

# OpenTheo

## Matthew 6:16 - 6:18



### Gospel of Matthew - Steve Gregg

Steve Gregg teaches about Matthew 6:16-18, a section within the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus teaches his disciples about piety and religiosity. In this passage, Jesus outlines fasting as a religious requirement of Judaism and stresses the importance of doing it with the right attitude, without seeking attention or recognition for it. Gregg explains that fasting is not meant to be a hunger strike or a means of making life easier through miracles, but rather a voluntary spiritual behavior motivated by the desire for closer communion with God.

### Transcript

For the last several sessions, we've been looking at Matthew 6, verses 1-18, which is a complete section within the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus is teaching the disciples principally one lesson about piety or about religiosity. And that is that if you're going to be religious, if you're going to do religious things, you need to make sure that your motivation is to please God and to be seen by him and to seek his approval, rather than to look religious in the sight of men and to seek their approval. Now, Jesus was basically saying that the style of religion most current among the Jews at that time, at least among the more religious ones, the Pharisees, was just all wrong in this respect.

Whatever they did religiously, they did it to be seen by men. And the only reward they sought was man's approval and man's admiration. And they had that.

They had the reward. The reward they were seeking, they had. But he was saying you should seek a different reward than that.

You should seek the reward of your father's approval. So, Jesus gave three examples of ways in which the Pharisees did what was wrong in this respect, and how he wanted his disciples to differ. One example had to do with giving charitable gifts, giving to the poor.

And one had to do with prayer, and the other that remains for us to look at today has to do with fasting. Now, giving to the poor, praying, and fasting were all religious requirements in Judaism. And Jesus expected his disciples would be continuing in these activities, but he wanted to make sure that they would not do them in the way the

Pharisees did.

He wanted them to make sure they had no showiness, no ostentation about it, that they were doing things in such a way as to guarantee the purity of their motivation. In giving charitable deeds, he said you should do that rather secretly, privately, without show, without fanfare. The Pharisees blow a trumpet before themselves before they give so everyone would be paying attention.

When you give, he says, don't let your left hand know what your right hand is doing. When you pray, don't do it in a boldly public way to get all people's attention. Go into your closet and pray privately there so that your father is paying attention and you're not really thinking about what other people are thinking about you.

You're thinking about what God is thinking. That's the motivation that is important. Now, he talks about fasting as the third example, and this comes up in Matthew 6, verses 16 through 18.

He says, Moreover, when you fast, do not be like the hypocrites with a sad countenance, for they disfigure their faces, that they may appear to men to be fasting. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward. But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, so that you do not appear to men to be fasting, but to your father who is in the secret place, and your father who sees in secret will reward you openly.

Now, this last illustration that comes from fasting, it takes the same form as the illustrations he gave about charitable deeds and about prayer. He said, Don't do it the way the Pharisees do it. He gave the example of how they do it, that they shouldn't do it.

In this case, when they fasted, the Pharisees would disfigure their faces. They would kind of look unusually gloomy, so that everyone would recognize this must be one of the days they're fasting. But he says, When you fast, don't give any indication that you're fasting.

Comb your hair normally, wear the same expression on your face, so that you're not making it obvious to anyone that you're fasting. Then only God will know that you're fasting. And if He knows you're fasting, that's all that matters.

If you're fasting for the right reasons, God will reward you openly, even if you will not have the reward of human admiration, which is what the Pharisees are seeking for themselves. To be admired by men. Okay, well, let's talk about this section a little bit.

First of all, we need to talk about what fasting is and exactly what obligation Christians have in this respect. Now, fasting means going without food. In the Bible, fasting is sometimes linked with prayer.

In fact, it is in this passage, because prayer is the last thing Jesus talked about before He talked about fasting. Now He's talking about fasting. And prayer and fasting are often

linked together.

In fact, I dare say, fasting, whenever it is mentioned in the Bible, probably presupposes that prayer is connected with it, too. I say that because there are rare occasions in the Bible where we're told that the Israelites fasted. And it doesn't mention whether they prayed or not.

In one case, in the book of Esther, the whole nation was in danger of being annihilated. And so Mordecai and Esther declared that all the Jews should fast for three days. Now, it doesn't say anything about praying.

It just says they should fast. But it is almost certain they were to be praying also. Fasting and praying are usually linked together in Scripture.

There was a time when the disciples were unable to cast a demon out of a young man. And Jesus managed to do it. And the disciples asked Him, why weren't we able to cast the demon out? And part of His answer was, well, this kind does not come out except by prayer and fasting.

Notice prayer and fasting together. Likewise, another word that is often linked in Scripture with fasting is the word watching. Watching and fasting.

Now, watching, used in this sense in Scripture, means to stay awake. And fasting means to not eat. So that watching really is depriving oneself of sleep.

And fasting is depriving oneself of food. And both of these things are linked with prayer in the Bible. The Bible talks about to pray with watching.

Or Jesus said, watch and pray that you enter not into temptation. So to deprive yourself of sleep and to deprive yourself of food both have biblical precedent when linked with prayer. It would appear that the Bible is saying that when you add to your prayers the self-deprivation from sleep or from food, you may be adding something in terms of power to your praying.

Now, I don't want to speculate too much as to how fasting would add power to prayer. It seems to me like the main power in prayer is that we are asking in Jesus' name and that we are asking in faith. These are things that the Bible repeats many times.

But it does not change the fact that fasting is often linked to prayer when it is particularly urgent that prayers be answered. And I'm not sure exactly why this is. It's possible that fasting is added to prayer only to give more time to pray.

Because we do spend an awful lot of time each day in the preparation of food and the eating of food and the cleaning up of food. A good portion of our day is taken up with food. And that's not really bad.

I mean, almost all creatures on the earth spend a lion's share, if I might say, of their time seeking food. And that's what they live for. They live to eat food and to reproduce.

It's really what most animals just exist for. Human beings have higher work than that to perform. But we still are quite tied to our need for food.

And so we shouldn't be too surprised. Throughout history, most people spent probably most of their working hours growing food. And women in the home would spend a great deal of their time preparing food and cleaning up after food.

And three times a day, people generally eat food. And sometimes this is the high point of every day. And sometimes it's protracted out to a longer period of time because it's so enjoyable.

Food is a necessary part of ordinary life. But some have felt that the purpose of fasting with prayer is to take that time that we would normally give to eating and give it to praying instead. Now that could be the whole explanation.

That could be why sometimes we're exhorted to fast and pray. It's also possible that fasting has a significance in terms of adding, what shall I say, urgency to our prayers. You know, we pray more urgently.

We pray with greater fervency when we sense we are in a crisis. Have you ever noticed that? When you're really in trouble, that's when your prayers are vehement. That's when your prayers are emotional.

That's when your prayers are really urgent. You cry out to God because you're in trouble. But at times when you're really comfortable and all the bills are paid and everything's going wonderful, you might still pray because you're a Christian and because you figure it's your obligation to pray.

Now I lay me down to sleep or something like that. But it's much harder to have the same urgency and, what shall I say, just a sense of an emergency in your praying. There's no crisis.

And it's hard to cry out to God with the same sense of desperation when you're not really desperate. And certainly this is obvious. I mean, this is not something that is disputable.

Everyone would agree about this. However, it's possible that fasting is one way to cause that sense of desperation to arise. You might even say artificially.

In other words, if your own circumstances are not pressing you, you press yourself by making yourself uncomfortable, by depriving yourself of the comforts of sleep and food, in order that you begin to feel more of a strain on your physical well-being, so that you're more inclined to focus on your prayers. I'm only suggesting this is another possibility.

But the Bible nowhere explains why fasting works with prayer in the way it does.

But there's no question that fasting and prayer are joined together as things that we do in order to see God's will done. Now, fasting is not bending God's arm. It's not like a hunger strike where you say, I'm not going to eat until you do what I want you to do.

That would be manipulative, and that's not what God has in mind. Fasting would never have any use in coaxing God to do that which he's reluctant to do. I'm sure that the value of fasting has much more to do with our side of praying, with helping us to focus more on the concerns we're praying for.

But whatever it may be, whatever the explanation of its significance may be, it is clear that Jesus expected that his disciples would fast from time to time. Because he didn't say, if you fast, he said, when you fast. And since he said, when you fast, it's clear that he expected that his disciples would be fasting.

That wasn't open to question. The question is, when they fast, would they do it in the way that the Pharisees did it, or in the way that he thought would be better for them to do it? Now, the Pharisees, when they would fast, would make it obvious to everyone that they were fasting. If you are a person who has fasted, and I hope you have at some time or another, then you know that when you're fasting, you're very uncomfortable.

At least after a certain point. If you just skip one or two meals, you may not be uncomfortable. But if you fast for a few days, there will be times when you really, really would like to eat.

Your stomach will be growling. You'll feel hunger pains. And that being so, it's an uncomfortable situation.

Well, the Pharisees didn't want to go through such a discomfort without being appreciated for it by people. And so on those days that they were fasting, they made sure that everybody knew they were fasting. By looking very sad, looking very uncomfortable, looking very disorderly, as if their whole life was thrown out of order by missing a few meals.

Jesus said that is definitely not what you need to be doing. You need to be acting normal. Your expression, your grooming and so forth should be the same on the days when you fast as it is at any other time.

Just so you don't draw attention to the fact that you're fasting. Now the Pharisees fasted on a schedule. They fasted twice a week.

We read of this in Luke chapter 18, but we also know that from extra biblical material from the Talmud and so forth. It was common for the Pharisees to fast two days a week. Of course, this fast was only from sunup to sundown.

So, if they ate their dinner after the sun went down, or if they ate their breakfast before the sun came up, they might miss only one meal. They might just miss lunch. And so, that was really not a great sacrifice.

But they wanted to be appreciated for it nonetheless, and so they made it very clear to all who were observing that they were fasting. Now, Jesus said don't do that. Don't do that.

If you're fasting, don't appear to be fasting. Because you are fasting not to please men, but to please God. If you're fasting to impress men, then your fast will be of no value, just like your prayers and your giving of alms will be of no value if you're doing it to please man.

The question then is, is it necessary to be absolutely secretive about fasting? The question is similar to, is it necessary to be absolutely secretive about giving gifts or about praying? To read what Jesus said here, in this section of Matthew 6, you get the impression that you should never let anyone in any way find out that you gave a gift or that you're praying. You have to go into your room and shut the doors to pray, so no one will hear. You have to not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing when you give.

As I said when we talked about those earlier passages, I believe Jesus is using something of a hyperbole in that he is saying, you know, it's best to be private about it. As secretive as you can, because that way you never have to wonder about your motives. When you are praying or giving gifts in a way that people can know that you're doing it, it's hard to know to what degree your own heart is concerned about their observance of it.

That they know you're doing it. If you are doing it totally secretly, you'll never have to wonder about your motives. At the same time, giving of gifts and prayer are sometimes done publicly, both by the apostles in the scripture and by Jesus himself.

And that being so, we need to realize that there is not some kind of a legalism here that Jesus is teaching, which would make it wrong to do these good things if people find out about them. I say that because some people do become legalistic about the Sermon on the Mount. Rather than recognizing the lesson that Jesus is teaching, they just apply his teaching in the same way that the Jews applied the law in a legalistic fashion.

In a wooden, inflexible, externalistic fashion. I know somebody who says that when he's fasting, he will never tell anyone that he's fasting. And of course, when you don't tell someone you're fasting, likely someone's going to offer you to have lunch with you or to offer you some food or something.

And of course, how do you handle it in a situation like that? Well, this brother said, so that he does not ever have to tell anyone when he's fasting, if somebody offers him food

during one of his fasts, he'll go ahead and eat it. He'll break his fast. But then, he'll just, without telling anyone, he'll just go ahead and extend the fast another day.

That seems to me like that could be very frustrating because you might have to extend your fast another day, several days in a row, because of the frequency with which people offer you to give you food. I don't believe that taking the words of Jesus that far are what he had in mind. That you have to be so secretive that you would even break your fast before you would tell somebody that you're fasting.

It seems to me that there's no violation if Jesus, I mean, if you are fasting and if somebody asks you, would you like to eat? And you say, no, thank you, I'm not eating today. If you make no big deal about it and you're not trying to impress anybody, I don't think you're violating what Jesus said. There was a fast that was scheduled on Yom Kippur for the Jews every year.

And the Apostle Paul apparently participated in that because on one of his occasions, he was on his way back to Jerusalem. He wanted to get there in time for the fast. Now, if Paul participated in that fast, it would be no secret that he was doing so because the whole nation of Israel was fasting on that day.

Obviously, he couldn't keep it a total secret that he was fasting if he was participating in that, nor would he need to. Jesus is not teaching that when you give charitable gifts or when you pray or when you fast, you should in no sense let anyone ever find out that you did it. As if you should be ashamed if they found out.

No, the idea is motivation. All the way through here, his teaching is motivation. The first verse in the chapter said, Take heed that you do not do your charitable deeds before men to be seen by them.

Otherwise, you have no reward from your Father in heaven. It's if you are doing something to be seen. Doing something so people will recognize what you're doing and will admire you for what you're doing.

That is what Jesus is getting at here. And so it is with fasting. Now, perhaps this would be a good time for me to answer some of the questions people have about fasting.

Although the passage itself is not really here to teach us much about fasting. It's more to teach us something about our attitude when we fast. A fast can be a total fast in that we don't eat or drink anything.

If that is the case, a fast should never go more than about three days, probably. Because if you go more than three days without water, for example, you could die. You can go weeks without food, but you can only go a few days at the most without water.

And so most fasts in the Bible, if they were any more than a day or so long, were not

complete or total fasts. Where the person would drink nothing. They would only eat nothing.

When Jesus fasted for 40 days in the wilderness, we're told that during that 40 days he ate nothing. And afterward he was hungry. It does not say he drank nothing and afterwards he was thirsty.

It mentions nothing about abstaining from water. Because Jesus could not abstain from water for 40 days without dying unless it was a miracle. And of course there were miracles in his life, but there's no suggestion that God made his experience of fasting easier for him miraculously.

I believe that Jesus drank water during his fast, but he didn't eat any food. So the normal fast would seem to be where you drink water, but you don't eat food. Now some people drink other things.

They drink juices or coffee or Cokes during their fast. Whatever you want to do, I guess I'm not going to criticize, but I could never do that when I'm fasting. Because part of the purpose of fasting is, I think, to not stimulate your taste buds.

Not to focus on gratification of your palate. And so it seems much normal in Scripture that when people fasted they drank water and they did nothing else. They drank nothing else.

But really to abstain from any food, to give up ice cream for six months or something, that would be a fast of sorts. That would be a partial fast. Daniel, we are told in Daniel chapter 10, went three weeks without eating any fancy foods.

That was kind of a fast, but he didn't give up all foods. So fasting can be in many forms. It can be a partial fast where you give up one thing or a few things or one category of things for a period of time.

Or it can be a normal fast where you eat no food at all, but just drink water. Or it could be a total fast, if it's short enough, where you neither eat or drink anything. And as far as what kind of fast you should do, that's between you and God.

The Bible nowhere legislates anything about fasting to the Christian. The Jews were required to fast one day out of the year, and that was on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. But there was no other day that they were told they had to fast.

All other fasting was voluntary. Likewise, in our case, fasting is voluntary. No one should tell you that you should be fasting twice a week or anything like that.

I do not think Jesus intended to make fasting a religious ritual. I believe it is something that is to be a sincere compliment to sincere prayer. That I don't eat because I want to



focus on praying at this time.

And I don't want to interrupt myself. I don't want my flesh to be gratified, my palate to be stimulated. I want to just devote my whole attention to the issues that I'm praying for.

That is what fasting, I think, is about. But the teaching of Jesus here is not really about fasting. It's more about motivation in spiritual behavior or in religious behavior.

And that is why this mention of fasting is simply one of three illustrations of that basic point. He's not saying that you should fast. He's just saying that when you do, you should do it in a way that is not ostentatious.

In a way that is secretive enough to guarantee that the only person you could possibly be trying to please is God. And, of course, if someone does find out you're fasting, you don't have to feel like somehow you've lost your reward. The idea that you could lose your reward by someone finding out that you did a religious act is not taught anywhere here.

You have your reward if all you're seeking is to be seen by men. If men see you, then you have what you wanted. You've had your reward.

The Bible does not talk about losing your reward if someone finds out you did something, so long as you were rightly motivated in the first place. Well, we're out of time again for our broadcast, so we're going to have to stop there. We'll continue through the Sermon on the Mount next time, taking another direction about not laying up treasures on earth.

You might want to pay attention to that one.