



Brown Community Group

Discussion Guide

Jesus: To Love Him Is to...Fast – May 8, 2022
Matthew 6:16-18

I. Starter Thoughts and Questions:

Do you find it difficult to not eat for long periods of time? How did you feel during those periods that you had not eaten?

Have you ever fasted or thought about fasting? What stopped you? What was your motivation? Could it be because we do not have the right Godly focus and sacrifice of our own personal will?

How many other things in the Bible that Jesus specifically tells us to do, do we deliberately not practice?

For those that have fasted from any item, even on a regular basis, what drove your motivation?

II. Discussion of Scripture:

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.

III. Context:

Some of the most important motives in a religious life are illustrated in the areas of almsgiving (the practice of giving money or food to the poor or needy), prayer and fasting. Jesus esteemed all three of these and assumed that his followers would practice each of them. **The motives behind religious expression gives it its meaning.**

Religious performance designed to impress God, other people or self is totally false and futile. If we look at the whole of chapter 16, it starts out talking about how practicing our piety is to think of righteousness as an outward performance. The fallacy stems from our failure to recognize that moral, ethical or spiritual value is not inherent in things we do or say, nor is it earned through our works.

In chapter 16:1-4, scripture discusses Almsgiving. Almsgiving helps us experience giving freely, which leads to the freedom from the obsession with possessing or from the fear of losing what we

have. It is a spiritual practice. For further understanding, there are four types of giving in the bible: 1) Tithes, 2) Offerings, 3) The First Fruits and 4) Almsgiving.

Verses 5-15 discuss prayer, which was covered last week so well by Frank, but today we will study and look at fasting.

Jesus sometimes fasted and expected his followers to do the same. Jesus was specifically rejecting fasting for show or display. It is interesting to note that the Mosaic Law actually did not explicitly require fasting, but Leviticus 16:31 was understood to require it for the Day of Atonement:

“It will be a Sabbath day of complete rest for you, and you must deny yourselves. This is a permanent law for you.”

The Pharisees fasted twice a week and made it a test of piety. Jesus was not bound by the calendar and fasted as a normal thing in times of crisis. Abstinence from something is a private means of freeing oneself of certain preoccupations (food, sleep, play or work) in favor of concentration upon something which for the time at least represents a higher claim. In this case, focus on God and not our needs and desires.

This passage is nestled into the Sermon on the Mount. Immediately before He delivered the Sermon on the Mount in Scripture, Jesus fasted. Matthew 4 outlines the story of how He was led into the wilderness by the Spirit so He might be tempted. In that time, He fasted for 40 days and 40 nights. When Jesus speaks to fasting, He speaks from both experience and authority.

Fasting is mentioned 13 times in the Gospels and Matthew, Mark and Luke all recount a similar story where Jesus is asked why John’s disciples fast and His do not. He replies (in Matthew), “Can the wedding guests mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them? The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast.” (Matthew 9:14-15, Mark 2:18-19 and Luke 5:33-34). Fasting can fuel our prayer lives and draw us closer to the Father. While Jesus was with His disciples, they had access to Him physically. That changed, of course, after His ascension.

Why in the text does Jesus mention how not to fast? John Piper said, “But Jesus calls them hypocrites. Why? Because the heart that motivates fasting is supposed to be a heart for God. That’s what fasting means: a heart-hunger for God. But the heart motivating their fasting is a heart for human admiration. So they are being open and transparent about what they are doing, but that very openness is deceptive about what they’re feeling. If they wanted to be really open, they would have to wear a sign about their necks that said, “The bottom line reward in my fasting is the praise of men.” Then they would not be hypocrites. They would be openly and transparently vain.”¹ Likewise, we must be vigilant to check our hearts and motivation when it comes to fasting.

Interesting facts on Fasting:

- The word fasting is not found in the Pentateuch, but often occurs in historical books (II Samuel, I Kings, Ezra, Isaiah, Joel, Zechariah)
 - The expression used in the law is “afflicting the soul”
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- All of the value of fasting is generated by “the sacrifice of the personal will”
- Jewish fasts lasted only a single day abstaining from every kind of food from evening to evening
- It was not unusual for them to wear sackcloth, rend their garments and spread ashes over their head
- No other periodical fasting except for the day of Atonement
- Pharisees fasted regularly on the second and fifth day of the week
- No fasting on the Sabbath

IV. Group Discussion Questions:

For those that have fasted from any item, even on a regular basis, what drove your motivation?

1. Let’s have a show of hands, how many of us have fasted? Could be food or other items restricting our own personal will?
2. How many do this on a regular basis?
3. Can you think of any other item in the bible that Jesus specifically tells us to do, but deliberately do not practice?
4. What does Jesus say in verse 16? Does he use the word “when” or “if”? How might this help motivate us to introduce fasting in your walk with God?
5. What does Jesus describe as our motivation to fast?
6. When can we discern if our motivation as gone astray?
7. With Christ’s joy, closeness and protection as our reward, what is limiting or holding us back from fasting?
8. Why did Jesus disciples not fast when they were with Him?
9. If our motivation for fasting is a heart hungry for God, how do you hope to grow closer to God in practicing fasting?

V. Responding in Prayer

- Consider why you haven’t fasted in the past and how you will move forward in the future in the practice of fasting.
- Consider someone you could ask to walk alongside you in this practice.
- Ask God to reveal to you how you might incorporate fasting into your life this month.
- Thank Jesus for being our daily bread and for modeling a life lived for Him so well. Thank Him for how He can supply joy greater than food or other pleasures because He is our source of joy.