

Are You Going To(o) Fast? (Matthew 6:16)

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by David Schrock

Fasting.

If you have read the Bible, you've probably come across it. It's mentioned about 75 times. Maybe you've even tried to it. But what is it?

Some testify to the miraculous results of this ancient practice. Others just skip over it, an impossible practice that is for "major league" Christians. And still others may be confused by the whole thing, or practice it for the wrong reason(s).

In Matthew 6:16–18, fasting for the wrong reason is what Jesus is targeting. Still, his words are not just relevant for his first century context; they also teach us important truths about denying ourselves and seeking God's reward.

The truth is, everyone fasts every week, but I suspect most of us don't think of it as fasting. Yet, how we deny ourselves and indulge ourselves is one of the most important things about who we are and who we are becoming.

Therefore in this week's sermon I sought to answer a number of questions related to fasting and how Jesus's words instruct all of us how to tune our fasting to seek the reward of knowing God. You can listen to this sermon online. Further resources about fasting can be found below, along with a few discussion questions.

Isaiah 58:1–14

¹ "Cry aloud; do not hold back; lift up your voice like a trumpet; declare to my people their transgression, to the house of Jacob their sins. ² Yet they seek me daily and delight to know my ways, as if they were a nation that did righteousness and did not forsake the judgment of their God; they ask of me righteous judgments; they delight to draw near to God. ³ 'Why have we fasted, and you see it not? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you take no knowledge of it?' Behold, in the day of your fast you seek your own pleasure, and oppress all your workers. ⁴ Behold, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to hit with a wicked fist. Fasting like yours this day will not make your voice to be heard on high. ⁵ Is such the fast that I choose, a day for a person to humble himself? Is it to bow down his head like a reed, and to spread sackcloth and ashes under him? Will you call this a fast, and a day acceptable to the Lord? ⁶ "Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? ⁷ Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh? ⁸ Then shall your light break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up speedily; your righteousness shall go before you; the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard. ⁹ Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry, and he will say, 'Here I am.' If you take away the yoke from your midst, the pointing of the finger, and speaking wickedness, ¹⁰ if you pour yourself out for the hungry and satisfy the desire of the afflicted, then shall your light rise in the darkness and your gloom be as the noonday. ¹¹ And the Lord will guide you continually and satisfy your desire in scorched places and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring

of water, whose waters do not fail. ¹² And your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to dwell in. ¹³ "If you turn back your foot from the Sabbath, from doing your pleasure on my holy day, and call the Sabbath a delight and the holy day of the Lord honorable; if you honor it, not going your own ways, or seeking your own pleasure, or talking idly; ¹⁴ then you shall take delight in the Lord, and I will make you ride on the heights of the earth; I will feed you with the heritage of Jacob your father, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken."

Matthew 6:16–18

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.

Discussion Questions

- 1 Do you currently practice fasting? Or, have you ever tried to fast before? Why? For what? How did it go?
- 2 In your own words, how would you describe fasting? What is it for?
- 3 What teaching have you received on fasting? Have you ever considered the difference between fasting in the Old Testament and the New? What is the difference?
- 4 Is it helpful to consider the fact that all people fast (i.e., deprive themselves of some material comfort to pursue other greater comforts)? How so? How might broadening your understanding of fasting help you practice fasting more strategically?
- 5 What does Jesus say about fasting? How do his words relate to the Sermon on the Mount? How do they apply to your life today?
- 6 What are the benefits to fasting? Why is it so necessary that we fast? In what ways might you incorporate fasting?
- 7 What other questions do you have about fasting?

Additional Resources

Articles

- [Drinking Deeply from Our Father in Heaven: Nine Observations about Giving, Praying, and Fasting \(Matthew 6:1–18\)](#) – As we consider the spiritual discipline of fasting, we should remember to read Jesus's words in the context of the whole Sermon on the Mount. Hopefully this article will help.
- [Fasting](#) by Randy Alcorn – A short guide on how to fast.
- [Fasting: The Benefits of Giving God More of Who We Are](#) – A conversation between Catherine Gates and Francis Umesiri M.D.
- [A New Covenant Perspective on Fasting](#) — The advent of Jesus Christ changed everything, including fasting. But how? This article tries to answer that question.
- [Fasting for the Father's Reward](#) by John Piper — sermon audio and sermon manuscript on Matthew 6:16-18

Books

[Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life](#) by Donald Whitney – In his book, professor and long-time pastor, Donald Whitney provides at least purposes for fasting. You can find

them summarized in this [Christianity.com](#) article, "[Nine Reasons to Fast](#)." These nine reasons include,

- To strengthen prayer
- To seek God's guidance
- To express grief
- To seek deliverance or protection
- To express repentance and a return to God
- To humble oneself before God
- To express concern for the work of God
- To overcome temptation and dedicate yourself to God
- To express love and worship to God

[*A Hunger for God: Desiring God through Fasting and Prayer*](#) by John Piper — This has been the most helpful book I've read on fasting. It covers the personal practice of fasting and the corporate call to fast. And chiefly, it teaches that fasting from food is for feasting on God.

[*Fasting for Life: Discover Lasting Health Benefits of This Spiritual Discipline*](#) by Francis E. Umesiri — I have not read this book, but based on the aforementioned interview with Dr. Umesiri, an [outspoken Christian](#) and assistant professor of chemistry at John Brown University, as well as the table contents, it looks like a faithful read.

The Common Rule



A "rule" is rhythm of life, ordered to cultivate habits of holiness. While "rules" are often associated with various monastic traditions, there are many others today who are seeing the need for such measured approaches to maintaining Christian priorities in the face of a chaotic world.

Enter Justin Early, who has developed what he calls The Common Rule. In his words, "The Common Rule is a set of daily and weekly practices designed to form us in the love of God and neighbor." Among these practices, there are both positive practices (things to do) and negative practices (things to resist). There are some that are private, others that are practiced in community. In total these practices include: working and praying, reading, eating, practicing presence, resting, friendship, beauty and justice, and fasting. You can find more about each of these practices at his [website](#) and in his coming book,

and you can learn more about fasting [here](#).

I appreciate The Common Rule's common sense approach. Surely, like all "rules" it could be turned into a slavish form of legalism. But approached rightly, for those who long to order their lives according to their heart-felt love for God, this may be a practical way to take concrete steps towards God and away from the chaos of this world.

Soli Deo Gloria, ds