

## ***Finding God through Fasting***

*Matthew 6:16-18*

“Is there anything more important to you than eating lunch today?” Is there any scenario in which you’d decide, “Actually, it would be more profitable for me NOT to eat lunch today than to eat lunch. . .”? I bet there is. If someone told you, “I’ll give you \$5,000 if you skip lunch today,” you’d probably say, “Let me think about it. . . okay, deal.” The vast majority of us would skip a meal (or two) if we felt like it would be worth it.

My point is that even though food is a good gift from God, and even though food is essential for life, and even though most of us find great pleasure in eating food, there might be times when we might voluntarily abstain from eating food. From a distinctively Christian point of view, that is the main reason to fast - because you’re convinced it’s worth it spiritually. People fast for many reasons. All the major religions of the world practice fasting; many people fast for health and dietary reasons. But today we’re going to discuss fasting from a distinctively Christian point of view.

We are in the midst of a sermon series on “Finding God.” We are teaching this series in conjunction with our 21 Days of Prayer and Fasting experience. Last week Logan taught from Matthew 7 where Jesus said that “those who ask receive, those who seek find, and those who knock have the door opened for them.” God is a good heavenly Father who knows how to give good gifts to His children who seek Him.

We are going to take three weeks to discuss ways that we can seek God in order to find Him. Next week we’ll talk about finding God through prayer; the following week we’ll discuss finding God through the Word. Today we’ll talk about finding God through fasting.

In the Bible, fasting refers to voluntarily not eating food for a period of time for a specific purpose. Before we launch into this topic, I want to acknowledge up front that it’s not advisable for some people to fast from food; I’m thinking about people with diabetes or those with an unhealthy relationship with food. We would never encourage you to do something that would be harmful to you medically or psychologically. We’ll talk about other types of fasting toward the end of this message. There is no shame whatsoever in fasting from something else if it’s not advisable for you to fast from food. There is great freedom in how we fast. But I wanted to acknowledge this up front since the passages we’ll consider do talk about fasting from food.

During this 21 Days of Prayer and Fasting we are encouraging you to identify one issue/area of your life in which you are desperate for God. If you’ve identified that issue, keep it in mind as we consider Jesus’ teaching on fasting in Matthew 6:16–18.

In the first half of Matthew 6 Jesus teaches about living for the notice and reward of our heavenly Father, not for the applause of other people. Here’s the umbrella statement in verse 1:

1 “Beware of practicing your righteousness before men to be noticed by them; otherwise you have no reward with your Father who is in heaven.

The three areas of righteousness (godly living) Jesus teaches about in verses 2 through 18 are giving to the poor, praying, and fasting. In each of these areas of righteousness, Jesus warns His disciples against craving the notice and reward of people; rather, Jesus says, we should give, pray, and fast for the notice and reward of God.

Next week we discuss what Jesus says in verses 5-15 about praying to God who sees and rewards in secret. Today we’ll discuss what Jesus says about fasting in verses 16-18. First Jesus warns against fasting for the wrong reasons, specifically fasting in order to be noticed by other people.

***Avoid fasting for the wrong reasons. (Matthew 6:16; see also Isaiah 58, Luke 18:9-14)***

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.

As with giving to the poor and with praying, Jesus says “***Whenever*** you fast. . .” not ***if*** you fast. . .” Speaking to a Jewish audience in Israel in the first century, Jesus could safely assume that fasting was woven into the fabric of their lives. All Jews fasted annually on the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 23:27 - “humble your souls”) as well as when circumstances demanded seeking God fervently and corporately. In Jesus’ day the Pharisees fasted twice a week (see Luke 18:12), probably on Monday and Thursday (Carson, p. 175). Fasting was a normal, common practice for Jesus’ audience.

Jesus’ caution was to avoid fasting in such a way that others would notice and be impressed. Don’t look sad and somber; don’t look all haggard and disheveled. Don’t try to get people to notice you so they’ll ask and so you can tell them that you’re fasting. In that culture, fellow Jews might be impressed at your devotion if you were fasting at a time when everybody else wasn’t. Jesus’ point is that if the thing you really want from fasting is the admiration of others, that will be your full reward. You will have no reward from your Father in heaven. Your fasting will be spiritually worthless.

Neglecting your appearance in order to impress others with your fasting may not be a particular temptation for you. Please note that other wrong motives for fasting are mentioned in Scripture. For example, in Luke 18:9-14 Jesus told a parable about a Pharisee and a tax collector who both went up into the temple to pray.

11 “The Pharisee stood and was praying this to himself: ‘God, I thank You that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. 12 ‘I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get.’

He didn't fast as a way to humble himself and seek God. His fasting and tithing were a source of pride and self-righteousness. He was so impressed with himself, especially in relation to others, that he was sure that God was equally impressed. By contrast:

13 "But the tax collector, standing some distance away, was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, the sinner!' 14 "I tell you, this man went to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted."

Fasting should be a way of humbling ourselves, not exalting ourselves above others (even if it's only in our own minds). David said in Psalm 35:13, "I humbled my soul with fasting." We fast because we are desperate for God to do what we cannot do.

Another example is found in Isaiah 58. There we read that the people wondered why God didn't respond to their prayer and fasting.

3 'Why have we fasted and You do not see?  
Why have we humbled ourselves and You do not notice?'

. . . .

They wondered why God was not seeing and rewarding their fasting. They thought that as long as they went without food that their fasting was acceptable to God. But if you read the rest of the chapter, you see that God viewed their fasting in the context of the rest of their lives. They were wealthy, powerful people. And while they were fasting, they mistreated those who worked for them; they were callous toward the hungry and the homeless in the Land. In other words, they were living in such obvious hypocrisy that their fasting was worthless to God. This is a warning for us: As we fast, we need to invite God to scrutinize our lives and show us if there's anything in our lives that is incompatible with His will. It doesn't mean that we need to be perfect before we can fast; but we do need to be humble and teachable before God.

Jesus warns us to avoid fasting with wrong motives and for the wrong reasons.

***Fast for the notice and reward of your Father.*** (Matthew 6:17-18; see also Matthew 41-44, Acts 13:1-3, etc.)

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.

Instead of neglecting your appearance, you practice normal hygiene so that nobody will ask you what's wrong. In Jesus' day, that involved "anointing their head" and "washing their face." In terms of "anointing," they used olive oil much like many people today use products for their skin and hair. The point is to take appropriate steps to avoid being noticed by other people. As a practical point, don't worry if those closest to you know that you're fasting. The issue is your heart motive.

Instead of fasting for the notice of other people, Jesus says in verse 18, fast to be noticed by your Father who is in secret. Jesus' instruction here suggests that we need to fast believing two specific things. First, we need to believe that **God sees what is done in secret**. We find this taught throughout Scripture. In Hebrews 4:13, for example, we read:

13 And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are open and laid bare to the eyes of Him with whom we have to do.

God sees everything. Nothing escapes His notice. This reality should be a motivation for us to obey Him and a stimulus to come clean when we disobey Him. The fact that nothing escapes God's notice should also be a great motivation for prayer and fasting. God notices when we intentionally humble ourselves through fasting; He sees our efforts at seeking Him. If we don't really believe that God sees what we do in secret, fasting will merely be a random Christian thing to do. But if we do believe that God sees in secret, we will fast with the conviction that our good heavenly Father is paying very careful attention to us and to what we're seeking.

Second, we fast believing that **our Father who sees in secret will reward us**. Some people resist the idea of rewards because it sounds so transactional and because it sounds as if we've earned something that God is obligated to give. But in Scripture, people don't earn rewards the way you would earn a paycheck. Rather, God gives rewards as a free gift, as an expression of His grace. We believe that God will reward us because He is gracious.

Hebrews 11:6 is instructive in this regard:

6 And without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him.

We come to God believing that He is/exists. God isn't a fairy tale or a figment of our imagination. We come to God believing that **He is** and that He is **a rewarder of those who seek Him**. Our Father who sees in secret rewards those who seek Him (through prayer and fasting and the Word). Interestingly, the context of Hebrews 11 makes clear that some of the rewards God gives come in this life and some come in the next. And some come in both.

Back in Matthew 6. . .

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.

. . . when we read that our Father "sees what is done in secret," Jesus assuring us that God sees our motives in fasting. God sees that we aren't trying to impress others with our discipline and piety; God sees that instead of trusting in ourselves we are trusting in

Him; God sees that we want His reward (whatever it might be) more than we want lunch.

As you've probably noticed, we aren't told how God will reward us when we seek Him through prayer and fasting. Sometimes we do receive exactly what we're asking; that's often the case because we are praying for things that are 100% compatible with His will. God gives us the wisdom we need for decisions and circumstances. God gives us freedom from strongholds that keep us in bondage. God gives us strength to persevere. We should fast and pray with great boldness when we're seeking first His kingdom and His righteousness.

Other times God doesn't reward us by giving us exactly what we've asked. In 2 Samuel 12 David fasted and prayed for 7 days when his son with Bathsheba was sick; but the child died. Significantly, David's faith wasn't shattered; he understood that his fasting didn't obligate God to give what he was asking. Admittedly, that example is complicated; but it illustrates how God doesn't always reward us by giving exactly what we've asked.

Sometimes the reward may be the grace to endure a hardship (instead of removing a hardship). Sometimes the reward might not be obvious in this lifetime. But we continue seeking Him believing that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him. We fast in light of the death and resurrection of Jesus. By giving His one and only Son to die for our sins, we fast knowing that He loves us and that He has our best interests in mind. We may not understand why He doesn't give us what we've asked, but we trust Him anyway.

***Here's an example*** of the way someone might seek God through prayer and fasting. Let's say you seeking God concerning some decision you need to make; perhaps you're considering becoming a foster parent or you're considering adopting a child. Generally speaking, that's a good, admirable, needed thing for people to do. But you want to know if God wants you to foster or adopt right now in this season of your life. That's such a monumental, consequential decision that you are desperate for God's leading. And so you decide to seek God's leading through prayer and fasting.

You might designate this Wednesday as a day to seek God through prayer and fasting. You eat supper on Tuesday night but you aren't going to eat again until supper on Wednesday night. You're really fasting for two meals. During that time you set aside 15 minutes to pray on Tuesday night, on Wednesday morning, Wednesday at noon, and just before you break your fast on Wednesday evening. Fasting disrupts your routine and makes you uncomfortable. But you do that gladly and voluntarily because you are desperate to hear God's voice/leading.

When your stomach growls or when you feel a twinge of hunger, you don't fixate on food; you turn your eyes to God. Your discomfort is a reminder: "I'm seeking God's will. I am desperate for Him to lead me. I don't just want to make a decision and hope it works out. I am denying myself something good (food) for a period of time, so that I might be more fervent in prayer and more attentive to God's voice." Your discomfort is a prompt to pray and seek God. That's how fasting can be an asset when we seek God. Mark

Batterson said that if prayer is walking on a sidewalk, prayer and fasting is walking on a moving sidewalk (it gets you there twice as fast). Fasting can accelerate our praying.

My encouragement is that you take Jesus at His word about fasting. Three simple suggestions:

**Decide *why you are fasting*.** If you are fasting just because you're supposed to, it will probably feel pretty pointless. Every time you feel hungry, you'll look at the clock and think about food ("Ugggghhh. . . I've got three more hours until I can eat food!"). Or if you decide to fast from television, every time you remember you can't watch your favorite show, you'll think, "I hope I can hold out until January 27th." But if you are fasting as a way to seek God for something you're desperate about, your fasting will prompt you to pray and continue seeking God.

Decide ***why*** you are fasting. You might decide to fast for any number of different reasons:

- \* Repentance - express to God your sorrow over some sin or some negligence in your relationship with Him.
- \* Wisdom - you need God's guidance in a decision or a situation or circumstance
- \* The salvation of someone you love
- \* Your love for God has grown cold

**Decide *how and when you will fast*.** In our Guide to 21 Days of Prayer and Fasting, we give you various options for fasting. You can pick up a Guide in the foyer (or in the Venue) or you can check the box on the connection card and we'll email you a link to the guide. We will also send you a list of this week's prayer opportunities; you can pray in different locations at different times throughout the week.

In terms of fasting, you might decide to do a ***complete fast*** in which you drink only liquids (typically water) for a period of time. I know that some people are fasting one day a week during this 21 Days.

You might decide to do a selective fast in which you remove certain types of food from your diet. Some are doing the "Daniel Fast" (based on the experience of Daniel and his friends while in exile in Babylon) in which they drink water and juice for fluids and eat fruits and vegetables for food during these 21 Days.

You might decide to do a ***partial fast*** in which you abstain from eating food during certain parts of the day. Some are fasting from breakfast each of these 21 Days; others are fasting from breakfast and lunch for several days a week.

You might decide to do what is called a ***soul fast*** in which you abstain from something besides food for these 21 Days. Some have given up social media and/or television and movies for these 21 Days. The times normally spent watching screens is spent with more intentional time in prayer and reading.

Our encouragement is to decide ahead of time how and when you'll fast. Choose something that will disrupt your normal routine and that will remind you that you are desperate to find God in a specific area of your life or circumstance.

***Fast for the notice and reward of Your Father.*** Rehearse the Scriptures we've discussed today and practice a God-centered fast. Pray, "Father, I believe that you exist and that you see my fasting and hear my praying. I humble myself through fasting as a way of expressing that I'm desperate to seek and find You. . ." Taste and see that the Lord is good.