

The Purpose of Biblical Fasting

By Don Green

sermonaudio.com

Bible Text: Matthew 6:16-18
Preached on: Sunday, September 10, 2017

Truth Community Church
4183 Mt. Carmel Tobasco Road
Cincinnati, OH 45255

Website: truthcommunitychurch.org
Online Sermons: www.sermonaudio.com/tcomm

For our message today, we're going to turn to Matthew 6, beginning in verse 16. For those of you that are visiting with us, we have been preaching verse-by-verse through the Sermon on the Mount for quite a while and we've just come naturally in our verse-by-verse exposition to Matthew 6, beginning in verse 16, where Jesus addresses the matter of his disciples and the whole topic of fasting. Matthew 6:16, we'll read the next 3 verses to set the text in our mind as we begin. Jesus said in verse 16,

16 Whenever you fast, do not put on a gloomy face as the hypocrites do, for they neglect their appearance so that they will be noticed by men when they are fasting. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. 17 But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face 18 so that your fasting will not be noticed by men, but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you.

Now, whenever I have the occasion to teach on this passage or teach on the topic of fasting, I like to start out by acknowledging a reality that I think is universal. When you teach on the topic of fasting in a Christian church, it has the tendency to make people defensive because they're never quite sure exactly where you're going to go, whether you're going to be chastened because you don't fast or the expectations and demands are going to be laid upon you that you need to fast this way or that and this often. We're not used to the idea of fasting, generally speaking, and when a man or a teacher starts to talk about it, we never know quite exactly where he's going to go with it and so what I wanted to do this morning was to start out by putting your mind completely at ease. There is no hook at the end of this sermon. There is no waiting in the shadows back behind the platform, there is nothing waiting to pull out to make a demand on you to fast or not to fast. That has nothing to do with our topic today. In fact, I'll go so far to say this at the start just to put your mind at ease: if you don't want to fast, don't fast. Now that may sound kind of funny coming from a Christian pastor, but I think that it's totally justified by what Jesus teaches in the tenor of Scripture. Beloved, if you don't want to fast, don't fast, and so I say that simply to put your mind at ease so that we're able to consider what Jesus is teaching us here with a receptive heart, with a non-defensive heart, and to just get the full benefit of God's word from what the text says to us. I have no agenda that I'm going to spring on you in the last five minutes whatsoever. What I will say, however, is this: that understanding biblical fasting will do wonders for your spiritual life whether

you skip a few meals or not. To understand the purpose of fasting, the way that Jesus is protecting the discipline of fasting in this passage has far more to do than the momentary cessation of food intake or anything like that.

So what we want to do today and also next week, we're going to cover this text in two messages here, what we want to do this week is consider the purpose of biblical fasting today and then next week consider the practice of biblical fasting and what I would say is this, is that this message will generate different responses among you depending upon your circumstances and I am more than content to allow the Holy Spirit to apply it to your heart as he sees fit and that's the spirit with which we are approaching this wonderful text from Jesus.

Let me define fasting as we start this morning. Fasting is the voluntary abstinence from food for spiritual purposes. Fasting is a voluntary cessation of eating for spiritual purposes. That's all that we mean by fasting and what I want you to see as we come to this passage is to realize the context in which Jesus presents it to us. This is so very important to understand because Jesus' primary point in this passage is not about fasting at all, it's rather about how you carry yourself as one of his disciples and that's quite easy to see as we remember the context of verses that we've studied in the past.

Look at Matthew 6:1. We're kind of getting our bearings and approaching the runway for a landing on this text based on the context that Jesus has provided for us. In Matthew 6:1, Jesus said, ""Beware of practicing your righteousness before men to be noticed by them; otherwise you have no reward with your Father who is in heaven." That functions as kind of a topic sentence, a topic verse, that guides our understanding in the 18 verses that follow. Jesus is primarily teaching us about how to carry ourselves and not to use our practice of righteousness as a means of calling attention to ourselves. That is the primary point, he is primarily teaching against hypocrisy and now what he does is he goes and he illustrates it with various ways where hypocrisy can manifest itself amongst the people of God.

So look at verse 2, for example there, he says, "So when you give to the poor," when you're giving, he says, "do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be honored by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full." He says, "You see what these men are doing as they are calling attention to their giving and how generous they are? Understand that all they're doing, it's not a spiritual act, it's not a vertical act at all, they are simply seeking attention and approval and applause from men. They're hypocrites. They are pretending to be one thing when actually they are just lovers of applause and they are proud in their heart; they're not actually generous, they're doing this for a reason so that they can get praise from men," he says. So he says, "Beware of practicing your righteousness before men. Think about it in the area of giving, don't do this."

He goes on and in verse 5 he says, "When you pray, you are not to be like the hypocrites." Do you see the theme that's coming on? Do you see how he's illustrating his bigger point with giving, with praying? He says in verse 5, "When you pray, you are not

to be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on the street corners so that they may be seen by men." Verse 2 he said they're doing this giving so that they can be honored by men. Verse 5, they're praying simply so that they'll be seen by men; that they want other people to see them being spiritual, other people to see them supposedly being godly. And he labels that as hypocrisy, something that has no reward with God whatsoever, something that the people of God are to avoid like the plague.

Now, when you come to verse 16, then, you see him repeating this theme once again, teaching against hypocrisy. So he says there in verse 16, look at it with me, he says, "Whenever you fast, do not put on a gloomy face as the hypocrites do, for they neglect their appearance so that they will be noticed by men when they are fasting." You see, people have different ways, don't they? Sometimes you and I have our ways of looking like we're doing one thing but we have a way of calling attention to ourselves as we do it with the hopes that someone will congratulate us, will say, "Wow, I wish I was like you. Aren't you somebody spiritual?" We're all exposed by this. We're all guilty of this to one degree or another and Jesus labels it all for what it is, it is hypocrisy. It is using spiritual disciplines in order to get praise from men rather than actually seeking to be someone who is a private vertical worshiper of God himself. So Christ is warning us against the sin of hypocrisy in this passage, illustrating it with giving, with prayer, and with fasting and that's the context that we come to it today; that this is about hypocrisy, not specifically about, it is about fasting but it's in the broader context of hypocrisy.

Now, how could it be that fasting would give itself over to this kind of hypocrisy? Well, what I want to do this morning, first of all, is to just give you the pattern of fasting so that we can understand the biblical pattern that had been established by the time that Jesus was giving this teaching so that you can understand what fasting was meant to be to Jesus' first century audience. So the pattern of fasting, if you're taking notes, would be your first point for this morning and Jesus was teaching on the basis of the Old Testament. He had said, in fact look at it there with me, he says in chapter 5, verse 17, Jesus said, "Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass from the Law until all is accomplished." Then he goes on and we've examined that teaching at length in the subsequent part of Matthew 5 in days gone by. I mention that simply for you to remember that Jesus is teaching in the context of saying, "I have come to fulfill the purpose of the Old Testament. I've come to explain its true meaning. I've come to fulfill its requirements and that is why I'm here. I'm not here to abolish it, I'm here to fulfill it." So he has the spirit and the mind of the Old Testament animating his thinking as he is teaching us throughout the Sermon on the Mount and specifically on the matter of fasting here this morning.

Well, what was the pattern of fasting in the Old Testament, then? That would inform what our expectations would be. Now, here's an important pivot in the message, a very important pivot in the message. I'll state a principle and then I'll illustrate it with you with some passages here. In the Old Testament, there was one required fast in the book of Leviticus on the Day of Atonement. All the other fasting in the Old Testament was a

voluntary act and that voluntary fasting is the focus of what Jesus is talking about here today, and that voluntary fasting was designed to do this: this voluntary fasting as you read through the Old Testament on it, it was expressing a mournful and an urgent seeking of God. A mournful urgent seeking of God in distressing circumstances. I'll say it one more time because that's really important: it was a mournful urgent seeking of God in distressing circumstances. And it's those voluntary fasts that are the focus of our attention here this morning and it is here where as we understand the Old Testament we start to see parallels to our own spiritual lives and where fasting might be particular and appropriate for us. Fasting, beloved, was expressing a deep profound dependence on God. It was often done in conjunction with prayer and it was based on a spiritual need that had no easy answer to it. A deep dependence on God for a profound spiritual need that had no human answer to it, no human explanation, no way of getting through the time.

So there is this mournful urgency that is attached to fasting in the Old Testament. Without turning to the passages, I'll give you a few examples of that to show you what I mean. You remember when David's son by Bathsheba was dying, David was fasting and he wept for his dying child. The circumstances were beyond his control. He could not rescue that child on his own. That child's life was in God's hands and David did not want to see him die. He was mournful. It was urgent because the physical distress of the infant was severe and so he fasted and he wept and he sought God in prayer. This was a matter of life and death that he was facing.

In the book of Esther 4, the Jews were faced with a proclamation from the king that authorized their destruction at the hands of their enemies and what did they do? They fasted. They turned to fasting because they were facing national extermination authorized by the king. A situation totally beyond their control, beyond life and death, in great urgency fasting in order to seek deliverance from God.

In Jonah 3, you may remember Jonah after he had been burped out of the whale, went and preached to Nineveh and they responded. The king responded, he said, "Yet 40 days and Nineveh will be judged. Nineveh will be overthrown." And under a convicting work in the Old Testament of the Holy Spirit, that city repented and they fasted saying, "Perhaps God will relent and spare us from this judgment that has been declared upon us." Urgent mournful seeking of God, a fast indicating judgment is upon us, judgment will be severe. We cannot save ourselves and so they turn to fasting to express the mournful urgency of their heart.

That's the spirit of voluntary fasting. In each case and others that could be mentioned, the fast was revolving around urgent life and death matters, matters of spiritual judgment, matters of national judgment, matters of a family member clinging to life and there is nothing that you can do for it. That's the sense of fasting. That's the picture that the Old Testament portrays with it, is it is associated with this deep sense of urgency.

Now, let's take that and compare it to the practice that Jesus describes there in Matthew 6:16 and all of a sudden you get an idea of how repulsive it is in the eyes of God for people to use that manner of fasting, that symbol of fasting, that seeking of God in

fasting, and to pervert that and turn that not because they were genuinely seeking God, but simply because they wanted people like you to applaud them and say, "Wow, he must really be serious about his spiritual life if he's fasting." So they did things in order to call attention. They would make their face dirty. They would not take care of themselves. They would not go through normal hygiene so that they stood out from the common folk and people say, "Oh, what's going on with him? What's going on with you?" "Oh well, I'm fasting. I'm seeking the Lord." "Ooo, wow. I should be like that too, I guess. I'm not spiritual like you."

You see, the spirit of the Old Testament fast expressed in Joel 2, the minor prophet that I hope one day in the future to teach as well, in Joel 2, it says this, it says, "'Yet even now,' declares the LORD, 'Return to Me with all your heart, And with fasting, weeping and mourning; And rend your heart and not your garments.'" The fasting was designed to be an expression of an inner turning, an inner profound repentance, of a turning to God in desperation and faith, calling out to him in a time of crisis. Well, the Pharisees had no crisis going on other than the fact that they hadn't been stroked enough to satisfy their pride. Scripture describes it as fasting with weeping and mourning and a matter that is expressing an inner compulsion, an inner overturning of heart that can be expressed in no other way. That's the spirit of true fasting. It was expressing a sense of mournful spiritual urgency commensurate with the dire circumstances.

You can think about it this way just to really, maybe at the risk of oversimplifying it, but normally what do we do? Normally what we do is we eat. We get up in the morning, we eat breakfast, maybe we eat lunch, maybe we eat supper. For those of you from other places, you eat dinner which could also be lunch. But you know in our normal routine, we eat because our bodily functions require it and that's just the routine of life that we're in. We eat because that's the pattern. That's normal life and that's a good thing and that's the way that it should be. We enjoy every good and perfect gift as a gift from God, from the Father above coming down, and that includes the way he provides for our bodily needs. Praise God! He's so good to us.

But there are times where the normal pattern is broken by events that are beyond our control. All of a sudden a loved one is in the hospital and the matter is urgent and life and death hang in the balance. Perhaps there are other massive circumstances bearing down on your life. You have a young person, you have a child of yours that is straying, that is rebellious against Christ and against you and is breaking your heart and you're concerned for the long term outcome of their soul, you're concerned of the direction and events come up and just make this so obvious and they're just so hard-hearted and you're dealing with the immediate consequences of that and your heart is rent in two for sake of love of the one that you gave birth to. You get the news and you go to the hospital and your loved one is gone at the age of 49 and the nurse has ushered you out of the emergency room. Time to zip up the bag, sorry to be so crass about it, but this is where real life hits. You have given your last stroke to the hair and it's time to leave the physical presence of the body that the soul has already departed.

Urgent matters beyond life and death, beyond ordinary circumstances, things that are utterly out of your control, this is where the spirit of fasting is appropriate. This is where there is that urgency, "O God! My child! O God! What about them? O God! I feel the weight of my sin and I see that I am under judgment, that I am under the wrath of God and suddenly Scripture just condemns me and shows me my spiritual bankruptcy and my multiplied guilt and all of my sins are open before you! God, if I die in this condition, I will go straight to hell because for the first time, I don't know, I'm seeing it clearly now, Lord! I realize that I am under the judgment of God and this is distressing and this is beyond life and death." You get the picture. Spiritual reality: death and profound urgency have invaded life so that normal life is no longer the right response. Normal life – get it this way – normal life is not designed to rise to the occasion of that kind of spiritual crisis. Ordinary eating and drinking and doing won't do because the reality is something greater than what you're accustomed to.

It's in that circumstance where Scripture shows people, those kinds of circumstances where Scripture shows people fasting as an expression of their seeking of God. You don't need in those times, let's put it this way, we'll talk about this more next week: in those times, you don't need a preacher, you don't need somebody in a book instructing you on what you can and cannot eat and how long the fast will be, your mind is way past those kinds of superficialities because you are dealing with urgencies that transcend the situation and there is a natural abstaining of food that takes place. "Do you know what? I just don't feel like eating right now. I just want to get alone with the Lord." That kind of thing.

Now, we can illustrate this from the other side, what I'm saying. If you'll turn over just a page to Matthew 9:14, just shortly after Matthew recorded Jesus' teaching on fasting, he tells an account in Jesus' life where Jesus addressed the matter of fasting from a different perspective. Matthew 9:14, the disciples of John came to Jesus asking, "Why do we and the Pharisees fast, but Your disciples do not fast?" And Jesus said to them, "The attendants of the bridegroom cannot mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them, can they?" You see, he raises the point of fasting and associates it with mourning. He says fasting is an expression of mourning. Well, on a wedding day when a man and woman have been joyfully united together, that's not a time for mourning, that's a time for rejoicing. That's for celebration. That's for feasting. This is a time for joy. This is a time for celebration. It's a time for food, to share in the joy. And his point here is, "My disciples have me with them. They're not supposed to be fasting and mournful when the Prince of Peace is here in human flesh with them. That would be an utter contradiction of the spirit of fasting," he says. "Incidentally, the time will come when I depart. They'll fast then. There will be a time for it but the time for fasting is not the time when rejoicing is appropriate."

So he isolates it. You see, fasting was never intended to be just this monolithic thing that you just did as a matter of routine. There are times where it's appropriate and times where it is not. So the idea of fasting is that there are inevitably, those of you that are going through it, those of you maybe younger who are still on the front end of these times of crises in your life, but inevitably there are urgent times in your life where your dependence on God is especially heightened, where circumstances strip you of your self-

sufficiency, circumstances strip you of your ability to say, "I can handle this. I've got this," and you're in a position where you have nowhere to look but up.

Now, I think that it's a good time for us to step back and say, see the positive side of what that means to us. Do you realize...let me say this first. Sometimes fasting is presented in this way. I can only describe the spirit of it. Sometimes it's presented this way, that if we fast really hard, maybe we can force the hand of a reluctant God to bless us. I detest that perspective and I detest that view of God as if our human rituals can make him more willing to bless us than he already is. Hasn't he already shown us how much he is ready to bless us when he sent the Lord Jesus Christ? Hasn't he shown us his love and care sufficiently when Christ was spilling his blood and said, "Father, forgive them, they don't know what they're doing"? Hasn't he already shown his willingness to bless you if you're a Christian here today? That he has caused you to be born again to a living hope? That he has blessed you again and again and in many times where you weren't even asking? Isn't that true? Isn't that what God is like? God is love. God is gracious. God is kind. God is merciful. Out with this suggestion that we need to force his hand in order to get a few dribbles of blessing out of him. That's not worthy of God to think that way. That's not what fasting is about.

In fasting, you're heightened even more to your creaturelyness, your sinfulness, your mortality, your lack of control, and you're casting yourself all the more, "God, I am dependent upon you here today." And what should that tell us? What should all of those Old Testament illustrations that we looked at, what did God do to Nineveh? He blessed them. He forgave their sins. What did he do with the Jews? He rescued them. With David? He lost his son at that time but God was with him in the remainder of his royal reign, even though he bore the consequences of his sin. God delivered. God delivered. God delivered.

What does fasting remind us of? What does our sense of dependence remind us of? It should bring your mind to this, beloved: that the God of the Bible is a God of deliverances. The God of the Bible is a saving God. The God of the Bible is a God who hears prayer and answers it and responds to it. So the mere fact that circumstances press us to look up should simultaneously remind us as we're looking up that this God is worth seeking, this God is worth having his blessing because he is a God, he alone who can deliver me from the extremity of my situation. So the urgency causes you to look to God and to clear away misconceptions and to remember the omnipotent power of his right hand to save us no matter what the circumstance may be. If you're looking to him under conviction of sin, that he's a God who would save a sinner ever just like you. Call out to him. He's gracious. He's merciful. It reminds us that he is a God who can be found in our time of crisis and that's a great comfort to us. So when our urgency is heightened, we see what the spirit behind fasting is, it's to seek God.

Now, I told you I wasn't going to...I'm not asking you to fast here, I just want to help you understand something: that in that time of spiritual urgency that comes upon you, whether or not you choose to literally fast at that time, the purpose behind fasting, the pattern of fasting, is for you to seek God profoundly and perhaps God has dislodged you from your

comfort zone in order to sanctify you, to wean you a little bit more from your love for this world, your love for human praise, your love for comfort, so that you would be in a position where you learn more experientially to be satisfied in him and in him alone; to find in Christ your all-sufficiency. "Lord, I have you. I need nothing else." If Christ is Lord and Christ is sufficient, that's where we come out. "Oh but, Lord, my heart is so broken and I've got to have you!"

Here's another, looking at this from another angle. I like to do that, don't I? Just looking at these things from all kinds of different angles. Okay, you're in the midst of the kind of crisis that we described earlier. Here's what the principles of fasting remind you of. Say it with compassion, say it with understanding that life can be very very difficult but we owe this to our Christ what I'm about to say. In those times, beloved, you cannot allow yourself to surrender to fear, you cannot allow yourself to forget your faithful God. The purpose of fasting drives you to seek him and you come to that spirit of urgency and you say, "I'm not going to forget my God. I'm going to seek him all the more in the midst of this crisis that I'm facing." And somewhere along the line, we trust that the Holy Spirit will bring to your mind thoughts like these, "My Christ is all-sufficient for me in this crisis."

Christ cares for you. Don't you see that, beloved? Don't you see it? Can you possibly in your mind look to Calvary, look to him spilling his blood, look to him crying out to God having been forsaken by his Father as he bore the wrath of God for your sin, don't you see that when you look at the cross, you see the care of God unanswerably displayed for you? You say, "I rest in that. Of course my God cares for me. This situation is more than I can bear but I know this, I don't know how this situation comes out but I know this, I know my God cares for me. When the days are weary, the long nights dreary, I know my Savior cares." So you seek for him in that way. You seek for him with a confidence that he may be found and that he is to be found. And you seek him with a confidence that in his time and his way, he will help you. Fasting reminds us of that.

So, you see, when we consider the totality of what fasting means, fasting is giving expression – watch this – fasting is giving expression to an earnest disposition of soul. It's earnest. There is no hypocrisy marked by it. You know, this is a seeking of God with the total man seeking him for help in your time of need. Fasting can be ancillary to that. That's the purpose of fasting.

Now, with that little bit of long introduction, let's go back to Matthew 6 and look at the protection of fasting that Jesus gives. We've seen the purpose of fasting expressed in the pattern of Old Testament examples, let's look at the protection of fasting that Jesus gives, protecting it as a discipline and protecting us from wrong thinking about it.

Well, go back, look back to verse 16 with me remembering what we said earlier in giving and prayer and in fasting, Jesus is illustrating a greater point: don't practice your righteousness before men. Don't abuse this pattern of fasting and turn it into something that's earthly and carnal and motivated by pride. So he says in verse 16, he says, "Whenever you fast, do not put on a gloomy face as the hypocrites do, for they neglect

their appearance so that they will be noticed by men when they are fasting. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full." Verse 16. The Pharisees were fasting but you see this, beloved, there was no intrinsic merit in the act of fasting at all. Go back to what Joel said, the prophet Joel, "Rend your heart and not your garments." Not external but something internal. Well, the Pharisees were going through this external game just designed to call attention to themselves and what Jesus tells us as his disciples is, he says, "Don't do that. Don't be like that. Don't turn things that are meant to be expressions of faith, expressions of contrition, expressions of seeking God, don't do that and turn it into something where you're seeking something from men." It's better not to fast than to do that. It's better to eat a good meal than to fast as a hypocrite. I'll be so bold as to say it's better not to pray than to pray as a hypocrite and to just stand before people or call attention to yourself in public, in a small group, on social media, where you're just saying, "Look at me. Look at my hands lifted up to the name on high. I'm waving them, do you see? You can see me, right?" Don't do that. It would be better to just stay home in a closet than to do that and to turn supposed acts of worship into a manifestation of simply self-love, self-display and a love for the praise of men.

Jesus says, look at verse 16 with me again, he says, "they neglect their appearance so that men will notice them." And he says, "I say to you, they have their reward in full." What he means by that, we've said this in the past, it's the picture of a paid receipt saying you've done something, here's your receipt for it. So Jesus is saying, "When they fast in this way, when they neglect themselves and when men notice them and praise them, that's all that it's going to be. It's just that human applause in the moment that has nothing to do with God. There is no reward from God waiting for them having done it this way."

And what you see, beloved, is this, is that when it comes to giving, it comes to prayer and it comes to fasting, Satan and false teachers are happy to pervert anything that is sacred. There is nothing so sacred that they won't try to twist and pervert it into something that they get from men so that they get something from men and Jesus says, "Don't be like that. There is nothing of God in it." So he gives us the proper instruction by contrast in verse 17, he says, "But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face so that your fasting will not be noticed by men, but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you." He says rather than going out of your way to make sure people know, go out of your way to make sure that people don't know. You're in sorrow over your loved ones, their rebellion? Praise God that you're with us today. This is the place to be when you're going through those times, to be with the people of God, to let the word of God encourage you, to let the people of God encourage you and strengthen you and pray for you. That's where you need to be, but if it's reached an urgency of fasting, don't put that on display. Let that be between you and God and let it be not something that you announce but rather something that you're just patiently looking to God alone for and looking to this promise again and again where it says, "your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you." Your Father knows your need. Your Father knows the crisis. Your Father knows how severe the situation is. Trust him. Trust him. And he says go out of your way so that people aren't saying it because this fasting is not given to you to get praise from men. Don't corrupt its true and holy purpose. The Pharisees, they didn't care about true holiness. They didn't care. It was never about

that to them. They only wanted credit from men for looking like they were holy. Jesus has none of it and he condemns the charade.

Now, we're all vulnerable to that temptation. We're all vulnerable to vanity, some of us more than others. We're all vulnerable to wanting, "Look at me," kind of thing. How do you protect yourself from the perversion of these things? How do you guard yourself? How do you control yourself so that you're not calling attention to yourself in the midst of your worship? Well, Jesus protects the purpose of fasting with what he says there in verse 17. Look at it with me again. He says, "when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face so that your fasting will not be noticed." He says, "Bring an element of secrecy to it," which is in perfect line with what he said in verse 6 about prayer. Go back to verse 6, "when you pray, go into your inner room, close your door and pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you." Verse 3, working our way back, "when you give to the poor, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving will be in secret; and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you." In the context of fasting: anoint your head, wash your face. It's just the normal hygiene of the first century. For us it would be: take a shower, get your clothes on straight, comb your hair, do things so that people aren't unnaturally drawing attention to you.

And here's the thing: rather than exaggerating a gloomy face, "Oh, if you only knew what I was going through." Rather than exaggerating it, present a normal face, present a normal picture to men so that they won't even notice that you're fasting. Let the urgency of your heart be directed vertically to the God who sees and the God who answers and the God who knows.

You know, there were teachers in the past, no need to name them, they're with the Lord now, but there were teachers in the past that I just never could understand how they talked ready and often about how often they fasted. They would say, "You know, I fast twice a week, on Tuesdays and on Fridays," or whatever. How can you justify that? How could a teacher justify that and say, "This is what I do," in light of what Jesus said, "Don't call attention to it"?

There are others, when I was preparing this material some time ago, running across people who would absolutely regulate what you could and couldn't do in a fast. You can eat this kind of food but not that food, and you can eat it in the morning but not in the evening, and all of it was nothing more than these man-made regulations, people trying to bring you, bring their readers, bring their disciples under their authority and controlling what they do, saying this is how it must be done. Well, we'll talk about this more next week but I want to show you something in this and remind you of an important biblical principle in the process. Isn't it true that Scripture is sufficient? That everything that we need to know to please God is revealed to us in the pages of the 66 books of the Bible? In the context here, when Jesus said in verse 9, notice that he says this, he says, "Pray, then, in this way," he said, "Don't call attention to yourself when you're praying. Go in your closet, hide, pray to your Father in secret and he'll reward you." Then he says, "Pray, then, in this way," and we've spent several weeks going through and unpacking the

meaning of what's called the Lord's prayer in the following 7 or 8 verses. He said, "Pray like this," so that you'd get it right.

Have you ever thought about this when you're reading Matthew 6:16-18: he doesn't do that with fasting. He doesn't say, "Fast therefore in this way." He gives great detail on prayer and says, "This is your model," in fasting, he stops and has nothing to say about it. That should restrain every teacher from trying to prescribe regulations on this matter and it should guard you from coming under the bondage of people who are wanting to oppose regulations on your outer man who are completely missing the purpose, the inward urgency of fasting that the Bible teaches.

So beloved, we look at this, we look at this pattern and we see what our Lord has given us and we see this: we have a God who is already ready, willing and able to bless us and to help us in our need. You have a God as a Christian, you have a God who knows what you need before you ask him. You have a God who has already blessed you, a God who is going to bless you throughout eternity, and in the window in between, what should we expect except his further blessing in between? God isn't hiding his blessing from you. God isn't keeping things back from you artificially just in order to play some kind of cosmic game of hide-n-seek. He's a good God. He's the sufficient God and when life presses you beyond the breaking point, you look up to him with a spirit of urgency and you seek him in a fresh way that will take you places that perhaps you've never gone to before spiritually, not in ecstatic utterances or visions or anything like that, but finding in the depth of your human need the all-sufficiency of Christ.

To close this, let's turn back to the book of Habakkuk and remind you of verses that we've taught in the past, verses in the past that show us a path of faith, what faith looks like in the midst of extremity. Habakkuk was a prophet. He had announced the coming of the foreign invaders, the Babylonians, to invade the people as a punishment from God on their sin, and yet he said the righteous will live by faith. There is a way forward. There is a path of faith forward here. And he says in Habakkuk 3:16, perhaps a description of the inner man and the outer man that you can identify with yourself here today in the midst of your own crisis. Habakkuk said, "I heard and my inward parts trembled, At the sound my lips quivered. Decay enters my bones, And in my place I tremble. Because I must wait quietly for the day of distress, For the people to arise who will invade us. Though the fig tree should not blossom And there be no fruit on the vines, Though the yield of the olive should fail And the fields produce no food, Though the flock should be cut off from the fold And there be no cattle in the stalls, Yet I will exult in the LORD, I will rejoice in the God of my salvation. The Lord GOD is my strength, And He has made my feet like hinds' feet, And makes me walk on my high places."

Do you see it, beloved? He was in a place of utter desperation. The foreign invaders were about to come. He's contemplating the end of life as he knew it. He's contemplating even the absence of daily food to sustain him. And in that urgency, he's seeking God, seeking it from a position of strength, saying, "The Lord GOD is my strength. If I have Christ with me, if I have this God with me, I have everything that I need." And that is the shelter that we retreat to in the midst of the storm. That is the place of refuge that we go to. "My

God knows. My God cares. My God is sovereign. My God loves me. My God will keep me. One way or another going forward, his hand will be on me."

That is the greatness of your God, believer. It's not just that he maneuvers the planets in their orbit. It's not just that he has the power to speak to a hurricane and say, "Hush, be still," and it would stop if he wanted. It's not even just that your God saved you from sin. It's not just that he's also going to lead you into heaven. All of those things are true, all of those things are wondrous, all of those things deserve our endless praise. The glory of God is seen in these things when you preeminently see that in the midst of your most desperate distress, that your God is sufficient. That which takes away the desire, the issues, that take away your desire for food, those desires can be satisfied in the reality of who Christ is and in his love and care for you.

So when the storm hits, you look up. There is nothing about this earthly life that attracts me even eating. "O God, my eyes are on you and you alone and I seek you knowing that you are sufficient. Lord, lead me into that inner recognition of your sufficiency that I might find the peace that I lack in the midst of this time." That's who our God is. Not just strong and mighty, not just our Savior from sin, not just our heavenly home, all of that wonderful but in the midst of where you're at today right now, oh beloved, Christ is sufficient and Christ is all you need.

Let's seek him as we close.

Our Father, we thank you, first of all, that so much of our life is lived in the pleasantness of happy circumstances, of comfortable living and we have the food that we need, we have relationships that we enjoy. We thank you that there is that aspect to our existence that we become accustomed to, Lord, perhaps even taking for granted just the consistent outpouring of your grace in our lives. Father, we thank you for all of that this morning and yet we recognize that there are those times in life where life alone, life as we know it, isn't enough. It doesn't satisfy the deepest needs of our hearts and we're exposed as the desperate and dependent creatures and sinners that we are. Father, when life reaches the end of its ability to satisfy our desires and we're left needing desperately more, Father, we thank you that you're a God that can be found; that we can set life aside, as it were, through a discipline of fasting, we can set aside the normal approach to things and look to you exclusively and know that you see, know that you care, and know that you will reward us as we seek you. Your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

Father, we admit, we confess before you that sometimes we're impatient, the load is so much that we just stagger under the load and we wonder how we're going to go another day with this weight on our shoulders. Father, your word says that you never tempt us beyond what we are able; that you're with us; that I fear no evil for you are with me. Father, those are the spiritual realities that we're trying to tap into as we close here today. For our loved ones that are present with us today, walking through the valley of the shadow of death, for those that we care about going through the valley of the shadow of death, Father, with relationships that have just broken our heart no end and there is no relief in sight, Father, for such ones as these, we ask you to be the gentle caring

Shepherd who knows how to tend to his wounded sheep. And Father, may the reminder of your continual care, reminder of our home in heaven, the reminder that you are with us to bless us, Father, strengthen us in a way that nothing earthly ever could. So Lord, with these things in mind, we commit ourselves to you and pray that we might find our satisfaction in Christ alone. It's in his name that we pray. Amen.

Thanks for listening to Pastor Don Green from Truth Community Church in Cincinnati, Ohio. You can find church information, Don's complete sermon library and other helpful materials at thetruthpulpit.com. This message is copyrighted by Don Green. All rights reserved.