

Wednesday Night BIBLE STUDY

Wednesday, January 6, 2021 – First Baptist Church Buda
Midweek Prayer Meeting & Bible Study



Impacting Your World Through Fasting
Matthew 6:16-18

M. Scott Boren has written an excellent little book entitled, "Difference Makers: An Action Guide for Jesus Followers." I want to listen to this statement from M. Scott Boren, "There are so many problems in our fallen world that it's easy to feel as if one person's efforts can't do much to fix them. But God calls every believer to help solve the world's problems, and one ordinary person's life can actually make an extraordinary impact on the world. You can make the world a better place through your life, and you don't have to be in worldly positions of influence (such as Hollywood or Wall Street) to do so."

But how? That is the question. How do we truly make a difference?

Boren goes on to tell us how, when he says, "When you rely on God to help you impact the world, His power will start to work through you in your neighborhood, workplace, and everywhere else you go – impacting the world around you significantly."

"Before you can impact the life of another for Christ, you must have been impacted by Christ in a personal and life-changing way" You can't be a world changer if your world hasn't been changed by Him to start with. Jesus' "Sermon on the Mount" actually teaches us how we may impact our world and the lives of those around us for Christ. We have been adding these important keys to impacting your world from Jesus's sermon. Let's review where we've been and add another one in our study as we proceed through Jesus' "Sermon on the Mount." We are now up to 9 important keys to impacting your world...

10 Important Keys to Impacting Your World: (From the Sermon on the Mount)

- 1. To impact your world for Christ you must KNOW CHRIST PERSONALLY = *Matthew 5:1-12, "The Beatitudes"***
- 2. To impact your world for Christ you must REFLECT CHRIST to the WORLD (others) = *Matthew 5:13-16, "Salt and Light"***

3. To impact your world for Christ you must LEARN to LIVE by the WORD of God daily = *Matthew 5:17-21, "Fulfilling and Living by the Word"*
4. To impact your world for Christ you must RIGHTLY RELATE to OTHERS = *Matthew 5:22ff*
5. To impact your world for Christ you must GUARD YOUR HEART = *Matthew 5:27-30*
6. To impact your world for Christ you must BUILD STRONG CHRIST- CENTERED MARRIAGES AND HOMES = *Matthew 5:31-32*
7. To impact your world for Christ you must LIVE A LIFE OF INTEGRITY = *Matthew 5:33-48*
8. To impact your world for Christ you must PRACTICE RADICAL GENEROSITY = *Matthew 6:1-4*
9. To impact your world for Christ you must BECOME A MAN OR WOMAN OF DEEP AND FERVENT PRAYER = *Matthew 6:5:15*
- ➡ 10. To impact your world for Christ you must GIVE YOURSELF AT TIMES TO THE SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINE OF FASTING = *Matthew 6:16-18*

In Matthew 6, Jesus deals with three commonly abused religious practices in Israel—giving (v.1-4), praying (v.5-15), and fasting (v.16-18). The religious leaders had made things that were good in and of themselves into bad things. The rituals of giving, praying, and fasting had become a form of self-worship (look at me, and how good I am, spiritual self-righteousness). They did those acts to be seen and praised by men instead of to honor God and receive his approval. And those things had very much become a just "going through the motions" kind of exercise in what they perceived as their religious duty. It as if they had taken these very important spiritual disciplines (of giving, praying and fasting) and devalued of them of their power and tremendous ability to impact their world for Christ and His Kingdom.

It is appropriate that right after teaching about proper prayer, Christ focuses on fasting. One can pray without fasting, but one cannot fast biblically without prayer. They go together. Therefore, in one sense, Christ is continuing his teaching on prayer in a way.

- ➡ Perhaps there is no spiritual discipline given in the scripture more misunderstood and less practiced than that of "fasting." Dr. Ronnie Floyd, past president of our own Southern Baptist Convention and tremendous pastor and Christian leader writes in his excellent book, "The Power of Prayer and Fasting," "I have been active in the church most of my life, and have attended umpteen religious meetings and conferences over the years, but I cannot recall a single occasion when a call to fasting was given center stage. I don't remember ever receiving any instruction on fasting or what it could do for my spiritual walk."

Why is that do you think? Why don't we fast and why don't we spend more time on the subject?

5 Reasons Christian May Not Practice Fasting:

- (1) **We don't know how** - Because "fasting" is so rarely taught or explained, many Christians simply don't know anything about fasting, therefore they don't practice it.

- (2) **We don't see the need** – Some believe that there are other measures that are just as effective for spiritual growth and closeness to God as fasting, and that fasting really doesn't do any good.
- (3) **We don't think it's for today** – There are some today who think that “fasting” was a practice of Biblical times that is no relevant for today... that somehow, fasting when away with the New Testament times.
- (4) **We don't understand what the Bible says about fasting** – We've never been taught Biblically/Scripturally about fasting.
- (5) **We don't think it's for us** – Some may believe that “fasting” is only for the professional clergy and religious leaders, not for the general laity. That only those in the ministry, preachers, and the life should fast

Well, here is what Jesus said about “fasting” in our passage, in His Sermon on the Mount. This is some of His instruction on the subject of fasting.

READ: Matthew 6:16-18

¹⁶ “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. ¹⁷ But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, ¹⁸ so 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 6:16-18 (NKJV)

Notice, once again, that Jesus assumes “fasting” in the lives of the religious (believers). He says, in the first part of **verse 5, “Moreover, when you fast...”**, not if you fast, or if you happen to be one who practices fasting. It is assumed that believers, His followers will practice fasting. That says to me that we need to not only understand “fasting” Biblically and what the Bible teaches about, but we need to practice... or begin to practice fasting Biblically in our lives.

WHAT IS FASTING?

Usually, fasting is the abstaining from food for a certain period of time. There are different types of fasting in the Bible, however, and not all of them involve food. Many people in the Bible fasted, including Moses, David, and Daniel in the Old Testament and Anna, Paul, and Jesus Christ in the New Testament. Many important figures in Christian history attested to fasting's value, as do many Christians today.

A Literal Definition of the Word, “Fasting” = “not to eat”

Fasting literally means “not to eat” according to Dr. David Guzik, noted Biblical scholar and theologian

A Good Definition of “Fasting” = “It is giving up food to focus on seeking God over some matter. It is to be so consumed with this matter that it becomes more important than food.”

That definition according to The Preacher's Outline and Sermon Bible. Fasting, therefore, is a way to enhance our prayer life and our relationship with God. That tell us how important and the

very importance of fasting for the life of every genuine believer. This is a discipline that we should strive to make a part of our lives.

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY ABOUT FASTING?

The Bible actually has quite a bit to say about the subject and instruction concerning fasting. Let me just give you some of what we know the Bible teaches concerning fasting.

12 Biblical Facts About Fasting:

- 1. Scripture does not command Christians to fast** - This seems like an important and significant truth from Scripture that should be noted concerning the subject of fasting. Although fasting is assumed for a believer, Scripture does not command Christians to fast. God does not require or demand it of Christians.
- 2. Scripture does present fasting as something that is good and proper and beneficial for the Christian** – While Scripture does not command fasting of Christians, the Bible presents fasting as something that is profitable and good... even important for a believer. The book of Acts records believers fasting before they made important decisions (Acts 13:2; 14:23).
- 3. Scripture often links fasting and prayer together** – As already stated, **“One can pray without fasting, but one cannot fast biblically without prayer.”** They go together. Fasting and prayer are often linked together in Scripture (Luke 2:37; 5:33). Even in our passage in Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 6, Jesus seems to be linking them together.
- 4. Biblically speaking fasting is seen as a way to take your eyes off of the things of this world and to focus completely on God** - Too often, the focus of fasting is on the lack of food. Instead, the purpose of fasting should be to take your eyes off the things of this world to focus completely on God. Fasting is a way to demonstrate to God, and to ourselves, that we are serious about our relationship with Him. Fasting helps us gain a new perspective and a renewed reliance upon God.
- 5. Although fasting in Scripture is almost always a fasting from food, there are other ways to fast** - Anything given up temporarily in order to focus all our attention on God can be considered a fast (Sexual relations within marriage, 1 Corinthians 7:1-5).
- 6. The Biblical picture of fasting should be limited to a set time, especially when fasting from food** - Extended periods of time without eating can be harmful to the body.
- 7. Scripturally fasting is not intended to punish the flesh, but to redirect attention to God** -
- 8. Biblical/Christian fasting should not be considered a “dieting method”** - The purpose of a biblical fast is not to lose weight, but rather to gain deeper fellowship with God.
- 9. Anyone can fast, but some may not be able to fast from food (diabetics, for example).**
- 10. The picture of fasting in Scripture is that everyone can temporarily give up something in order to draw closer to God** - By taking our eyes off the things of this world, we can more successfully turn our attention to Christ.
- 11. Biblically, fasting is not ever to be seen as a way to get God to do what we want** - Fasting changes us, not God.
- 12. In Scripture, fasting is never seen as a way to appear more spiritual than others** - Fasting is to be done in a spirit of humility and a joyful attitude. In our passage in **Matthew 6:16-18** declares, **“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. 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."

WHAT DID JESUS TEACH ABOUT FASTING?

Here are Jesus' words again in our passage... look at them with me in Matthew 6:16-18,

¹⁶ *"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."* ¹⁷ *But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face,* ¹⁸ *so 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 6:16-18 (NKJV)*

Observation Question: According to Jesus, what practices were associated with the hypocrites and their fasting?

In Matthew 6:16, Christ describes how the religious leaders commonly abused the discipline of fasting. They would purposely look sullen by disfiguring their faces. *"Disfigure their faces"* literally means *"covering their faces."*¹ They commonly would do this with dirt and ashes—so that everybody could see. In addition, they would wear their oldest and dirtiest clothes during their fasts to be noticed by others.²

In New Testament times the Pharisees fasted on Monday and Thursday. They claimed that the reason was because Moses ascended and descended from Mount Sinai, where he received the law, on those days.³ *However, those days just "happened" to be major market days, where people from the country would crowd the towns and cities to buy and sell.*⁴ Clearly, those were the days the religious leaders had the biggest audience.

Jesus called them "hypocrites," which was a word used of actors (v. 16). Their fasting was about putting on a show and receiving applause. They had received their reward in full, which was the praise of people, but they would receive no reward from God. Therefore, Christ warned his disciples to not fast like them.

Application Question: How should we practice proper fasting?

5 Ways to Practice Proper Fasting According to Jesus' Teaching in Matthew 6:16-18:

- 1. When fasting, we must practice secrecy** - Of course, when we choose to not eat, others may notice. But we should practice, as much as possible, not sharing this discipline with others. Why? *It's not because telling others is bad; it's because our hearts are bad. They are too prone to spiritual pride and loving the praise of others. We practice secrecy to protect our sin-filled hearts.* Certainly, there may be times to share that we are fasting—such as with a

corporate fast or for accountability sake—but as a general principle, we must practice secrecy.

2. **When fasting, we should act normal** - When Jesus said that the disciples should put oil on their heads and wash their faces, he was not describing extravagant practices. These were normal acts of body care and grooming in ancient times. Oil was often scented and used, at least partially, as perfume.⁵ In others words, when we fast, we should look normal, so that our fasting is perceived only by God.
3. **When fasting, we must focus on God alone and not others** - He is the purpose of our fast—to seek his face in a special way. As we do this, God will reward our faithfulness.
4. **When fasting, we must fervently pray** - As mentioned, one can pray without fasting, but not fast without praying. In every biblical account, the two are linked together.⁶ If we have no extra prayer and time in God’s Word, we are just not eating—which, by itself, brings no spiritual benefit.
5. **When fasting, we must practice obedient living** - In Zechariah 7:4-5 and 8-10, God rebukes Israel for fasting without the accompanying righteousness. The text says, *“The word of the Lord who rules over all then came to me, ‘Speak to all the people and priests of the land as follows: ‘When you fasted and lamented in the fifth and seventh months through all these seventy years, did you truly fast for me—for me, indeed? ...Again the word of the Lord came to Zechariah: ‘The Lord who rules over all said, ‘Exercise true judgment and show brotherhood and compassion to each other. You must not oppress the widow, the orphan, the foreigner, or the poor, nor should anyone secretly plot evil against his fellow human being.’”* To seek the Lord by fasting or any other religious act and yet to continue in unrepentant sin is worthless. Why seek the Lord in fasting if we plan to continue in sin and unrighteousness? That is exactly what the Pharisees were doing. It was just hypocrisy! Fasting must be accompanied by righteousness. David said if he cherished iniquity in his heart the Lord would not hear him (Ps 66:18).

WHAT ARE SOME REASONS TO FAST?

Interpretation Question: What are some common reasons for fasting, as seen in Scripture?


8 Reasons to Fast: *(based on Dr. John MacArthur’s Commentary on Matthew’s gospel and the subject of fasting)*

1. **Fasting is appropriate when mourning over some great pain or loss** - In **Matthew 9:15**, Jesus said this in reply to the question of why his disciples didn’t fast, *“‘The wedding guests cannot mourn while the bridegroom is with them, can they? But the days are coming when the bridegroom will be taken from them, and then they will fast.’”* When Christ died, the disciples would fast and mourn. Often when people are hurting over the loss of a loved one or some great pain, they don’t desire to eat. This is totally normal. But to biblically fast while mourning, we must direct those emotions and thoughts to the Lord, as we mourn in hope.
2. **Fasting is appropriate when mourning over sin** – In **Ezra 10**, when the Israelites were intermarrying with unbelieving Gentiles, Ezra confessed their sins and mourned with fasting. **Ezra 10:6** says, *“...he did not eat food or drink water, for he was in mourning over the infidelity of the exiles.”* He was hurting over their sins and desiring for them to repent. At

⁵ MacArthur, J. F., Jr. (1985). *Matthew* (pp. 404–405). Chicago: Moody Press.

⁶ MacArthur, J. F., Jr. (1985). *Matthew* (p. 404). Chicago: Moody Press.

times, we also see fasting with national repentance. When Jonah called Nineveh to repent, they responded with mourning and fasting. The King of Nineveh commanded for both people and animals to abstain from food and water, as they called upon the Lord and repented (Jonah 3:7-9). In addition, when Ezra and Nehemiah led Israel in repentance, the nation corporately fasted and confessed their sins together (Neh 9:1-3). Similarly, when our family members, churches, and nations are in great sin, it is appropriate to mourn, confess their sins, and fast—seeking for God to turn them back to himself. It is also appropriate to mourn and fast when we are struggling with habitual sin. **Fasting is a natural response to mental, spiritual, or physical pain. Our problem is that sin often doesn't deeply affect us.** Sadly, we're often too comfortable with it; therefore, we eat, drink, and continue as if nothing is happening. **Matthew 5:4** says, *"Blessed are those who mourn."* God blesses those who mourn, fast, and repent because of their sin and that of others.

3. **Fasting is an appropriate means of seeking to conquer sin and temptation** - Similar to the last point, **Isaiah 58:6** (NIV) says, *"Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke?"* Certainly, we should fast as a means of conquering sin and temptation in our own lives. Christ was fasting when he conquered Satan's temptations in the wilderness (Matt 4).  We should consider this when constantly plagued by a reoccurring depression, a stronghold of lust, or an addiction. **Fasting is also a great way to confront cultural and societal evils like abortion, trafficking, government corruption, and discord in the church and family. God desires for fasting that loosens the chains of injustice, unties the cords of a yoke, and sets the oppressed free. Lord help us to fast in such a way.**
4. **Fasting is appropriate when seeking God's favor in a desperate situation** – When David's first child was ill unto death, he fasted and prayed that God would spare the infant (2 Sam 12:16). Similarly, in Nehemiah 1, Nehemiah fasts and prays for God to forgive Israel's sin and that God would give him favor with the Persian king, as he desired to help rebuild Jerusalem. Likewise, when Israel was about to be slaughtered in Persia, Esther asked the people to fast as she sought the King's favor. **Esther 4:15-16** says, *"Then Esther sent this reply to Mordecai: 'Go, assemble all the Jews who are found in Susa and fast in my behalf. Don't eat and don't drink for three days, night or day. My female attendants and I will also fast in the same way. Afterward I will go to the king, even though it violates the law. If I perish, I perish!'"* When we encounter desperate situations, it is appropriate to seek God's favor through fasting and prayer.
5. **Fasting is appropriate when seeking wisdom and revelation from God.** - In Daniel 9 and 10—on two separate occasions—Daniel fasted, and God gave him revelation through an angel. Also, in Exodus 24, Moses received the law from God while fasting on Mount Sinai. Similarly, it was while the elders in Antioch were fasting that the Holy Spirit called Paul and Barnabas to global missions (Acts 13). It was that revelation that led to much of the Gentile world being reached. **Certainly, we should employ fasting and prayer when seeking God's guidance, making a big decision, and even trying to understand God's Word. Our lack of fasting often shows how little we desire to know God's will and understand his Word.** Dr. John MacArthur says, *"We often fail to understand God's Word as fully as we ought simply because, unlike those great people of God, we do not seek to comprehend it with their degree of intensity and determination. Skipping a few meals might be the small price we willingly*

pay for staying in the Word until understanding comes.⁷” In what ways is God calling you to seek wisdom for a current situation, the future, or understanding from his Word through fasting?

6. **Fasting is appropriate when preparing for some great ministry or task** - In Luke 4, Jesus fasted for forty days before beginning his ministry. After finishing, he left the wilderness in the Spirit’s power (cf. Lk 4:14). In addition, when elders were set apart for ministry in the early church, it was commonly done with prayer and fasting. Acts 14:23 says, *“When they had appointed elders for them in the various churches, with prayer and fasting they entrusted them to the protection of the Lord in whom they had believed.”* Fasting and prayer was preparation for their great work—it was a recognition that ministry could not be effectively done in human power. We need God’s grace for ministry, and we should seek it through prayer and fasting. No doubt, we often lack power for ministry because we lack intense times of prayer and fasting.
7. **Fasting is appropriate for developing self-control** – In describing how Christians must be like spiritual athletes, Paul said in 1 Corinthians 9:27, *“Instead I subdue my body and make it my slave, so that after preaching to others I myself will not be disqualified”* (1 Cor 9:27). William Barclay’s comments are helpful in considering how fasting can be helpful for discipline. Barclay says, *“There are not a few of us who indulge in certain habits because we find it impossible to stop them. They have become so essential that we cannot break them; we develop such a craving for certain things that what ought to be a pleasure has become a necessity; and to be cut off from the thing which we have learned to desire so much can be a purgatory. If we practiced a wise fasting, no pleasure would become a chain, and no habit would come to rule our lives. We would have control over our pleasures, and not our pleasures over us.”*⁸ Fasting can help us avoid becoming slaves of our desires, and instead have control over them.
8. **Fasting is appropriate in helping us extend mercy to others** - This might be implied by Isaiah’s rebuke in Isaiah 58:6-7, *“Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter – when you see the naked, to clothe them, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?”* It seems Israel was fasting and yet there were people around them without food and clothes. God says that type of fasting is useless. We should fast in order to practice mercy.

SOME PRACTICAL TIPS FOR FASTING?

Application Question: What are some practical tips to be applied when fasting or initially trying out fasting?

3 Practical Tips for Fasting:

1. **When initially beginning to fast, start out small** - Don’t try a forty day fast for your first time. Try skipping a meal or two. After skipping a meal or two, try fasting for a day or more. Typically, during the first day of fasting, one experiences headaches as the body gets rid of toxins. However, after the first day or so, one begins to experience a fasting high where they feel like they can keep going. As one feels more comfortable with the discipline of fasting or

compelled to seek the Lord in a greater way, then he or she can gradually increase the time given to fasting.

2. **When beginning a fast, one must decide what type of fast they will perform -** In Scripture, there are all types of fasts: (1) Most people will employ some type of partial fast—like drinking water but not eating food. People can only survive around thirty to forty days without food. In a partial fast, one must consider what types of food/drink to abstain from. In Daniel 1:12, the four Hebrews chose to eat only vegetables and drink only water. This is often called a Daniel fast. (2) Others practice absolute fasts—without food and water. People can only survive without liquid for a short period of time—only about three days—so that type of fast should be limited.
3. **When fasting, it must be remembered that fasting is not simply giving up something—it is giving up something to pursue something greater, which is God -** Therefore, one must consider how he will spend that time with or for God that would normally be given to eating and drinking. It should be used to pursue God through prayer, worship, Bible study, service, etc.

Remember, Jesus did not say “if you fast,” but “when you fast.” He expects his followers to fast. We live in a world that vies for our attention and affection. It is so easy to neglect the best thing for not only the good but also the bad. Fasting assures that the best thing stays the first. Are you practicing the discipline of fasting, so the best thing can remain the first thing? When you do this, God, who sees your secret sacrifices, will reward you in the open. Lord, draw your people to deep seasons of fasting and reward them with yourself and your righteousness.