

Matthew 6:16–18, Luke 5:33–39, Acts 13:1–3 and Fasting

Prayer

Introductory Questions

- What is fasting? What is *Christian* fasting?
- What interferes with your own willingness or ability to fast more regularly?

Introduction

Fasting is voluntarily abstaining from food or other gifts from God (such as sex in marriage; 1 Cor. 7:5) for a short period of time to pray. Fasting is not an exclusively Christian practice, for many religions advocate fasting. And fasting is not an exclusively religious practice, for many irreligious people fast for health benefits, whether their approaches are effective or not. The comments below provide context for this lesson.

1. **When we fast, we communicate to God that we value him, his Word, and his will more than we value food.** For example, early in Jesus’s life there was a prophetess named Anna, whose hunger for God and his will were obvious. What did she value? She “did not leave the temple, serving God night and day with fasting and prayers. At that very moment, she came up and began to thank God and to speak about him to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem” (Luke 2:37–38).
2. **Fasting may reflect distorted thoughts and desires.** Some people’s practice of fasting and other spiritual disciplines reflects their pride, self-righteousness, and legalistic attitude, perhaps because they believe they are superior to others and can earn salvation. For example, “the Pharisee was standing and praying like this about himself: ‘God, I thank you that I’m not like other people—greedy, unrighteous, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of everything I get’” (Luke 18:11–12).
3. **Fasting is not advisable for some people.** Particularly if you have confirmed health issues or concerns about your health, consult a doctor before you start fasting.
4. **Fasting is difficult.** Whether we fast from food or something else for the purposes of reading the Word and prayer, fasting exposes our dependence on things other than God. We may become angry, for example, when we fast, for eating helps us manage our anger.
5. **Fasting is a powerful means of grace in our lives.** When we combine the Word, prayer, and fasting, God rewards us by revealing more of himself and his will. Fasting expresses to God that we choose him above food, which is good for our souls and glorifies God.

In this lesson, we study the nature of fasting by focusing on three passages from Scripture: Matthew 6:16–18, Luke 5:33–39, and Acts 13:1–3. We conclude this lesson by summarizing how to combine the Word, prayer, and fasting from food.

1. Fasting in Secret

- “1 Be careful not to practice your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them. Otherwise, you have no reward with your Father in heaven.” (Matt 6:1)
- “16 Whenever you fast, don’t be gloomy like the hypocrites. For they make their faces unattractive so that their fasting is obvious to people. Truly I tell you, they have their reward. 17 But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, 18 so that your fasting isn’t obvious to others but to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.” (Matt. 6:16–18)

These verses are part of Jesus’s Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5–7). More specifically, they are part of Jesus’s teaching about our inner life before God (6:1–18). Jesus began this section by warning against attention-seeking, religious behavior (v. 1), which he applied to giving to the poor (vv. 2–4) and prayers to God (vv. 5–15). Jesus then applied his teaching to fasting. Jesus warned about drawing attention to ourselves when we fast—looking gloomy and making our faces unattractive so our fasting is obvious (v. 16). Doing so would make us hypocrites, because there would be a major disconnect between how we present ourselves (God-centered) as compared to the state of our hearts (self-centered). Such people have received their reward—admiration from other people, but not from God. Jesus instructed us to present ourselves *normally* when we fast, which, if we lived in Jesus’s day, would have included putting oil on our heads and washing our faces (v. 17). Acting normally ensures that only the Father will see us as we fast secretly (v. 18). And the Father, who sees in secret, will reward us. Jesus does not explain the nature of the reward in any detail. But surely it includes approval from God (not from men; cf. v. 16). The reward may also include a deeper revelation of and intimacy with God the Father, for he is our ultimate reward (Heb. 11:6) (Osborne, *Matthew*, 235–238).

- What is hypocrisy? How can we fight against that tendency?
- How do you want to be rewarded by God when you read the Word, pray, and fast?

2. Fasting Now that Jesus Has Returned to Heaven

33 Then they said to him, “John’s disciples fast often and say prayers, and those of the Pharisees do the same, but yours eat and drink.” 34 Jesus said to them, “You can’t make the wedding guests fast while the groom is with them, can you? 35 But the time will come when the groom will be taken away from them—then they will fast in those days.” 36 He also told them a parable: “No one tears a patch from a new garment and puts it on an old garment. Otherwise, not only will he tear the new, but also the piece from the new garment will not match the old. 37 And no one puts new wine into old wineskins. Otherwise, the new wine will burst the skins, it will spill, and the skins will be ruined. 38 No, new wine is put into fresh wineskins. 39 And no one, after drinking old wine, wants new, because he says, ‘The old is better.’” (Luke 5:33–39)

The Pharisees questioned Jesus why John the Baptist’s and the Pharisees’ disciples fast often and say prayers, but Jesus’s disciples “eat and drink” (v. 33). To clarify Jesus’s response, God is described as a bridegroom/husband in the Old Testament (Isa. 54:5–6), and in this passage it refers to Jesus (vv. 34–35; cf. John 3:29; 2 Cor. 11:2). Jesus highlighted the inappropriateness of asking wedding guests to fast while the groom is with them (v. 34; cf. Luke 12:35–40; Rev. 19:6–10). Jesus taught that the groom would be taken from them. His disciples would then fast “in those days,” which refers to the time after he returned to heaven (v. 35). Such fasting would include mourning and longing for his return. Jesus concluded with two parables—one about new and old garments, and the other about new and old wineskins (vv. 36–39). *What is new?* Jesus and the kingdom he ushered in. *What is old?* The Jewish religion apart from Jesus and his kingdom. Jesus could not “be patched onto old Judaism or poured into the old wineskins of Judaism. New forms would have to accompany the kingdom Jesus was now inaugurating” (Carson, *Matthew*, 267). With this in mind, “the question is whether they [his disciples] will forsake business as usual and join the wedding celebration; whether they will become entirely new receptacles for the expanding fermentation of Jesus and the gospel in their lives” (Edwards, *The Gospel according to Luke*, 176). The Pharisees so preferred their position of authority and their (limited) view of God and his Word that they could not see and appreciate the inbreaking of God’s kingdom through Jesus (v. 39; cf. Luke 24:44).

- Explain the two parables (vv. 36–39) in your own words as they relate to Jesus.
- What responses to Jesus honor him?

3. Worshipping the Lord, Fasting, and Responding to the Holy Spirit

1 Now in the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen, a close friend of Herod the tetrarch, and Saul.
 2 As 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.”
 3 Then after they had fasted, prayed, and laid hands on them, they sent them off. (Acts 13:1–3)

This passage is not primarily about fasting. But it provides context for what we call Paul’s “first missionary journey” (Acts 13–14), though Paul ministered in approximately fifteen “periods” (Schnabel, *Acts*, 548–549). The church at Antioch was dedicated to strengthening Christians and sending out missionaries to evangelize and start churches. Worshipping the Lord Jesus and fasting set the stage for hearing from the Holy Spirit—and then responding to him through fasting, prayer, and commissioning and sending off Paul and Barnabas (vv. 2–3).

- How does worship, fasting, and prayer prepare us to hear from God?
- To which areas of your life do you want God to speak? What might he say?

How to Combine the Word, Prayer, and Fasting from Food

Oftentimes we do not fast because we do not ask for God’s help in this area of our lives, and we do not plan to fast. Below are some suggestions for how to proceed.

1. **Ask God for guidance and strength as you fast.** Perhaps pray something like this: “God, please lead and empower me to seek you through your Word, prayer, and fasting. Help me to turn away from the things that I value more than you.”
2. **Schedule a time to skip one or more meals to be alone with God.** Keep the appointment just as you would for any other appointment on your calendar.
3. **As an alternative to skipping a meal, devote the first part of your lunch break, for example, to Bible reading and prayer (even if it is for five to fifteen minutes), and eat after that.** In time, your mindset may shift from “lunchtime” to “midday prayer,” whether you eat lunch after that or not.
4. **Quiet yourself and listen to God, particularly what he is saying to you through his Word.** Consider journaling about your emerging desires, thoughts, and emotions. See christiangathering.org/journal for guidance on how to journal.
5. **Express your desires to God about yourself, your family and friends, your church and its leaders, and the world.** For example:
 - “God, please reveal my sins to me with greater clarity and grant me the willingness to repent.”
 - “God, grant me supernatural boldness to share the gospel with those in my sphere of influence and invite them into my church family.”
 - “God, lead me and my spouse to enjoy greater spiritual intimacy together through reading your Word and praying together.”
 - “God, grant my church leaders clarity in proclaiming and explaining the truth of your Word.”
 - “God, empower me to serve you more faithfully in my family and local church.”
 - “God, grant me the ability to trust you in the midst of this trial: _____.”
6. **Express your love, worship, and gratitude to God for who he is and what he does.**
7. **Trust that God will answer in his perfect way and his perfect timing.**

Ultimately, Christian fasting is a God-centered activity—a time to worship, give thanks, and express our desires to him in prayer. We fast for other reasons, such as to grieve over tragedies (Esth. 4:3) or to anticipate Jesus’s return (Luke 2:38; Matt. 9:15). But fasting is always an opportunity to intensify our focus on God, which benefits us greatly and glorifies God.

- What comments and questions do you have about this lesson?
- What is one thing you can do in response to this lesson?

Prayer