

Hope Christian Church  
D. Todd Cravens  
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Sermon Series: *Jesus Said What?*



# When You Fast

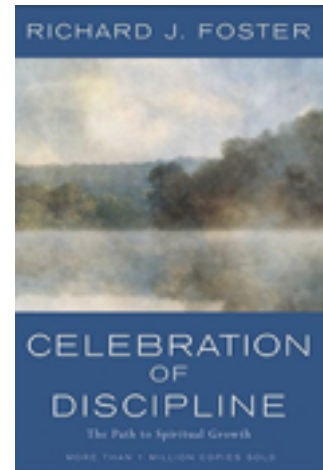
Hungering for More of God

**(Matthew 6:16-18 ESV)**

*<sup>16</sup> "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. <sup>17</sup> But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, <sup>18</sup> 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."*

## Introduction

Fasting is not a hot topic in most Christian communities. In Richard Foster's classic book on the spiritual disciplines, *The Celebration of Discipline*, in the opening paragraph in the chapter on fasting, he wrote "in my research I could not find a single book published on the subject of Christian fasting from 1861 to 1954, a period of nearly one hundred years."<sup>1</sup>



For some reason, there's not a lot of excitement among Christians about the topic of fasting. I'll never forget teaching on this issue once and I opened the class with the question, "What is fasting?" An older man quickly and loudly responded, "Not ordained by God." I wonder why we hardly ever talk about fasting?

## When You Fast, Not If

Jesus talked about fasting. In fact, Jesus expected that his disciples would fast. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said,

**Matthew 6:16 (ESV)**

<sup>16</sup> "When you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites..."

The first thing we notice is that Jesus said, "When you fast..." not "If you fast..." Jesus expects his followers to fast. This might be news to many of us. We might be tempted to say, "**Jesus said what?**" Jesus said, "When you fast..." If Jesus expects his followers to fast, then we should probably think about fasting. If Jesus talked about fasting, then we need to know what he said about it. We should not shy away from talking about it. We need to know what he said about fasting so we can obey what he taught.

## Fasting Defined

The first question to ask is what is fasting? *Fasting is the intentional abstaining from food for spiritual purposes.*<sup>2</sup> The Greek word (νηστεύω, nēsteuō), means "to go without food for a set time as a religious duty."<sup>3</sup> This is biblical definition of the fasting.

## Fasting In Contemporary Culture

Fasting may not be popular to talk about in Christians circles, but it is a hot topic in other circles of our culture. For example, the diet industry has lately been talking quite a lot about

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<sup>1</sup> Richard J. Foster. "Celebration of Discipline." iBooks. <https://itun.es/us/Y6wRv.l>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), 540.

fasting. Beyoncé wanted to look good for the Grammy's so she went on a fast diet and lost 20 pounds in two weeks. She later confessed that she immediately gained it all back after stopping the diet.

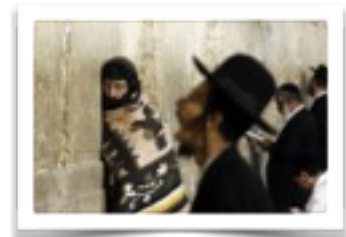


Jennifer Aniston and Jennifer Lopez both lost lots of weight on the 5:2 Diet, where you eat normally for five days and then fast two. Over the past three years fasting diets have been all the rage. The 5:2 Diet book has now been published in 20 languages. You do not have to be a religious person to fast.

## Fasting Is Practiced By Virtually All Major Religions

Fasting is not a uniquely Christian practice. People in virtually all religions practice fasting.

The Jews fast five times annually, with the most prominent being Yom-Kippur, the Day of Atonement.



Muslims fast from sunrise to sunset for thirty days every year during Ramadan.



In Hinduism there's a fast for every day of the week except Wednesday.<sup>4</sup> There are also monthly and yearly fasts.



Fasting is not only used for religious purposes, it can also be used for political purposes. Gandhi used fasting as a political weapon to bring about social change. Eric Rogers, author of a book on fasting, wrote about Gandhi,



His fasting undoubtedly touched more hearts than anything else he did. Not just in India, but practically everywhere,

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<sup>4</sup> Source: <http://hinduismfacts.org/fasting-in-hinduism/> accessed 19 Feb 2016.

men were haunted by the image of a frail little man cheerfully enduring privation for the sake of a principle.<sup>5</sup>

Fasting is practiced by both religious and non-religious persons. Fasting is practiced for spiritual, dietary, and political reasons. So why should Christians fast? What's distinct about Christian fasting? Why did Jesus expect his followers to fast? Is there any benefit to fasting?

## Four Observations

From the passage before us this morning, Matthew 6:16-18, we can make four observations about fasting.

1. Fasting is expected
2. Fasting is not for proclaiming personal spiritual piety
3. Fasting is a means of drawing nearer to God
4. Fasting is promised a reward

### 1) Fasting is Expected

The first observation has already been made, and that is that **fasting is expected**. Jesus assumed that his followers would fast since he said, "*When you fast...*" not "*If you fast...*" This conclusion is confirmed by the answer Jesus gave to the disciples of John the Baptist when they asked him why his disciples did not fast (Mt 9:14-17). We will look at that passage in just a little while. Jesus expected that his disciples would practice fasting.

### 2) Fasting is Not for Proclaiming Piety

The second observation is a negative one, and it refers to what fasting is not. Fasting is **not for proclaiming one's own piety**. Fasting is not intended to be a means of letting everyone around you know how devout you are. The goal of fasting is not to be seen by men.

#### **(Matthew 6:16 ESV)**

*<sup>16</sup> "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."*

If you practice fasting to impress those around you, then you probably will succeed, but you will not succeed in impressing God and you'll have missed the point of fasting. God will not reward fasting that is aimed at securing the praise of men. The goal of fasting is not proclaiming spiritual piety.

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<sup>5</sup> Quoted in John Piper, *A Hunger for God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1997), 28.

## There Is a Place for Corporate Fasting

This is not to say that there is no place for corporate fasting. There is. Fasting is often an expression of mourning and sadness over the presence of personal sin in the individual or *in the community*.

When **Jonah** preached to the city of **Nineveh** and proclaimed that God would destroy them because of their sin, the king responded and proclaimed a city-wide fast of both man and beast (Jonah 3:6-9). The whole city fasted as a symbol of their repentance and sorrow over their sin. But they certainly were not fasting in order to impress each other or to demonstrate how religious they were. They were pleading with God for their lives.

When the news reached **queen Esther's** ears that Haman had convinced the king to destroy all the Jews in the land, she ordered a city-wide fast of all Jews (Est 4:16) in **Susa** until she could plead with the king to save them. Once again, the fast was not because of a pious demonstration of individual religiosity. It was a desperate plea of broken-hearted dependence upon God alone to save their lives. God does not reward fasting intended to get the attention of men, but he does reward fasting that is intended to get his attention. This leads us to the next observation.

In both of these instances, the motivation was a desperation for God to act. A desperation for God is the heartbeat of all true fasting.

## 3) Fasting is For Drawing Nearer to God

The third observation is that *fasting is for drawing nearer to God*. Fasting is a means for increasing intimacy between man and God.

(Matthew 6:17-18 ESV)

*<sup>17</sup> But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, <sup>18</sup> 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."*

The fasting that Jesus expects of his followers is intensely personal. It is specifically God-ward. It is an interchange between an individual and God the Father alone. Fasting is pushing something away—food—in order to bring something else nearer—God. Fasting "is an intensifier of spiritual desire."<sup>6</sup> *Fasting is a physical expression of a spiritual hunger for more of God*. It's saying 'no' to food in order to say 'yes' to God. Fasting is not saying that food is bad, but only that God is better. *Fasting is a beautiful confession that God is more dear to us than even the food that sustains our life*. David said it this way,

Psalms 63:3 (ESV)

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<sup>6</sup> John Piper, *A Hunger for God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1997), 22.

“...your steadfast love is better than life...”

David is saying that knowing God’s love is better than food, even better than life itself.

Job said it this way,

(Job 23:12 ESV)

<sup>12</sup> *I have not departed from the commandment of his lips;  
I have treasured the words of his mouth more than my portion of food.*

Job is saying that he has desired to be obedient to God more than he has desired his daily allotment of food. Job’s treasured pleasing God far more than he treasured pleasing his own belly. O that this would be true of us.

We learn what pleases God by reading his word, for it is through his word that he has revealed himself to us. Without his word, we would not know him. This is why *many Christians, when they fast, will choose to read God’s word during the time that they would normally give to eating.* Once again, David helps us.

(Psalms 119:103 ESV)

<sup>103</sup> *How sweet are your words to my taste,  
sweeter than honey to my mouth;*



Once you have tasted the sweetness of God’s goodness, it’s very natural to yearn for more. Once you’ve experienced the goodness of his word, it is natural to yearn for more of his word. ***Fasting flows from a hunger to know God more deeply, to draw ever nearer to him, and to yield oneself more submissively to the will of God.***

Fasting is personal and it is private. Jesus instructs his people to avoid making fasting a show, so he instructs us to not make it known. This can be taken to unhelpful extremes. If you are fasting, you should make this known to persons who may regularly prepare meals of which you are expected to partake.

I learned very early in my marriage that it is unwise, to fail to let one’s wife know that one is fasting if she is cooking a meal for you and expecting you to eat it. Jesus’ point is not that no one can know that you are fasting. His point is that the ***fasting that pleases God is fasting that is focused on the Father, not on the opinions of your friends.*** This is why fasting and prayer go hand and hand.



## Prayer & Fasting

Notice that, in this passage (i.e. the Sermon on the Mount), immediately prior to teaching about fasting, Jesus had just been teaching on prayer. Prayer, of course, is communication with the Father. As Jesus was teaching on prayer, he then most naturally began teaching on fasting. In his mind, the one led to the other. If the point of fasting is drawing nearer to God, then it makes complete sense that prayer be closely attached to it.

### 4) Right Fasting Carries the Promise of Reward

The fourth observation from these verses is that *right fasting carries a promise of reward*.

#### **(Matthew 6:17-18 ESV)**

*<sup>17</sup> But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, <sup>18</sup> 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."*

Right fasting will receive a just reward from the Father. God uses promise of reward to induce his children to draw near to him. Jesus tells us that proper fasting is not only seen by the Father, but is also *rewarded* by the Father. Jesus does not here specify exactly what the reward will be, but I believe we are given a hint the next time Jesus teaches about fasting.

### Why Don't Your Disciples Fast?

The disciples of John the Baptist came to Jesus one day and asked him why his disciples did not fast, even though they and the Pharisees did.

#### **(Matthew 9:14-17 ESV)**

*<sup>14</sup> Then the disciples of John came to him, saying, "Why do we and the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?" <sup>15</sup> And Jesus said to them, "Can the wedding guests mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them? The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast. <sup>16</sup> No one puts a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old garment, for the patch tears away from the garment, and a worse tear is made. <sup>17</sup> Neither is new wine put into old wineskins. If it is, the skins burst and the wine is spilled and the skins are destroyed. But new wine is put into fresh wineskins, and so both are preserved."*

First, notice the connection Jesus makes between fasting and mourning? He uses the two words in parallel. In every instance of fasting in the Old Testament (OT), it was connected with some kind of mourning, whether it be because of personal sin, sadness over rampant wickedness, or some kind of national calamity, which required an intense seeking of God for either deep forgiveness or quick deliverance.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> ??? examples ???

In answering their question about fasting, Jesus responds by talking about mourning. Jesus answers by saying, "*Wedding guests don't mourn when they are near the bridegroom.*" Jesus likens fasting with mourning. We could replace the word 'mourn' with 'fasting' in Jesus' answer and it would carry the same meaning, "*Do wedding guests fast as long as the bridegroom is with them?*" Both responses mean the same and the answer is the same. The expected answer is "No."

Jesus is saying his disciples don't fast because they are with him. Jesus is the bridegroom. While his disciples are with him, that's no time for fasting, no time for mourning. While they are with him they are filled with joy. Fasting is not appropriate during days of joy, because fasting is an expression that something is not right.

However, Jesus does indicate that there will come a day when "*the bridegroom will be taken away from them, then they will fast*" (v.15). Jesus will one day be taken away from his disciples, **then** his disciples will fast. But they will not fast while he is with them. Once again, notice that *fasting is expected*. Jesus assumes his disciples will fast after he has been taken away from them.

## New Fasting for a New Day

But notice also that their fasting will be very different. Fasting will continue to be practiced among the followers of Jesus, but it will be a very different kind of fast. Jesus uses two illustrations to communicate this truth, a new patch on old cloth and new wine in old wine-skin. Jesus says,

### Matthew 9:16-17 (ESV)

*<sup>16</sup> No one puts a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old garment, for the patch tears away from the garment, and a worse tear is made. <sup>17</sup> Neither is new wine put into old wineskins. If it is, the skins burst and the wine is spilled and the skins are destroyed. But new wine is put into fresh wineskins, and so both are preserved."*

First, he says that a new patch on old cloth causes a worse tear than no patch. [Hmm, Jesus knows something about laundry and sewing.] Then he says that new wine in old wineskins causes both to be lost. However, new wine in a new wineskin allows both to be preserved. Jesus is talking about fasting. He's not talking about laundry and he's not talking about wine. He's using two illustrations to teach one truth about fasting.

Jesus is saying, that his disciples do not now (i.e. at the time of the asking of the question) fast, because he is with them, but they will fast after he is taken from them. However, their fasting—after he has gone from them—will be completely different from the kind of fasting preceded his arrival. So we should practice fasting because Jesus has been taken from us. He is not now with us in his bodily presence. He is with us—and in us—through the presence of his Holy Spirit, but he is bodily taken from us, so we should be occasionally fasting for the day when we



will be fully and completely united with him in all the glory of resurrected, perfected body in the full glory of his kingdom.

But the question for us today is, how is fasting post resurrection & ascension is to be different from fasting prior to resurrection and ascension?

I think there are two primary differences. First, fasting before the coming of Jesus (i.e. in OT) was rooted in a mourning due to the reality of actual *sin*. However, now fasting is rooted in the reality of actual *forgiveness*. We no longer fast yearning for our sins **to be** forgiven, as was true before the coming of the Lamb of God. When we fast today our fasting must be grounded in the truth that our sins **have already** been forgiven and paid for. We no longer fast yearning for our sins **to be** atoned for. When we fast, we fast knowing that a sure atonement for our sins **has already** been made.

(Hebrews 10:14 ESV)

<sup>14</sup> *For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.*

What Jesus did on the cross **has perfected for all time** those of us who are right now in the process of **being sanctified**. Christians live within the wonderful tension that in Christ we are completely perfect, while in the body—here and now—there’s still a whole lot of cleaning up that needs to happen.

Christian, if you fast today, you do not fast so that God will forgive your sins and accept you. If you are in Christ, then you already are accepted and so fast that a greater work of sanctification will be accomplished in you. Christians don’t fast in order to be forgiven, we fast because we already are forgiven. Christians fast for a greater sense of God’s presence and power in our lives. We fast for God to more powerfully work through us and among us.

We fast with the assurance that every promise of God has already been granted to us through faith in Jesus. We fast yearning for the death-overcoming power of Jesus to reign unresisted in our lives. We fast knowing that all for our sanctified souls yearn, will be given to us through Jesus. We fast knowing the hardest work has already been accomplished by Jesus. The path has already been cleared for us. The way has already been made. Heaven’s gates are opened. There is nothing to stop God’s powerful work within us (except our own resistance). Jesus has gone before us and blazed a trail that he now calls us to walk and with his Spirit within us, empowering us and strengthen us, we will be welcomed into the kingdom. We fast with certainty, not uncertainty.

The cave on Travis Cox’s farm

This leads us to the second difference in fasting today compared to fasting before Jesus.

## Fasting for the Expansion of the Kingdom

Christians fast so that more people will experience the reality of forgiveness. Christians fast so that the name of God will be magnified among them. Evidently this is what was going on in Antioch just prior to the greatest mission trip of all time. In Acts 13 the church at Antioch had come together and they were worshipping the Lord and fasting.<sup>8</sup>

(Acts 13:2-3 ESV)

*<sup>2</sup> 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."<sup>3</sup> Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off.*

As a result of their fasting, the Holy Spirit moved among them, and caused them to send Paul and Barnabas out on the first mission trip that enable the gospel to break through the Roman Empire. Their opponents would later say of them,

*"...these are the men who have turned the world upside down..."<sup>9</sup>*

It's amazing isn't it? Two little men who went from town to town telling people about Jesus... and the world has never been the same since. They were fasting and worshipping God and this is what God did through them.

I wonder what the Lord would be pleased to do through us if we were to embrace the spiritual discipline of fasting?

I wonder what the Lord would do in your life if you were to begin to occasionally practice fasting in order to see God more powerfully work through your life?

I wonder how rewarding it would be if you were to occasionally fast in order to draw nearer to God?

I wonder what God would do among us a church if were to occasionally agree to fast together for some spiritual purpose? Some kingdom advancing purpose? Some darkness dispelling purpose?

I wonder if any of you have lately been sensing that the Lord is calling you to a deeper level of obedience. Why not fast and pray about this? Skip lunch and spend that time in prayer seeking him.

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<sup>8</sup> Acts 13:1-2.

<sup>9</sup> Acts 17:6.

## Conclusion

Jesus expects his disciples to fast.

We are to fast in order impress our friends or put our devotion on display.

We are to fast in order to draw nearer to God.

Jesus promises those who fast rightly a reward from the Father.

Fast for a more willing submission to the will of God.

Fast for the advancement of the kingdom.

Fast for the salvation of your friends and family.

Fast for the return of Jesus.

Fast as an expression of your hunger for more of God.

Fast not out of a spirit of mourning, but out of a spirit of hopefulness!

Since prayer and fasting go hand and hand, and since Tuesdays are the days that we gather in this building to pray, I'm going to invite you to consider fasting with me one meal on a Tuesday. I plan to do this for the next four Tuesdays. If you decided to join me, then it's up to you whichever meal you want to fast. Then on Tuesday, March 15 in stead of meeting at 7:30 for prayer, we'll meet at 7:00 and spend 30 minutes sharing what your experience was like. You must have some clear spiritual purpose or else your just going without food.

Whether you join me in the or not, we all need to remember, Jesus said, "**When** you fast..." not "*If* you fast..."