

# THE RIGHT MOTIVE FOR FASTING

## MATHEW 06: 16–18

### *Introduction – All About Fasting*

Fasting means to abstain from food for some religious or spiritual purpose. A study of the fasting practiced by Jesus and by the great leaders of the Bible reveals what God means by fasting. Very simply, fasting means being so consumed with a matter that it becomes more important than food. Therefore, the believer sets food aside *in order to concentrate on seeking God about the matter*. Biblical fasting means more than just abstaining from food; it means to abstain from food in order to concentrate upon God and His answer to a particular matter. Biblical fasting involves prayer, intense supplication before God. Note the words “when you fast” (v. 16, 17). Jesus assumed believers fasted; He expected them to fast. He fasted and He taught fasting (Mt. 4:2), and the early believers fasted (Mt. 17:21; Lk. 2:37; Act. 10:30; 13:3; 14:23; 1 Cor. 7:5; 2 Cor. 6:5; 11:27). Yet so few have continued such intense seeking of the Lord: so few fast, truly fast.

The benefits of fasting are enormous, but there are also dangers. We can fast for the wrong reasons. This is the point of the present passage. Christ counsels us on the wrong and the right motives for fasting.

- I. The wrong way to fast (v. 16).
- II. The right way to fast (vv. 17-18).

### **I. *Mathew 06:16 Fasting – the Wrong Way***

The wrong way to fast.

1. Fasting as a hypocrite is wrong. Being hypocritical is a real danger when fasting. There are four reasons men fast, and all but one are false and hypocritical.
  - a. Men fast to gain a sense of God’s approval and of self-approval.
  - b. Men fast to fulfill a religious act.
  - c. Men fast to gain religious recognition.
  - d. Men fast to genuinely meet God for some special purpose.

**Thought 1.** Fasting is not condemned by Christ. Fasting for any purpose other than to meet God is condemned: when you fast, fast “only to your Father” (v. 18).

**Mat 6:2** “So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honoured by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full.”

**Mat 15:8** “These people honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.”

**Luke 18:12** ‘I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.’

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**2 Tim 3:5** *Having a form of godliness but denying its power. Have nothing to do with them.*

**Isa 29:13** *The Lord says: "These people come near to me with their mouth and honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. Their worship of me is made up only of rules taught by men.*

**Hosea 6:6** *For I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings.*

2. Fasting for recognition is wrong. It poses several serious dangers that must be guarded against with all diligence.
  - a. The danger of feeling super-spiritual. Few believers follow a true fast. Therefore when they really fast, they have to guard against a sense of super-spirituality and pride.
  - b. The danger of over-confidence. The believer's confidence is to be in God, not in self. After a genuine fast a believer usually feels spiritually confident, ready to go forth. He must go forth depending upon the strength of Christ and not upon his own energy and effort.
  - c. The danger of sharing one's fasting experience. The believer has usually learned so much from being in God's presence that he is anxious to share it, especially with those closest to him. The best advice is to hush: share nothing, not even with one's dearest friend.
  - d. The danger of changing one's appearance and the way one acts and behaves. Any change whatsoever from one's normal behaviour and routine attracts attention and ruins the whole benefit of the fast. As Christ says, "they disfigure their faces" (act super-spiritual) (v. 16).

**Mat 23:5** *"Everything they do is done for men to see: They make their phylacteries wide and the tassels on their garments long."*

**Mat 23:27** *"Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men's bones and everything unclean."*

**John 7:24** *"Stop judging by mere appearances, and make a right judgment."*

**2 Cor 10:7** *You are looking only on the surface of things. If anyone is confident that he belongs to Christ, he should consider again that we belong to Christ just as much as he.*

3. Fasting the wrong way has its reward. A person will receive human recognition and esteem, but the recognition of men is all he will ever receive.

**Thought 1** Some gain the control and discipline of their bodies through fasting, but they ruin themselves and their ministry through pride. They lose their reward.

*1 Pet 1:24* For, “All men are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall.”

*Psa 49:12* But man, despite his riches, does not endure: he is like the beasts that perish.

*Psa 49:17* For he will take nothing with him when he dies, his splendour will not descend with him.

*Isa 5:14* Therefore the grave enlarges its appetite and opens its mouth without limit; into it will descend their nobles and masses with all their brawlers and revelers.

*Hosea 4:7* The more the priests increased, the more they sinned against me; they exchanged their Glory for something disgraceful.

## II. *Mathew 06:17–18 Fasting – the Right Way*

The right way to fast. As stated in the introduction, fasting means being so consumed with a matter that it becomes more important than food. Therefore, the believer sets food aside *in order to concentrate on seeking* God about the matter. Biblical fasting means more than just abstaining from food; it means to abstain from food in order to concentrate upon God and His answer to a particular matter. Biblical fasting involves prayer, intense supplication before God.

1. Fasting is a duty. Every believer is expected to fast. Christ said, “When you fast.” He expects us to fast.

=> Jesus Himself fasted.

*Mat 4:2* After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry.

=> The apostles were to fast.

*Mat 9:15* Jesus answered, “How can the guests of the bridegroom mourn while he is with them? The time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them; then they will fast.” (see Mk. 2:20; Lk. 5:35)

=> Anna fasted.

*Luke 2:37* And then was a widow until she was eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying.

=> Church leaders fasted.

*Acts 13:2* While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.”

*Acts 14:23* 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.

=> Husbands and wives are expected to fast.

**1 Cor 7:5** *Do not deprive each other except by mutual consent and for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer. Then come together again so that Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.*

=> Paul fasted often.

**2 Cor 6:5** *In beatings, imprisonments and riots; in hard work, sleepless nights and hunger.*

**2 Cor 11:27** *I have laboured and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked.*

2. Fasting is to be done without notice. The believer is to fast before God, not before men. There is to be no change in appearance or behaviour to indicate that he is fasting. Think about it. Why should there be? Why should anyone know that a person is seeking God in a very special way? The matter is God's affair, not man's affair. It is between the person and God, not the person and other people.

**Thought 1.** What is fasting? It is not to be "obvious to men...but only to your Father" (v. 18). It is to come into God's presence for a very, very special session of prayer.

3. Fasting is to be to God alone. The believer is to fast to God alone. God is the object of his fast. He needs to meet God in a very, very special way. In meeting God all alone, the believer is demonstrating his dependency upon God and His provision.

**Thought 1.** A religionist fasts before men. A genuine believer fasts before God.

**Thought 2.** God does not say when or how often we should fast, but He does tell us how to fast. We must take every precaution to fast exactly as He says: before God, in secret, without any ostentation or show whatsoever. No one is to see or know.

4. Fasting the right way has its reward: God shall reward us openly. How much greater is His reward than the recognition of men! God's acceptance and eternal reward is enough for genuine believers.

**Mat 6:3-4** *But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.*

**2 Cor 5:10** *For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due to him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.*

**2 John 1:8** *Watch out that you do not lose what you have worked for, but that you may be rewarded fully.*

**Rev 22:12** *"Behold, I am coming soon! My reward is with me, and I will give to everyone according to what he has done."*

**Psa 19:9, 11** *The fear of the LORD is pure, enduring forever. The ordinances of the LORD are sure and altogether righteous. By them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward.*

**Psa 58:11** *Then men will say, “Surely the righteous still are rewarded; surely there is a God who judges the earth.”*

**Isa 40:10** *See, the Sovereign LORD comes with power, and his arm rules for him. See, his reward is with him, and his recompense accompanies him.*

**Isa 62:11** *The LORD has made proclamation to the ends of the earth: “Say to the Daughter of Zion, ‘See, your Saviour comes! See, his reward is with him, and his recompense accompanies him.’”*

**Jer 17:10** *“I the LORD search the heart and examine the mind, to reward a man according to his conduct, according to what his deeds deserve.”*

**Jer 23:24** *“Can anyone hide in secret places so that I cannot see him?” declares the LORD. “Do not I fill heaven and earth?” declares the LORD. ■*

### MATHEW 06:17–18 OCCASIONS OF FASTING

There are at least four times when the believer should fast.

1. There are times when the believer feels a special pull, an urge, a call within his heart to get alone with God. This is God’s Spirit moving within his heart. When this happens, nothing – not food, not responsibility – should keep him from getting all alone with God. He should fast as soon as possible.
2. There are times when special needs arise. The needs may concern the believer’s own life or the life of friends, society, the world, or some ministry or mission. Again, nothing should keep the believer from spending a very special time in God’s presence when facing such dire needs.
3. There are times when the believer needs to humble his soul before God. At such times he learns not only humility but dependence upon God (Psa. 35:13).
4. There are times when the believer needs a very special power from God. The Lord promised such power if the believer prayed and fasted (Mt. 17:21; Mk. 9:29). □

### MATHEW 06:17–18 THE BENEFITS OF FASTING

Why are believers to fast? There are excellent benefits to fasting, and God wants His people to reap these benefits.

1. Fasting keeps the believer in the presence of God. He is fasting in order to seek God's presence for a very special purpose; he remains in God's presence until he feels God has or is going to meet his need.
2. Fasting humbles the believer's soul before God. It says that God is the most important thing in all the world to him (Psa. 35:13).
3. Fasting teaches the believer dependency upon God. He is seeking God, and in so doing he is demonstrating his conviction that he is dependent upon God.
4. Fasting demonstrates to God (by action) a real seriousness. It shows by act that the matter being considered is a priority.
5. Fasting teaches the believer to control and discipline his life. He does without food in order to gain a greater substance.
6. Fasting keeps the believer from being enslaved by habit. He lays aside all substances; in so doing, he breaks the hold of anything that might have him chained.
7. Fasting helps the believer to stay physically fit. It helps keep him from becoming overweight and soft. □