

God-Centered Fasting

“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. But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, 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.”

Matthew 6:16-18

Application Questions

1. The subject of fasting is one that is not commonly considered in our day, especially among western affluent Evangelicals. Often confused with works-based religious practices, fasting finds very little significance among us. It would certainly be considered by most as the least important of the three religious duties that our Lord has addressed. What impacted you most in the message about fasting? What helped the most?
2. Almsgiving (Matthew 6:2-4), praying (6:5-8), and fasting (6:16-18) were referred to as the three “pillars of Judaism,” constituting the cardinal religious duties of the Jews. Did Jesus issue a rebuke for failure of fasting? Did Jesus rebuke the practice of fasting?
3. What specifically did Jesus say not to do (Matthew 6:16)? Were the “hypocrites” in view saying one thing and doing another? Since it was common Jewish practice when fasting to look dejected (1 Kings 21:27), which appears consistent with what they were doing, what was the essence of their hypocrisy? So hypocrisy, as Jesus identifies it here, has less to do with the difference between what we **say** and _____ and more to do with what we **do** and _____.
4. Jesus doesn’t command us to fast here, He simply assumes that we will. What is fasting? Food has a particular attachment to the purpose of fasting. What is the correlation? [Our appetites are linked—stomach and soul. It profoundly illustrates that we are creatures that live in constant dependence on something outside of ourselves in order to survive. Fasting expresses that our lives are supremely dependent not on bread but on God (Matthew 4:4). We are reminded that full stomachs tend to spoil appetite for God.] Is abstaining from various other enjoyments in life the same? If not, why?

5. Name some of the actions and attitudes that most often accompany fasting in the Bible (Judges 20:26; 1 Samuel 7:5-6; 31:13; 2 Samuel 12:16; 1 Kings 21:27; Ezra 8:23; Nehemiah 1:4; 9:1-2; Psalm 35:13; Daniel 9:3; Jonah 3:5; Joel 2:12). Name some of the occasions of fasting witnessed in the Bible (Joel 1:14; 2:12; 2 Samuel 1:12; Psalm 35:13; Daniel 6:18; 2 Samuel 12:16; Psalm 69:10; Isaiah 58:3, 5; Esther 4:16; Acts 13:3; 14:23).
6. How does fasting fit with 1 Timothy 4:3?
7. What can we learn about fasting from Matthew 9:14-17?
8. What did Jesus mean with the words, “when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face”? Who should be the audience of your fasting? Is there a difference between fasting to be seen and being seen fasting?
9. What is the (ultimate) purpose of fasting? Is dieting a form of fasting? List some things that fasting is not. List some spiritual benefits of fasting.
10. Read Psalm 42:1-3; 63:1-5; 84:2; 143:6. What do each of these passages say about cravings? How do they relate to fasting? What are some occasions or situations for which you might choose to fast?