

# **“Father-Centered Fasting”**

## **Matthew 6:16-18**

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[SERMON MANUSCRIPT]

### **Introduction**

This sermon is from Matthew 6:16-18 and it is titled, “Father-Centered Fasting.” In light of the One Desire Fast that we announced will be from January 9-22, the elders wanted to prepare our church for this season of fasting. You know, there are many reasons why people fast.

People fast for religious reasons. The practice of fasting is a part of many major religions in the world. Muslims, Catholics, Protestants, Jews, Buddhists, and Hindus all fast. The specific purposes may differ: for opening spiritual-mindedness, observing holy days, or improving self-control and moral character.

People fast to protest or advocate causes. Gandhi is famous for fasting to protest against British rule and for Indian freedom. It was a form of non-violent resistance. During World War II, citizens in the United States had “Meatless Tuesdays” (no meat on Tuesdays) and “Wheatless Wednesdays” (no bread on Wednesdays) in order to make sure their soldiers had enough food while fighting in the war.

People fast to promote health. Intermittent fasting is really popular now; it's fasting for short periods of time and it's proven to be an effective way for people to lose weight. There are some reports that say fasting improves people's cognitive performance, alertness, and mood. The final verdict is not conclusive though.

Christian fasting is also done as part of our faith. Christian fasting is also to advocate a cause and does produce holistic health. But Christian fasting is *so much more* than just these reasons. I'll explain how Christian fasting is unique in today's sermon!

### **Scripture Reading**

Please turn to Matthew 6:16-18 in your Bibles. The part we'll be reading is in the middle of what is called the “Sermon on the Mount,” which Jesus preached during the early part of his ministry in Galilee. The overall teaching of the Sermon on the Mount is about God's Kingdom: how its values, practices, and perspectives are so different than the world's; how its citizens should also live so differently than the world.

Specifically, chapter 6 started with the overall message of: “Be careful not to practice your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven” (6:1). Jesus elaborated specifically on the topics of giving to the poor and praying. Then he taught about fasting. I'll go ahead and read this now. This is God's Word from...

Matthew 6:16-18 (ESV):

*16 “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. 17 But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, 18 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.*

Amen!

## **Proposition**

Here's what we call the "one thing" because it's the main message from this passage of Scripture:

***Let's fast for our Father in heaven  
to see us and to reward us.***

## **Organizational Statement**

This passage of Scripture can be divided into two simple parts: first, the wrong way to fast (from verse 16) and second, the right way to fast (from verses 17-18). I'll ask and then answer a few questions in each part to move us through the text.

**Transition:** Alright, let's dive into the exposition now! Here's the first part of what Jesus taught...

## **Sermon Outline**

### **I. The Wrong Way to Fast (v. 16)**

A. There are three initial questions that I'd like to ask and answer based on verse 16.

1. [Here's the first question...] **What were the reasons people fasted in the Bible?**
  - a) Jesus said in verse 16, *And when you fast*. "Fasting" means to not eat food (in most cases), although it can be more broadly used to mean to abstain from something specific like a type of food or a preferred habit or hobby. Notice here that Jesus said "when" and not "if," as if he expected his disciples to fast as part of their lives. It is interesting that nowhere in the Bible is there a command for Christians to fast, but God's people throughout the Bible practiced fasting, including Jesus himself. In an article by David Mathis, he wrote that examples of fasting in the Old Testament all expressed human limitations and thus dependence on God. Old Testament fasting was usually in one of three directions.
    - b) First, there was *inward* fasting to express repentance. Remember in Nehemiah 9, God's people "assembled with fasting" to confess and ask God for forgiveness for their sins (Nehemiah 9:1-2). Second, there was *outward* fasting to grieve hard providences. When David experienced other people's disapproval and disappointment, he wrote in Psalm 69 that he "wept" and "humbled his soul with fasting." Third, there was *forward* fasting to seek God's will and favor. When God's people faced genocide in Esther 4, Queen Esther called all the Jews in the city to fast in preparation for her to approach the king of Persia to help them.

- c) God's people In the New Testament fasted as well for those same reasons- expressing repentance, grieving hard providences, and seeking God's favor- but in light of Jesus now. It was not to gain merit points with God, but for Christians to reinforce their human limitations and their dependence on what Christ has already done for them as their Savior. The additional wrinkle that Jesus specifically added was what he said in Matthew 9:15. Jesus said that his disciples would fast while they waited for him- the "bridegroom" of the church- to return.
  - d) As we saw last week in the example of Anna, she fasted and prayed because she was *homesick for heaven* and *longed for Christ* to come back and take her home. And throughout the New Testament, the church continued the practice of fasting. In Acts 13, the church in Antioch was "worshiping the Lord and fasting" (Acts 13:2) when they were led to send Barnabas and Paul as missionaries. Then they "fasted" and "prayed" when they commissioned Barnabas and Paul out (Acts 13:3). And in Acts 14, Barnabas and Paul prayed and fasted as they appointed elders to the new churches that they planted (Acts 14:23).
  - e) Jesus says to his church today as well: *And when you fast*. We also look *inward*: we fast to confess and ask for forgiveness for our sins. In fact, we can joyfully discover, address, and even dig up the sins deep within our hearts because we rest assured that Jesus forgives us! We can also look *outward*: we fast to grieve hard providences. In the challenges, difficulties, and struggles that we inevitably fast, we can willfully depend on God for the strength to endure through them and to figure out how to honor God through them. We can also look *forward*: we fast to seek God's will and favor in the key moments and situations that we face. We can ask God for guidance, wisdom, and discernment as we trek through the journey of our lives. These reasons why people fasted in the Bible are also the reasons why we do this One Desire Fast every year.
2. [Here's the second question...] **How and why did people fast the "wrong" way?**
- a) Look again at what Jesus said in verse 16: *Do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others*. So what was common in Jesus' day (and probably not so different in any day and age) was that people- especially the "religious" ones- would fast regularly and "look gloomy." They would *try* to look miserable and disheveled so that others would know that they were fasting. If you've ever tried to fast before, you know that this would *not* be hard to do because fasting *does* make a person feel miserable and disheveled!
  - b) As mentioned before, this passage of Scripture is part of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. And in this specific part, the Lord was preaching about how to practice their "acts of righteousness": giving to the poor, praying, and also fasting. Apparently, it was tempting for people to make a show of these acts of righteousness so that people would notice them. Specifically, it was tempting for people to make it obvious to others that they were fasting.
  - c) Jesus said this was what the "hypocrites" did. The idea of a hypocrite in Jesus' time was from the ancient Greek idea of an actor in a play. An actor would play multiple roles in a Greek play; and that one actor would wear different masks at various times when portraying different characters. So the idea of being a hypocrite meant that there were people "wearing masks": they were being deceitful or disingenuous of what really was in their hearts while they put on a show of their fasting. Although people

*fasted* (which was a good thing to do), it was tempting to do it for the wrong reasons (which was to get people to notice them).

- d) I was thinking about how and why people act hypocritically this way that Jesus described when they fasted. I thought of a few reasons that I think we can all relate to in some ways. Sometimes people feel the need for others- and God- to approve us as “good enough,” so fasting is a way to gain some merit from people. This is often the case for those of us who have high moral standards or who are more “religious” by nature. Sometimes people feel the need for others- and God- to respect us for our piety, so fasting is a way to gain that admiration or recognition from others. This is often the case for those of us who have tendencies to be people-pleasers. Sometimes people feel the need for other- and God- to not see who they really are, so they wear the mask of appearing to be “devoted to God.” This is often the case for those of us who often feel guilt or shame for what we do or don’t do and for who we are or are not. Or maybe it’s some combination of these three things. These are the ways that people fast the “wrong” way according to Jesus.

3. [Here’s the third question...] **What are the results of fasting in this way?**

- a) Let’s take one last look at the rest of verse 16: *Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward.* Jesus said that when people fast for the purpose of other noticing them, then they will receive their reward- what they wanted in their hearts from their act of fasting. If someone fasts so that so that others will approve of him, this will happen. There will be some people who *will* give you credit- and maybe even praise- for being such a good person. If someone fasts so that others will respect him for his piety, this will happen too. There will be some people who *will* think that you are a very devoted and spiritual person. If someone fasts so that others will not see who we really are on the inside, it will happen as well. There will be some people who *will not* see all your struggles with guilt and shame.
- b) But there are serious limitations with fasting this way. This kind of fasting doesn’t change anything. It doesn’t *do anything* in terms of expressing repentance, grieving hard providences, and seeking God’s will and favor. It doesn’t do anything in terms of strengthening us on the journey to our eternal homes and to comfort our homesickness. Therefore, this kind of fasting benefits us *immediately* but not *sufficiently*- not with anything that meaningful or significant. The harsh reality of living for others to notice is that this is a cruel master. We’ll always be lacking in some way or another: we won’t gain approval from everyone; we won’t be respected by everyone; we won’t be able to hide it all the time from everyone.
- c) But most importantly, this kind of fasting is pretty much absent of God. On our own (that is, apart from God), we cannot hide our guilt and shame due to our sin forever; we cannot ever be “pious” enough or “religious” enough to meet up to God’s holy standards; we cannot please God or be accepted by God on our own merit. Just to say it bluntly, fasting that is absent of God is a waste of our energies, efforts, and pain! According to Jesus’ logic, this reward is short-lived- the longest it will last is our lifetimes, but usually it’s much shorter than that! As well, this reward is short-sighted- there’s a bigger, better reward that God wants us pursue! These are the results of fasting in this “wrong” way.

- d) So if this is the case, maybe you're thinking, "Then should we just *not* fast?" This is a valid question that is relevant for a lot of other similar questions. What do we do if we don't have good motives to do other things too, like attend church gatherings, serve others, or give your offerings or tithes? The answer isn't to *not* do those things, but to confront our hearts and confess our sinful motives. And then we correct our thinking and remain assured that God can and does change us. Jesus tackles this in verse 17-18 in the "right" way to fast, so let's move on from here.

**Transition:** So that was Jesus' teaching about the wrong way to fast. Here's the second part of what Jesus taught...

## II. The Right Way to Fast (vv. 17-18)

A. There are three more questions that I'll ask and answer based on verses 17-18.

1. [Here's the first question...] **What way are Jesus' disciples supposed to fast?**
  - a) Jesus said this in verses 17-18: *And 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.* Jesus reiterated again that his disciples were expected to fast. And remember, "fasting" simply means to not eat food (in most cases), although it can be more broadly used to mean to abstain from something specific like a type of food or a preferred habit or hobby.
  - b) For example, the fast that we'll do for the One Desire Fast is this way. For that first week, we'll be fasting from meat. Then for the second week, you have the choice of fasting from solid foods the entire week (in other words consuming only liquids) or fasting from all food except for one meal per day. We'll also fast from social media- a habit or hobby that almost all of us have- for the entire two weeks of the ODF. Now remember, these are only guidelines for us to fast together, so you can modify any part of what I said as you need to for work, for personal reasons or convictions, or because of health conditions. Part of this fasting is to do it *united together* as a church, but we're leaving it flexible for people to participate as they see fit.
  - c) Going back to the text, this "anointing your head" wasn't like publicly recognizing a new king by anointing him with oil (like we see in the Old Testament). It's actually more like what it says in Ecclesiastes 9:8: "Let not oil be lacking on your head"- a normal, daily grooming that was a part of "enjoying life." I think it can be understood like this: "When you fast, brush and style your hair and wash your face like you would do every day." Don't intentionally look miserable when you fast (even though abstaining from food *is* tough). Also fasting is something that we do in the context of life. In most ways, we carry on in normal life- we're not supposed to just lounge around all day. Actually, I think just lounging around all day would be harder for me to do because I'd just be thinking about food all day and checking how much time I have left before I can break fast!
  - d) But also, fasting is what we do to *consciously remind us* and *intentionally make room* to "feast on Christ": to be with Jesus through being in his Word and spending quality time in prayer. I think this is one of the huge plusses of fasting- it gives us a tangible reminder (literally it can be those hunger pangs or random cravings for certain foods) that we need Jesus *more than anything else* in our lives. Also, not eating meals or not doing social media creates the extra time that we need- despite being busy with everything else that we have to deal with on a daily basis- to have more time to pray and more time to read and meditate on the Scriptures.

- e) What about what Jesus said here about fasting in “secret” so that only God sees us doing it? This goes along with giving and praying too: Jesus said to not let your left hand know that your right one is giving but to do it in secret (6:3-4); Jesus said to pray in your room with your door shut in secret (6:5-6). Are we violating Christ’s command by asking you to put your name on your tithe or offering? Are we violating Christ’s command by praying publicly at our church gathering? Of course, we can certainly still give, pray, and fast in secret but with the wrong motives, can’t we? The answer lies in this phrase that Jesus said: *Your Father who is in secret*. Jesus gives the *heart* of giving, praying, and fasting, which is to do it in the secret place of the heart. Doing these acts of righteousness with the proper motive to be seen by God- and not with the motive to be noticed by others- is what really matters to God! This was the way that Jesus’ disciples were supposed to fast.
2. [Here’s the second question...] **How can Jesus’ disciples fast in this “right” way?**
- a) Let’s look at what Jesus said again in verses 17-18: *And 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*. Jesus said that his disciples have a Father who is in heaven! I’ll say that again just to reinforce how amazing it is: Jesus told his disciples that they have a Father who is in heaven! In fact, throughout Matthew 6, Jesus specifically mentions the word “Father” ten times. Throughout his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught about the Father. He said that the Father knows what they needed even before they asked (6:8), so they could pray with confidence to their Father in heaven. He said that they didn’t need to worry about what they would eat or drink or wear because their Father in heaven would take care of them (6:26).
- b) The Bible says that we all have a Creator; we are all created by God. But all human beings have sinned, rebelling from God’s authority in our lives and rejecting the relationship God started with us. In effect, our sinfulness causes us to live as “spiritual orphans” now- effectively without a Father in heaven anymore. But the good news is that the Father sent his Son, Jesus Christ, to die on the cross as a substitute sacrifice for our sins. In this way, he paid the penalty for our sins and forgives us for our rebellion and rejection. Jesus makes reconciliation- repaired relationship with God- possible. So what do we do in response to this? Look at John 1:12-13.
- o John 1:12-13 (NLT): *12 But to all who believed him and accepted him, he gave the right to become children of God. 13 They are reborn- not with a physical birth resulting from human passion or plan, but a birth that comes from God.*

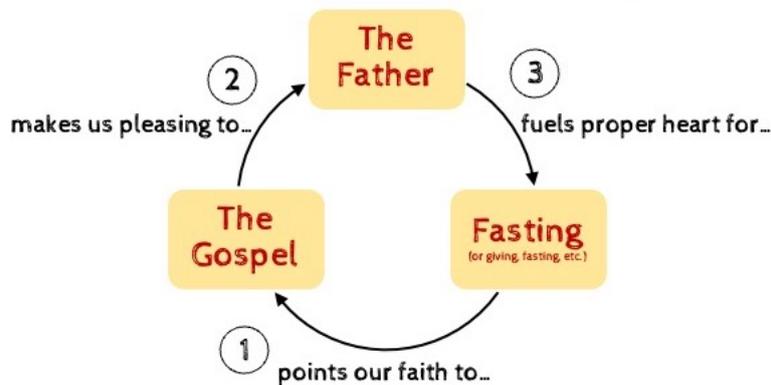
When we believe in Jesus and accept him as the Savior and King of our lives, we *become children of God*. This is not anything that we can accomplish; this is *God’s gracious work* of spiritual adoption! We have a Father in heaven again- through Christ!

- c) So how do we fast to be seen by our Father alone? What I’m say is that it’s *impossible* to fast this way by our own willpower! We can’t ever have pure motives as we fast because we are hopelessly self-conscious people. We all know some form of this saying from Fyodor Dostoevsky: “Try to pose for yourself this task: not to think of a polar bear, and you will see that the cursed thing will come to mind every minute.” The more we try to not care about what people think about us, the more we care about what people

think about us! The only way we can overcome our preoccupation on ourselves is to focus on the one we *should* focus on: we focus our Father and what he has provided to make us his, Christ Jesus who redeemed us on the cross.

- d) So again, how do we fast in this “right” way? Simply put, we fast *by faith in Christ*. By faith in Christ, we are made holy and forgiven by God; by faith in Christ, we have a Father in heaven who now accepts us unconditionally (no matter what kinds of ulterior, selfish motives we have). As we reiterate all the time, fasting is a *means of grace*- it is a way that we put ourselves in position to receive more grace from God. I'll try to clarify what I'm talking about by using this diagram- particularly the lower-half of it for now. Fasting isn't the way to the Father, but fasting points our faith properly to the Gospel (which is labeled #1 on the diagram): that Christ is the only way to the Father, the only way to be accepted by the Father, the only way to have real, unhindered relationship with the Father (which is labeled #2 on the diagram). This is *how* Jesus' disciples can fast in this right way!

## Father-Centered Fasting



3. [Here's the third question...] **Why do Jesus' disciples fast (with what motive)?**
- a) I want to focus my answer on the second part of verse 18: *And your Father, who sees in secret will reward you*. Jesus said that those who fast with the heart motive of being noticed by God their Father will be rewarded by God their Father. We know that we have a Father in heaven who loves us, takes care of us, and has adopted us as his spiritual children (we're pleasing to him by faith in Jesus alone). This is what the diagram shows: the Gospel makes us pleasing to the Father; the Father fuels proper heart for fasting (which is labeled #3 on the diagram)!.
- b) Now in light of all of God's grace poured upon us through Jesus Christ, we are fueled with a proper heart to fast (as well as pray and give). We no longer need wear a mask before God- we are set free from the guilt and shame of our sin. We no longer need people to admire or recognize that we're “good enough” because we admire Jesus alone and recognize that he was “good enough” as our substitute sacrifice. We no longer need others to approve of us because we know we are now approved of by God through Christ.

- c) In fact, the practice of fasting reinforces our need and internalization of the Gospel. Remember the Biblical examples of fasting from the Old Testament? The *inward* practice of fasting expressed repentance. Our Father is pleased when we humble ourselves to do some honest and soul-searching examining of our sinful desires, attitudes, thoughts, and behaviors. Our Father is pleased to forgive us in Christ and we experience the joy of God's salvation that we have by his grace- a "reward" of the Gospel! Actually, fasting is not a showcase of our will power but an exposure of the ugly stuff that's in already in our hearts! I don't know about you, but that's what happens *every time* I fast!
- d) The *forward* practice of fasting is seeking God's will and favor in certain situations. Our Father is pleased to shepherd his children through the questions and decisions and situations we face along the journey of life. Our Father is pleased to give us what he wisely and perfectly knows to be the very best for us- even if we don't understand it or think so- this is another "reward" of the Gospel! The *outward* practice of fasting was to grieve hard providences. Our Father is pleased when we pour out our hearts in honest lament and when we end up depending on him during those hardships. Our Father is pleased to give us strength, comfort, faith, and endurance to make it until the very end- also a "reward" of the Gospel! So our *great* reward will be when we finish our earthly lives and we are welcomed into heaven- our home forever. And our *greatest* reward will be that we are with our Father in heaven forever!

**Transition:** So that was Jesus' teaching about the right way to fast. Are you convinced? Let's move on to the next steps we can take with the...

## Conclusion

### III. Life Application

- A. Here's the "one thing" from Matthew 6:16-18 again: ***Let's fast for our Father in heaven to see us and to reward us!*** Let's do this church! I have a couple specific ideas as you pray and ask the Holy Spirit how he wants you to put this into practice.
1. First, incorporate regular, Father-centered fasting into your life.
    - a) I don't know when there has been a more obviously important year to be seeking our Father in heaven in fasting and praying than in 2022- after all that has already happened, are you kidding me? For many years now there has been a little-known practice among the leaders of our church to fast on Thursdays. I'd like to invite you all- especially members of the church to try it. If not Thursdays, then some other day of the week. You can decide exactly how you're going to fast (for example: no food from sunrise until sunset, no food for twelve hours, or no lunch).

2. Second, fast with the church during the One Desire Fast from January 9-22.
  - a) I'd also invite you to come together as a church to fast inwardly to express repentance, outwardly to grieve hard providences, and forwardly to seek God's will and favor! We're going to be preaching through our theme of "Rediscover Church" for the two Sundays during ODF, which will be really good to also pray through during the fast- especially as we all ask our Father how "Rediscover Church" can apply to us personally and to us corporately as a local church body. I don't want to guilt or force people to do it- I trust that the Holy Spirit is speaking to you already.

**Transition:** As Jesus' taught us in Matthew 6:16-18, ***let's fast for our Father in heaven to see us and to reward us!*** For those of us onsite here at Sunday Celebration, let's stand and spend some time to respond to the Lord. For those of us online at home for today's Sunday Celebration, I'd ask you to pray and respond to the Lord where you are. Let's pray...

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