



January Sermon Series

Practicing Righteousness

Fasting, Giving, and Prayer

Practicing Righteousness: Fasting
Matthew 6:1-18, (focused: 16-18)
January 23, 2022

Main Idea: Following Jesus in fasting is practicing righteousness

Personal Study Guide

READ ENTIRE TEXT: MATTHEW 6:1-18, PARTICULARLY VERSES 16-18

Matthew 6:1-18

Giving to the Needy

6 “Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven.

² “Thus, when you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. ³ But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, ⁴ so that your giving may be in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

The Lord’s Prayer

⁵ “And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. ⁶ But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

⁷ “And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words. ⁸ Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. ⁹ Pray then like this:

“Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name.

¹⁰ Your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.

¹¹ Give us this day our daily bread,
¹² and forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.

¹³ And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.

¹⁴ For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you,
¹⁵ but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

Fasting

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.¹

¹ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#). (2016). (Mt 6:1–18). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.

Highlight – What stands out?

1. Look at verses 16-18. Is there anything surprising to you about fasting in this text?
2. What questions do you have about fasting from this text?
3. Look at the entire text now. Do you notice any repeated words, phrases, or themes?
4. What do you learn about God as it pertains to fasting? What do you learn about what God expects of us?
5. Look back at verses 16-18. What does Jesus say not to do? What Jesus say to do?

Explain – What does this mean?

1. Look up *fasting* in a Bible dictionary or English dictionary. What does it mean? How is this different or similar to what you've commonly thought about fasting?

2. Look up the following verses: Dan. 9:3-19; Matt. 4:1-5, Matt. 9:14-17, Acts 13:1-3, based on these verses, what is the purpose of fasting?
3. Look at Matthew 6:1 and back at verses 16-18. Based on these verses, what is the key component to practicing righteousness? What is Jesus most concerned about when we fast?

Apply – How does this change me?

1. The heart of fasting is for a spiritual purpose, but there are some people who cannot abstain from a meal for medical reasons. What are some other ways they can practice righteousness in fasting?
2. As you look to the new year, what are some of the biggest barriers to your spiritual health or what are some prayers that you want to see God answer this year? How can fasting serve you in these needs?

3. There are repeated phrases in verses 2-6, 7, 16-18. What are they? What is the assumption that Jesus has about our role in fasting and God the Father's role in fasting?
4. As you look at your own motivations for fasting and obeying Christ, can you think of a time where you obeyed him in fasting (or another discipline) so others would notice you? Why is this dangerous? How did it play out in your life?

Respond – What's my next step?

1. Will you join us in fasting? If so, what will you fast from? How long?
2. Who can you invite to join you and hold you accountable? Make a plan for what this will look like.

Commentary

*For additional study on fasting, there are two resources listed below in the "Additional Resources" section that will help prepare you.

Taken from The Gospel According to Matthew by Leon Morris

c. Fasting, 6:16–18

¹⁶ “And whenever you fast, do not be like the hypocrites, putting on a gloomy look, for they disfigure their faces so that they may appear to men as fasting; truly I tell you, they have their reward. ¹⁷ But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, ¹⁸ so that you do not appear to men as fasting, but to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will recompense you.”

This is another Matthean section without parallels. It fits in with the kind of teaching given earlier in the chapter where the demand is for complete sincerity in praying and giving. So is it with fasting. This is no concern of anyone except the fasting person and God. Anyone who fasts should take care to keep it that way; he should make no display of his fasting. Jesus and his disciples apparently fasted rarely, if at all (9:14–15, though cf. 4:2).

16. The one fast prescribed in the law was the Day of Atonement (Lev. 16:29–31; “afflict yourselves” is generally understood to include fasting). But other fasts came to be observed (Zech. 8:19; cf. Neh. 9:1; Ps. 35:13, etc.; private fasting was also practiced, Neh. 1:4; Dan. 9:3; for New Testament times cf. Luke 18:12). *Whenever* indicates that people will fast, but leaves the times open. No particular significance is attached to fasting here, as though the fast were for a specific object; it is simply a normal religious, disciplinary activity, one of three pious practices held in special esteem among the Jews (with almsgiving and prayer). But Jesus says that whenever it takes place certain precautions should be observed, for fasting readily gives an opening for those who like to make a show of their piety (for *hypocrites* see on v. 2). Fasters could put on a *gloomy look* to go with their physical discomfort, or they might *disfigure*⁵⁶ *their faces*. It is not quite certain what form the disfigurement took, but evidently some act of disfigurement was recognized as a common accompaniment of fasting so that these people not only fasted but appeared to fast; they made it plain to those who saw them that they were engaged in a serious and onerous religious duty. They were more interested in appearing to fast than in the actual fasting itself. Such people, Jesus says, *have their reward* (i.e., they have received in full all the reward they are going to get; see on verses 1–2). They aimed at making an impression rather than at religious excellence. They succeeded in their aim and should not expect any further recompense than the applause they had attained.

17. *But you* puts the follower of Jesus in contrast; that way is not for the disciple. Jesus implies that those who follow him will fast from time to time, but he says nothing about frequency, occasion, or method. He is concerned only with the motive behind the fasting and indeed primarily with the requirement that fasting be done secretly, as a matter between the religious person and God. So the faster is told *anoint your head*; this points to a normal social custom of the day, but evidently those who fasted sometimes omitted the practice. So with washing the face. It is pleasant to be clean, and evidently it was felt by some who fasted that they should forego this pleasure. And, of course, an untended face is very obvious.

18. The purpose of this (*so that*) is that those fasting should not make a display of their disciplinary activity. The hypocrites fasted in order to make an impression on others (“a sacred means is being corrupted by an unholy purpose,” Gutzwiller); Jesus prescribes the exact opposite:

his followers are not to appear to fast. Fasting is a matter between them and the Father. The thought of being “in secret” is repeated from verses 4 and 6, though with a slightly different vocabulary. With fasting, as with almsgiving and prayer, it is important that the activity be done in secret. As with those activities the Father will *recompense* the person who fasts rightly (in the end justice will be done), but the emphasis is not on the recompense; it is on keeping one’s religious activities religious and not making them a means of self-glorification.²

² Morris, L. (1992). [*The Gospel according to Matthew*](#) (pp. 150–151). Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press.



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Group Study Guide

*This lesson is for the Group Leader to use to teach the lesson and facilitate the discussion. It is not intended that you will use every question in this guide during your group time. You will likely only be able to cover 4-5 questions, depending on how discussion goes. This guide is longer than what you will need but provides the freedom and flexibility to pull questions out for discussion that will best serve your group time.

Tip: You may want to pull one question from each section for discussion or spend more time on a particular section than another on. It's totally up to your discretion.

Introduction

Icebreaker Question:

Have you ever fasted? If so, what was the experience like?

OR

What is your gut reaction when you hear someone encouraging you to fast? Why do you think that is the case?

This entire series is on “practicing righteousness,” so if you are struggling to get into a spiritual habit, this series is for you!

READ ENTIRE TEXT: MATTHEW 6:1-18, PARTICULARLY 16-18

Highlight – What stands out?

1. Read the entire passage: What are some repeated words, phrases or ideas in these verses? **(These can be popcorn answers)**
2. Read verses 16-18 again: What is the “do this, don’t do that” component to these verses? **(These can be popcorn answers)**
3. Does anything sound familiar to you in this passage?

Explain – What does this mean?

*For larger groups, the questions that you choose from this section (and the Apply and Respond sections) might be best answered in a smaller group format. You could have people in your group turn to the person next to them (or get in a group of 3-4) and discuss for 5 minutes and then come back together as a group and have one or two groups share. This allows more people to learn from each other, but also promotes active learning in the group.

1. Look at Matthew 6:1 and back at verses 16-18. Based on these verses, what is the key component to practicing righteousness? What is Jesus most concerned about when we fast?

2. Look up: Luke 18:9-14. How does this parable speak to what Jesus is saying in Matthew 6:16-18?

Apply – How do I live this out?

1. The heart of fasting is for a spiritual purpose, but there are some people who cannot abstain from a meal for medical reasons. What are some other ways they can practice righteousness in fasting? What are other things you can fast from this month?

2. As you look to the new year, what are some of the biggest barriers to your spiritual health or what are some prayers that you want to see God answer this year? How can fasting serve you in these needs?

ILLUSTRATION SUGGESTION: IS THERE A TIME YOU FASTED TO BE NOTICED? OR IS THERE A TIME YOU FASTED THE RIGHT WAY? WHAT WAS THE OUTCOME IN YOUR LIFE? OR MAYBE YOU HAVE AN ILLUSTRATION FROM SOMEONE ELSE THAT MIGHT SERVE THIS QUESTION?

3. For application, have your group look up these verses. Based on these verses what is the purpose of fasting? Is there one purpose from these verses that you see fasting serving you in?

- EZRA 8:21-23
- JOEL 1:14
- DANIEL 9:3-19
- ACTS 13:1-3

Respond – What’s my next step?

1. Did you join us in fasting? Can you share about your experience?

2. Who can you invite to join you and hold you accountable? Make a plan for your group to participate and stay accountable.

Additional Resources:

Video: [What is the Purpose of Fasting by Don Whitney](#). Dr. Whitney has written a number of helpful books on spiritual disciplines, including [Spiritual](#)

[Disciplines for the Christian Life](#). In this video, he unpacks the purpose of fasting and what you can do if you can't fast fully from food.

Podcast: [Why Do Christians Fast? by John Piper](#) This is a short Ask Pastor John episode where he breaks down a few passages on why fasting is a Christian discipline.