

# Fasting

📖 Matthew 6:16-18

👤 Pastor Jeremy Thomas

📅 October 29, 2014

🌐 fbgbible.org

📍 Fredericksburg Bible Church

107 East Austin Street

Fredericksburg, Texas 78624

(830) 997-8834

**Q:** If Matt 6:9-13 is not the Lord's Prayer but the Model Prayer what is the Lord's Prayer?

**A:** John 17 is the Lord's Prayer. John 17 is where you see the Lord actually praying, whereas the Model Prayer is a prayer that He could not pray because He says "and forgive us our debts" when He had no debts to be forgiven. So John 17 is the actual Lord's Prayer. That being said, we would want to say that while Jesus could not pray the Matt 6 prayer He could and did employ the principles of the prayer. For example, in John 17 He puts the Father's interests ahead of His own interests. He shows that the essence of prayer is asking God not talking to God. So the Lord's Prayer is John 17 but the Lord did employ the principles of the Matt 6 prayer in His own prayer life.

**Q:** Regarding Matt 6:12, 14 and 15 the forgiveness of debts. My problem is that on the face these verses do appear to attach some sort of forgiveness by God to the Jew's forgiveness of others. If I recall, your take on these verses is that Jesus is pointing out to them that they need to understand the gravity of their own sins and, with the proper understanding of their own sinfulness and God's mercy, they should forgive the comparatively minor sins of others. I know God's forgiveness of us is not contingent on our forgiveness of others, but in the context is there something about the period prior to the kingdom that may tie the physical consequences of sin (as opposed to spiritual consequences) with forgiveness of others?

**A:** In the context the period preceding the kingdom is in view. However, the principles of forgiveness are the same then as now. It should be kept in mind that the forgiveness in view is not judicial (relationship) but experiential (fellowship). In the context of fellowship the verses *are* saying that you can't have fellowship with God if you don't forgive others. This is very clear on the face of verses 14-15. "If you forgive others their transgressions then your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions." However, I just took it one step further as verse 12 prompts us to do by showing why this is so. Verse 12 is a request to God asking Him to "forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors." The one making this request has

forgiven others. This means he clearly considers the sins of others against himself to be minor in comparison to his own sins against God. He therefore has the right attitude toward his sin. This is the underlying premise in forgiving others and confessing our sins before God. Verses 15 is pointing up that if you do not forgive others then you are very short-sighted with respect to your own sins. Thinking this way precludes fellowship with God because in effect you don't think you have any sin that needs to be confessed and forgiven. Everybody else has the problem, not you. 1 John addresses the same issue when it says, "If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us." Thinking that way precludes walking in fellowship with God. The teaching of Jesus here is that the attitude that underlies fellowship with God is that we forgive others their sins. Failure to do so manifests that we have magnified others sins against ourselves while minimizing our own sins against God. Such a failure precludes fellowship with God because we see ourselves as sinless and in no need to confess. Jesus' disciples need to have the proper attitude toward their own sin and thereby enjoy fellowship with God.

**Q:** Why, if we emphasize 1 John 1:9 and getting in fellowship with God prior to praying doesn't Jesus make that emphasis in this prayer?

**A:** There is no command I am aware of that we must confess our sin before we pray. I think our emphasis on confessing is not implying that we have to do it at that time. It's just taking an opportunity to do it at that time. I'm not sure that really answers the question but it came up a few months ago whether 1 John 1:9 and fellowship was the heart of sanctification. I would say no. The heart of sanctification is the word of God. It's the word of God that convicts you of sin so that you can confess. So any complete model of sanctification has to start with knowledge of the word of God. That makes the word of God the heart of sanctification, not 1 John 1:9. 1 John 1:9 is just what we use when the word of God is used by the Spirit of God to convict us of our sin.

**Q:** Should we pray for the Kingdom to come or for the Glorification of the Church in this age of Grace or both?

**A:** Good question. I think the answer is prayer for the glorification of the Church because the kingdom is for Israel but glorification is for the Church before the kingdom. Col 3:1-4 says, "Therefore if you have been raised up with Christ, keep seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth. For you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is our life, is revealed, then you also will be revealed with Him in glory." The reason we are to have that upward focus is because it purifies us in our daily life. If our position is in Christ in heaven then focusing on our position will have a cleansing effect on our experience here on earth. But we do desire the kingdom to come. If 2 Pet 3:10 is referring to the destruction during the Tribulation period then 3:11-12 is saying "we are looking for and hastening the

coming of the day of God." The day of God would either be a reference to the kingdom or to the eternal state that follows. In any scenario, I think the more pressing desire and focus is on our heavenly position in Christ. That is what the focus of our prayers should be on. The kingdom focus in prayer is for Israel just prior to the kingdom.

Alright, by way of review, what is Jesus addressing in Matt 6:1-18? The three chief acts of righteousness practiced by the scribes and Pharisees. He doesn't even mention directly the scribes and the Pharisees but it's obvious they're in the background. Pentecost says, "There were certain so-called acts of righteousness on which the Pharisees set great store. These acts were giving alms, praying, and fasting. Jesus took up the three in order."<sup>1</sup> So the address is a direct affront to the manner in which the scribes and Pharisees carried out these practices. How were they carrying out these practices? What was their chief purpose? To be noticed by men. Note verse 1, "Beware of practicing your righteousness before men to be noticed by them." Was the problem practicing righteousness before men? No. Public practice of righteousness was not being condemned. What did Jesus say before in 5:16, "Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven." So the problem was not public displays of righteousness but the motive behind the public displays of righteousness. The scribes and Pharisees wanted "to be noticed by" men. Jesus' disciples should want to be noticed by God alone. So the issue is pure motives. Jesus was not so concerned with the external act as He was with the motives underlying the act. If they did these three acts of righteousness to be noticed by men then three times it says they have no reward with the Father in heaven (6:2, 5, 16). Three times it is also says that they are hypocrites (6:2, 5, 16). A.T. Robertson says, "This is the hardest word that Jesus has for any class of people and he employs it for these pious pretenders who pose as perfect." In reality they were nothing more than actors, the substance of which is hidden under a mask. Jesus' disciples should give alms, pray and fast, even before men, but not with the motive to be noticed by men. They should do all three with the desire to be noticed by the Father. If they did they would be saving up reward with Him in heaven so that when His kingdom came to earth they could enjoy their reward.

Taking up the first issue in 6:2-4, the giving of alms, Jesus says that when they give to the poor they should not make a big announcement when they are about to give in order to be honored by men, but rather to not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing. In other words, do it with the motive that there is no thought of return. On occasion someone asks me to pass a gift on to someone else so that they remain anonymous. This is giving without thought of return. They don't want to be noticed by men. They want to be noticed by God and they are trying to find a way to do this that does not give occasion for being honored by men. The real intent is that they will be honored by God. By doing so they are storing up reward in heaven with the Father who will return their investment to them with interest to be enjoyed in the kingdom.

The second issue in 6:5-15, prayer, Jesus says when they pray they are not to love standing and praying in the synagogues and on the street corners in order to be seen by men, but rather to go into your inner room, close your door and pray to your Father in secret. In other words, do it with the motive that God alone is your audience. It's not condemning public prayer, its condemning public prayer in order to be seen by men. Further, they were not to use meaningless repetition like the pagans who think that their god will be moved to answer them because of the repetition. That is not taking into account that the Father is omniscient and already knows what you need before you ask and cannot be manipulated by us. If they should not pray this way then how should they pray? Verses 9-13 gives the Model Prayer. Rather than the lengthy, ostentatious, repetitive prayers of the scribes and Pharisees Jesus' disciples should pray simply, concisely and to the point putting the Father's interests before their own. As far as the requests are concerned the first three requests relate to the coming of the kingdom. The first is that His name be hallowed. His name will be hallowed when the kingdom comes. The second is that His kingdom come. When Israel repents and gets in shape spiritually His kingdom will come. The third is that His will be done on earth as it is in heaven. When the Messiah returns the Father's will will be done on earth as it is in heaven. The last three requests relate to the needs of the Jews just prior to the coming of the kingdom. The first is give us this day our daily bread. This refers to the daily physical needs during the time of difficulty that precedes the kingdom. The second is forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. This refers to being in a state of spiritual readiness just prior to the kingdom. The third is do not lead us into temptation but deliver us from the evil one. This refers to the need for God to restrain the tempting activity of Satan just prior to the kingdom. The prayer concludes with a liturgical formula that is perfectly orthodox but is not original as evidenced by the late and varied differences in manuscripts. The point is that the scribal and Pharisaic practice of prayer was not righteous. They prayed lengthy, ostentatious and repetitive prayers in the synagogues and street corners in order to be noticed by men. Jesus' disciples should pray simply, concisely and to the point, putting God's interests before their own and with Him as their primary audience. If they prayed this way then their prayers would be considered righteous and would be rewarded in the coming kingdom.

Today we come to Matt 6:16-18 and we'll cover the third chief act of Jewish piety; fasting, and then conclude this section by drawing out the principles and making secondary application to the Church. There was a first century practice of fasting, particularly among the scribes and Pharisees, and most Jews fasted to some extent, including Jesus' disciples, as verses 16 and 17 imply. Jesus in these verses is condemning the practice as it was being carried out by the scribes and Pharisees in the 1<sup>st</sup> century, and again the issue is ultimately the same, as verse 16 shows, they did it in order to **be noticed by men**. This was the same motive they had in giving and in prayer. So it's clear they had background. What does Jesus instruct as the proper motive? To do it in order to be noticed by God. Verse 18, when done in

secret it would be noticed by God and rewarded. So would we say that God had an interest in fasting? If He would reward it when done properly then clearly He had an interest.

Let's look at the OT context of fasting. Did the OT command fasting? There is one command for the Jew to fast on one day of the year. Turn to Lev 23:26-32. This was the Day of Atonement, known in the Hebrew as *Yom Kippur*. It was the one day every year when the high priest would go through a very elaborate set of procedures before entering into the Most Holy Place to offer the blood of atonement on the mercy seat of the ark of the covenant for the whole house of Israel (cf Lev 16). On that day Lev 23:26 explains the procedure of every Israelite. "The LORD spoke to Moses, saying, "On exactly the tenth day of this seventh month is the day of atonement; it shall be a holy convocation for you, and you shall *humble* your souls and present an offering by fire to the LORD." What does it mean to "humble your souls"? The Hebrew word means "to afflict, to punish, to treat harshly." In this case the affliction was the pains of physical hunger and the spiritual practices of repentance, confession and mourning. Ross says, "It is interpreted here to mean that the people should follow a total fast and penitential exercises; that is, they should abstain from the pleasures and comforts they normally enjoyed because these were incompatible with repentance, confession, and atonement."<sup>2</sup> The same word is used in verse 29 again where the Lord says, "If there is any person who will not *humble* himself on this same day, he shall be cut off from his people." And again in verse 32, "It is to be a sabbath of complete rest to you, and you shall *humble* your souls; on the ninth of the month at evening, from evening until evening you shall keep your sabbath." So the one command to fast in the OT related to one day of the year, the Day of Atonement and it was to be accompanied by repentance, confession and mourning. The reason for mourning was because of the atonement that was made for their sins year after year after year. It was not a joyous occasion to know that the final atonement had not come. This fast continued to be practiced into the NT times and is referred to in Acts 27:9 as "the fast." The reference is in the context of Paul being taken by ship to Rome. The signification is that Paul's voyage occurred during the most dangerous time of the year for navigation which was September-October, the time of the Day of Atonement.

We want to point out that three fasts eventually developed. The first fast was the total fast and it consisted of no food or liquids for one entire day. This was the kind of fast God commanded for the Day of Atonement when the sacrifices of the high priest were made to atone for the sins of the whole house of Israel. It was a time of mourning and repentance because the sins had to be dealt with year after year after year. Second, later Judaism developed the partial fast. The partial fast involves limiting one's diet so that some foods and liquids are allowed and others are disallowed. This was the kind of fast Daniel practiced in Dan 10:3, 12 which lasted twenty-one days. During the twenty-one days Daniel took food and drink but not any that were highly desirable. During the twenty-one days he was seeking understanding of a vision by prayer and this understanding was given by angelic visitation. Third, later

Judaism also developed the normal fast. The normal fast involved no intake of food for a prescribed period of time, though there was intake of liquids. This was the kind of fast Jesus engaged in for forty days and nights during the wilderness temptations in Matt 4:1-11. During this time Jesus was so preoccupied with spiritual matters that He did not become conscious of His physical hunger until the forty days and nights had elapsed. It was then that Satan came tempting with respect to His hunger.

During the 70 years of captivity to Babylon four additional fasts were added. Zech 7:5 mentions two of them, one in the 5<sup>th</sup> month and another in the 7<sup>th</sup> month. Zech 8:19 mentions all four, one in the 10<sup>th</sup> month to commemorate the beginning of the siege against Jerusalem in 588BC, one in the 4<sup>th</sup> month to commemorate the capturing of Jerusalem in 586BC, one in the 5<sup>th</sup> month to commemorate the burning of Jerusalem and the Temple in 586BC and one in the 7<sup>th</sup> month to commemorate the killing of Gedaliah in 586BC. With the multiplication of fasts the original purpose and meaning was distorted. Even before the time of Christ rabbinic tradition made much of the external ritual of fasting by the pious and considered it meritorious. Elwell and Comfort say, "The setting for the NT understanding of fasting lies in the development of the rabbinic tradition that grew out of the period between the Testaments, during which fasting became the distinguishing mark of the pious Jew... fasting became externalized as an empty ritual in which a pretense of piety was presented as a public image... ..This developed into a rabbinic tradition in which fasting was viewed as meritorious..."<sup>3</sup> This is the immediate setting inside of which Christ's teaching on fasting is given. Plummer says, "The Pharisees made a parade of fasting twice a week, Monday and Thursday, in addition to the annual fast prescribed for all; hence the boast in the parable (Lk. xviii. 12)." Smith adds this insight, "They fasted every Monday and Thursday; and since it happened opportunely that these were the days when the Synagogue met, it was given them to display themselves to the assembled worshippers in their guise of woe. Their fasting was not merely abstinence from meat and drink. They did not wash or anoint themselves, they went barefoot, and they sprinkled ashes on their heads, "making their faces unsightly that they might be a sight to men in their fasting."<sup>4</sup>

This explains why Jesus in Matt 6:16 says, **Whenever you fast, do not put on a gloomy face as the hypocrites do, for they neglect their appearance so that they will be noticed by men when they are fasting.** Clearly the scribes and Pharisees are the ones being designated **hypocrites**. Recall that this is the hardest word Jesus has for any individual or group. The word meant they were putting on a superficial mask. There was no genuineness behind their fasting. It was an act of pure outward piety to seek men's attention and favor, to be thought of as super-spiritual. If this was their motive then what does Jesus say? **Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full.** If all they wanted was recognition from men then they got recognition from men and it stopped there. The Father would not notice that kind of fasting. If Jesus' disciples followed that kind of fasting the Father would not notice it either. They would have no reward.

How then should they fast? Note that it is supposed that they will fast. Verse 17, **But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face.** These were two things the scribes and Pharisees did not do. Why? In order to make a show of themselves. They wanted everyone to know that they not only fasted on the prescribed Day of Atonement but they fasted every Monday and Thursday. Not incidentally they did this on the same two days the people met for synagogue and not incidentally on the same two days they gave lengthy prayers and alms. This was all one big opportunity to put on a spiritual show and impress everyone. **Washing your face** is clear enough but what was the purpose of anointing and what does it mean here to **anoint your head?** Anointing was the process of taking pure olive oil or olive oil mixed with fragrances and costly spices and pouring over something. It was used several ways in the OT. First, it was used ceremonially for setting apart priests, kings and prophets for their office. Second, it was poured out on guests signifying that all the guests' needs would be amply supplied. Third, it was used sparingly for daily hygiene of the hair and body. It was this third usage which the scribes and Pharisees neglected on these days. We would say they did not wash their hair or care for their skin and therefore appeared unkempt. This appearance would signify to 1<sup>st</sup> century onlookers that they were in mourning over their sin.<sup>5</sup> However, as Jesus pointed out, it was hypocritical because they really did it only to attract the attention of men. They were not truly contrite over their sin. They were only interested in the honor of men. This is what Jesus condemns.

Hold your place here and turn to James 5:13 for another use of anointing in this third sense of oil used for daily hygiene of the hair and body. This passage is often misused today when someone has a physical sickness. They will go over their house and pour oil on them and expect a miracle. When it doesn't happen those who prayed are told that they didn't have enough faith. That's not what this passage is talking about. The subject in context is spiritual trials and sufferings. Job is mentioned in verse 11 as an example of one who endured much trial and suffering due to the death of his children as well as the loss of his own physical health. This was a trial. Sometimes a Christian doesn't endure his trial like Job and as a consequence sinks into a spiritually weak and depressed state. The verb in verse 14 translated "sick" is referring to that kind of Christian. As a consequence of not counting it all joy and thus enduring the trial they have fallen into a state of spiritual weakness and mourning accompanied by neglect of daily hygiene. We would translate verse 14, "Is anyone among you spiritually weak? Then he must call for the elders of the church and they are to pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord." The instruction to anoint him with oil is to provide the oil necessary for daily hygiene needs of the 1<sup>st</sup> century. Because of the intense mourning and difficulty the Christian had neglected to take care of his daily hygiene. The rest of the passage speaks of other spiritual matters that need to be corrected but the anointing is a physical hygiene matter. The elders are there to aid in the physical and spiritual restoration of a brother who has failed to count it all joy in a trial and is thus spiritually weak with all the attendant physical consequences.

Turning back to Matthew 6:17, Jesus' disciples, **when they fast**, should **anoint** their heads and **wash** their **faces** in order to go unnoticed by men. Why? So that they aren't noticed by men but only by God. Which is precisely what Jesus says in verse 18, **so that your fasting will not be noticed by men, but your Father who is in secret**. Again, to fast in **secret** does not mean that you can't be in public while fasting any more than praying in secret means you can't pray in public or giving alms in secret means you can't give alms in public. It only means that you should not do these activities to get men's attention. In the case of fasting don't let your daily hygiene reflect that you are fasting. You ought to look normal and go about life as if it were normal. The point is to do these spiritual practices with God as your audience and not men. You're not doing them with thought of what men think but with thought of what God thinks. When done in this manner verse 18 concludes; **and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you**. Since the rewards for Jews will be given at their resurrection just before the kingdom then the Father is storing up the rewards now and will give them to the Jew at the initiation of the kingdom. This is not the same as the judgment seat of Christ which is for the Church and occurs at least seven years before, but the principles of rewards are the same. When we are motivated to do something in order to please God then that will be rewarded but if we do them to be seen by men then we already have our reward in full. The important thing to notice is that it is the motives that are ultimately the issue in rewards.

What about fasting today in the Church age? There are four observations with respect to fasting that should be noted. First, the early church did practice fasting. In Acts 13:2-3 the church at Antioch fasted and prayed and God the Spirit set apart Barnabas and Saul for their first missionary journey. In Acts 14:23 in the appointment of elders they prayed with fasting. Both moments were of tremendous spiritual gravity. Choosing missionaries and appointing elders are both very important spiritual needs. In order to meet those needs they allotted the time usually devoted to preparing and eating food to prayer and study of the word. Laney says, "Fasting involves setting aside the preparation and eating of food to give oneself to God and to devote time to prayer."<sup>6</sup> I consider this kind of fasting valid during the Church age. Second, because of the once for all atoning work of the Lord Jesus Christ fasting in association with mourning is inappropriate today. The fasting that God commanded in the OT was associated with mourning because the atonement had to be made year after year after year. Now that atonement has been made once for all there is no longer any need to mourn. As one author notes, "The Bridegroom is here. It is a time of joy, not of sorrow. Consequently, the prevailing mood of fasting as mournful stress...is inconsistent with the mood of the new age that has begun."<sup>7</sup> Third, there is no command to fast for the Church age believer. What is found in the Acts is *descriptive* of their practice not *prescriptive*. If you don't fast you are not violating any commandment. Therefore it is not essential to living a life that is pleasing to God. The only purpose is to devote the time usually used in preparation and consumption to prayer and study because of some intense spiritual situation. This may result in



reward. Fourth, if you do choose to fast do it privately. Do not go around advertising that you are fasting. A few weeks ago a friend of mine in Austin informed me that he asked to meet with his pastor. The pastor said, "I'd like to go to lunch with you but I'm fasting this week so how about next week." This is spiritual showmanship. All the pastor needed to say was "How about next week?" There was no need to go tell anyone. That pastor got his reward in full. He got the recognition he wanted from men and that is where it ends. Personally, I would leave the Church. I don't think that man is spiritual; I think he is a spiritual showman.

In conclusion, what are the principles we can learn from Matt 6:1-18? First, a primary principle we can take with us is from 6:1a; that we have as our motive when we practice righteousness to be noticed by God alone. Our motive should not be what other people think. Our motive should be what God alone thinks. Second, another primary principle we can take with us is from 6:1b; that if we do our righteousness with the motive of pleasing God then we have reward with our Father in heaven. The primary thing that results in reward with our Father is our heart motives that underlie the practices of righteousness. The rewards will be enjoyed in the kingdom. Third, when practicing righteousness we should do so in secret. This is stated in 6:3-4, 6 and 17-18. To practice in secret does not mean it can only be done in a private setting. 5:16 commanded to let your light shine before men so that they may see your good works. The meaning of practice in secret is to practice with the motive of pleasing God alone. This principle of secrecy is applied here to giving, praying and fasting. In 6:2-4 the principle of secrecy is applied to giving. Giving in secret means to not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing and this means to give without thought of return. So the ultimate issue in giving is giving without thought of return. If we do it will be rewarded. In 6:5-15 the principle of secrecy is applied to praying. Praying in secret means to pray simply and concisely knowing that your heavenly Father knows what you need before you ask Him. In 6:16-18, the principle of secrecy is applied to fasting. Fasting in secret means to not neglect your physical hygiene but simply to go about life as normal. Fasting in this way will result in reward. Anytime we do these things for men their value before God is negated and we already have our reward in full.

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<sup>1</sup> Dwight Pentecost, *The Words and Works of Jesus Christ*, p 182.

<sup>2</sup> Allen P. Ross, *Holiness to the Lord*, p 431.

<sup>3</sup> Walter A. Elwell and Philip Wesley Comfort, *Tyndale Bible Dictionary*, Tyndale Reference Library (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2001), 478.

<sup>4</sup> David Smith, *The Days of His Flesh*, p 104, quoted by Pentecost, *The Words and Works...*, p 184.

<sup>5</sup> James M. Freeman and Harold J. Chadwick, *Manners & Customs of the Bible* (North Brunswick, NJ: Bridge-Logos Publishers, 1998), 314.

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<sup>6</sup> J. Carl Laney, *Answers to Tough Questions*, p 191.

<sup>7</sup> Walter A. Elwell and Philip Wesley Comfort, *Tyndale Bible Dictionary*, Tyndale Reference Library (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2001), 478.