

# The Final Word on Fasting

MATTHEW 6:16-18

## INTRODUCTION

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Many of you may know that last Sunday ended our 10 days of Prayer and Fasting campaign. Again, this campaign was a remarkably simple campaign by which we have asked God to help us with His power and His Spirit in building our church. You see the Bible clearly teaches that this church, Calvary Baptist Church, is His church. And, as such, He firmly promised that He would build His church and it would be a church that the gates of Hell could not prevail against. Later, in the book of Acts, the first local church of Jerusalem becomes the model of God building His church. We know that on the Day of Pentecost and through the power of the Holy Spirit God added to that church in one day over 3000 people. Even after that day, another 5000 were added. Scripture plainly says that it was **“the Lord”** who **“added to the church daily such as should be saved.”** (Acts 2:47) Thus, we spent 10 days praying and asking that God would do the same of our church. In fact, last Sunday was the day we know as the Day of Pentecost. My prayer is that God will do the same of us.

I hope that you have joined us in that campaign. I have intentionally not asked people sign up or make a commitment to our church publicly. In fact, when I first began to consider this, Bro. Jerry Holcomb and I had a long discussion about whether we should do so. During that

discussion, Bro Jerry pointed out the principle of our text today which we get into in just a few moments. It was then that I realized that we could not violate Christ's teaching in asking you to make a public commitment. Instead, we simply trust that many of you joined us. Privately, some of you have indicated that you have done so. I appreciate those who did. In fact, many who did tell me privately did so for the simple fact of encouraging me. They wanted me to know that I along with Bro. Jerry were not alone in doing so. I am thankful for those who did and am also thankful for those who fasted and prayed even though it was not known to me.

You see all that I just said is particularly important. It is so important that Christ, in this great sermon on the Mount, emphasized and taught its importance.

**I am convinced that prayer as well as fasting can be immensely powerful spiritual tools.** We all know that the prayer of a righteous man does much. We also know that prayer in conjunction with fasting can do the impossible.

**How do we know that? We know it from Scripture.** There is a story given to us by God in the Gospels that helps to understand. This story is found in both Matthew and Mark's account of the Gospel. **And, as the story goes, there was father whose son was sorely vexed by a devil.** And, at times, the son as the devil possessed him would cast himself into a fire or even into water. The father as you would guess was overcome with fear for the boy's life and was incapable of doing anything. However, the father in desperation to save his son brought the boy to the disciples for healing. As the story continues, the disciples were unable to do anything. Thus, the father brought him to Jesus noting to Jesus that the disciples were unable to cast out the devil. Jesus cast out the devil and restored the boy to his right mind. At this point,

the disciples are wondering why they were unable to cast out the devil. So, they ask our Lord Jesus Christ this question.

***“Why could we not cast him out?”*** To which, the Lord replied with this statement, ***“Because of your unbelief: for verily I say unto you, If ye have faith as a grain of mustard seed, ye shall say to this mountain, Remove hence to yonder place; and it shall remove; and nothing shall be impossible unto you.”*** Then, Christ added this thought. ***“Howbeit this kind goeth not out but by prayer and fasting.”***

Now, as I read that story and consider what Christ said, I realize that there are some things that only come about through prayer and fasting. The disciples were unable to cast out the devil (which by the way is an extremely difficult thing or as we would note an impossible thing to do) because of their unbelief. Yet, Christ also taught that sometimes we must show a degree of seriousness in our request. A seriousness that is clear not just with our prayers but also by our actions. In this case, adding the action of fasting to our prayers.

**My understanding then is that there just some things that are so important and so serious that sometimes they demand the action of prayer and fasting.** For me, the weight of Christ’s commission to us as a local church is enormous. Our Lord Jesus Christ expects us to be a growing local church. He specifically gave us the command to be ***“witnesses”*** for Him. Just before that command, He instructed the disciples to go to Jerusalem and wait for the empowering of the Holy Spirit. Then, as they were obedient, God worked, and the local church grew under God’s direction. You see it was their obedience and their faith in God’s promise that led to that local church growing.

These are reasons why I felt led as your pastor in leading a 10 Day Prayer and Fasting Campaign. More than ever, we need our church to be growing. We need our church to be a beacon in this community shining brightly the way to Calvary and salvation. However, I have come to realize that for us to do that we must allow God to do the work. We are simply His instruments. Through obedience and submission to His word, we are to be the witnesses for Him. However, I also realize that we live in some incredibly unique times. More than ever before, we are on the doorsteps of God's next great event on the timetable of mankind. That great next event is the Rapture ushering this world into seven incredible years that have never been seen since its creation. It will be time of great judgment upon all men. And as such, God has uniquely positioned us, Calvary Baptist Church, in this place at this time with one purpose. Our purpose is to do all that we can in rescuing as many souls as possible before it all begins. It is a task that often seems impossible especially in the light of man's sinfulness. Yet, it is a task that remains until the trumpet sounds. It is a task that only God can do. It is a task that demands a season of prayer and fasting.

All this then brings me to today's text. The subject matter at hand today is FASTING.

Note with me Christ's words in Matthew 6:16-18.

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**Moreover when ye fast, be not, as the hypocrites, of a sad countenance: for they disfigure their faces, that they may appear unto men to fast. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward. But thou, when thou fastest, anoint**

**thine head, and wash thy face; That  
thou appear not unto men to fast,  
but unto thy Father which is in  
secret: and thy Father, which seeth  
in secret, shall reward thee openly.  
Matthew 6:16-18**

As we already know, Christ has just finished teaching us about alms giving and prayer. We have learned from Him the way we are to pray. However, in our text today, Christ seems to pick back up with the thought of spiritual motivation. I say spiritual motivation because He addresses the reasons that many often give alms, pray loud prayers, or even fast. If you look back to verses 1-6, you will note how He encourages us to not be hypocritical. He points out the fact that many people of His day would often do such things so they could be seen of others. Their rewards, as He noted, was the praise of men. Thus, their motivation for doing what they did was self-exaltation.

Christ returns to that point when He now teaches us about fasting.

The first question that often comes with the subject to fasting is this.

## **BODY**

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### **What is fasting?**

Fasting was not a new or novel idea even in the time of Christ's ministry on earth. Men and women have used the means of fasting for decades. In its simple understanding, we know that fasting is a voluntary abstinence from food.

There are many O.T. references to those who fasted. There were multiple times that Israel as whole fasted demonstrating their humbleness before God asking for His intervention. Many of the psalmist speak of fasting often in remorse for sin and their desire for God's forgiveness. Equally, we see men like Jeremiah, Daniel, and others use fasting demonstrating their seriousness in seeking God's face.

When we come to the New Testament, especially during the time of Christ's ministry, fasting had become common practice among many Jews. Unfortunately, it was so common that it had lost its meaning. Just like alms giving and prayer fasting was now more about the show than anything else. It too had lost its intended purpose.

One theologian noted that "the practice of fasting also was very congenial to the Pharisees. They fasted ever 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 fast 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 face unsightly that they might be a sight to men in their fasting.'"

So, you can see that fasting had become more than just abstinence of food or drink, it had become a show.

Thus, Christ, as He did with alms giving and prayer, went straight to the heart of the matter. He dealt with the motivation behind it all.

Christ gives us the WRONG MOTIVATION for fasting.

# Fasting is NOT about SEEKING MEN'S APPROVAL!

Note Christ's words.

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**Moreover when ye fast, be not, as the hypocrites, of a sad countenance: for they disfigure their faces, that they may appear unto men to fast. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward.**  
**Matthew 6:16**

Again, as we already noted, these men made a big show of it. Just as they would stand on the street corner's praying loud prayers, so every Monday and Thursday they would parade down the street to the synagogue acting pious with their fasting attire. An attire that was complete with sackcloth and ashes. What was the purpose? What was their reward? It was the same as Christ noted in verses 2 and 5 concerning giving alms and prayer. Their reward was that they might be seen of men.

The warning for us is that we must be careful. We must be aware that even doing right things can be done for the wrong reasons. It is important that what we do (i.e. praying, Bible reading, giving to the those in need, fasting, etc.) be done to simply glorify the Lord. If we do it to bring attention to ourselves so that we are receiving men's praise, we are doing it for the wrong things.

Pride is a dangerous thing! Even good Christian people who love the Lord can be tempted by pride. It is for this reason that Christ gave such clear instructions about giving, prayer, and fasting. All this brings us to the last point for today.

## **Fasting is ABOUT SEEKING Answers from God!**

Ultimately, when it comes down to it as you study fasting, it always seems to work in conjunction with prayer. And, additionally, it seems to always be men seeking serious answers from God as they fast and pray. You see when a person truly fasts and prays Biblically, they are humbling themselves through self-denial. They are saying to God that this matter at hand is so serious and I am in such need of an answer from Him that I am going to deny the very basics of food asking God to answer.

Christ noted this when instructing us about prayer as well as fasting.

In verse 6, we read...

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**But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly. Matthew 6:6**

He then follows up with verse 8 saying...

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**Be not ye therefore like unto them: for your Father knoweth what things ye have need of, before ye ask him. Matthew 6:8**

The implication is that we are seeking answers from God through the avenue of prayer. If then, we seek them in secret, He will reward openly. And then verse 8 speaks to the fact

that God already knows what we need even before we ask. The underlying theme then becomes seeking God for answers to what we need or what we request. That same theme continues with area of fasting.

Note again, Christ said concerning fasting...

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**That thou appear not unto men to fast, but unto thy Father which is in secret: and thy Father, which seeth in secret, shall reward thee openly.**  
**Matthew 6:18**

Christ uses the exact same terminology that He used concerning prayer and concerning giving to the poor. However, in the instances of prayer and fasting, we understand that significance of asking and expecting answers. Christ is simply saying that we are to do it in such a way that we are not making a show for men. We are to go in secret. The only people who know are the person asking and God from whom the person is seeking an answer. No one else needs to know. In the end, God, per His perfect will, will decide to answer and/or make it public. The reality is that we are to simply trust Him.

For this reason, Christ is adamant that we take the necessary actions that, for lack of a better term, hide the fact we are fasting. We are to anoint our heads and wash our faces just as we would any other day. In other words, we are not change our routine or our countenance to draw attention to ourselves. Instead, do it privately as you trust a public answer from God.

# CONCLUSION

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There is so much more that we could say and learn from God's Word about prayer and fasting. Unfortunately, my time is already gone. My goal this morning more than anything was simply give you what Christ gave in our text. And the simple truth He was trying to teach us was be RIGHT in your motivation. If you are doing things such as giving to the poor, praying, and even fasting so that you can receive men's praise. Your motivation is totally wrong. However, if you are doing it so that you can please God and gain truthful answers from Him, you have the right motivation. Thus, the right motivation demands that you do it the right way. The right way is God's way. God's way is do it in secret and let Him do the rest.