, or suffering (1 Sam. 31:13; 1 Chron. 10:11, 12; 2 Sam. 1:12),
- the hearing of bad news (Neh. 1:4),
- a supernatural plague because of sin (Joel 1:14; 2:12–15)—
- Their lives were threatened (2 Chron. 20:3, 5 ff.; Esther 4:3; 9:31).

Those are all legitimate and Biblical reasons to fast.

However, in the OT, the Lord only commanded one particular fast that took place once per year.

That fast is connected with the Day of Atonement.

Atonement is the means of reconciliation between God and His people.

“At-One.”

God reconciles, reunites, and restores the relationship between God and people through a very specific way—there is only one way to have this kind of restoration with God.

And that is through a blood sacrifice.

The Day of Atonement is when Israel cleansed the sanctuary of impurity and dealt with their sin through the sacrifice of animals.

+ **Leviticus 16:29 NLT**— On the tenth day of the appointed month in early autumn, you must deny yourselves. Neither native-born Israelites nor foreigners living among you may do any kind of work. This is a permanent law for you.

+ **Leviticus 16:30 NLT**— On that day, offerings of purification will be made for you, and you will be purified in the Lord's presence from all your sins.

+ **Leviticus 16:31 NLT**— It will be a Sabbath day of complete rest for you, and you must deny yourselves. This is a permanent law for you.

+ **Leviticus 16:32 NLT**— In future generations, the purification ceremony will be performed by the priest who has been anointed and ordained to serve as high priest in place of his ancestor Aaron. He will put on the holy linen garments

+ **Leviticus 16:33 NLT**— and purify the Most Holy Place, the Tabernacle, the altar, the priests, and the entire congregation.

+ **Leviticus 16:34** NLT— *This is a permanent law for you, to purify the people of Israel from their sins, making them right with the Lord once each year.*

The Day of Atonement within the OT was a national fast involving every man, woman, and child in Israel.

And the New Testament tells us of the fasting of Anna, John the Baptist and his disciples, Jesus, Paul, and numerous others.

However, by Jesus' time in the first century, fasting had become a ritual that consisted of two things.

First, it was a means to try and gain favor with God.

"God, if I fast for you, won't you do this or that for me?"

Secondly, it was a way to show others how spiritual they were.

As we have learned throughout the Sermon on the Mount, fasting was similar to praying and giving to the poor— it became a religious show for many Pharisees.

We see this in verse sixteen with fasting as well.

+ **Matthew 6:16**— *"Whenever you fast, don't be gloomy like the hypocrites.*

Don't be gloomy, don't look sad—don't make it obvious.

Jesus had no problem using the Pharisees as an example and calling them hypocrites, as He's done before.

A hypocrite is someone who wears a mask.

A hypocrite is on stage performing.

Verse sixteen is an excellent example of when I say, “God hates religion”—this is precisely what I’m referring to.

Religion in the sense that we’re trying to earn favor from God based on some kind of good deed.

And that’s precisely what the Pharisees were doing—

They weren’t fasting or praying—they were performing.

The Pharisees fasted each Monday and Thursday and did so in such a way that people knew they were fasting.

Their purpose was to impress others.

The Pharisees fasted on those days because they believed that they were the days that Moses made the two separate trips to receive The Ten Commandments from God on Mount Sinai.

But those two days also happened to be the busiest shopping days within the Jewish markets.

In other words, these two days just happened to have the largest audiences for everyone to see the Pharisee’s piety—what a coincidence!

Jesus calls them hypocrites because they would wear old clothes, mess up their hair, and cover themselves with dirt and ashes.

Some even went so far as to use makeup to look sick.

People still do this today in other belief systems as well.

There is a story about a so-called “holy man” in a far eastern city.

As a sign of his great humility, he covered himself with ashes.

Every day he would position himself on the most prominent street corner in the city and sit there all day.

As the story goes, when a tourist would come up to him and ask for his picture, he would take his ashes and smear them around on his face.

In commenting on this story, one commentator says this:

A great deal of religion amounts to nothing more than rearranging religious "ashes" to impress the world with one's supposed humility and devotion. The problem, of course, is that his humility is a sham, and the devotion is to self, not God. (John MacArthur)

KEYPOINT 2:

Fasting has no lasting spiritual benefit if your heart is not entirely devoted to God.

God speaks about true fasting in Isaiah 58.

Isaiah 58:1 NLT—Shout with the voice of a trumpet blast.

Shout aloud! Don't be timid.

Tell my people Israel of their sins!

Isaiah 58:2 NLT— Yet they act so pious!

They come to the Temple every day
and seem delighted to learn all about me.

They act like a righteous nation
that would never abandon the laws of its God.

They ask me to take action on their behalf,
pretending they want to be near me.

Isaiah 58:3 NLT— 'We have fasted before you!' they say.
'Why aren't you impressed?

We have been very hard on ourselves,
and you don't even notice it!

"I will tell you why!" I respond.

"It's because you are fasting to please yourselves.

Even while you fast,
you keep oppressing your workers.

Isaiah 58:4 NLT— What good is fasting
when you keep on fighting and quarreling?

This kind of fasting will never get you anywhere with me.

Isaiah 58:5 NLT— You humble yourselves
by going through the motions of penance,
bowing your heads

like reeds bending in the wind.

You dress in burlap
and cover yourselves with ashes.

Is this what you call fasting?

Do you really think this will please the Lord?

Isaiah 58:6 NLT— "No, this is the kind of fasting I want:

Free those who are wrongly imprisoned;

lighten the burden of those who work for you.

Let the oppressed go free,

and remove the chains that bind people.

Isaiah 58:7 NLT— Share your food with the hungry,
and give shelter to the homeless.

Give clothes to those who need them,

and do not hide from relatives who need your help.

+ **Isaiah 58:8** NLT— "Then your salvation will come like the dawn, and your wounds will quickly heal. Your godliness will lead you forward, and the glory of the Lord will protect you from behind.

So the Israelites were upset because God wasn't answering their prayers.

However, God does answer prayer when we're not trying to manipulate Him through our prayers, fasting, and good deeds.

We see this with Jonah.

+ **Jonah 3:1**—Then the Lord spoke to Jonah a second time:

+ **Jonah 3:2**— "Get up and go to the great city of Nineveh, and deliver the message I have given you."

+ **Jonah 3:3**— This time, Jonah obeyed the Lord's command and went to Nineveh, a city so large that it took three days to see it all.

+ **Jonah 3:4**— On the day Jonah entered the city, he shouted to the crowds: "Forty days from now Nineveh will be destroyed!"

+ **Jonah 3:5**—Then the people of Nineveh believed God. They proclaimed a fast and dressed in sackcloth—from the greatest of them to the least.

Sackcloth is a rough cloth made from animal hair, usually that of a goat or camel.

Similar to a burlap bag - very uncomfortable

People would wear this type of cloth to express repentance, lamentation and mourning.

+ **Jonah 3:6**— When word reached the king of Nineveh, he got up from his throne, took off his royal robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes.

Jonah 3:7— Then he issued a decree in Nineveh:
By order of the king and his nobles: No person or animal, herd or flock, is to taste anything at all. They must not eat or drink water.

Jonah 3:8— Furthermore, both people and animals must be covered with sackcloth, and everyone must call out earnestly to God. Each must turn from his evil ways and from his wrongdoing.

Jonah 3:9— Who knows? God may turn and relent; he may turn from his burning anger so that we will not perish.

Jonah 3:10— God saw their actions—that they had turned from their evil ways—so God relented from the disaster he had threatened them with. And he did not do it.

So God rewards people who come before Him with a soft repentant heart.

Does God reward those who put on a show with their fasting?

Matthew 6:16— “Whenever you fast, don't be gloomy like the hypocrites. For they make their faces unattractive so that their fasting is obvious to people. Truly I tell you, they have their reward.”

As with showy prayer and giving to the poor, there is no reward from God because other people have already applauded these folks—that's the reward.

Matthew 6:17— But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face,

Notice that Jesus said, “When you fast.”

He assumes His disciples will fast, just as He assumes they will give to the poor (Matt 6:2) and pray (Matt 6:5).

So please note that Jesus' statement reveals that fasting is normal and acceptable in the Christian life back then and today.

How do we know that it's appropriate to fast today?

+ **Matthew 9:14**— Then John's disciples (The Baptizer) came to Jesus, saying, "Why do we and the Pharisees fast often, but your disciples do not fast?"

+ **Matthew 9:15a**— Jesus said to them, "Can the wedding guests be sad while the groom is with them?"

Of course not. Weddings are not a place to be sad. Weddings are a place to party!

Weddings are a time of celebration and feasting!

+ **Matthew 9:15b**—The time will come when the groom will be taken away from them, and then they will fast.

Jesus assumes that we, in our time and culture, will fast on certain occasions for specific reasons because He is not physically with us.

But Jesus does not command or specify a particular time, place, or method.

+ **Matthew 6:17/18**— But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that your fasting isn't obvious to others *but to your Father who is in secret*

This was Jesus' way of saying, "Take a shower."

Look normal, don't draw attention to yourself by showing everyone how spiritual you are.

+ **Matthew 6:18**— *but to your Father who is in secret*. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

How are we rewarded at the end of our fast?

Our "reward" for fasting is, ironically ~~but wonderfully~~, a new deeper hunger and thirst for God.

Biblical Fasting will give you a larger appetite for God.

This is why the Puritans, who fasted a lot, called fasting "soul-fattening."

PREACH:

Let me address some practical matters when it comes to fasting.

Fasting has its ups and downs as a discipline.

KEYPOINT 3:

Start small and walk slowly. w/ any spiritual discipline but especially fasting.

Begin your time of fasting with prayer.

Ask the Lord how He wants you to fast.

Talk to your Brothers and Sisters about fasting.

-learn from them

Contact your doctor for any health-related issues.

When I say start small...baby steps.

Example:
Choose one meal to start with.

And then choose which day of the week to fast from that meal.

So to begin, you are fasting from one meal per week.

-not day

And fast from that one meal per week for the next 40 days.

Drink extra water as you do this.

And after 40 days, go back to the Lord and ask what your next step is.

KEYPOINT 4:

Fast prayerfully.

Before, During, After

As your stomach begins to cry out for food, pray.

Pray that the Lord Jesus will honor your fasting by allowing you to be drawn closer to him.

Fasting must center on God. It must be God-initiated and God-ordained.

KEYPOINT 5:

Fast secretly.

The reason the Pharisees fasted in public was that they were addicted to the praise of others.

The only people who need to know about your fasting are your spouse and doctor. *medal*

Nobody else needs to know.

KEYPOINT 6:

Fast humbly.

...I humbled my soul with fasting, (Ps 69:10 NRSV)

KEYPOINT 7:

Fast creatively.

For example, if a person with diabetes cannot fast for physical reasons, consider fasting from television. *something else.*

- Television
- TALK RADIO
- NEWS
- Social Media
- ↳ list goes on

Fasting is a broader issue than food.

So if we broaden the definition of fasting.

Fasting includes "abstinence from anything for the sake of a spiritual purpose."

Biblical

KEYPOINT 8:

Fasting is a means to an end.

Fasting is a way of saying goodbye to the power of our possessions.

As we go through the process of fasting, it should lead us to a specific question:

"Do I love God or do I love God for the earthly comforts and provisions that He provides?"

Is God my Heavenly Father or a cosmic genie?

KEYPOINT 9:

Fasting makes us consider what to do with our unhappiness.

On Wednesday nights, we are studying the Spiritual Disciplines within Spiritual Formation.

Richard Foster says,

"More than any other 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.

At first we'll rationalize that our anger is due to our hunger.

Then we'll realize that we are angry because the spirit of anger is within us.

We can rejoice in this knowledge because we know that healing is available through the power of Christ."

Healing of Anger, b. Herress, jealousy, strife, fear

Fasting helps us keep 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 they enslave us—this is something that Jesus addresses next week.

He moves into discussing our possessions, money, and the anxiety that comes from those worldly things.

So here's a question I would like you to ponder this week:

SLIDE:

What is the one thing you do that you know God doesn't like but puts up with for now?

Are you willing to take a few principles we discussed this morning and begin slowly fasting from that one thing?

PRAYER

BENEDICTION

Grace, mercy, and peace will be with us, from God the Father and from Jesus Christ the Father's Son, in truth and love. (2 John 3).

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