



The Sermon on the Mount Study  
**Bible Study Session 17**  
**Matthew 6:16-18: Topic 16.0**

Study By  
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**Greek NT**

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

6.17 σὺ δὲ νηστεύων ἄλειψαί σου τὴν κεφαλὴν καὶ τὸ πρόσωπόν σου νίψαι, 6.18 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.

**Gute Nachricht Bibel**

16 Wenn ihr fastet, dann setzt keine Leidensmiene auf wie die Scheinheiligen. Sie machen ein saures Gesicht, damit alle Welt merkt, dass sie fasten. Ich versichere euch: Sie haben ihren Lohn schon kassiert.

17 Wenn du fasten willst, dann wasche dein Gesicht und kämme dich, 18 damit niemand es merkt als nur dein Vater, der im Verborgenen ist. Dein Vater, der auch das Verborgene sieht, wird dich dafür belohnen.

**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 Study of the Text:<sup>1</sup>**

**1. What did the text mean to the first readers?**

For many Christians the idea of fasting is foreign, except as a part of a dietary program of some kind or else as a required preparation for a medical examination. Although widely practiced in the Judeo-Christian religious traditions in the ancient world and into the modern era, religious fasting by Christians today is not wide spread. Consequently, understanding of the practice both in its history and in the guidelines set forth in the Bible is very minimal. Many Christians have little or no understanding of even the meaning of the word fasting.

Some definition of fasting is important so that a clear understanding of the topic remains in view.<sup>2</sup> Normally the idea of fasting in modern times refers to an individual either not eating anything for a short period of time, or else severely limiting food intake over a longer period of time.<sup>3</sup> Both patterns fall under the label of fasting.

<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>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)

<sup>3</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."

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Sometimes eliminating other activities are also included under the label of fasting.

Fasting is often grouped under different categories depending on the circumstance and motivation. Usually it will be labeled as **medical fasting** with the goal of addressing a health issue of some sort; **political fasting** such as a hunger strike in order to call attention to some social issue perceived as injustice; or **religious fasting** with some spiritual objective in mind.

When the focus is on religious fasting in the modern world, differing perspectives will surface often limiting the idea of fasting to the complete elimination of food for a specified period of time.<sup>4</sup> Frequently not is eating food forbidden during fasting but others activities such as smoking and sexual activity are included among the forbidden actions during a fast.

As will become clear in the study below, the ideas of either partial or complete eliminating of food during fasting are present in the biblical materials as well. But the biblical texts do not describe the forbidding of other actions as fasting. One biblical point is clear: fasting and praying are closely linked to one another in the biblical texts.

### **Historical Context:**

Thus Matthew 6:16-18, against the backdrop of the history of fasting among both Jews and Christians in the ancient world, becomes an important text for careful study. Correct understanding of biblical teaching is critical, especially in light of much misunderstanding of the Bible at this people.

The historical setting of fasting includes the typical three perspectives of ancient history: the Greco-Roman, the Jewish, and the early Christian practices.

**Greco-Roman practices of fasting:** In the ancient world fasting was practiced mostly on religious grounds, as J. Behm notes:<sup>5</sup>

Fasting is found in all religions. It is the temporary abstention from nourishment on religious grounds. At first it is more common among the Greeks than the Romans, but it spreads over the whole of the ancient world. Fear of demons plays a role in it; it is also seen as a means of preparing for dealings with deity. The mourning fast is due to fear of demonic infection. Egyptian priests fast before entering the sanctuary. Fasting also prepares the way for ecstatic revelations. There is little relation between fasting and ethics in antiquity.

Anselm Grün adds this note about the Greco-Roman patterns:<sup>6</sup>

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.

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<sup>4</sup>Note the following examples taken from the Wikipedia article on fasting: **1. Baha'i Faith:** "It is the complete abstaining from both food and drink (including abstaining from smoking). Consumption of prescribed medications is not restricted." **2. Roman Catholicism:** "For Roman Catholics, fasting is the reduction of one's intake of food to one full meal (which may not contain meat during Fridays in Lent) and two small meals (known liturgically as collations, taken in the morning and the evening). Eating solid food between meals is not permitted. Fasting is required of the faithful between the ages of 21 and 60 on specified days. Complete abstinence, required of those older than 14, is the avoidance of meat for the entire day. Partial abstinence prescribes that meat be taken only once during the course of the day. To some Roman Catholics, fasting still means consuming nothing but water." **3. Church of England:** "The Book of Common Prayer prescribes certain days as days for fasting and abstinence, but since the separation of the Church of England from the Roman Catholic Church, there have been no regulations prescribing the mode of observance of these days, nor is any distinction made between fasting and abstinence. Observance of fast days declined until the 19th century, when under the influence of the Oxford Movement many Anglicans began once again taking the prescribed fast days more seriously." **4. Eastern Orthodoxy:** "For Eastern Orthodox and Greek-Catholic Christians, fasting is an important spiritual discipline, found in both the Old Testament and the New, and is tied to the principle in Orthodox theology of the synergy between the body (Greek: soma) and the soul (pneuma)." **5. Modern Judaism:** "Fasting for Jews means completely abstaining from food and drink, including water. Brushing the teeth is forbidden on the major fast days of Yom Kippur and Tisha B'Av (see below), but permitted on minor fast days. Taking medications is generally not permitted, except where a doctor's orders would forbid abstaining. Traditionally observant Jews fast on up to six days of the year. With the exception of Yom Kippur, fasting is never permitted on Shabbat, for the commandment of keeping Shabbat is biblically ordained and overrides the later rabbinically-instituted fast days." **6. Islam:** "Fasting is the fourth of the Five Pillars of Islam and involves fasting during Ramadan, which is probably the most notable time for fasting among non-Muslims." **7. Hinduism:** "Fasting is a very integral part of the Hindu religion. Individuals observe different kinds of fasts based on personal beliefs and local customs."

<sup>5</sup>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.

<sup>6</sup>Erwin Fahlbusch and Geoffrey William Bromiley, *The Encyclopedia of Christianity* (Grand Rapids, Mich.; Leiden, Netherlands: Wm. B. Eerdmans; Brill, 1999-<2003), 2:295-296.

Fasting, then, was an important part of the life of a large number of people in the world of Jesus outside the Jewish traditions. It had mystical and somewhat superstitious tones to it in the religious practice. So when the New Testament texts were read to non-Jewish Christians the ideas of fasting were not new or strange. This will help explain why the teachings of the New Testament were, beginning in the second century AD, quickly given new and often different meanings than that found in the biblical text itself.<sup>7</sup>

**Ancient Jewish practices of fasting:** The pattern of fasting among Jews in the ancient world was an evolving form. In the Old Testament fasting was not highly regulated and was closely identified to specific events mostly in an individual's life but sometimes in the corporate religious life of the Israelite people. Note J. Behm's summary of this practice among first the Israelites and then the Jews:<sup>8</sup>

**The OT** uses various terms for fasting. Many aspects of OT fasting are the same as elsewhere. There is a mourning fast for the dead that expresses sorrow (1 Sam. 31:13). Moses fasts before receiving the commandments (Ex. 34:28), as does Daniel before receiving his visions (Dan. 9:3). Fasting also expresses submission to God, whether in the case of individuals (2 Sam. 12:16ff.) or the people (Judg. 20:26 etc.). Prayer accompanies fasting (Jer. 14:12), especially penitential prayer (1 Sam. 7:6). The one who fasts often takes the posture of a mourner (cf. 1 Kgs. 21:27). Fasts last one day (Judg. 20:26); three days in Esth. 4:16. In the seven-day fast of 1 Sam. 31:13 the actual fasting is only during the day. The only cultic fast is on the Day of Atonement (Lev. 16:29ff.). Special fasts are set up to remember the fall of Jerusalem (Zech. 7:3, 5; 8:19). The prophets protest against the view that purely external fasting gains a hearing with God (cf. Jer. 14:12; Is. 58:1ff.). For them true fasting is a bowing down of the soul that leads to moral action.

**Judaism** finds an important place for fasting. Apocalyptists prepare for revelation by it. Fasting confirms vows and prayer. It has efficacy with God for forgiveness, healing, and exorcism, although true fasting necessarily involves repentance. The devout make the second and fifth days of the week into additional fasts, but there is never fasting on special feast days, days of preparation, or the sabbath. Longer fasts of up to 40 days occur, and much stress is laid on gestures of mourning in fasting. The Pharisees, the disciples of the Baptist, and the Therapeutae all observe fasts. Philo extols *nēsteia* as ascetic restraint. Rules are set up for the public fasts, and individual fasting tends to replace sacrifice after the destruction of the temple, since it grants expiation, guarantees a divine hearing, and produces sanctity. Yet there are warnings that penitence is also required, and students are advised against excessive fasting.

One must clearly distinguish between the Israelite patterns in the Old Testament and the intertestamental evolution in Judaism that produced the patterns followed at the beginning of the Christian era. The process of the institutionalization of fasting propelled most of these changes. Fasting took on the value of achieving merit before God in anticipation of final judgment. This was particularly true for the Pharisees, Essenes and others who believed in life after death and a final judgment.

**Early Christian practices of fasting:** The Christian practice of fasting found inside the New Testament has its roots in the Jewish practice, particularly that found in the Old Testament. Again, J. Behm summarizes effectively both the first century practice and that which developed in the second century:

**Fasting in the NT.** Jesus opens his ministry with a 40-day fast corresponding to that of Moses. But Jesus as the Mediator of the new covenant has already received God's revelation, and he fasts in order to be equipped to confirm his messianic dignity and power. He seems not to engage in special fasting during his ministry, but he would naturally observe the public fasts, and he does not forbid his hearers to fast. For Jesus, however, fasting is service of God and a sign of true conversion. It must be done in secret and not accompanied by open signs of mourning. His disciples do not fast like those of the Baptist (Mk. 2:18ff.), for the presence of the Messiah means rejoicing as at the presence of a bridegroom. The new age is an age of joy. Only the age of waiting (which will begin again after his death) is a time of fasting (cf. Jn. 16:20). The eschatological message of Jesus transcends fasting, but since there is a gap between the dawn of salvation and its consummation there is room for fasting, not as a pious work, but as the sign of an inner attitude. The sayings about the patch and the wineskins are linked to the question of fasting in Mk. 2:18ff. This link preserves the insight that the new age has come as an age of joy. Yet fasting goes hand in hand with prayer in Acts 13:2-3 and 14:23, when missionaries are sent out and elders are appointed. The epistles do not mention fasting; it is not listed even in Heb. 13:16.

**Fasting in the Early Church.** 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

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<sup>7</sup>"From the days of the → Gnostics, fasting has been viewed as a way of illumination, of attaining to divine secrets (→ Tertullian). It opens us to God, sharpens our sense of the supernatural, and makes mystical experiences possible (→ Mysticism)." [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>8</sup>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.

awareness of Jesus' distinctive approach to fasting.

One has to note from this overview that the patterns of fasting both from the Old Testament and from the New Testament were seldom followed by either Jews or Christians. The question of why and how such happened naturally arises. A partial answer at least lies in the almost irresistible tendency to take a rather spontaneous action of devotion to God and institutionalize it into a religious ritual that has to be observed with high frequency. This was largely driven by seeing in the action of fasting etc. religious virtue to be individually achieved through rigorous adherence to the prescribed patterns of the day. When piety expressions such as fasting move from spontaneous expressions of genuine devotion to God, they undergo profound change in meaning and content. The prescribed and often mandated ritualistic practice of such actions changes fasting, praying etc. into some very different from that set forth in the scripture. They then become destructive to true spiritual growth and development. This is an important lesson that seems often not to have been learned by many Christians in our time all across the theological spectrum.

**Literary Aspects:**

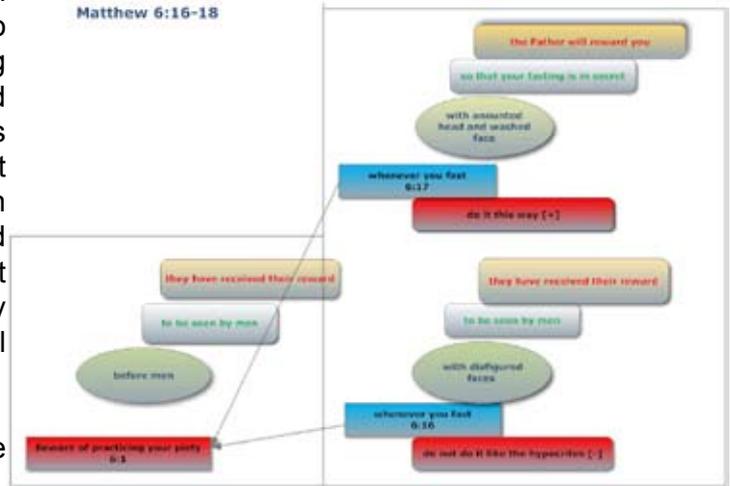
The literary aspects of Mt. 6:16-18 are important for correct understanding of the text.

**Literary Form:**

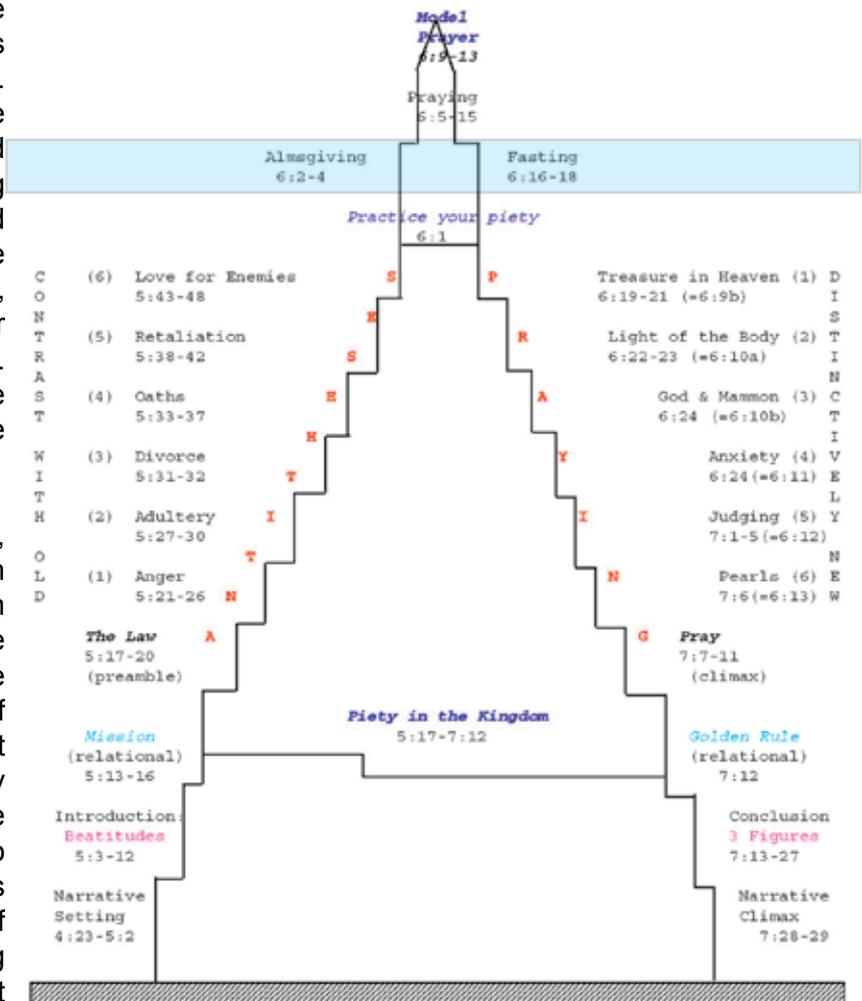
The 'discipleship saying' genre identification remains valid here as for the two previous pericopes in vv. 2-4 and 5-15. This third pericope returns to the same short form and structure as found in the almsgiving passage in verses 2-4. Repeated phraseology from 6:1, as well as the thought construct established there, serve as the organizing structure for the negative (v. 16) and positive (vv. 17-18) emphases on fasting. See the above right diagram for a visual picture of this structure.

**Literary Setting:**

As the chart to the right illustrates, Matt. 6:16-18 is the third pericope on patterns of piety that were set forth in verse one. Almsgiving and prayer were first treated, then fasting comes as the third theme. In this larger passage of vv. 1-18, Jesus sat in strong contrast the devotional expressions to God by the scribes and Pharisees, i.e., the hypocrites, to what He considered to be the only legitimate way to express devotion to God in the Kingdom of Heaven. Certainly only by following the prescribed guidelines He set forth could a disciple expect God to acknowledge his devotion as genuine.



The Literary Structure of the Sermon on the Mount  
Matthew 4:23-7:29



Source: Lein E. Cranford, Study Manual of the Sermon on the Mount, Greek Text (Fort Worth: Scripta Publishing Inc., 1988), 320. Adapted from Gunter Bonkamm, "Der Aufbau der Bergpredigt," New Testament Studies 24 (1977-78): 419-432.



The Pharisees are labeled by Jesus as ‘hypocrites’ (οἱ ὑποκριταί).<sup>9</sup> Note the helpful summation of the concept in the New Testament by Greg W. Parsons:<sup>10</sup>

The New Testament seems to combine the Old Testament concept of the godless rebel and the Attic Greek hypokrisis [ὑπόκρισις], “stage-playing or acting.” The Greek idea of “play-acting” seems paramount in Matthew 6:2, 5, 16, where Jesus warns against religious performance to impress men (vv. 5,16,18 cf. Matt 23:5 ). Hypocrites make an outward show of religion, whether in giving alms, praying, or fasting. The English concept of hypocrisy as failing to practice what one preaches is rarely found ( Matt 23:3 ).

The hypocrite is self-deluded by his or her own pretension, which fools no one else ( Matt 7:5 ; Luke 6:42 ). Hypocrisy may involve a failure to discern spiritual truth ( Luke 12:54-56 ; 13:15 ; cf. Matt 12:7 ; 23:23 ) or even a willful blindness to spiritual matters ( Matthew 23:17 Matthew 23:19 Matthew 23:23-24 Matthew 23:26 ).

The hypocrite pretends goodness, but beneath a religious veneer is a malicious or deceitful heart (Matt 22:15-18 ; cf. 1 Peter 2:1 ). Though hypocrites justify their religious activity, their hearts are not true to God ( Matthew 15:7-9 Matthew 15:18-19 ; cf. Isa 29:13-14 ). As in the Old Testament a discrepancy exists between outward conformity to religious ritual and the true state of their hearts ( Matt 23:25-30 ; contrast 5:8 ). Thus, the term “hypocrite” ( Matt 24:51 ) can occur as a synonym for “unfaithful/unbeliever.” Such “hypocrites” hinder others from coming to Christ and even make converts to their godless lifestyle ( Matthew 23:13 Matthew 23:15 ; cf. Daniel 11:32 Daniel 11:34 ). Or they deceive others into doctrinal error ( 1 Tim 4:1-2 ). Thus hypocrisy is implied as one of the evidences of earthly or demonic wisdom ( James 3:13-17 ).

The ‘play acting’ of the Pharisees here in regard to their fasting is emphasized in two ways. First they are the ‘gloomy hypocrites’ (οἱ ὑποκριταί 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.<sup>11</sup> 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 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.<sup>12</sup> Thus the Pharisees did to their 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.



THANKS TO HIS COMPETITIVE SPIRIT AND IMPRESSIVE HEAD START, HE TOTALLY KICKED BUTT IN THE CHURCH FAST

<sup>9</sup>Matthew is particularly fond of this label with 14 of the 18 uses of the term in the New Testament. That he has the Pharisees in mind with this label is clear from the series of ‘woes’ pronounced on them in Matthew 23 with the introductory formula repeated with each of the seven condemnations: “woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites,...”.

<sup>10</sup>Greg W. Parsons, “Hypocrisy,” Baker’s Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology online.

<sup>11</sup>“Fasting could be an expression of grief or mourning, a mark of remorse and penitence, or simply a sign of humility before God. Because of these associations, persons fasting would often simulate mourners in their appearance. They would wear sackcloth, sprinkle ashes over their heads, go unbathed without anointing the head or body, and look generally sad.” [Gardner, R. B. (1991). *Matthew*. Believers church Bible commentary (121–124). Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press]

<sup>12</sup>“אֵפֶרֶת is used most often (Gen. 18:27; Num. 19:9; II Sam. 13:19; etc.) in referring to ashes, as a sign of mourning (Esth. 4:1, 3; Job 2:8; etc.) and penitence (Job 42:6; Dan. 9:3). The same word appears in I Kings 20:38, 41, where the KJV used “ashes”; more correctly, most English translations, including the RSV, use “bandage,” as required by the context, which calls for an article of disguise such as a mask. A word with the same consonants but different vowels was used in referring to the ashes of the burnt offering having a purifying effect (Num. 19:17) and in designating the ashes produced by the burning of vessels used in pagan worship II Kings 23:4). The term often designated merely ashes from a home, or the refuse from a city (Isa. 58:5; Jer. 6:26), and as a metaphor implied destruction (Ezek. 28:18; Mal. 4:3), worthless maxims (Job 13:12), or unworthy people (Gen. 18:27; Eccles. 10:9; 17:32).” [W.L. Reed, “Ashes,” *Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, iPreach]

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, ἀπέχουσι 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.

**Fast like this, vv. 17-18:** "But 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; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you." (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· καὶ ὁ πατήρ σου ὁ βλέπων ἐν τῷ κρυφαίῳ ἀποδώσει σοι.).

Jesus now turns to the positive approach to fasting, and his emphasis builds off the negative model of the Pharisees by contrastive thrust: do your fasting pretty much the opposite way of the Pharisees. Two parts to his instructions are present: Do it this way and the Heavenly Father will acknowledge your fasting in final judgment.



How is the disciple to fast?<sup>13</sup> 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. And his instructions here are somewhat surprising in the context of traditional patterns of fasting among the Jews of the first century. 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.

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.

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 πατήρ 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.**

<sup>13</sup>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' (14). 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.]

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>14</sup> Note the helpful description of Eugene H. Merrill:<sup>15</sup>

Fasting is nowhere commanded in the Torah and, in fact, is never attested earlier than the time of the judges of Israel (cf. Judges 20:26 ). The fact that Jesus and the disciples sanctioned it by their own example ( Matt 4:2; Acts 13:2-3 ), however, is sufficient justification for its practice in biblical times and, in fact, in modern times as well....

As a whole, however, fasting appears to be a private matter in the Bible, an expression of personal devotion linked to 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.

As an expression of lamentation and/or penitence, fasting nearly always is associated with weeping ( Judges 20:26 ; Esther 4:3 ; Psalm 69:10 ; Joel 2:12 ), confession ( 1 Sam 7:6 ; Dan 9:3 ), and the wearing of sackcloth ( 1 Kings 21:27 ; Neh 9:1 ; Esther 4:3 ; Psalm 69:10 ; Dan 9:3 ). In the New Testament Jesus chides the hypocritical Pharisees for disfiguring their faces when they fast ( Matt 6:16-18 ), a reference no doubt to the custom of smearing themselves with ashes. These objects and actions had no intrinsic penitential value but in a culture in which inner feelings were commonly displayed or even dramatized, when done sincerely they effectively communicated contrition. It became easy, however, for the outward exhibition of repentance to take the place of a genuine, inner attitude and thus become an act of hypocrisy.

Fasting also appears as a sign of mourning. Following Saul's death, the people of Jabesh- Gilead lamented his passing by fasting ( 1 Sam 31:13 ) as did David and his companions when they heard the news ( 2 Sam 1:12 ). David goes so far as to say that he commiserated with his enemies when they were sick, fasting and dressing himself in sackcloth ( Psalm 35:13 ). Such behavior was a sign of his mourning over them (v. 14). Zechariah describes the commemoration of Israel's tragic days of past defeat and judgment as times of mourning attended by fasting ( 7:5 ). But these days of fasting in the fourth, fifth, seventh, and tenth months will one day be turned to times of joy ( 8:19 ). Jesus speaks of the time of his departure from his disciples as a time of mourning when it will be entirely appropriate to fast ( Matt 9:14-15 ; Mark 2:18-20 ; Luke 5:33-35 ).

Finally, fasting was frequently associated with supplicatory prayer. David prayed and fasted over his sick child ( 2 Sam 12:16 ), weeping before the Lord in earnest intercession (vv. 21-22). Nehemiah, having heard of Jerusalem's desolation, wept, fasted, and prayed that God would give him favor with King Artaxerxes of Persia so that he might return to his homeland and repair its ruins ( Neh 1:4-11 ). Esther, under similar circumstances, urged Mordecai and the Jews to fast for her as she planned to appear before her husband the king ( Esther 4:16 ). Clearly, fasting and petition are here one and the same (cf. Jer 14:12 ).

Jesus equates supplication and fasting when he teaches that the removal of mountains comes about only by prayer and fasting ( Matt 17:21 ). The godly prophetess Anna looked for the redemption of Israel with supplicatory prayer and fasting ( Luke 2:37 ). Before Paul and Barnabas appointed elders for the various churches, they committed them to the Lord with prayer and fasting ( Acts 14:23 ). In all these instances there is the clear implication that fasting is an effective adjunct to petition.

The purpose of fasting is never explicitly stated in Scripture but its connection to penitence, mourning, and supplication suggests a self-denial that opens one to God and to the immaterial aspects of life. Inasmuch as food and drink typify life in the flesh and all its demands and satisfactions, their absence or rejection speaks to the reality of a higher dimension, one in which the things of the spirit predominate. The theology of fasting, then, is a theology of priorities in which believers are given the opportunity to express themselves in an undivided and intensive devotion to the Lord and to the concerns of the spiritual life.

## 2. What does the text mean to us today?

- 1) Do you practice fasting? Why? Why not?
  
- 2) How do you go about fasting?
  
- 3) How often do you fast?

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<sup>14</sup>Cf. NRSV concordance search on "fast\*" from Bible Study Tools.

<sup>15</sup>Eugene H. Merrill, "Fast, Fasting," *Baker's Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology* online.  
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