

## PERFECT FASTING

### Matthew 6:16-18

## I. INTRODUCTION

## II. THE TEXT

**KJV**—**16** *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. 17 But thou, when thou fastest, anoint thine head, and wash thy face; 18 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.*

**NIV**—**16** *When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show others they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. 17 But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, 18 so that it will not be obvious to others that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.*

**NASB**—**16** *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. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. 17 But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face 18 so that your fasting will not be noticed by men, but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you.*

**ESV**—**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. 17 But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, 18 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.*

**The Message**—*When you practice some appetite-denying discipline to better concentrate on God, don't make a production out of it. It might turn you into a small-time celebrity but it won't make you a saint. If you 'go into training' inwardly, act normal outwardly. Shampoo and comb your hair, brush your teeth, wash your face. God doesn't require attention-getting devices. He won't overlook what you are doing; he'll reward you well.*

## III. BACKGROUND

### A. CONTEXT

1. No parallel passages—unique in the NT
2. Background OT Passage—Jesus may have been thinking of Isaiah's rebuke:

**Is 58** [The Message]—**1-3**—*Shout! A full-throated shout! Hold nothing back—a trumpet-blast shout! Tell my people what's wrong with their lives, face my family Jacob with their sins! They're busy, busy, busy at worship, and love studying all about me. To all appearances they're a nation of right-living people—law-abiding, God-honoring. They ask me, 'What's the right thing to do?' and love having me on their side. But they also complain, 'Why do we fast and you don't look our way? Why do we humble*

ourselves and you don't even notice?' **3-5** Well, here's why: The bottom line on your 'fast days' is profit. You drive your employees much too hard. You fast, but at the same time you bicker and fight. You fast, but you swing a mean fist. The kind of fasting you do won't get your prayers off the ground. Do you think this is the kind of fast day I'm after: a day to show off humility? To put on a pious long face and parade around solemnly in black? Do you call that fasting, a fast day that I, GOD, would like? **6-9** This is the kind of fast day I'm after: to break the chains of injustice, get rid of exploitation in the workplace, free the oppressed, cancel debts. What I'm interested in seeing you do is: sharing your food with the hungry, inviting the homeless poor into your homes, putting clothes on the shivering ill-clad, being available to your own families. Do this and the lights will turn on, and your lives will turn around at once. Your righteousness will pave your way. The GOD of glory will secure your passage. Then when you pray, GOD will answer. You'll call out for help and I'll say, 'Here I am.' **9-12** If you get rid of unfair practices, quit blaming victims, quit gossiping about other people's sins, If you are generous with the hungry and start giving yourselves to the down-and-out, Your lives will begin to glow in the darkness, your shadowed lives will be bathed in sunlight. I will always show you where to go. I'll give you a full life in the emptiest of places—firm muscles, strong bones. You'll be like a well-watered garden, a gurgling spring that never runs dry. You'll use the old rubble of past lives to build anew, rebuild the foundations from out of your past. You'll be known as those who can fix anything, restore old ruins, rebuild and renovate, make the community livable again.

## B. BIBLICAL GUIDELINES

1. Only requirement for fasting—Day of Atonement—**Lev 16:29-34; 23:26-32; Nu 29:7-11;**
  - 10<sup>th</sup> day of 7<sup>th</sup> month
  - Humble your souls—**generally understood to include fasting**
  - Present a burnt offering
  - Do not work
2. The Day of Atonement is probably what Luke means by “the fast”—in **Acts 27:9**

## C. PURPOSES

1. **Repentance**—humiliation and sorrow for sin
2. **Self-renunciation**—seeking to stay God's wrath and obtain mercy (Moses on behalf of Israel)
3. **Petitioning** God—to spare impending disaster or trouble—in times of emergency
4. **Commemorating** special occasions
  - Reminders of calamity and humility before God
  - Done on regular (annual) basis
  - 4 such fasts mentioned in **Zech 7:1-7; 8:19**
5. **Mourning**—grief over catastrophe, disaster, personal tragedy
6. Seeking divine **guidance**—knowing God's will

- Such as the NT seeking guidance on selecting leaders—[Acts 13:3; 14:23](#)

#### D. OPERATIVE DYNAMICS

1. Act of **devotion**—showing sincerity and desire for favorable response from God
2. Act of **humiliation**—showing right worshipful relation to God
3. Act of **sacrifice**—doing without in order to become a living sacrifice
4. Act of **discipline**—hunger focuses mind—self-conscious reflection
  - Constant reminder of relation to and dependence on God
  - Constant reminder of objective/purpose in fasting

#### E. PRACTICES

1. Rabbinical tradition
  - Pharisees fasted twice weekly
  - Tuesday and Thursday
  - Evidence—Pharisee’s prayer in Temple—[Lk 18:12](#)
2. Types
  - a. Normal = no food—but allowed to drink liquids
  - b. Partial = limited diet—but restricted some food
  - c. Absolute = no food and no liquids
3. Duration
  - a. Usually for one day—during daytime—allowed to eat at night
  - b. Some special fasts lasted longer
    - Moses fasted 40 days—interceding for Israel
    - 7 day fast after the death of Saul
    - Mordecai called for 3-day fast before his interview with the King Ahaseurus (Xerxes)
4. Attendant actions
  - a. Usually accompanied by prayer—fasting was seen to enhance prayer
  - b. Other actions of humiliation or mourning
    - Weeping
    - Sackcloth
    - Covering with soil or ashes

- Tearing of clothing

## 5. Christian Tradition

### a. Early church

1. At first—continued Jewish practice—twice weekly—Tuesday and Thursday
2. Later shifted to—Wednesday and Friday

### b. Roman Catholic Church

1. Two obligatory days of fasting—Ash Wednesday and Good Friday
2. Abstinence from meat on Fridays during Lent
3. Ashes on forehead on Ash Wednesday
4. Eucharistic fast—allowed to take nothing but water/medicine one hour before Mass

## F. ABUSES

### 1. People began to do it for the wrong reasons

- Perfunctory, legalistic religious act
- To earn merit with God
- To get attention from men

### 2. Three passages rebuking these abuses

#### a. **Is 58**—see above

b. **Jer 14:10-12**—*Thus says the LORD to this people, “Even so they have loved to wander; they have not kept their feet in check. Therefore the LORD does not accept them; now He will remember their iniquity and call their sins to account.” So the LORD said to me, “Do not pray for the welfare of this people. When they fast, I am not going to listen to their cry; and when they offer burnt offering and grain offering, I am not going to accept them. Rather I am going to make an end of them by the sword, famine and pestilence.*

c. **Zech 7:5**—*Say to all the people of the land and to the priests, ‘When you fasted and mourned in the fifth and seventh months these seventy years, was it actually for Me that you fasted?’*

## G. JESUS’ ATTITUDE ABOUT FASTING

### 1. Jesus fasted

- a. He kept the Law—fulfilled it—so He would have fasted at least on the Day of Atonement
- b. He did not prohibit it—but actually endorsed it

- In this Sermon—He says “when you fast”—which implicitly endorses it

- c. Jesus fasted 40 days in the wilderness—**Mt 4:2 ff**
- 2. Jesus and His disciples did not regularly fast like the Pharisees or John’s disciples
  - a. He was challenged about His refusal to do so—**Mt 9:14-15; Mk 2:18-20**
  - b. He was even accused of being a ‘wine-bibber’ and ‘glutton’—**Lk 5:33-35**
  - c. His response
    - His followers were to celebrate as long as He was with them
    - But they would fast (mourn) later—when He (the bridegroom) was taken from them
- 3. He rebuked the empty legalism and pretentiousness of fasting for a show—here in the Sermon

#### **IV. EXPLANATION OF TEXT**

*When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show others they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. **17** But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, **18** so that it will not be obvious to others that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.*

##### **1. When you fast**

- No prohibition—but an endorsement of fasting—when done properly
- Again—present active subjunctive—suggests a regular activity that is expected

##### **2. Do not be look somber like the hypocrites**

- a. **Hypocrites**—same term used for almsgiving and prayer—‘play-actors’
- b. **Somber**
  - 1. **σκυθρωπός** = appear to be + sullen

2. Sad countenance—gloomy

3. Only other usage

- **Lk 24:17**—on the road to Emmaus—the two stood there “looking sad”

##### **3. For they disfigure their faces to show others they are fasting**

- a. **Disfigure their faces**—discolor their faces with make-up
  - 1. **ἀφανίζω** = deprive of luster—make unsightly—cause to vanish—destroy—disappear

2. Other usages:

- **Mt 6:19-20**—earthly treasures—where moth and rust ‘**destroy**’—‘**corrupt**’
- **Jas 4:14**—your life is like a vapor: appears for a little time and then ‘**vanishes away**’

b. **To show others**—to be noticed—to appear

- **φαίω** = shine—be resplendent—exposed to view—to be seen—appear

c. Word play—similarity in Greek for ‘disfigure’ (disappear)—‘to show’ (appear)

1. They put on a show of **disappearing**—so they might **appear** to be pious
2. Result:
  - a. They just ‘appear’ to be pious—but leave no lasting impression
  - b. And their pious image actually ‘disappears’ in the process

4. **But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face**

a. **Oil on your head**

1. Anointing—was done with olive oil, commonly with perfumes
2. Usually done when bathing—to protect skin from heat and lime dust in Palestine
3. Withholding oil from toiletry was a sign of fasting
4. Beginning it again was sign fasting had ended
5. Anointment was a customary preparation for feast
6. Anointment done to honor a guest—to anoint head
  - **Ps 23:5**—*You anoint my head; my cup runs over*
  - **Mk 14:3-9**—woman [Mary] anointed Jesus’ head [and body]

b. **Wash your face**

- a. Action usually associated with anointment
- b. Also—the opposite of disfiguring the face—putting ashes/dirt on it

5. **So it will not be obvious to others that you are fasting, but only to your Father who is unseen**

- a. So it will not be obvious = **φαίω**

1. Same word for ‘appear’—as above in **verse 16**
2. This *negates* any effort to be noticed by people
- b. But only your Father who is unseen
  1. Unseen = ‘crypto’ = **κρυπτός**
  2. Same word in **verse 4** and **8**—in ‘secret’
    - a. **Verse 4**—giving was ‘in secret’
    - b. **Verse 8**—prayer **and** Father are ‘in secret’
    - c. Here—fasting and Father are ‘in secret’
      1. But Father is not in a ‘secret’ place—like the closet of prayer
      2. Here it simply means that He is ‘unseen’

**7. And your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you.**

- a. Like previous two passages—almsgiving and prayer
- b. Two possible ways to read this
  1. Your Father, Who sees what is done in secret—will reward you (openly)
  2. Your Father, Who sees what is done—in secret will reward you (accordingly)

**V. SUMMARY—OF ALL THREE ‘PERFECT’ PASSAGES**

1. MAIN IDEA

- Don’t make a show of your religious piety
- If you do—you already have your reward—paid in full—now
- Instead, do it unobtrusively—not for show
- And your Father will show you He is pleased

2. TRUE (RIGHT/PERFECT) PIETY

- a. Takes careful measures to avoid a show
  - Secret giving—not letting one hand know the other is giving
  - Secret praying—going into closet and closing the door
  - Secret fasting—anooint head and wash face
- b. But this does not mean it is sinful if inadvertently detected

- c. Be careful not to become legalistic about hidden piety—this can become proud and smug!

### 3. PERSPECTIVE

- a. It is good to do ‘righteous’ acts for various reasons—‘piety’ is a good, not a bad thing
- b. All these actions should be done *foremost* with a view toward pleasing the Father
- c. It is bad to make a show of them—this misuses holy things for unholy purposes
- d. Be careful not to focus on external things that draw attention to ourselves
  - ° Such as big budgets, numbers, success, baptisms