

## Not So Fast Matthew 6:16-18

Food is a natural part of our daily lives. Breakfast is often described as the most important meal of the day as it fuels the body for the day. Food is always a part of social gatherings whether at formal or informal events. We talk about comfort foods. At holidays we have feasts centered around food. Like oxygen or water, food is something we can't live without.

When we read the Old Testament and consider the laws established by God, food was a part of their ceremonies whether it was the solemn remembrance of Passover in which certain foods were to be eaten, or the other festivals. Following the reconstruction of the wall, Nehemiah had the law read and it says the people mourned because they realized they had ignored it which was the reason for the plight they found themselves. There was a time of repentance but Nehemiah told them it wasn't a time to grieve, but a time to rejoice over food and sweet drink. It was a day of celebration.

In the Gospels we see occasions where food was part of the story. The feeding of the 5,000. The meal where Jesus was anointed with oil. When Peter's mother was healed, she fixed a meal. When Jesus talked with the woman at the well, the disciples had gone for food. Martha was busy fixing food while Mary sat and listened to Jesus teach. The Passover supper before the arrest and crucifixion. The fact is, we love to eat.

But there comes a time when abstaining from food may be necessary, not mandatory, but necessary for spiritual reasons. Our topic for today is about fasting found in **Matthew 6:16-18**. We typically practice fasting in preparation for some surgical procedure, like the dreaded colonoscopy or if your doctor requires a fasting blood draw prior to an annual physical. But when it comes to fasting as a spiritual matter, my guess is that most Christians have never participated in fasting for spiritual purposes. That's the nature of Jesus's discussion in our passage and the third discipline in this section on the Sermon on the Mount. Once again Jesus talks

about the true motivation behind this practice. Once again, He contrasts the practice of the day and the way in which it should be observed.

What we see from Jesus in this teaching is that fasting was something done as part of a spiritual discipline. The fact that Jesus mentions fasting means that He considered it to be a legitimate spiritual practice. The word "when" assumes that fasting was a common observance. But what we see, at least from the practice of the religious leaders whom Jesus refers to as hypocrites, is that it had no eternal value or spiritual benefit because their practice was for a show. Jesus first speaks about the kind of fasting that is vain.

### I. FASTING THAT IS VAIN – v. 16

We need to understand that in all of Scripture only one day was designated for fasting and that was the Day of Atonement. Any other fast was voluntary and could be for any number of reasons.

Some fasted in connection with mourning.

Some fasted because of a national or personal crisis.

Sickness might be a reason to fast as when David fasted while the baby born to Bathsheba from their adulterous affair lay between life and death.

When the nation of Israel faced an enemy King Jehoshaphat called on the nation to fast.

After the edict to eradicate the Jews fostered by Haman, Queen Esther and her servants fasted. She also instructed Mordecai and all Jews to fast for her for three days.

Some people fasted while mourning over sin, as when Moses fasted 40 days over Israel's idolatry. Ahab fasted for his sin. Nineveh fasted for its sin after Jonah preached repentance. Daniel fasted as he confessed Israel's sin. Israel fasted following the reading of the law by Ezra resulting in repentance.

On certain anniversaries of past calamities, they observed the date and event with a fast like after the burning of the Temple by the Babylonians.

But the fasting Jesus condemns here wasn't for any of those reasons. It was for their hypocrisy. He condemned their vanity. Notice that their practice was all for show. They acted the part to impress those who would see them by disfiguring their faces giving the appearance of piety.

According to **Luke 18:12**, the Pharisees fasted twice a week on Mondays and Thursdays. You might ask, why those two days. Tradition says those two days were chosen because they claimed that it was on those days that Moses made his two separate trips up Mt. Sinai to receive the tablets of law from God, but the fact is those were the days that farmers and merchants took their goods into town to sell. Those were the days the Pharisees knew they could count on a large crowd milling around buying and selling where they would have a big audience to show off how pious they were.

Greek scholar A.T. Robertson writes **“it is this practice of piety that Jesus so sharply ridicules.”**

Here's what these hypocrites would do. They would put on old, dirty clothes that were purposely torn. They wouldn't comb their hair, and then they would cover themselves with dirt and ashes. They even put on makeup to appear pale and sickly. It was intentional to gain attention.

John Phillips states that **“Fasting has its place, but we must observe two rules: beware of personal extravagances and beware of public exhibition.”**

These religious hypocrites paid no attention to such advice because they went to great lengths to draw attention to themselves and give a false impression of their piety.

The classic example of this exhibition for show was Simeon Stylites who lived from A.D. 390-459. As a result of his efforts he was canonized by the Roman Catholic Church. One year he had himself walled up in a monastery for the entire period of Lent. He devised all kinds of cruel ways of self-torture including living on top of a pole.

His life on top of a pole began when he moved to a hillside not far from his monastery. The original

height started at six feet. He climbed on top of the pole and chained himself with an iron collar around his neck. Periodically, the pole was raised until it reached 50 feet high. His disciples had to climb a ladder to bring him scraps of food as he would disdain eating. He lived on top of that pole for over 30 years enduring the bitterness of cold winters and the searing heat of summer. He refused shelter choosing to suffer through wind and rain, frost and sun an effort to publicly demonstrate his piety.

Some people will go to great lengths to appear to be religious, just to draw attention to themselves. These religious hypocrites stooped so low while fasting just to get others to notice them. Jesus condemned their vanity. It was nothing but a veneer, a practice that covered up the real motive of their heart. Their practice was only to gain attention. Jesus said, if that's all they want, that's all they get.

John MacArthur states that **“Their fasting was not a matter of spiritual conviction but a means of self-gratification. By the time of Christ fasting had been perverted and twisted beyond what was scriptural and sincere.”**

Jesus said that if all you want is the praise of men, you will have it. People will stand in amazement and applaud your effort, TV cameras and reporters will come around to tell stories of your perceived religious piety. If all you want is man's approval, that's what you'll get and nothing more.

Warren Wiersbe suggests that **“If we have to look miserable to be considered spiritual, then there is something wrong with our views of spirituality. We substitute reputation for character. When reputation is more important than character, we have become hypocrites.”** When we fast to be seen by others, we rob ourselves of character and spiritual rewards.

Again, Jesus isn't condemning the practice of fasting. His objection is the way in which it was done. In **verse 17** He teaches about how it should be done. In this verse He talks about fasting that is virtuous.

## II. FASTING THAT IS VIRTUOUS – v. 17

Fasting literally means not to eat or to put your hand over your mouth. But fasting could also be from other things besides food.

Some fast from technology or social media. We are currently in a time which some observe the 40 days of lent leading up to Easter Sunday. Lent is a type of fasting. The most common thing noted that people give up for lent is chocolate. I read that some people fast during lent from using plastic spoons. Others will give up transportation or music. I'm really not sure what the point is.

Now to be clear, the Bible does talk about different kinds of fasting that were observed, again for legitimate spiritual purposes.

There is the **normal fast**. This involves abstaining from all food but not from water. Saul called a fast when they were routing the Philistines.

A second type of fast is the **partial fast**. In his fast you limit your diet by abstaining from certain foods, but not all food. Daniel and his friends observed this kind of fast when they arrived in Babylon. They only ate vegetables and drank water.

A variation of the partial fast is to skip a meal rather than skip all meals for the entire day.

A third type of fast is the **absolute fast**. This fast abstains from both food and water. We read in **Ezra 6:10** that he observed this by eating no food or drinking any water. **Esther 4:16** says that she requested the Jews fast and pray on her behalf. She specified that they were to neither eat nor drink for three days, night or day.

A fourth type of fast is the **private fast**. That's the kind Jesus is referring to here. Instead of fasting for the purpose of being noticed, He said we should fast in a way that isn't obvious to men, but only to God who looks at the motivation of the heart.

A fifth type of fast is the **congregational fast**. In **Joel 2:15-16**, there was a call for a sacred assembly in which the congregation was to observe a fast. At times a church may fast for a specific purpose.

A final type of fast mentioned in Scripture was a **national fast** when the whole nation was called on

to fast. In **II Chron. 20:3** Jehoshaphat called on the nation to fast and ask the Lord to intervene.

In our own nation's history, three Presidents, John Adams, James Madison, and Abraham Lincoln called on the nation to observe a fast because of threats the nation was facing. Lincoln called a fast three times during the Civil War.

Jesus encourages fasting with the proper motive. As I said, other than the Day of Atonement for the Jews, fasting was voluntary and done for the purpose of drawing closer to God. While in our society there are reasons people fast, the primary purpose is spiritually motivated. The purpose of fasting isn't to give something up, but instead to focus completely on God as we seek Him for guidance in making decisions or requesting His help during a particularly difficult time we might be going through. Fasting is a way to express that we are serious about why we are focusing on God. It could be a time of deep sorrow and repentance. It may be praying for our nation to return to God while seeking His mercy.

In his Institutes, John Calvin states that there isn't anything magical about fasting. It's simply a way of showing our sincerity in seeking God as we focus our attention on Him. It is to show that our priority in that moment or for the duration of our fast is to be serious with God.

The point or focus of fasting isn't giving up food or other things, but instead to take our eyes off those things so we can focus on our relationship with God, to show Him we are serious about Him. It helps sharpen our focus and dependence on Him. It isn't about punishing the flesh as Simeon Stylites did, but to draw closer to God. Fasting isn't a way to get God to notice us or do what we want. Fasting doesn't change God. Fasting done with the right motive changes us.

Arthur Wallis observed that "**Fasting is calculated to bring a note of urgency to our prayers.**"

Fasting is for the heart that yearns to draw closer to God as we seek Him. It is for asking Him to

intervene in our life, in our nation, in the life of someone we love or just for the pure joy of sitting in His presence.

When Christ returns there will no longer be a need for fasting. That will be a time of celebration as Jesus invites us to feast with Him. Until then, we are encouraged to experience a voluntary fast that draws us into His presence. And Jesus gives us some guidance on what our fasting should entail so that we don't appear hypocritical.

When we fast, He tells us to look normal by putting oil on the head, which was a part of daily grooming. Often the oil was scented or used as a perfume.

Some of you might remember the commercial and jingle for Brylcreem where "a little dab will do ya." But I don't think Jesus had that in mind because the jingle went on to say that it would draw the gals to ya. Jesus says that when you fast, don't give any indication that you are fasting. Look normal. Take care of your appearance. Don't draw attention to yourself.

Many years ago when I was working in HR, I was taking a new HR assistant manager to a meeting. It happened to be a lunch meeting. As we were walking down to the meeting she noticed I didn't have a lunch and asked me about it. I simply commented that I wasn't eating that day. She asked why but I didn't want to make a big deal about it. But she kept pressing so I told her that one day I week I chose to fast as a way of focusing on my relationship with God.

Jesus said when you fast look as normal as possible. Comb your hair and wash your face. Do the opposite of how the hypocrites practiced fasting. Have the right motivation when fasting that stems from a heart that approaches God rather than appear to be something you are not.

G. Campbell Morgan sums it up nicely for us when he says that "we are to have perpetual lent in our souls and everlasting Easter on our faces."

Fasting that is virtuous always has God as the main focus.

Finally, let's consider fasting that has value.

### III. FASTING THAT HAS VALUE – v. 18

Jesus again reminds us that our fasting should not be obvious. Like the spiritual discipline of prayer that we talked about last week, fasting should be done in secret, so that God is the only one who notices. When our heart is right, God will reward.

So, when you fast, what is your true heart's motive? Do you want the applause of men or the approval of God? Is your motive self-centered or spiritual?

In her book, The Daniel Fast, Susan Gregory writes "Whenever fasts are mentioned in the Bible, they are accompanied with a spiritual issue. So when you consider biblical fasting, it always has to do with restricting food for a spiritual purpose...otherwise it is just a diet."

As I mentioned earlier fasting isn't just a restriction on food. We can fast by restricting time watching TV or time on social media for the purpose of devoting more time to prayer, meditating on God's Word or the study of Scripture. Whatever it is you are fasting from, it is for a specific purpose and for a specific time.

But some people for health reasons can't or shouldn't fast from food by altering their diet because of adverse effects on their health. For example, it might be dangerous for a diabetic to abstain from food because of how it might alter the balance of their blood sugar level. Those with chronic kidney disease or someone who is recovering from surgery or an illness probably shouldn't participate in a food fast.

But for the rest of us, with a doctor's okay, there are good reasons to fast that have a spiritual purpose. See if these reasons given for fasting from Scripture might be reasons we should consider fasting today.

#### 1. Fast in times of sorrow

In **II Samuel 3:35** we read that King David fasted after Joab murdered Abner. Abner was King Saul's general and Joab was David's general. After Saul was killed in battle and David crowned king by

Judah, Abner came to visit David in the hopes of uniting the kingdom. Joab was wary of Abner's intent thinking the visit was to determine David's vulnerability, seize the opportunity to kill him and give the kingdom back to Saul's family. So Joab had a secret meeting with Abner and killed him. As a result, David mourned for the death of Abner.

We mentioned earlier that in **II Samuel 12:16** David fasted when the child born to he and Bathsheba became ill. He fasted and prayed all the while the child was sick before he died, hoping that God would restore the child to health.

A natural human response when grieving is not to want food. We don't have an appetite and so we abstain from eating.

Maybe you have done the same thing, fasted and prayed as you sought God for comfort, strength, or help during times of mourning.

## 2. Fast in times of great danger **II Chronicles 20:3-4**

Faced with overwhelming odds, Jehoshaphat called on the nation to come together for a fast as they sought the Lord. When they assembled, we read that he led them in corporate prayer for God's protection and deliverance. He concluded his prayer with these words, words that are fitting for us when we face great danger whatever it might be. **"We do not know what to do, but our eyes are upon You."** Fasting brings keener focus on God.

During their fast a Levite named Jahaziel experienced the anointing of the Holy Spirit and spoke for God exclaiming that the battle didn't belong to the Israelites, but to God. He further instructed them that on the next day they were to march out in battle formation, not be afraid, not be discouraged, not do anything but stand firm and watch God deliver them.

**Have you ever faced some difficult situation in which it seemed so overwhelming to you that you didn't know what to do?** Take a lesson from Jehoshaphat, pray and fast as you seek God for an answer. **James 4:8** says that when we draw near to

God, He will draw near to us. *Fasting accompanied with prayer takes our eyes off what we think we should do and helps us focus on what God can do.*

## 3. Fast in times of travel **Ezra 8:21-23**

Now I have to say that I have fasted for a variety of reasons, but I can also say that fasting while I traveled somewhere is something I have never done. When Ezra set out with those returning to Jerusalem he proclaimed a fast asking for God's protection as they traveled.

## 4. Fast in times of repentance **II Kings 21:17-29** **Jonah 3:1-10**

In both instances, we see that whether individually or nationally, repentance was accompanied with fasting resulting God forgiving their sin. Now, fasting is not required when repenting but if does show the depth of sincerity in our heart when seeking God's forgiveness. Fasting because of our remorse over sin shows how serious we are in our confession and our desire to change.

Maybe it's time for us to take a long look at how we deal with sin and show God how serious we are by not only asking His forgiveness but letting Him know we are serious about it by fasting.

## 5. Fast in times when asking God for something **Daniel 9:1-3, (the answer) 21-22**

Daniel prayed and fasted for wisdom from God to understand the prophecy of Jeremiah regarding the length of Israel's deportation.

Again, this type of fast isn't to try and merit God's favor so that He grants our request, but more so to seek God's will, to focus on what God might be saying as we look to Him for guidance.

*I had a friend who fasted for a time as he prayed about a possible job change.*

If you are praying for wisdom about direction from God over a decision you are facing, maybe you should include a time of fasting along with prayer.

John MacArthur says that **“Skipping a few meals might be the small price we willingly pay for staying in the Word until understanding comes.”** That’s what Daniel did.

## **6. Fast in times of beginning an important task or ministry**

After His baptism as He was led into the wilderness, Jesus fasted 40 days before beginning His ministry.

The early church fasted and prayed before Paul and Barnabas were set apart for serving God.

**Acts 13:2-3 “While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, ‘Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.’ So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off.”**

In **Acts 14:23** we read that **“Paul and Barnabas appointed elders for them in each church and, with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord, in whom they had put their trust.”**

As I look toward retirement in the next year or so, it would be prudent of the church to fast and pray as we seek God for direction in selecting the next pastor to lead this church.

**If you are a Sunday school teacher or facilitator, have you ever thought about fasting before you begin that assignment?** It can be a way of focusing on what God is going to do in you and through you.

**Have we as church leaders thought about fasting before we begin a new year of serving as pastor and Deacons?**

**For those serving on the Nominating committee, have you thought about fasting before beginning the process of selecting deacons to run for office? Have those being considered for office considered fasting before making the decision to serve?**

There are some good reasons to fast. The right way to fast is to have the right motivation, the right heart as you seek to be in God’s presence. Again, fasting isn’t commanded, but something we can practice as a way to grow in the Lord by focusing on Him.

If you do plan a fast, there are some things to consider.

First, pray about your fast. Yes, prayer is a part of fasting as that’s what separates it into something that is spiritual. Praying before the fast can help clarify the purpose for why you are fasting, making sure it’s with the right motive.

Second, determine the length of time you will devote to fasting and what type of fasting you will pursue: normal, partial, or absolute. Will it be something that you do yourself or will you ask others to join you?

Prepare yourself both spiritually and physically. By physical I mean that you may want to include plenty of water before and during the fast. Jack Hayford, who pastored on the west coast, said that when he was hungry during his times of fasting, he might include a piece of bread and grape juice and incorporate that as a time of worship with the elements of communion.

Include a time of praise in your fast as you thank the Lord for what you are being taught. Praise Him for His forgiveness. Your praise should be appropriate to your reason for the fast.

Fasting is a time of intense prayer where you focus on God and His work either in you or through you or as you pray for someone or something for which you are seeking God’s guidance. Always make it about God. Otherwise, there is no spiritual benefit.

**Is your fasting out of self-centered vanity or is it for spiritual value?** If it’s focus is self-centered, men will praise you. If its focus is God-centered and spiritual, God will reward you. Do you want rewards that are temporal or eternal? The Lord knows your heart and you will be rewarded accordingly.

Warren Wiersbe concludes that **“unless there is the devotion of the heart, there is no lasting spiritual benefit.”**

**Is it time to make fasting of some kind part of our spiritual discipline?**