

## **Fasting, the Helpful Servant of Prayer**

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Matthew 6:16-18 (page 4 in the black Bibles)

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So far, the past three weeks we have seen the necessary attitudes that should go hand in hand with prayer. We saw from Acts 4:23-31 that desperation marked the believers' prayer.

In Matthew 6:1-8 we saw sincerity rather than hypocrisy was the attitude we need in prayer.

And last week, humility rather than pride was the attitude brought out in Matthew 6:7-15.

Today, we are going to look at Matthew 6:16-18 which like giving and prayer must be done with an attitude of sincerity if it is to be rewarded by our heavenly Father. Because prayer and fasting are seen in Scripture as often times practiced together, we see once again the attitude of desperation.

**Main Point:** Fasting, if done in the way that Scripture encourages, can be a practice that helps and supports prayer.

### **How is fasting the helpful servant of prayer?**

1. Fasting is the helpful servant of prayer in that fasting is a cry of desperation from the heart that we long for God and for His work to be done in our hearts and in the world. We want God and all that He is for us in Christ more than we want food or whatever it is from which we abstain.

2. Fasting along with God's word is also the helpful servant of prayer in that it can be effective in slaying the sins that so easily enslave us and prepare our hearts to meet with God. (1 Corinthians 6:12;

### **What is fasting?**

Fasting is abstaining from eating food for varying lengths of time. It can be done for physical, political and religious purposes.

### **Fasting in the Old Testament**

Day of Atonement – “deny yourselves”, humble your souls” or “afflict yourselves” (Lev. 16:29-31; 23:27-32) is traditionally understood as fasting.

In Psalm 35:13b, David writes that he “humbled my soul with fasting.”

In Isaiah 58:3 we read, “Why have we fasted and You do not see? Why have we humbled ourselves and You do not notice?”

In 2 Chronicles 20:3-4 we're told that "Jehoshaphat was afraid and turned his attention to seek the LORD, and proclaimed a fast throughout all Judah. So Judah gathered together to seek help from the LORD; they even came from all the cities of Judah to seek the LORD."

### **Fasting in the New Testament**

Anna fasted and prayed in the temple. (Luke 2:37)

John [the Baptist] came neither eating nor drinking..." (Matthew 11:18-19; Luke 9:14)

Jesus fasted in the wilderness (Matthew 4:1-2)

Pharisees fasted twice a week. (Luke 18:12, also in 9:14)

The believers fasted in Acts 13:2-3 and in 14:23.

### **Our Context:**

Matthew 6 starts with a warning. "Beware of practicing your righteousness before men to be noticed by them;" Giving alms, prayer and fasting are the three examples "of practicing your righteousness" that Jesus addresses in verses 2-18.

We have already looked at giving and prayer in verses 2-15. Today we are going to look at fasting in verses 16-18.

### **It is assumed that Jesus' followers will fast.**

Like giving and prayer, Jesus assumes that His disciples will fast.

"When you give" – (vv.2, 3); "when you pray" – (vv. 5, 6, 7); "when you fast" - (vv. 16-17)

1. Don't have as your motive to be noticed by men. (v. 16)

2. Let your motive be "not to be seen by men but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you." (vv. 17-18)

Also see Matthew 9:14-15. (Matthew 11:18-19)

14Then the disciples of John came to Him, asking, "Why do we and the Pharisees fast, but Your disciples do not fast?" 15And Jesus said to them, "The attendants of the bridegroom cannot mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them, can they? But the days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast."

**"Fasting is for times of yearning and aching and longing." (John Piper, A Hunger for God, p.36)**

The fasting that the followers of Jesus do is marked by the Lord no longer being with the physically. They will fast as an expression of that longing until he returns.

With this in mind let's go back to Matthew 6:16-18 and see how fasting supports prayer (Matthew 6:9-13) and fasting helps us to fight the fight against things that might distract us from trusting the Lord (Matthew 6:19-34)

### **Warning against the misuse of fasting.**

#### **Colossians 2:20-23**

<sup>20</sup>If you have died with Christ to the elementary principles of the world, why, as if you were living in the world, do you submit yourself to decrees, such as, <sup>21</sup>"Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch!" <sup>22</sup>(which all *refer to* things destined to perish with use)—in accordance with the commandments and teachings of men? <sup>23</sup>These are matters which have, to be sure, the appearance of wisdom in self-made religion and self-abasement and severe treatment of the body, *but are* of no value against fleshly indulgence.

#### **1 Timothy 4:1-5**

<sup>1</sup>But the Spirit explicitly says that in later times some will fall away from the faith, paying attention to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons, <sup>2</sup>by means of the hypocrisy of liars seared in their own conscience as with a branding iron, <sup>3</sup>*men* who forbid marriage *and advocate* abstaining from foods which God has created to be gratefully shared in by those who believe and know the truth. <sup>4</sup>For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with gratitude; <sup>5</sup>for it is sanctified by means of the word of God and prayer.

**Also see Isaiah 58.**

### **Application**

Although fasting is most often associated with food we can apply fasting to other things in our lives that will help us to express our longing for the Lord.

Even good gifts that we have from the Lord can become for us, if we are not careful, things that deaden us to the longing we should have for the Lord, and for His work in our lives and in longing for people around the world to know Him.

We can choose to fast from food or from television or social media or fill in the blank, to seek the Lord and pray for the lost people around us and around the world.

1 Corinthians 6:12 "All things are lawful for me, but not all things are profitable. All things are lawful for me, but I will not be mastered by anything."

We have started scheduling certain Sunday evenings for corporate prayer. Would you be willing during the month of October or even longer if you are led to, to fast and pray for Wahoo Bible Church, for your family and neighbors who have yet to trust in the Lord as their Savior, for the work of the gospel around the world?

Let's seek the Lord in prayer and fasting and see what the Lord might do to glorify His name in and through our lives and church to reach people with the gospel of the Lord Jesus.