



Three Acts of Righteousness Part 3: Do Fast (Matthew 6:16-18)

Why do you fast? During trials or times of weighty decisions, do you leverage fasting as a magic wand with God as your object? Do you fast with the motive that others will see your plight and comfort you? Fasting means literally to abstain from food or drink; however, in the Bible it is accompanied with a humble heart toward God (Psalm 35:13). Fasting is an avenue of surrender to God's will for our lives.

Fasting appears in three forms throughout Scripture. First is a *normal fast* (no food). Jesus fasted from food for forty days preparing for His temptation and the inauguration of His preaching (Matthew 4:1-2; Luke 4:1-2). Second is a *partial fast* (no particular substance or act). Daniel ate no meat, drank no wine, and applied no lotion to his body for three weeks of mourning (Daniel 10:3). Third is an *absolute fast* (no food or water). Esther fasted from food and water for three days during a period of national crisis (Esther 4:16); Paul fasted from food and water for three days after his conversion (Acts 9:9).

In His *Sermon on the Mount*, Jesus described the *be-do-go of full surrender*. In essence, He taught, "Who you are to *be* determines what you *do* which determines where you *go*." In Matthew, Chapter 6, Jesus moved from who we are to *be* to what we are to *do*. He began with three acts of piety in Judaism: (1) giving to the needy, (2) praying, and (3) fasting. In each, Jesus cut to the heart of the matter exposing why we do what we do. We either have a selfish motive or a selfless one. With each good deed, He described what not to do, then what to do. Jesus said, "Do fast" (Matthew 6:16-18).

First, do not fast with the motive to be recognized and honored. "When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full" (Matthew 6:16). The law had provided for fasting once a year on the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16:29-34; 23:26-32). The key phrase was "humble your souls" (NASB). By Jesus' time, the pious Pharisees were fasting twice a week (Mondays and Thursdays) because Moses was said to have gone up on Sinai on those days (Luke 18:12). Pharisees wanted everyone to know that they were fasting so they did not wash or trim their hair, and sometimes, they placed ashes on their heads. Abstaining from pleasures such as anointing their heads with oil to prevent dry skin was common, but they still made fasting obvious to the people they encountered. Others pretended to fast by disfiguring their outward appearances. In either case, they had a selfish motive.

Hypocrites were actors. They wore masks on stage, pretending to be one way on the outside, though they were another on the inside. Jesus said that if being seen (outside) was one's motive (inside), then the attention he had received was his reward in full (a reference to payment in ancient business receipts). There would be no reward of an intimate relationship with God because of the selfish motive.

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Ask the Holy Spirit to examine your heart for any selfish motive in using fasting as a tool to manipulate God or others around you. Surrender any impure desires to Him.

Second, do fast in secret. "But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to men that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you" (Matthew 6:17-18). Both anointing one's head and washing one's face, two common acts of daily



life in Palestine, were forbidden by the Pharisees during fasting. Jesus did not say that no one can know we are fasting. Rather, He said that fasting should not be done with a selfish motive to be recognized and honored by others. Fasting should be done with a selfless motive to surrender our wills to God. When our fasting motive is unselfish, our reward is intimacy with our heavenly Father, the greatest reward of all.

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During your next trial or decision, humbly fast in secret as a support to prayer in an attempt to discover God's will for your life.

Conclusion

Fasting has always been about intimacy with God (Isaiah 58:3-12). Jesus taught that when we fast, we are to do so in secret as a support to prayer, surrendering our wills to our heavenly Father.