

week #23



UPSIDE DOWN
AFFECTIONS

SMALL GROUPS

Fasting in Secret	Coram Deo	Study
<p>“Contentment with piety for the Lord’s sake and not as a show for others will bring us far more than the fleeting praises of men.”</p>	<p>“Going without food helps remind us how much we depend on God for our sustenance and, indeed, for all things.”</p>	<p>Open It</p> <p>Explore It</p> <p>Get It</p>

“When you fast, anoint your head and wash your face.... And your Father who sees in secret will reward **you.**” Matthew 6:17-18

Fasting in Secret

Before we look at Jesus’ teaching on fasting in today’s passage, we need to provide a few closing comments on the Lord’s Prayer, the prayer He has given to His disciples (Matt. 6:9–15). Most believers have prayed this prayer verbatim at some point, which is not inappropriate if it is said with thoughtful reflection. Yet this prayer is to be used primarily as a guide for structuring our communion with God. We are to pray like Jesus teaches us (v. 9; Luke 11:1–4). In other words, it is good to compose our prayers

after the format of the Lord’s Prayer, using it as a model to follow. Taking each petition and applying it more directly to our own lives, we are to pray for our own particular needs, sins, and the extension of His kingdom among our friends and families.

Praying for the extension of God’s kingdom is especially important (Matt. 6:10). Since our Creator already rules over all (Ps. 97:1), this is a prayer for His rule to be recognized, not established. It is a prayer that we and those around us cease to rebel against our Father and do His will just as it is done in heaven (Matt. 6:9–10) —

spontaneously, not begrudgingly — and with full acknowledgment and respect of His holiness. Augustine said that to pray for the kingdom to come is to pray for it to be manifested on earth (Sermon on the Mount, 2.6.20). Today’s passage records our Savior’s teaching on avoiding hypocrisy when fasting, a major act of Jewish piety in His day. During Jesus’ lifetime, fasting is an opportune time for displaying one’s piety; many go about disheveled and visibly hungry to show others their “spirituality.” Some even dirty themselves with ashes to show how much they have “given up for God.” As with prayer and almsgiving, the



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Messiah’s solution is not to forbid fasting altogether, but to make sure that it is done in secret so that His disciples will receive a lasting reward (Matt. 6:16–18). Our fasting is to be so secretive that we show forth our cleanliness and joy, which was often done with oil in first-century Israel (Ps. 104:14–15). If we are clean and happy, who but God will know we are fasting? **Contentment with piety for the Lord’s sake and not as a show for others will bring us far more than the fleeting praises of men (Matt. 6:18).**

Coram Deo (before the face of God)

Fasting is extremely beneficial to our spiritual growth and our prayer lives. Going without food helps remind us how much we depend on God for our sustenance and, indeed, for all things. This helps us seek Him fervently, for we know that the only

hope we have to see our loved ones saved and our lives changed is through His working. Consider taking some time to fast and pray this week so that you may know what it means to rely wholly on the Lord.¹

Passages for Further Study

Esther 4

Isaiah 58:1–12

Matthew 9:10–13

Acts 14:19–23

Open It!

1. Name some modern conveniences that you can't live without. What makes them so important to you that you cannot live without them?
2. What experience, if any, do you have with fasting?

Read It | Matthew 6:16-18

Read the entire passage before proceeding to the questions below.

Explore It

1. What types of things do hypocrites do to be noticed during a fast?
2. What things should we do when we fast?
3. Who should see our fasting?

Get It

Fasting has been practiced by many different religions for centuries. It is personal self-discipline in which a person denies himself a normal need in order to learn to restrain his passions and desires, and to express his devotion. Often God's people have fasted in order to express humility before the Lord, and to show an earnest desire for the Lord to work in a particular way. Most commonly, fasting involves denying oneself a meal or meals in order to give oneself to the purpose of seeking God's face.

-Phil Newton

Jesus
on
fasting

1. In verse 16 Jesus assumes that Christians will fast, yet it seems that few Christians practice this spiritual discipline. What factors may contribute to this trend?
2. Read 2 Samuel 12:15-23; Nehemiah 9:1; Acts 13:2, 14:23. Under what circumstances might fasting be a helpful spiritual discipline for you?
3. Jesus addresses ways that the hypocrites of His day fasted (vs.16-17). In what ways might hypocrites fast today?
4. How hard has it been (or would it be) for you to go on a fast and not let other people know?

"By fasting, the body learns to obey the soul; by praying the soul learns to obey the body."

-William Secker

prayer and fasting

5. Throughout the scriptures we see that fasting is accompanied by prayer. How might these two work in tandem?
6. Read Daniel 9:3. What significance does the ancient practice of fasting and praying in sackcloth and ashes tell us about our disposition when we fast?
7. What does fasting teach us about the connection of the physical and the spiritual?
8. Read Nehemiah 9:1 and Judges 20:26. If Jesus calls us to fast in secret then is all corporate or public fasting wrong? Explain your answer.
9. Just as with fasting, the Christian is called to abstain from many different things. (1 Thessalonians 5:22) What are some differences between fasting and abstaining?
10. Read Isaiah 58:1-9. How does this passage reinforce the teaching of Jesus on fasting?

Fasting, if we conceive of it truly, must not... be confined to the question of food and drink; fasting should really be made to include temporary abstinence from anything which is legitimate in and of itself for the sake of some special spiritual purpose. There are many bodily functions which are right and normal and perfectly legitimate, but which for special peculiar reasons in certain circumstances should be controlled. That is fasting.²

11. In ancient times people would fast their meals because of the time and energy a daily meal might take to prepare. In an age of fast food and with so many things on demand, what contemporary activities can we give up for the sake of greater times of fellowship with God?

12. In light of Jesus' teaching, should all Christians fast? If God is not leading you to fast, do you feel guilty? Explain.

The weakness of our hunger for God is not because He is unsavory, but because we keep ourselves stuffed with "other things."

- John Piper, *A Hunger for God*

13. How does the world's stuff keep us too full to hunger for God? How can fasting counteract such pursuits of the wrong things? In what ways does fasting lead us to savor God?

14. What are some takeaways from this passage on fasting? After reading this passage are you more or less inclined to fast in the future? Explain your answer.

¹ R.C. Sproul, Fasting in Secret *From Ligonier Ministries, the teaching fellowship of R.C. Sproul. All rights reserved. Website: www.ligonier.org*

² Lloyd Jones, D. M., Studies in the Sermon on the Mount.