

# Fasting in the Presence of the Father

## Matthew 6:16-18

**Introduction** – When it comes to the hypocritical lives of the Pharisees, Jesus was clear: Don't give like they give, don't pray like they pray, don't fast like they fast. We must consider several things. We must understand the nature and purpose of fasting. We must understand and avoid hypocritical fasting. But we must also consider that, today, almost no one fasts in order to be seen by men, because almost no one fasts. What does this have to say about our lives in the presence of the Father?

**When You Fast** – Once again, Jesus assumes that His disciples will be practicing a particular discipline. There was only one annual public fast in the old covenant. This was the Day of Atonement (Lev 23:26ff). All other fasts, individual and corporate, were called for specific situations. This carries over into the new covenant, when we see Paul fast, not only at his conversion (Acts 9:9), but also as the church at Antioch prepares its missions work (Acts 13:2). Here we have an example again not to take these instructions from the Sermon on the Mount out of context. *Being seen fasting* and *fasting to be seen* are not the same.

**The Hypocrites** – In the days of Jesus, the Pharisees were known for fasting two days a week, Mondays and Thursdays. These 'fasts' were done very openly so that men would see their devotion. Christ and His disciples are known for distancing themselves from such practices (Matt 9:14-17). Again, Jesus warns them that if they are seeking the praise of men, that is all they will get. That wasn't the purpose of fasting.

**What Is Fasting?** – Fasting is the practice of abstaining from food for a period of time in order to humble oneself before God. *"Then I proclaimed a fast there at the river of Ahava, that we might humble ourselves before our God, to seek from Him the right way for us and our little ones and all our possessions."* (Ezra 8:21) *"I humbled my soul with fasting"* (Psalm 69:10). Humbling before God can occur:

**During a Time of God's Judgment** – Joel 1:13-14 – *"Gird yourselves and lament, you priests; Wail, you who minister before the altar; come, lie all night in sackcloth, you who minister to my God; for the grain offering and the drink offering are withheld from the house of your God. Consecrate a fast, call a sacred assembly; gather the elders."*

**During a Time of Great Danger** – 2 Chron 20:3 – *"And Jehoshaphat feared, and set himself to seek the Lord, and proclaimed a fast throughout all Judah."*

**During a Time of Confession** – Dan 9:3 – *"Then I set my face toward the Lord God to make request by prayer and supplications, with fasting, sackcloth, and ashes."*

In all of these circumstances, we see a heart that motivates fasting is supposed to be a heart for God. Fasting means one has a hunger for God's approval, not man's approval. And so we see the hypocrisy of the Pharisees.

**Fasting In the Presence of the Father** – If I am seeking God, I am only concerned about what He thinks, not what men notice (Matt 5:17-18). On the one hand, I should look ordinary, but on the other hand, there should be outward manifestations of a truly contrite heart. Acts of mercy ought to overshadow the fast itself. Isaiah 58 teaches that a true fast should be accompanied with feeding the poor, clothing the naked (v7), extending healing and justice (v8), the ceasing of slanderous words and actions (v9). In addition, the result of soul-affliction should be a true delight in the Lord's Day and in the Lord Himself (vv13-14).

**An Appropriate Time To Fast** – So why is there so little fasting today?

**Humility** – We are taught to believe in ourselves, find it within ourselves, discover for ourselves, but never to humble ourselves. *"Rend your heart, and not your garments"* – Joel 2:13. An 'easy believism' leaves us wondering why we even have to bother with confessing our sins – 'what sins?' But Isaiah 66:2 – *"But on this one will I look: On him who is poor and of a contrite spirit, and who trembles at My word"*, and Matt 5:6-7 teach differently.

**Mealtime Is No Longer a Holy Time** – Pragmatism has robbed us of the joy of family dinners. Our children receive only the leftovers, of our time and talents. This has blurred our sense of broken covenant and broken communion in a time of fasting.

**Fasting and Feasting** – Zech 7:4-6 teaches us that if we do not know how to feast, then we will not know how to fast. The Bible is full of feasting before the Lord, and culminates in the wedding supper of the Lamb. This is not just about good food and wine, but it is about those things. And it is about enjoying them unto the Lord.

**Additions, or Sins?** – We have not learned to fast with regard to things. Nothing is to control us but the Holy Spirit (Eph 5:18). *"For the life of Christians ought ever to be tempered with frugality and sobriety, so that the whole course of it should present some appearance of fasting."* – Calvin