

Matthew 6:16-18

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/matt/matt-6/matthew-616-18/>

Jesus warns against fasting to win the hollow rewards of man's approval and self-righteousness. Instead He encourages His disciples to seek the greater reward from their Heavenly Father by fasting in secret.

There is no apparent parallel account of this teaching in the Gospels.

Jesus began this chapter telling His disciples how to gain a rich *reward* from God by how they gave to the poor and prayed. After giving the right perspective on how to pray, Jesus now returns to how to gain the best *reward*; this time in how to *fast*.

Fasting is a deliberate denial for a time of something normal and good for the purpose of spiritual growth. People can *fast* from almost anything, including social media, sleep, smart phones, or the internet. But when we think of *fasting*, we usually think of refraining from eating food. And this is what people often fasted from in the Bible. Sometimes people did a total *fast* of food and water for a few days (Ezra 10:6, Esther 4:16, Acts 9:9). When Jesus fasted for forty days in the wilderness, we know He was *fasting* from food (Matthew 4:2). When Moses went up on Mount Horeb (Sinai) he fasted forty days from both food and water (Exodus 34:28).

The point of *fasting* is usually to seek God. It creates humbling opportunities to be mindful of one's need for God. *Fasting* often involved prayers and petitions, confessions of sin, or extended periods of listening to God. It can be in petition for something, as in the Esther 4:16 example, where Esther asks for earnest petition for protection. It can be practical, as Moses' might have been, where He entered God's presence without making provision, and food was unavailable (but God supernaturally supplied for him). Or it can be to enter God's presence to know Him more personally. As giving and prayer had become a religious spectacle, so too had *fasting*. Instead of *fasting* to become closer to God, the religious leaders fasted to gain recognition from other *men*. They were more concerned about what other *men* thought, and were not actually humbling themselves before God.

Jesus wants His disciples to consider their motivation for why they *fast*. Jesus does not say that His disciples must practice *fasting*, He only gives His instruction to apply to *whenever* they *fast*. He tells them the *reward* for *fasting as the hypocrites do* is only the favor of men. But the *reward* for *fasting in secret* gains the approval of God. Jesus encourages His disciples to choose the greater *reward*. Jesus commands but does not impose, even though He has the power to make people comply. Instead, He exhorts them to self-governance and lets them consider which *reward* they desire.

He tells them, *do not put on a gloomy face* and look like you are miserable from fasting *as the hypocrites* (religious pretenders) *do*. With delicious irony Jesus says *they neglect their appearance*, when in reality appearing to be super-spiritual and *being noticed* for their super-spiritual *fast by men* is all *they* care about. These *hypocrites* were dressing down their appearance

and demeanor *so that* everyone would know when they were *fasting*. Their *fasting* was not with the objective to grow closer to God, but to signal the *appearance* that they were close to Him. Jesus personally assures His disciples (*Truly I say to you*) and warns that such *hypocrites* already *have their reward in full*. Their *reward* will come from men, and therefore be trivial in comparison to the *reward* offered by God.

Jesus then tells His disciples how to get the better *reward*: *But when you fast do so in secret and anoint your head and wash your face so that your fasting will not be noticed by men*. In other words, don't broadcast to everyone around you either by your words or expressions (or by any other means) that you are *fasting*. God (*your Father who is in secret*) will see *what you do in secret* and He *will reward you* with a better *reward*. Jesus acknowledges the freedom God has granted each of His disciples to choose for themselves. As with the Mosaic covenant, Jesus' instructions are geared toward helping His disciples understand how to seek their best interest.

Biblical Text

Whenever you fast, do not put on a gloomy face as the hypocrites do, for they neglect their appearance so that they will be noticed by men when they are fasting. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face so that your fasting will not be noticed by men, but by