



World Christian Fellowship

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How Not to fast? Matthew 6:16-18

Matthew 6:16-18, *“Moreover, when you fast, do not be like the hypocrites, with a sad countenance. For they disfigure their faces that they may appear to men to be fasting. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward. ¹⁷But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, ¹⁸so that you do not appear to men to be fasting, but to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly.*

Matthew 6:1-4, deals about Hypocrisy on giving.

Matthew 6:5-15, deals with Hypocrisy in prayer.

Matthew 6:16-18, deals with Hypocrisy in fasting.

The Pharisees and the scribes and the Jews were involved in many, many fasts. Very common part of their religious system. It needed to be corrected.

We must understand what fasting is all about?

Fasting in the church of Jesus Christ is a little understood factor of religious or spiritual experience.

Fasting is a very popular but that is not to be confused with what the Bible is teaching us about fasting.

We all like food. God in a wonderful way, permits that. God has provided such an infinite variety of tastes and such an infinite capacity in the part of the tongue to enjoy those tastes.

God wanted us to have the fullness of enjoying all there is to enjoy in eating.

God has made a world like this world because He wanted us to enjoy colour. If everything could be black, then the whole world could be black.

There would need to be some variety.

When it comes to food, God is very much aware of the fact that there is variety. We are not like automobiles. We don't just take Petrol or Diesel. Although some human beings in this world are not so fortunate as to have the variety that we have in our country.

Genesis 1:30, *Also, to every beast of the earth, to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, in*

which there is life, I have given every green herb for food”; and it was so.

After the flood, God allowed man to eat everything.

Genesis 9:3, *Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you. I have given you all things, even as the green herbs.*

All things from the vegetables, the fruits, the meats, and nuts, everything that God has provided in this world to make eating an enjoyable thing.

God knew we had to eat, and we would eat. But God gave us the wonder of taste so that life would be richer and more blessed just in eating.

So, it's a good gift from God just in its sustenance value.

It's nourishing, filled with the things we need.

Also in its enjoyment element, it's a good gift from God.

It's also a good gift from God because it is the source of fellowship.

When God and two angels visited Abraham, they dined together.

All through the Old Testament the people of God came together and dined. Families still find a resource of love and

fellowship and discussion and understanding when they come together to eat.

The body of Christ has done that. They have broken bread since the church was born on the day of Pentecost, from house to house. We continue to enjoy that fellowship even today.

Jesus made breakfast and then said to His beloved disciples.

John 21:9, *Then, as soon as they had come to land, they saw a fire of coals there, and fish laid on it, and bread.*

John 21:12, *Jesus said to them, "Come and eat breakfast." Yet none of the disciples dared ask Him, "Who are You?"—knowing that it was the Lord.*

Jesus stands at the door knocking and wants us to open that He may come in and sup with us.

Revelation 3:20, *Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me.*

Food then provides
Sustenance,
Enjoyment, and
fellowship.

Every meal that we eat is a gift from God.

The Lord's prayer says, *"Give us this day our daily bread."*

It is simply the constant recognition that the source of all our sustenance is God Himself who grants to us the food that we eat.

1 Timothy 4:3-5, *forbidding to marry, and commanding to abstain from foods which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth. ⁴For every creature of God is good, and nothing is to be refused if it is received with thanksgiving; ⁵for it is sanctified by the word of God and prayer.*

We are to be grateful to God for such a wonderful provision.

God has created this for us to enjoy. Obviously, you need to have some common sense about putting things in your body that are unhealthful. But nonetheless, we have the right to enjoy fully the provision that God has given us.

Some of Rabbi's reacted against fasting and they said, "When you get to heaven and to the judgment seat, you will have to answer to God for every good thing that you didn't eat."

Certainly, don't want to have to answer in the judgment for not eating some good thing that God created.

That is the other extreme, but some of the rabbis went to that end.

Some of the other Rabbi's went to the extreme of not eating anything and fasting and that was their religious pretence.

These are the extremities to which Jesus applies the corrective in His message.

The Greeks and the Romans had the same problem. The Greeks ate feasts constantly, just feast after feast after feast. Anything they could celebrate, they'd celebrate. The Romans the same thing. The Romans had as many as 76 official feasts a year.

Imagine if you were a Roman and you had 76 Thanksgivings in a year. The rich Roman dined in his dining room on a couch.

The banquet would begin at 4:00 in the afternoon and end after midnight. Some would go all night long unto the next day. They would eat not only volumes of things and then they would take a vomit and go to the centre of the floor and come back and eat more. But the stuff they ate is amazing.

The Romans were fond of food, but **Julius Caesar in 46 B.C.** passed a law which placed a limit on the amount of food that a person might consume and the amount of money they might spend on food. Unfortunately, he couldn't enforce his law.

The quickest way to a man's heart is through his stomach. Business believes that. If they want to sell you something, they take you out and stuff you first. That is why the Bible warns us not to eat with everybody.

Psalm 141:3-4, *Set a guard, O Lord, over my mouth; Keep watch over the door of my lips. ⁴Do not incline my heart to any evil thing, To practice wicked works With men who work iniquity; And do not let me eat of their delicacies.*

Don't sit down to a meal with the wrong people. You will get conned into doing something that isn't right. You not only have to guard what comes out of your mouth, but you must get to guard what goes in your mouth.

Food has become for us almost like a God. A fascination beyond the normal.

We get ourselves into bad situations because we compromise, sometimes by eating with folks we shouldn't be eating with and getting engaged in things we shouldn't be involved in.

Fasting is a very popular phenomenon. There's a lot of it going on today. Many people are fasting. There are fasting diets where you don't eat anything.

These days fasting guarantee the weight loss.
What people are looking to fasting to accomplish.

Fasting makes you feeling better physically and mentally, looking and feeling younger, saving money. Obviously, if you don't buy food, you are going to save money.

Fasting's been around a long time.
Do you know that many of the pagans used to believe that demons entered the body through food?

When they felt a special onslaught of demons, they stopped eating so they wouldn't be taking any demons because they thought they came in through the mouth?

Yogis were very committed to fasting as a source of receiving mystical revelations.

The disciples of Buddha fast. Buddha doesn't look like he ever got anywhere near a fast, but his disciples fast. The disciples of Buddha believed that you induce a vision situation when you fast.

There are many in the history of the world that have given themselves to fasting.

The Bible never presents any place in the entire Scripture fasting for physical reasons. Never.

The only even remote hint that that could be considered is in **Isaiah 58** where the word health is used.

But in my judgment, it has reference to a spiritual wholeness, not a physical one.

The Bible never deals with fasting on a physical level.

Fasting, to get the body beautiful, is not the issue.

But because of this insatiable desire for the beautiful body, we have even created a new disease, this **anorexia disease**, where people get a mental aversion to eating. They can't put it in their mouths without eventually vomiting it back out again and they and continue to lose weight.

Fasting is not to give you the body beautiful.

Fasting is not to feed your pride.

Romans 14:17, *For the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.*

Don't be superstitious about fasting. It isn't going to get you any super spirituality. Fasting does not isolate itself to be a spiritual virtue.

We are not interested in a physical, self-centred mystical kind of fast to get a better-looking body or to get yourself ready for a gluttonous activity tomorrow. We are not interested in a fast just for the sake of saying you fasted. That isn't the issue. There must be a spiritual context for a fast to be biblical. There is only fast ever commanded in all the Bible. Only one time did God ever command a fast.

There is only one compulsory fast from one end of Scripture to the other, just one. It was a general public national fast.

God said, on the Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur, that one day a year when sacrifices of the nation are given for the sins of the people for the year past.

Leviticus 16:29-31, *“This shall be a statute forever for you: In the seventh month, on the tenth day of the month, you shall afflict your souls, and do no work at all, whether a native of your own country or a stranger who dwells among you. ³⁰For on that day the priest shall make atonement for you, to cleanse you, that you may be clean from all your sins before the Lord. ³¹It is a sabbath of solemn rest for you, and you shall afflict your souls. It is a statute forever.*

On that day from sunrise to sunset, you will fast, Yom Kippur. That is the only fast ever given as compulsory by God in the entire Scripture.

But notice it is a fast connected with a deep mournful spirit in confessing sin. Now that ought to give you a hint of what fasting is all about.

Fasting is inextricably connected to a great sense of spiritual anxiety. A time in that case of confession of sin and seeking forgiveness at the hand of God.

In fact, the Jews went so far as to say on the Day of Atonement, “it is forbidden” – says the Talmud – “to eat, to drink, to bathe, to anoint oneself, to wear sandals or to engage in conjugal intercourse.” Even the little children on the Day of Atonement couldn’t eat. These little children had to learn that that was to be a prescribe fast. They had to learn it when they were young so they would maintain it when they became older.

Now, beyond that the Bible never commands a fast.

The New Testament never commands us to fast.

The Bible commands us to give again and again, commands us to pray again and again, but doesn’t command us to fast.

That just is not a biblical command.

Yet isn’t it interesting that it fits right in with these other two things, giving and praying in this section.

Fasting then, was a personal non-compulsory, spontaneous, voluntary act. There's no structure to fasting delineated in the Scripture. There's just endless variety.

Now, by the time Jesus arrives, fasting has become a great part of the Jewish society. It was in the Old Testament. The Old Testament is filled with fasts. There's just a lot of fasts. Sometimes by the nation, sometimes by a small group of people and sometimes by one individual.

When Satan wanted to tempt Eve and caused the whole human race to fall, what did he tempt her with?
Food.

When Noah fell into a horrible and gross and vial sin he did so because it says he planted a vineyard and drank of the wine and lay uncovered in his tent.

Eating and drinking has always been a potential disaster.

Esau who had the birth right, the tremendous treasure of being the first born and the blessing of the first born was his, but for one single meal he sold his birth right.

Numbers 11:4-5, *Now the mixed multitude who were among them yielded to intense craving; so the children of Israel also wept again and said: "Who will give us meat to eat?"⁵We*

remember the fish which we ate freely in Egypt, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic;

All they could think about wandering in the wilderness was what we used to eat. Here are a bunch of people who have been delivered from Egypt in a series of incredible miracles, who have been given the law of God, who are marching to the promised land and all they can do is think about what they would like to eat.

Numbers 21:5, *And the people spoke against God and against Moses: "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and our soul loathes this worthless bread."*

We do not choose to eat to live, we choose to live to eat.

Psalms 78:29-31, *So they ate and were well filled, For He gave them their own desire. ³⁰They were not deprived of their craving; But while their food was still in their mouths, ³¹The wrath of God came against them, And slew the stoutest of them, And struck down the choice men of Israel.*

God's a little upset about that attitude. Do you know the lust for food even found its way into the sanctuary of God and corrupted the house of the high priest himself?

Even Eli.

1 Samuel 2:29, *Why do you kick at My sacrifice and My offering which I have commanded in My dwelling place, and honour your sons more than Me, to make yourselves fat with the best of all the offerings of Israel My people?’*

When anybody brought an offering, part of it was consumed on the altar and part of it went to support the priests. Those priests made sure they took the choice cuts and left the rest for God. Their desire for the gratification of an appetite had come to the place where it corrupted the worship of the very priests within the sanctuary of God.

Now there are some people in the ministry today whose ministry I think is corrupted because they cannot deal with themselves in regard to food.

Paul had some very strong words for the undisciplined congregation in Corinth who were so used to feasting that even when it was time for the love feast and even when it was time for the Lord’s Supper, they turned it into a gluttonous, drunken orgy.

The rich people came and consumed all the food before the poor could come and have any.

Matthew 24:37-38, *But as the days of Noah were, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be. ³⁸For as in the days before the flood, they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noah entered the ark,*

Now, some say this is simply a statement about the fact that things are going on as usual and normal, and that may well be. The other alternative is that there was an over-indulgence in eating and drinking and a misapplication of marrying and giving in marriage.

Certainly, we are ripe for the return of Christ because marriage and giving in marriage is a constant thing. People are marrying and eating to a point that no society has ever had the consumption of food to the volume that we do to the extent of our society that engages in it.

Drinking. Alcoholism is an incredible problem.

Gluttony and drunkenness, as well as the dissolution of marriage, seems to mark a time when Jesus will return.

When somebody gives in to the passions of their appetite for food, it causes a decline in all other elements of their spiritual life, because spirituality is a total package.

An illustration:

Jeremiah 5:7-8, *“How shall I pardon you for this? Your children have forsaken Me And sworn by those that are not gods. When I had fed them to the full, Then they committed adultery And assembled themselves by troops in the harlots’ houses. ⁸They were like well-fed lusty stallions; Every one neighed after his neighbour’s wife.*

When they got what they wanted and began to live to saturate their desire for food with fullness, they couldn’t restrain themselves from other lusts which also took over. You can’t isolate it.

Deuteronomy 32:15, *“But Jeshurun grew fat and kicked; You grew fat, you grew thick, You are obese! Then he forsook God who made him, And scornfully esteemed the Rock of his salvation.*

It may be a spiritual thing, but it’s a physical illustration that insatiable lust to fulfil the appetite led to apostasy. There must be balance here.

On the one hand you have the sins of gluttony.

On the other hand, you have this concept of fasting.

A society like ours where we are being literally bombarded with food and our appetites are constantly assaulted to give in, fasting is not a common discipline.

Some people think fasting bring them repentance from their sin. Fasting for religious purposes like Fridays in lent which are unbiblical.

Fasting as the penny in the slot idea to think you are going to get a blessing. Fasting to get the body beautiful, Fasting for passive resistance to political things like Mahatma Gandhi does.

But those are not the biblical issues. The Scripture calls for a fast in the life of a believer.

A vast number of you have never fasted, because you have never really understood what the Bible meant when it talked about it.

Gluttony is not a matter of how big you are, it's a matter of what's going on in your head more than anything else.

There are lots of people who don't show it but are gluttonous. There are some people who may seem to show it, but are not.

God has given us a wonderful gift in food, but we have pushed it way too far the wrong direction. Instead of overdoing it, we ought to be underdoing it and drawing ourselves into a proper biblical perspective on fasting.

But the Old Testament is full of them and so this was a part of their society. This was a part of their life. But when you come to Jesus's time, this thing had gone beyond its bounds.

What started as a true, spontaneous, voluntary, heartfelt fast had ended up as a point of hypocritical, self-righteous demonstration in front of men.

They put on this tremendous pretence, made themselves look as wretched and miserable and dismal as they could and paraded around letting everybody know they were fasting. So, they would think they were super spiritual.

The Jews were fasting for every reason and their basic motive was to be seen by men. The ego trip, super spiritual, super pious. Jesus must correct this.

The Pharisees fasted twice a week.

Luke 18:12, *I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess.'*

That is not a biblical prescription. They had come to the place where they did that.

The Talmud tells us they fasted on the second day and the fifth day.

Why the second and the fifth day?

Because it was the second day and the fifth day which Moses went up and down from Sinai.

- Moses went up to Sinai to get the law on the fifth day of the week.
- Moses came down on the second day of the week.

In commemorating that the Pharisee's fast on the second and the fifth day.

But, as spiritual as it sounds, if you look a little closer in Jewish history, in the city of Jerusalem, you will find out that market day was the second and the fifth day. Those were the two days in the week when everybody from the countryside came to town. If you were going to parade your religiosity that was the time.

On the second and the fifth day, market day, with people crowding in the city and the country all moving around, it was a great time, an ideal place for those who fasted for a public pretence to put on their act.

They would do it for spiritual pride.

- They would walk through the streets with their hair all messy.
- They would put on old clothes and get dirt all over them.
- They would cover their faces with white stuff, so they would look pale.

- They would dump ashes on their head.

They would parade around on market day so everybody would see how spiritual they really were.

Jesus attacks this in this text.

1. The principle of fasting.

Fasting is total abstinence from food.

The Greek word, *nēsteia*,

nē, means not

esthiō, means to eat.

It means not to eat!

A modified fast or a partial fast can be taken where you don't totally fast and totally abstain from food, but you abstain from banqueting, lavishness, rich foods, to eat a rather common food.

Daniel did that. Daniel wouldn't touch the delicacies of the king's meat, but said I only want to eat what is called pulse and water.

It was not a total fast, but it was a restricted fast for spiritual priority reasons. It is a total abstinence from food for a short or a long period.

Total abstinence from food related to very troubled spirit or a very anxious heart. Fasting is almost the equivalent of the phrase to humble oneself before the Lord.

As Leviticus 16 says, fasting equals inflicting one's soul.

In other words, it is a self-denial act.

Fasting is to deny self. But it is not done in a vacuum.

Stop eating for no good reason, because then several things are going to happen. If there's nothing else in your mind, you are going to go nuts not eating and you lose the whole import of the fast.

You are going to congratulate yourself saying, "am I something. I am getting spiritual." So that fasting never occurs in a vacuum. It never occurs, biblically, without a consequence.

There is a reason to humble yourself in that manner.

There is a reason to deny yourself in that manner.

There is a reason to inflict yourself in that manner and the reason is a consuming one.

So that fasting is almost not something you choose to do, but something you cannot avoid.

It is common in the New Testament.

At least 30 times and more, the word *nēsteia* or a form of that word is used in the New Testament, so it was very common then.

The Pharisees have twisted and perverted it.

The Chinese for years, for centuries loved to eat and it is not unusual for a Chinese dinner to consist of 40 courses. When we get Chinese food in bits and pieces of all kinds of assortments. This was traditional.

There is no place in the world, nor has there ever been a period in history where people have so indulged themselves with food as we do in our society. There are restaurants all over the place.

2. The period of fasting.

People have discussed and debated how long a fast should be?

Some have said, “if you are really spiritual you fast for 40 days and 40 nights.” If you are not so spiritual, you fast for one day. But if you can just hang on for 40 days and 40 nights.

You can practically be like Enoch, just walk off to heaven someday you will be so spiritual.

The Bible never prescribes the time for a fast, never.

The time depends on the person, depends on the circumstance, depends on the situation and the need.

2 Corinthians 6:5, *in stripes, in imprisonments, in tumults, in labours, in sleeplessness, in fastings;*

2 Corinthians 11:27, *in weariness and toil, in sleeplessness often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness—*

So that in his lifetime there were fastings.

Different kinds,

Different times,

Different reasons, and

Different purposes.

There was no standard uniformity.

If fastings often were true of Paul, you would have thought that he would have said something about the fact that they should be true of us and yet he never uttered a word about that.

In all the commandments and directives that he gave, never is there one regarding fasting. It is such a spontaneous, voluntary, and individual and personal thing.

The only compulsory public fast was the Day of Atonement and when Christ died on the cross, the Day of Atonement stopped existing.

There's no longer a Day of Atonement so that the only public fast is done away with.

Whatever there is a fasting that remains is a personal, private, spontaneous, voluntary fast.

It is so much that, that the Bible never even commands it. It is almost as if it will happen when it should happen.

That is because fasting is an outcome to something else.

Day fast:

Sometimes in the Bible, most commonly, a fast was from sunrise to sunset. You didn't eat from the rising of the sun to the setting of the sun. That is a fast.

Twice a week:

Luke 18:12,

Pharisees fasted twice a week.

7 Day fast:

There were, in many cases in the Old Testament, seven-day fasts.

1 Samuel 31.

21 Days Fast:

Daniel 10 talks about a three-week fast.

So, the times and the length of times are varied depending on the situation in each given element.

3. The priority of fasting.

V 16, "When you fast."

V 17, "When you fast."

Two things:

Jesus assumed this would happen.

Jesus doesn't say stop fasting or fast.

He just says when you fast, just like when you pray or when you give. It is assumed as a part of the life of a person who represents the kingdom or who is a part of it.

The Scripture speaks of many people who fasted.

Let me just give you a few; **Moses, Samson, Samuel, Hannah, Saul, Jonathan, David, Elijah, Jehoshaphat, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Daniel, John the Baptist, Anna, the prophets and teachers at Antioch, the apostle Paul.**

Most significantly, our own Lord Jesus fasted for 40 days and 40 nights.

Matthew chapter 4 tells us.

Right on down to today, the people of God fast. Our Lord assumed this. Though the public fast on the Day of Atonement was over, I think the Lord knew that the times of fasting in individual lives were not over, and even after His death and resurrection and ascension people would fast.

Matthew 9:14-15, *Then the disciples of John came to Him, saying, "Why do we and the Pharisees fast ¹⁴often, but Your disciples do not fast?" ¹⁵And Jesus said to them, "Can the friends of the bridegroom mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them? But the days will come when the bridegroom will be taken away from them, and then they will fast.*

Jesus said this is not the time to fast, because we can't mourn.

To what then is fasting connected?

To mourning.

Fasting is always a corollary to some deep spiritual anxiety. Jesus is saying we are not fasting because there is no reason to fast.

In other words, fasting then apart from some mourning as a source inducing it, is meaningless.

People who say, “Oh I fasted, and I had such spiritual sensitivities. I fasted and I rose to such spiritual heights.”

No!

Fasting is a response, not an inducement to something. Jesus says, we don't fast because there is nothing to fast about.

We are living in the period when the bridegroom is taken from us. The marriage supper of the lamb will occur when we are joined with Christ, but until that time, says our Lord, there will be fasting.

Why?

Because there will be spiritual struggle and there will be anxiety and, in My absence, it will not be as it is in My presence.

In Matthew 9, Jesus is simply saying there is going to be times of fasting. Throughout the history of the church there have those times when fasting would be the right response.

There is a priority in fasting.

It has a priority place in this age.

It belongs to this era. It didn't belong to the disciples when Jesus was present. It belongs to this time and this place and to us in this hour.