



The Sermon on the Mount Study  
**Bible Study Session 16**  
**Matthew 6:16-18**

Study By  
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**Greek NT**

16 Ὅταν δὲ νηστεύητε, μὴ γίνεσθε ὡς οἱ ὑποκριταὶ σκυθρωποὶ, ἀφανίζουσιν γὰρ τὰ πρόσωπα αὐτῶν ὅπως φανῶσιν τοῖς ἀνθρώποις νηστεύοντες· ἀμὴν λέγω ὑμῖν, ἀπέχουσιν τὸν μισθὸν αὐτῶν. 17 σὺ δὲ νηστεύων ἄλειψαί σου τὴν κεφαλὴν καὶ τὸ πρόσωπόν σου νίψαι, 18 ὅπως μὴ φανῆς τοῖς ἀνθρώποις νηστεύων ἀλλὰ τῷ πατρὶ σου τῷ ἐν τῷ κρυφαίῳ· καὶ ὁ πατήρ σου ὁ βλέπων ἐν τῷ κρυφαίῳ ἀποδώσει σοι.

**La Biblia de las Américas**

16 Y cuando ayunéis, no pongáis cara triste, como los hipócritas; porque ellos desfiguran sus rostros para mostrar a los hombres que están ayunando. En verdad os digo que ya han recibido su recompensa. 17 Pero tú, cuando ayunes, unge tu cabeza y lava tu rostro, 18 para no hacer ver a los hombres que ayunas, sino a tu Padre que está en secreto; y tu Padre, que ve en lo secreto, te recompensará.

**NRSV**

16 And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. 17 But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, 18 so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

**NLT**

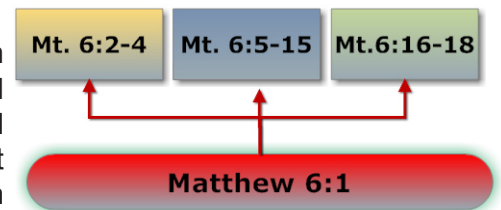
16 And when you fast, don't make it obvious, as the hypocrites do, who try to look pale and disheveled so people will admire them for their fasting. I assure you, that is the only reward they will ever get. 17 But when you fast, comb your hair and wash your face. 18 Then no one will suspect you are fasting, except your Father, who knows what you do in secret. And your Father, who knows all secrets, will reward you.

**The Outline of the Text:<sup>1</sup>**

Not until recently with the increasing public awareness of the Muslim practice of 'fasting' during their Ramadan celebration has the general public been aware of the idea of religious fasting to any great extent, and especially as a distinctive religious action. What then is fasting?<sup>2</sup> What kinds of fasting are being done in our world today? In modern western societies fasting is understood in a variety of ways. And the practice of fasting usually falls into one of three categories: **1) Medical Fasting** with the goal of addressing a health issue of some sort<sup>3</sup>; **2) Political Fasting** such as a hunger strike in order to call attention to some social issue perceived as injustice; or **3) Religious Fasting** with some spiritual objective in mind.

Clearly, Jesus in vv. 16-18 is referring to Religious Fasting with the heritage of its practice among ancient Jews. Fasting among modern Jews follows dramatically different patterns than those which Jesus alludes to in our passage. And the practice of fasting by Jews in Jesus' day was significantly different than the way it was practiced in the Old Testament. These parameters are essential if we are to clearly understand Jesus' words.

The literary structure of this third pericope on piety in 6:1-18 follows closely the established pattern of



<sup>1</sup>Serious study of the biblical text must look at the 'then' meaning, i.e., the historical meaning, and the 'now' meaning, i.e., the contemporary application, of the scripture text. In considering the historical meaning, both elements of literary design and historical aspects must be considered. In each study we will attempt a summary overview of these procedures in the interpretation of the scripture text.

<sup>2</sup>*Merriam-Webster online Dictionary definition*: "1: to abstain from food; 2: to eat sparingly or abstain from some foods." The *Concise Oxford English Dictionary (11th edition)* defines 'fast' as "v. abstain from food or drink. n. an act or period of fasting". Also see the *Wikipedia article* on 'fasting': "Fasting is primarily the act of willingly abstaining from some or all food, drink, or both, for a period of time. A fast may be total or partial concerning that from which one fasts, and may be prolonged or intermittent as to the period of fasting. Fasting practices may preclude sexual activity as well as food, in addition to refraining from eating certain types or groups of foods; for example, one might refrain from eating meat. A complete fast in its traditional definition is abstinence of all food and liquids."

<sup>3</sup>Medically speaking, fasting "may refer to (1) the metabolic status of a person who has not eaten overnight, (2) to the metabolic state achieved after complete digestion and absorption of a meal, or (3) an unusually extended period of starvation. Several metabolic adjustments occur during fasting, and many medical diagnostic tests are standardized for fasting conditions. For most ordinary diagnostic purposes a person is assumed to be fasting after 8–12 hours. Many of the metabolic shifts of fasting begin as absorption of a meal is complete (typically 3–5 hours after a meal); "post-absorptive state" is synonymous with this usage, in contrast to the "post-prandial" state of ongoing digestion. A diagnostic fast refers to prolonged fasting (from 8–72 hours depending on age) conducted under medical observation for investigation of a problem, usually hypoglycemia. Finally, extended fasting has been recommended as therapy for various conditions by physicians of most cultures, throughout history, from ancient to modern." ("Fasting," Wikipedia online)

negative example followed by positive instruction. The introductory header, Ὅταν δὲ νηστεύητε, adheres to the same pattern as the two previous ones on prayer, Καὶ ὅταν προσεύχησθε, in v. 5 and on almsgiving, Ὅταν οὖν ποιῆς ἔλεημοσύνην, in verse 2. The only variable is the connector, the Greek coordinate conjunctions οὖν, καὶ, and δὲ, that serve to link the pericopes together, and especially with verse one. The positive example subunit header σὺ δὲ νηστεύων follows the basic pattern also: σοῦ δὲ ποιούντος ἔλεημοσύνην (v. 3) and σὺ δὲ ὅταν προσεύχῃ (v. 6), thus introducing the positive side to piety as a disciple of Christ.

### I. How not to fast, v. 16.

And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward.

Ὅταν δὲ νηστεύητε, μὴ γίνεσθε ὡς οἱ ὑποκριταὶ σκυθρωποὶ, ἀφανίζουσιν γὰρ τὰ πρόσωπα αὐτῶν ὅπως φανῶσιν τοῖς ἀνθρώποις νηστεύοντες· ἀμὴν λέγω ὑμῖν, ἀπέχουσιν τὸν μισθὸν αὐτῶν.

**First century Jewish fasting verses Old Testament fasting.** In order to grasp the significance of what Jesus is saying, one must understand the tension between the first century Jewish practice of fasting and the teaching on fasting found in the Old Testament. The spontaneous practice of fasting in the OT as a spiritual preparation for important decision making etc. became institutionalized by Jesus day and turned into a highly regimented practice demanded two times weekly (cf. Lk. 18:12) in addition to the fasting mandated by the Jewish festival periods in the annual religious calendar.<sup>4</sup> In the process a religious practice with value to reach out to God took on 'brownie point' value and was done merely in order to achieve merit before God. Whether one came into closer contact with God or not through fasting was at best of secondary importance, if it mattered at all. The worshipper was primarily concerned with keeping a religious 'scorecard' with God in order to supposedly make it to Heaven.<sup>5</sup> Fasting in the OT was mainly a personal matter of private devotion to God connected mostly with "three major kinds of crisis in life: lamentation/penitence, mourning, and petition. Without exception it has to do with a sense of need and dependence, of abject helplessness in the face of actual or anticipated calamity. It is in examining these situations that the theological meaning and value of fasting are to be discovered."<sup>6</sup> To be sure "by the ninth century b.c. fasting had become institutionalized or formalized to the extent that days or other periods of fasting were called as occasions for public worship. The usual way of describing such convocation is 'to call for' or 'proclaim' a fast."<sup>7</sup> The groundwork for the continued shift to formalization of fasting was laid. The intertestamental era would add the theological merit to the act of fasting with the view to preparing for final judgment.<sup>8</sup>

**The hypocrisy of the Pharisees.** Jesus took the Pharisees to task severely for the manner of their fasting, which betrayed the true motivation for their practice. He did not condemn the fact that they fasted, even though while on earth Jesus did not practice fasting Himself (cf. Mt. 9:14) after the 40 day wilderness experience (cf. Mt. 4:2).<sup>9</sup> The 'play acting' of the Pharisees here in regard to their fasting is emphasized in two ways. First they are the 'gloomy hypocrites' (οἱ ὑποκριταὶ σκυθρωποί). The adjective σκυθρωπός is suggestive of sadness or gloom. In the secular Greek world, this appearance was often conveyed by wearing dark clothes. Because fasting was historically associated with repentance, mourning or some calamity in Jewish tradition, the sad appearance was intended most likely to convey that the Pharisee was repenting of his sins. Unfortunately, this was pretence and fake, i.e., play acting.

Their means of appearing sad and gloomy was by what they did to their face: "they disfigure their faces" (ἀφανίζουσιν τὰ πρόσωπα αὐτῶν). An untranslatable word play exists in the Greek text that one can not sense from reading a translation. They 'disfigured their faces' (ἀφανίζουσιν) so that they might 'appear' (φανῶσιν) to

<sup>4</sup>For a helpful summary of fasting in the Bible and ancient Judaism see Eugene H. Merrill, "Fast, Fasting," *Baker's Evangelical dictionary of Biblical Theology* online.

<sup>5</sup>Final judgment was a balancing of sins and good deeds on the heavenly scales. To make it into Heaven the good deeds had to substantially outweigh the sins. Thus doing religious things took on merit within themselves as a means of stacking up good deeds against that day of judgment.

<sup>6</sup>Eugene H. Merrill, "Fast, Fasting," *Baker's Evangelical dictionary of Biblical Theology* online.

<sup>7</sup>Eugene H. Merrill, "Fast, Fasting," *Baker's Evangelical dictionary of Biblical Theology* online.

<sup>8</sup>In the surrounding Greco-Roman culture, religious fasting was widely practiced as Anselm Grün notes: "Fasting was practiced in the → mystery religions (in the Cybele-Attis and Isis mysteries, and in Mithraism); in divinations, as a means of seeing secret things; and in medicine, which used it against inflammations. In the philosophical schools of the → Cynics, → Stoics, Epicureans, and Pythagoreans (→ Greek Philosophy), it was a favorite ascetic tool for leading one to inner freedom, release from needs, and union with God." [Erwin Fahlbusch and Geoffrey William Bromiley, *The Encyclopedia of Christianity* (Grand Rapids, Mich.; Leiden, Netherlands: Wm. B. Eerdmans; Brill, 1999-2003), 2:295-296]

<sup>9</sup>Cf. the 15 instances of the verb νηστεύω in the NT and the 6 instances of the noun νηστεία in the GNT.

be fasting. Literally, they sought to make their faces disappear so that they might appear to be fasting. What did they do in order to 'make their faces disappear'? It is not clear what Jesus is implying here beyond their vain, hypocritical effort to make their natural face invisible. Grief, sadness and mourning among ancient Jews often included smearing ashes on one's face. Thus the Pharisees did to their faces whatever would best convey the sense of mourning and sadness. This was linked to the action of fasting among the Jews and thus it was easy for the Pharisee to employ these devices for their purpose.

The point here is that outward appearance should reflect what is taking place inwardly in one's life. Once more, as with almsgiving and praying, the improper motive behind the action is at the heart of the wrongness of the patterns of the Pharisees. With sarcastic irony in the Greek translation of Jesus' original words in Aramaic, he accused the Pharisees of 'hiding' their faces in order to be seen to be fasting. In other words, they were making a show of fasting without being genuine or sincere.

Consequently their hypocritical actions in fasting would bring them only the attention of other people, but no acknowledgment from God: "Truly I tell you, they have received their reward" (*ἀμὴν λέγω ὑμῖν, ἀπέχουσιν τὸν μισθὸν αὐτῶν*). The wording of the Greek text here is exactly the same as the parallel expressions in verses six (prayer) and two (almsgiving). And all three play off the declaration in verse one: "then you have no reward from your Father in heaven" (*μισθὸν οὐκ ἔχετε παρὰ τῷ πατρὶ ὑμῶν τῷ ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς*). The formal language here underscores eschatological judgment as the primary reference in mind. The Pharisees in their quest to be seen fasting by other people will miss their ultimate goal: divine acknowledgment of their pious action of fasting. Thus their 'righteousness' falls short of divine standards and will not bring God's approval (cf. 5:20). Thus the disciple in the Kingdom of Heaven must avoid fasting like the Pharisees.

## II. How to fast, vv. 17-18.

17 But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, 18 so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

17 σὺ δὲ νηστεύων ἀλειψαί σου τὴν κεφαλὴν καὶ τὸ πρόσωπόν σου νίψαι, 18 ὅπως μὴ φανῆς τοῖς ἀνθρώποις νηστεύων ἀλλὰ τῷ πατρὶ σου τῷ ἐν τῷ κρυφαίῳ· καὶ ὁ πατὴρ σου ὁ βλέπων ἐν τῷ κρυφαίῳ ἀποδώσει σοι.

How is the disciple to fast? No detailed instructions are given here because of the context and thematic emphasis. Instead, Jesus focused on the manner and motivation for fasting, rather than the procedure of fasting.

**Outward appearance in Christian fasting.** Essentially Jesus says that to fast we need to get ready to party: "when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret" (σὺ δὲ νηστεύων ἀλειψαί σου τὴν κεφαλὴν καὶ τὸ πρόσωπόν σου νίψαι, ὅπως μὴ φανῆς τοῖς ἀνθρώποις νηστεύων ἀλλὰ τῷ πατρὶ σου τῷ ἐν τῷ κρυφαίῳ·). The actions of putting oil on one's head and washing are motivated by the desire to not appear to be fasting to other people. Only God will know that one is fasting. Thus, as is the case with almsgiving and prayer, the focus is on God. Our pietistic actions are expressions of devotion to God and thus not for public show.

**Motivation behind fasting.** Whatever prompts the desire to fast, whether repentance, mourning etc., one must focus on God and not make an outward display of his fasting. This is Jesus' point for the disciple in the Kingdom of Heaven.

**The eschatological blessing of the Heavenly Father.** This approach to fasting will then bring the Heavenly Father's acknowledgement on the day of final judgment: "and your Father who sees in secret will reward you" (καὶ ὁ πατὴρ σου ὁ βλέπων ἐν τῷ κρυφαίῳ ἀποδώσει σοι). Once again the wording of the Greek text here is exactly the same as in the parallel statements about prayer (v. 6) and almsgiving (v. 4). And they play off the denial of divine acknowledgement in verse one -- "then you have no reward from your Father in heaven" (*μισθὸν οὐκ ἔχετε παρὰ τῷ πατρὶ ὑμῶν τῷ ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς*) -- by reversing the heavenly verdict on judgment day. God's approval of fasting is not blanket approval of the act of fasting. To the contrary, for God to place His stamp of approval on fasting it must be done in the proper manner and with the proper motive.

Are Christians supposed to be fasting today? The answer to this question is not as simple as it might first appear. Unquestionably, Jesus offers his teaching on fasting here in Mt. 6:16-18 on the assumption that disciples in the Kingdom of Heaven will practice fasting. Yet, other scripture texts suggest that Jesus did not regularly fast, nor did his disciples.<sup>10</sup> The early church in Acts did make some use of fasting, but none of the apostles wrote

<sup>10</sup>Interestingly the idea of fasting, either as a concept or as a practice, is mentioned only in the gospels and in Acts, but not in the epistles nor in Revelation. Jesus affirms the idea but apart from His wilderness temptation He did not personally practice fasting. Nor did the Twelve Apostles during the days of their walk with the Lord. The mentioning of fasting in Acts is itself limited to chapters 13

about it in their letters.

### Summary of 6:1-18: How are we to do piety as believers?

Piety (τὴν δικαιοσύνην ὑμῶν ποιεῖν, v. 1) is the outward expression of the inward spiritual devotion to God. Using three traditional ancient Jewish examples of almsgiving, prayer, and fasting, Jesus insists that our devotion to God be just that, devotion to God, and not a religious show intending to impress other people. This is the only way the Heavenly Father will acknowledge our piety as genuine on the Day of Judgment.

### Diagram of the Sermon on the Mount Mt. 5:21-26

6:16 And  
whenever you fast,  
88 **do not become**  
like the gloomy hypocrites,  
for  
89 **they disfigure their faces,**  
so that they may be seen  
by men  
to be fasting;  
90 **Truly I tell you**  
they have their reward.  
6:17 and  
when you fast  
91 **anoint your head with olive oil,**  
and  
92 **wash your face,**  
6:18 so that you may not be seen by men to be fasting  
but  
-- ---- --- --- be seen by your Father -- -- -----  
And  
93 **your Father will reward you.**  
who sees in the secret place

The literary structure is very clear. The header, “whenever you fast,” introduces the negative model of the ‘hypocrites’ (#s. 88-90). The header, “when you fast,” introduces the positive model for disciples (#s. 91-93). The divine evaluation of both models is given (#s. 90 and 93). The dramatic opposite pattern of outward appearance while fasting is defined (#s 88-89 and 91-92). Significant rhetorical balance is achieved by Matthew in recording the words of Jesus. This balance made memorization of the text substantially easier.

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and 14 (13:2, 3; 14:23). The church at Antioch spent time in prayer and fasting and the Holy Spirit instructed them to send Barnabas and Paul on the first missionary journey. On the return trip of the first missionary journey Paul and Barnabas spent time with the churches of Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe in prayer and fasting before leaving them with newly appointed leaders.

This sparsity of reference and the non-practice by Jesus and the Apostles led to a diverse viewpoint about fasting in later Christianity. “It appears that some early Christians, encouraged by Jesus’ words about the bridegroom (Mk 2:18–20), gave up fasting altogether (cf. Apoc. Elijah 1:13–22; Gos. Thom. 14). The Gospel of Thomas in fact contains this strange passage: ‘Jesus said to them, if you fast (νηστεύω) you will give rise to sin for yourselves; and if you pray, you will be condemned; and if you give alms (ἐλεημοσύνη) you will do harm to your spirits’<sup>14</sup>. This sentence is the polar opposite of Mt 6:1–18. While Matthew gives instruction on almsgiving, prayer, and fasting, the Gospel of Thomas rejects the three practices, naming them in an order precisely opposite to that of the First Gospel.” [Davies, W. D., & Allison, D. C. (2004). *A critical and exegetical commentary on the Gospel according to Saint Matthew* (619–620). London; New York: T&T Clark International.]

But other streams of early Christian adopted fasting as a Christian practice: “Voluntary fasting on specific days returns in the early church (Wednesday and Friday in *Did.* 8.1). The Easter fast is laid on all Christians in the second century (Eusebius *Ecclesiastical History* 5.24. 12ff.). Fasting before baptism also comes into vogue (*Did.* 7.4), as does fasting before communion. Reasons given for fasting are to strengthen prayer, to prepare for revelation, to express sorrow, to help the poor with the food saved, and to reconcile penitents with God. Criticisms of fasting are based on the OT prophets (*Barn.* 3. 1ff.), and there is a tendency to subordinate the rite to inwardness and to the ethical (*Hermas Similitudes* 5.3.5ff.). But the early church shows little awareness of Jesus’ distinctive approach to fasting.” [Gerhard Kittel, Gerhard Friedrich and Geoffrey William Bromiley, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Translation of: *Theologisches Wörterbuch Zum Neuen Testament*. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans, 1995, c1985), 632.]

