

Matthew 6:16-18 (NKJV)

16 "Moreover, when you fast, do not be like the hypocrites, with a sad countenance. For they disfigure their faces that they may appear to men to be fasting. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward.

17 But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face,

18 so that you do not appear to men to be fasting, but to your Father who is in the secret *place*; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly.

I hope we have all enjoyed Al Mohler's exploration of the Lord's Prayer. I trust we have grown from the experience.

Over the years I have seen a bunch of outlines. I think this is a helpful one-

Adoration

Consecration

Supplication

Intercession

Protection

We are now continuing in our study on how we are to live our lives on planet earth in relationship to God. Remember that this is addressing **believers**.

We are still under the general heading of **acts of righteousness** described in verse 1 of Chapter 6.

The topic for today is **Fasting**.

When is last time you fasted solely because of a desire **to serve or please God**? When is the last time you cared about something that **only God could give you** that you gave up eating for a period of time?

I hope that your answers are better than mine to that question.

We are going to look at fasting this morning. And I hope it will be a positive encouragement to do this activity. I hope it helps us say, "I can see why a believer would **want** to do this. I can see how **I** want to do this."

We start out with the most obvious thing. Jesus says "**When** you fast". He does not say "**If** you fast". It is **assumed** that if you are a follower of Christ fasting is something you will do.

Jesus is silent about **how often** or **when** this is to be done. Or even **why**. He just says **when you do this thing** that you are sure to do.

When we read that we must pay attention.

Fasting is right up there with **doing a charitable deed** and **praying**, both assumed activities for a believer.

You can get the idea that it is just as likely for us **to fast** as it is for us to **pray** or **give** charitable gifts.

But before we begin trying to protect ourselves from what Jesus is saying... and isn't that the natural tendency? When Jesus says **we must do something we don't want to do**, don't we begin finding **exception** clauses and reasons we don't have to do it. Before we do this, we need to consider that maybe we are looking at it wrong. I hope that I am talking to **more than myself** when I say this.

When spiritual services, spiritual activities are given to us, they are truly blessings. They are gifts.

Do you not, in your heart of hearts, want your life to count for something? Do you not want to look back over the last week, or month, or year, or decade and say, **I was used by God**. My life, though far from perfect, was spent doing things that **furthered** the Kingdom of God. Hours were spent serving the needs of other believers. Hours were spent getting to know God better and getting to know His word better. Hours were spent imploring God to further His kingdom. Hours were spent proclaiming God's word **in relationships** or in **formal settings**.

That is all **wealth planning**. That is **treasure setting**. And ultimately fulfilling our spiritual purpose for living **makes us happy**. Not giddy happy all the time. But it provides a deep down knowledge that our lives count. God wants that happiness for us. So He has given us **means of carrying out** His purpose. I found out a long time ago how directly our **sense of worth** is tied to the **actual worth** of that **which we are pursuing**. **Our value is experienced based on the value of that which we are committed to**. If you live your life for your self, you are dedicated to something that grants little worth. So you feel little worth. If you live for Christ, you are living for that which is of greatest worth. And it translates into a **sense of worth**. Telling people how wonderful they are is not the path to improving their mental state. It doesn't work, I think, partly because, if we are smart at all, we know it isn't true. We know we need to live for something more important than the person we greet in the mirror every day.

I say all this to show how spiritual disciplines are **a gift** to us. I will grant they are wrapped funny. But they are gifts. They are packed with meaning. They give us activities that matter, that transport us beyond the mundane and here and now. Ultimately they are God's tools to **help us experience Him** and **this life** as we should. They are valuable. We can treat them as drudgeries. But when we do, we are not seeing them fully. When we view them properly, they will produce a gladness, just like in giving. **God loves a cheerful giver** and

God knows that the right reason for doing such a thing **gives** us this disposition. The right thinking about a spiritual service gives us joy **in the doing of it**. The same is true of fasting. When we are doing a thing for the right reason there is a sense of satisfaction in that thing. We have given it thought and determined that, no matter how difficult or unpleasant, it is that thing we have determined to be the highest thing we can do with that moment. And as such, it is the **best place** to be doing the **best thing** we can do.

OK so in general, what does the Bible say about fasting?

There was one appointed day in the law connected with the Day of Atonement. On that day everyone was commanded to fast. It was a day of getting very serious with God. It was an expression of humility and need for God's atonement. Since Christ fulfilled that atonement there is now no specific command to fast.

Even in the New Testament it is not commanded. It is not like charitable giving or prayer, which are both commanded. So fasting is primarily a voluntary act that one does for spiritual reasons.

We also know that John the Baptist's disciples fasted but Jesus's disciples did not regularly fast (even though Jesus fasted 40 days and nights in the wilderness)

Matthew 9:14-15 (NKJV)

14 Then the disciples of John came to Him, saying, "Why do we and the Pharisees fast often, but Your disciples do not fast?"

15 And Jesus said to them, "Can the friends of the bridegroom mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them? But the days will come when the bridegroom will be taken away from them, and then they will fast.

The disciples of John must have been confused about this. They were roughing it out in the wilderness. Their boss wore rugged outdoor gear and ate insects. And Jesus is eating and drinking with sinners and his disciples appear to have easy duty.

What is Jesus reason for his disciples **not fasting**? Essentially it is this. Their circumstances are such, right now, that they do not need to fast. They have no reason to fast. But they will. Oh they will.

And what were their circumstances? They were living in the very presence of God. If they wanted to be closer to God, they could change where they were sitting. It was as good as it would get for them.

We can learn a great deal from this. The goal of fasting is not to fast. The goal is to accomplish something that has to do with a need we have. And it stems

from Christ not being in the room next over. We fast because we need something of Jesus that the disciples already had when Christ was with them. So what can we learn about why and how people fasted in scripture?

Psalm 35:13 (NKJV)

13 But as for me, when they were sick, My clothing was sackcloth; I humbled myself with fasting; And my prayer would return to my own heart.

David prayed when his enemies were sick. So his fast had to do with his prayer for their wellbeing.

Zechariah 7:5 (NKJV)

5 "Say to all the people of the land, and to the priests: 'When you fasted and mourned in the fifth and seventh *months* during those seventy years, did you really fast for Me--for Me?

Here we see the people of Israel were going through the motions but whatever reasons they were fasting **did not please God at all**. They clearly were doing this thing, but not for the right reasons. How do we know? Look further.

Zechariah 7:9-10 (NKJV)

9 "Thus says the LORD of hosts: 'Execute true justice, Show mercy and compassion Everyone to his brother.

10 Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, The alien or the poor. Let none of you plan evil in his heart Against his brother.'

It is very clear that fasting is not some kind of thing we can do that will substitute for, or cover, sins that we are doing. It is worthless if it is done while we are living in broken fellowship with our Father due to sinful attitudes. Fasting may be effective at obtaining God's convicting work in our hearts regarding our sin, but it will never work as a substitute for repentance. It can be used in conjunction with repentance but not as a substitute for it.

Isaiah 58:5-9 (NKJV)

5 Is it a fast that I have chosen, A day for a man to afflict his soul? *Is it* to bow down his head like a bulrush, And to spread out sackcloth and ashes? Would you call this a fast, And an acceptable day to the LORD?

6 "Is this not the fast that I have chosen: To loose the bonds of wickedness, To undo the heavy burdens, To let the oppressed go free, And that you break every yoke?

7 *Is it* not to share your bread with the hungry, And that you bring to your house the poor who are cast out; When you see the naked, that you cover him, And not hide yourself from your own flesh?

⁸ Then your light shall break forth like the morning, Your healing shall spring forth speedily, And your righteousness shall go before you; The glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard.

⁹ Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer; You shall cry, and He will say, 'Here I am.' "If you take away the yoke from your midst, The pointing of the finger, and speaking wickedness,

Again we see how God views a fast. A fast must represent a congruent desire in the “faster” to more greatly please and serve God. It is couched in humility and honesty. It cannot be a charade. Charades just makes God angry. We cannot **know** what pleases God, choose to **do otherwise**, and think that a fast will somehow be received in a positive light. The fast has to **represent** our desire to please God, not be **an exception** to our **true** desire, which is for something else.

Now quickly scanning the New Testament we know that the apostles did it. The church of Antioch fasted and prayed prior to sending out Paul and Barnabas. The early church of Acts often fasted in the face of important decisions. When Paul talked about his life he said he fasted often.

But why?

Could God not hear them if their bellies were full? Did God desire some kind of suffering before He would respond? Clearly those ideas are foolish when we look at what God says about Himself.

I believe if we were to look at every passage in scripture about fasting, fasting is always couched in **intense desire** to **relationally connect** with God for the purpose of receiving something from God that is important to God and us. Sometimes people fasted for God’s guidance on a decision they had to make. Sometimes people fasted for God to bless the endeavors they were carrying out in a sincere effort to serve Him. Sometimes people fasted to obtain a provision that only God could give them. Sometimes people fasted in their deep repentance with a desire that they could be truly changed and fellowship could be completely restored.

But all of these things were couched in intense desire to **connect with God** in some way. The fasting was not a show or a performance or an act designed to twist God’s arm in some way. No, it is a **congruent gesture** that displays an **inward heart desire**.

MacArthur says

Genuine fasting is simply a part of concentrated, intense prayer and concern for the Lord, His will, and His work.

With that said, we must look at what it is not. Fasting is not seen to be some kind of tool with which we can **barter with God** or **twist His arm**. It is not

some spiritual mumbo jumbo that we can do and God is suddenly obligated to be ungodlike.

It is not a discipline we put on our schedule and then carry it out because it is on our schedule. It is an **exceptional** thing, not a **normal** thing. It is not a way that God wants to starve all His children. No it is an exceptional thing only done when it represents our heart's desire for more of God. I think that might be a simple way of saying what fasting is all about. It is about **having more of God** because that is what we most want, even more than food.

Mr Jones tells us that fasting should always be seen as a **means to an end** rather than **the end itself**. We are never fasting to fast. We are fasting as an expression of something we want more than the fast.

He makes a good point that we should not see fasting as a means of disciplining our selves. His point is that we must discipline ourselves all the time, every moment. But we are not to always fast. Fasting is an exception to the rule. It is not the rule. Fasting is reserved for special occasions of special need or desire.

He says this:

I must discipline myself at all times, and must fast only when I feel led by the Spirit of God to do so, when I am intent on some mighty spiritual purpose, not according to rule, but because I feel there is some peculiar need of an entire concentration of the whole of my being upon God and my worship of Him. That is the time to fast, and that is the way to approach the subject.

Now it is important that we keep our text in context. Christ was not addressing the **need to fast** or **when** it should be done by a believer. He was talking about the **abuse** of fasting. And He tells a believer **HOW** to do it the **right** way. Again He does not talk about WHY. He talks about HOW.

Since fasts are a doing without a permissible thing for a purely spiritual motive, they are not difficult to understand. It is not hard at all to know what a fast is. Most often it is doing without food and only drinking water. Daniel had a fast from meat. A fast could be a denial of most anything that is permissible if done for the purpose of having more of God.

So what a fast **is** is not a difficult concept.

It might be good to note that a fast done for a non spiritual motive may be a good thing. But we should not confuse it with the fasting Christ is talking about. We can feel free to talk about that kind of fasting with others because it is not spiritual. There is a very effective diet out now that has one fasting from the end of supper to noon the following day. A lot of people lose weight with

that. But the most heathen person alive can do that and lose weight. It is not spiritual fasting.

Ok lets look at our text again.

16 "Moreover, when you fast, do not be like the hypocrites, with a sad countenance. For they disfigure their faces that they may appear to men to be fasting. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward.

I think the phrase "**that they may appear to man**" is the main gist of this passage. Motive is revealed. They are fasting because there is an audience they can fast in front of. If there **was no audience** there would **be no fasting**. This has nothing to do with God. This person does not want more of God. He wants more of **man's praise**. So whatever praise he gets from man is all the reward he will receive.

What we have here is a picture of play acting. The person is pretending to have a sad countenance. It will help him have more of an effect on the onlookers. If he was happy, the audience would not regard him as being spiritual. But if he is miserable he will be perceived as paying a great spiritual price.

Have you ever caught yourself playing this game? Maybe you have a fight with your spouse. Do you find yourself putting on a face long after the prior turmoil is over. That is easily a form of hypocrisy. It is play acting. It is dishonesty. It is game playing instead of honest communication. And it leads to a lingering break in fellowship instead of a restoration of it.

It is funny when little children do it because it is so obvious. But when adults do it it can be devastating to relationships. When we put on a sad countenance, not because we are sad, but because being sad will give us some kind of power over the other person, that is devilish. And it will lead to no good. Congruence is what believers shoot for. Not games. Not dishonesty. Disfiguring their faces is just more of the same. It is so very hard to remain congruent. Our flesh won't do it. It **does not want** to do it. Honesty isn't the goal in flesh. Self worship is. So if it requires disfiguring a face, that is a small price to pay to manipulate those around us. Dishonesty knows no bounds when self is on the throne, when the goal is to get those around us to worship us. But that is not what Christ calls us to.

17 But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face,

18 so that you do not appear to men to be fasting, but to your Father who is in the secret *place*; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly.

Do we get this? It isn't hard at all. It is none of the audience's business to know those things we do for the Lord. So keep it secret as much as you are able. For your sake.

I think it is interesting that Jesus does not tell us to appear to be either happy or sad. There is no need to **pretend** anything. We are not play acting being happy when we are miserable. No. There is **zero need** to act at all. We are not told to act incongruent. But we are not to broadcast what we are doing to those for whom it is none of their business what we are doing.

What Jesus is advising is for us to take our showers and wear our deodorant just like we normally would. Do not put unnecessary clues out there to stir up people's interest in what is different about us.

The idea is not to play act that we are not fasting. The idea is to go about life like normal so we are not communicating that which is between us and God.

The Pharisees had to put a great effort into **image**. They were concerned about self, how self looks, how it is perceived, how it is imaged.

The believer is just the opposite. He wants to go **unnoticed**. He wants his spiritual status to be between him and the only One who needs to know.

To do otherwise would be kind of like sharing a friend's secret to unrelated parties. Why would you do such a thing except to **impress someone** that you actually have friends that trust you. It is absurd. That is the flavor you get in the text. It is unnecessary and unhelpful and duplicitous. So.... don't do it.

And then let's end with the last statement in the text.

your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly.

Why do anything that gives a temporal reward when the same action can give an eternal reward?

That is the million dollar question.

When we fast,

when we go without something for the only reason of having more of God for some reason

When we fast for that reason, God promises that **He will reward it**. Will He always give what we ask? Maybe not. It depends upon if that which we ask for is **in Jesus's name**, if it represents the interests of Christ.

But from what I can gather, just **the fasting** done by a heart desperate for God will **receive a reward**.

Look at that. Even when we ask for the wrong thing in the right way it gets rewarded. What can be better than that.

This is what I was alluding to earlier. Look at the **goodness** of fasting here. It is a gesture displaying our desperation for God. We do not have to get

everything perfect. But God will respond by **rewarding** us. It may be now **and** later. It may **just** be later. But a reward is assured.

Can you see what I was saying about the reasons to **look forward** to doing this and to doing this cheerfully?

When God is issuing reward we can rest assured, He will never, like an employer, miss a believers hours on the paycheck. We do not need to fear anything we truly do in Christ's service **will be missed**. There will be no inequity. The reward is certain and it is a perfect reward for the service done. And that is the reasoning that Christ gives us to inspire doing those acts of righteousness. What could be better?

So is there an area of your life where you need something that only God can do? Is there someone in your life who needs something only God can do? Have you considered fasting. We cannot miss the obvious logic here that this is an opportunity to transform what would just have been another set of meals into an eternal reward of some sort. How good is that? God may grant both the **thing we request** and reward us for **the method in which** we ask. That truly is the kind of God we serve.