

# Hungering for God

## Matthew 6:16-18

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*King of Kings! (Gospel of Matthew Series)*

Prepared by: Matthew S. Black

Sunday, August 4, 2013, 10:30am at Living Hope Church of Roselle, Illinois

“Christian fasting, at its root, is the hunger of a homesickness for God.”<sup>1</sup>

JOHN PIPER

1. WELCOME VISITORS
2. ASK FOR PLACE FOR THE RAYMERS FROM SAT PM-MON AM
3. ANNOUNCE GRAND OPENING OF PANTRY – BRING CLOTHES, FOOD, THIS WEEK TODAY
4. ANNOUNCE FATHER-SON CAMPOUT

 Open your Bible to **Matthew 6:16-18**. We are continuing in a series entitled: “King of kings.” This morning we are looking into the second part of a message entitled “Hungering for God.” We continue in our study of the Sermon on the Mount.

This morning we have an opportunity to dive deeper into our relationship with God. Jesus mentions three activities involved in worship: giving, praying, and fasting. These are not the only things involved in worship, but these are common activities. Jesus says, "Don't do religious activities of worship to be seen of others." Don't turn your worship into the idolatry of self. It's really easy to do.

In verse 16 we come to fasting and we have to ask ourselves, what is that all about?

### Reading of Holy Scripture

**Matthew 6:16-18**, “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.”

### An Audience of One

The Sermon on the Mount begins with inward convictions about sin and God (the Beatitudes) and then goes to outward convictions about righteousness (the 6 intensifications of the Law) and then chapter 6 we have upward convictions about worship (giving, praying, fasting). What we learn is that in worship we have **an audience of One**. Anytime we increase that audience so that we might be seen of men we turn our worship into **idolatry**.

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<sup>1</sup> John Piper. *A Hunger for God* (Crossway: Wheaton, IL, 1997), 14.

## Outline

To understand what fasting is all about were going to see:

1. The **purpose** of fasting
2. The **past time** of fasting and
3. The **practice** of fasting.

### I. The **Purpose** of Fasting (6:13) – an audience of One!

**Matthew 6:16-18**, “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.**”

#### **Ambition – Seen in Athletes and Business Men**

The purpose of fasting is to have a holy ambition for God. We have an audience of One.

**Athletes** – You'll notice that it is the normal habit and practice of mankind to deny themselves for something greater. We see this in athletes. Athletes are willing to deny themselves in order to gain the crown or a medal.

**Business** – We see this in business. I think of **Armand Hammer**. He was a man who works for **Occidental Petroleum**. It was said that he never took a day off of work. He was willing to deny himself for what was to him the almighty dollar.

**A Holy Ambition for God** – Christians are to have a holy ambition for God. Testing is one way to express this holy ambition for God. We are saying that we want God more than we want money more than we want pleasure more than we want fame or fortune. We want God more than we want life itself.

Again, in worship we must always remember, we have **an audience of One**. Anytime we increase that audience so that we might be seen of men we turn our worship into **idolatry**.

Fasting at its root is a “hunger for God”. John Piper said, “Christian fasting, at its root, is the hunger of a homesickness for God.” So the purpose of fasting is to honor God, to commune with Him, to become one with Him.

#### **Not Confined to Food & Drink Only**

Let me make a clarification about fasting. Martin Lloyd-Jones said in his great book on the Sermon on the Mount:

Fasting, if we conceive of it truly, must not . . . be confined to the question of food and drink; fasting should really be made to include abstinence from anything which is legitimate in and of itself for the sake of some special spiritual purpose. There are many bodily functions which are right and normal and perfectly legitimate, but which for special peculiar reasons in certain circumstances should be controlled. That is fasting.<sup>2</sup>

### II. The **Past Time** (History) of Fasting (6:16).

**Matthew 6:16**, “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.”

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<sup>2</sup> Martyn Lloyd-Jones. *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*, 71.

## Jesus' Example

It is important to note that as Jesus was standing on the brink of the most important public ministry the world had ever seen [Mt. 4:1-11], He chose to fast! Have you ever paused to reflect on the eternal consequences of what transpired in the wilderness of Judea those forty days? Heaven and hell hung in the balance. Had Jesus wavered, had He faltered, had He balked, all hope of heaven would have been dashed on the very rocks with which the enemy tempted Him. Of the dozens of things Jesus might have done to withstand temptation, He is led by the Spirit to fast.<sup>3</sup>

## The Jews' Example

*Nēsteia* (**fast**) literally means not to eat, to abstain from food. Fasts were sometimes total and sometimes partial, and ordinarily only water was drunk.

**Two Extremes.** Two extreme views of eating were held among the Jews of Jesus' day. Many, like the ones mentioned in this passage, made an obvious display of fasting. Others believed that, because food is a gift from God, each person would have to give an account to Him on the Day of Judgment for every good thing he had not eaten. The first group not only was more prevalent but was more self-righteous and proud. Their fasting was not a matter of spiritual conviction but a means of self-gratification.

By the time of Christ, fasting, like almost every other aspect of Jewish religious life, had been perverted and twisted beyond what was scriptural and sincere. Fasting had become a ritual to gain merit with God and attention before men. Like praying and almsgiving, it was largely a hypocritical religious show.

**Two Days a Week.** Many Pharisees fasted twice a week (Luke 18:12), usually on the second and fifth days of the week. They claimed those days were chosen because they were the days Moses made the two separate trips to receive the tablets of law from God on Mount Sinai. But those two days also happened to be the major Jewish market days, when cities and towns were crowded with farmers, merchants, and shoppers. They were, therefore, the two days where public fasting would have the largest audiences.<sup>4</sup>

Fasting must never be an isolated act or a ceremony or ritual that has some inherent efficacy or merit. It has no value at all-in fact becomes a spiritual hindrance and a sin-when done for any reason apart from knowing and following the Lord's will.<sup>5</sup>

## Fasting Often Neglected or Prideful

Fasting is normally either all together neglected, or it is taken to an extreme where it makes a person feel he is elite or super spiritual.

## The Early Church

Fasting was regularly observed in the early church.

**The *Didache*,** a manual of church instruction from near the end of the first century says, "Let not your fasts be with the hypocrites, for they fast on Mondays and Thursdays, but do your fast

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 172.

<sup>4</sup> MacArthur, J. F., Jr. (1985). *Matthew*. MacArthur New Testament Commentary (pp. 400-401). Chicago: Moody Press.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 404.

on Wednesdays and Fridays.” (7:1) In other words the early church sought to distance itself of the emptiness of fasting without losing the value of the practice.

**Epiphanius**, a bishop in Italy in the fifth century, said,

“Who does not know that the fast of the fourth and sixth days of the week are observed by Christians throughout the world?”<sup>6</sup>

**John Calvin**, in the 16th century, warned of the danger of extreme views of fasting.

Let us say something about fasting, because many, for want of knowing its usefulness, undervalue its necessity, and some reject it as almost superfluous; while, on the other hand where the use of it is not well understood, it easily degenerates into superstition. Holy and legitimate fasting is directed to three ends; for we practice it either as a restraint on the flesh, to preserve it from licentiousness, or as a preparation for prayers and pious meditations, or as a testimony of our humiliation in the presence of God when we are desirous of confessing our guilt before him.<sup>7</sup>

### III. The **Practice** of Fasting (6:17-18). **F-A-S-T**

**Matthew 6:16-18**, “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.**”

#### **An Acronym for the Practice of Fasting**

We can remember the practice for fasting with the acronym F-A-S-T

- F-Fellowship /Feasting on God
- A-Asking God for breakthroughs and guidance in big decisions
- S-Self-denial, i.e. sanctification
- T-True repentance

#### **F – FEAST ON GOD**

1. **Fellowship** with / Feasting on God - “God, I want you more than food, media, my spouse, my friends, my church, etc.” Pursuing God’s pleasure!

#### **The Pursuit of Pleasure in God**

I want to insist that, contrary to popular opinion, fasting is not the suppression of desire but the intense pursuit of it. We fast because we want something more than food. We say No to food for a season only to fill ourselves with something far more tasty, far more filling, far more satisfying. That is to say, if one suppresses the desire for food it is only because he or she has a greater and more intense desire for something more precious – something of eternal values.<sup>8</sup>

**Sam Storms**

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<sup>6</sup> From John Piper. <http://es.desiringgod.org/resource-library/sermons/when-the-bridegroom-is-taken-away-they-will-fast-with-new-wineskins?lang=en>

<sup>7</sup> *Institutes*, IV.12, 14, 15.

<sup>8</sup> Sam Storms. *Pleasures Evermore: The Life-Changing Power of Knowing God* (Nav Press, 2000), 169.

## **Linked with Intense Prayer and Seeking After God**

In every scriptural account genuine fasting is linked with prayer. You can pray without fasting, but you cannot fast biblically without praying. Fasting is an affirmation of intense prayer, a corollary of deep spiritual struggle before God.

### **A – ASK GOD FOR A BREAKTHROUGH**

2. Asking God for new breakthroughs and guidance in big decisions.

A.W. Tozer said, “You can’t truly rest until every area in your life rests in God”. He said, “The more my trust rests in God, the less I trust myself. If we truly desire to live the crucified life, we must get rid of self trust and trust only in God.” One day he got a letter from a Christian brother in Africa, and that letter was so special to him. It couldn’t have been more important had it been from the president of the United States. Tozer tells the story of this brother from whom he received the letter, on the continent of Africa who felt the call of God on his life and told his pastor. He asked the pastor if he could help him find a church to preach in. The man’s pastor there had no confidence in the man. He was weak. He wasn’t articulate. The pastor told him to go pray about it. This man went off and knew he had to get alone with God. Twenty one days he prayed and fasted. He drank water from a nearby stream but did not eat. He sought God. He sought God’s face. He sought God’s presence. He sought God’s power. He came out after 21 days, and his face was shining like Moses. He went to his pastor and asked him again if there was a church that he could pastor. The man’s pastor told him to go to a very poor community on the outside of town. He could preach there. If he failed, at least one of the deacons could go there and cover for him.<sup>9</sup>

**A New Work with the Nation of Israel...** We see **Moses** fasts for 40 days and nights when God gave him the Ten Commandments (See Exod. 34:2, 28; Deut. 9:9, 18). What a breakthrough!

**Jehoshaphat and victory over an enemy...** 2 Chronicles 20:3–10 – He had armies coming against him from Ammon, Edom, and Moab. We read, “Then Jehoshaphat was afraid and set his face to seek the LORD, and proclaimed a fast throughout all Judah. 4 And Judah assembled to seek help from the LORD; from all the cities of Judah they came to seek the LORD.” The LORD completely delivered godly King Jehoshaphat! What a breakthrough!

**Ezra, and a new ministry...** Ezra 8:21... As the exiles were about to leave Babylon for the adventurous return to Jerusalem, Ezra declared a fast, “that we might humble ourselves before our God to seek from Him a safe journey for us, our little ones, and all our possessions”. Ezra continues, “For I was ashamed to request from the king troops and horsemen to protect us from the enemy on the way, because we had said to the king, ‘The hand of our God is favorably disposed to all those who seek Him, but His power and His anger are against all those who forsake Him.’ So we fasted and sought our God concerning this matter, and He listened to our entreaty” (vv. 22–23). They didn’t have an police force to protect them. What a breakthrough!

Fasting in the New Testament is seen often in decision making.

**Peter** was fasting in Joppa prior to receiving the vision of the great sheet let down from heaven, which led to the opening of the gospel to the Gentiles (see Acts 10:11).

**When God’s Church fasts in the book of Acts**, and the Holy Spirit begins to talk to them and guide them in the sending out of Saul and Barnabas as missionaries (Acts 13:2-3)

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<sup>9</sup> From Leonard Ravenhill’s sermon “Anointing” from <http://illbehonest.com/anointing-leonard-ravenhill>.

**Saul and Barnabas** also fasted when they appointed elders in the churches (Acts 14:23, “when they had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed.” What a breakthrough!

Those were probably the most significant moments in the history of the early Christian church, and in each case, the believers involved were seeking God and his will and were answered by strong, unmistakable, and historically significant directions.<sup>10</sup>

This is just a small smattering of breakthroughs when God’s people are fasting, communing with God. I want that! Don’t you?!

## S – SELF DENIAL FOR SANCTIFICATION

### 3. Self-denial.

Fasting can be a form of self denial so that we can learn restrain the flesh. In fasting we learn self control. We learn what it is like to deny the body so that when temptation comes we can mortify our desires and eliminate slavery to sin. – mourning over areas of sin. Example of Jesus’ disciples not fasting...

**Luke 9:23**, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.”

Jesus has called us to be “in the world” but not “of the world”. Nothing in this world should have mastery over us.

Paul says in **1 Corinthians 6:12–13**, “All things are lawful for me,” but not all things are helpful. “All things are lawful for me,” but I will not be dominated by anything.” Paul mentions food and sex in the next verse. Both are good in their godly context, but we were not made for either of them. The only thing that ought to dominate us is the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

Jesus says in **Matthew 6:24**, “No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money.” You can’t have a divided heart and divided loyalty.

### What Controls Us?

Christian fasting is a test to see what desires control us. Fasting reveals the measure of food’s mastery over us – or **television** or **computers** or **media** whatever we submit to again and again to conceal the weakness of our hunger for God. What is it that **controls** you? Is it **pleasure, food, media, entertainment, money, security**? What is it? Fasting is a living out of your preference for God over His **gifts** and it glorifies Him to worship Him over His creation. In fasting we are saying “God is better than the creation”. I wasn’t made for this creation. I was made for God. God’s gifts are good, but God’s presence is better. Fasting is not the only way, or the main way, that we glorify God in preferring Him above His gifts. But it is one way.”<sup>11</sup>

**What are we slaves to?** What are our bottom-line passions? Fasting is God’s testing ground – and healing ground. Will we murmur as the Israelites murmured when they had no bread? Will we leave the path of obedience and turn stones into bread? Or will we “live by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God?” Fasting is a way of revealing to ourselves and confessing to God what is in our hearts.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Boice, J. M. (2001). *The Gospel of Matthew* (p. 101). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 18-22.

<sup>12</sup> John Piper. *Man Shall Not Live by Bread Alone*, Sermon, January 15, 1995, www.DesiringGod.org. Used by Permission.

## Doing Hardship for Developing the Spiritual Life

I love what **Oswald Chambers** said about fasting. He says fasting is “means doing a hardship to the body for the sake of developing the spiritual life. Put your life through discipline but do not say a word about it—“Do not appear to men to be fasting.”<sup>13</sup>

### T – TRUE REPENTANCE

#### 4. True Repentance.

True repentance was often accompanied by fasting.

**Israel** fasted in repentance for asking for a king in 1 Samuel 7:5–6, “Then Samuel said, “Gather all Israel at Mizpah, and I will pray to the LORD for you.” 6 So they gathered at Mizpah and drew water and poured it out before the LORD and fasted on that day and said there, “We have sinned against the LORD.” And Samuel judged the people of Israel at Mizpah.”

**David** fasted after his double sin of committing adultery with Bathsheba and then having her husband Uriah sent to the front of the battle to be killed (2 Sam. 12:16, 21–23).

**Daniel** fasted as he prayed for God to forgive the sins of his people.

**King Ahab**: When Elijah confronted Ahab with God’s judgment for his great wickedness, King Ahab “tore his clothes and put on sackcloth and fasted, and he lay in sackcloth and went about despondently” (1 Kings 21:27). Because of Ahab’s sincerity, the Lord postponed the judgment (v. 29).

**Israel after Captivity**: Centuries later, after the exiles had returned safely to Jerusalem, the Israelites were convicted of their intermarrying with unbelieving Gentiles. As Ezra confessed that sin in behalf of his people, “he did not eat bread, nor drink water, for he was mourning over the unfaithfulness of the exiles” (Ezra 10:6).<sup>14</sup>

**The People of Nineveh**: When the people of Nineveh heard Jonah’s preaching they were so convicted that they believed in God and “called a great fast and put on sackcloth from the greatest to the least of them. . . . By the decree of the king” they would “not let man, beast, herd, or flock taste a thing” (Jonah 3:5, 7). Rather than resent the warning of judgment and damnation, they repentantly turned to God and sought His forgiveness and mercy.<sup>15</sup>

Again, we can remember the practice for fasting with the acronym F-A-S-T

- F-Fellowship /Feasting on God
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## Conclusion

Saints of God, as we go forward, we see signs of God’s presence with us. We are seeing people saved. We are growing. We are seeing God’s hand upon us. But with great blessing there is great battle. There are areas of our lives that God wants us to overcome. We must be slaves only to Him.

We must consider that it was after Elijah’s greatest victory that he received his greatest satanic attack. We need to be ready saints! We need to be fasting and praying.

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<sup>13</sup> Chambers, Oswald (2011-07-20). *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount* (Kindle Locations 869-871). Discovery House Publishers. Kindle Edition.

<sup>14</sup> MacArthur, J. F., Jr. (1985). *Matthew*. MacArthur New Testament Commentary (pp. 402–403). Chicago: Moody Press.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 403.

- Would you consider setting aside regular time for fasting and prayer?
- We do it not for each other's approval – that would be idolatry.
- We do it for an audience of One. We do it because we hunger and thirst after righteousness.
- We do it for the next spiritual breakthrough for His Kingdom.
- We do it for true and ongoing repentance in our lives.
- But most of all, we fast and pray so that we might draw nearer to God. We are hungry for Him!

**Psalm 16:11**, “in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore.” May it be said of you as you seek God more than food or pleasure or power or position: “They looked to Him and were radiant” (Psalm 34:5). May our faces shine with delight in God!