

**First Baptist Church Merritt Island**  
**Senior Pastor Titus Green**  
**October 19, 2025**  
**IN THE SCHOOL OF PRAYER**  
**When You Fast**  
**Matthew 6:16-18**

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This morning, we are continuing our study on prayer from the life of Jesus. It's our third lesson and it's perhaps one of the most misunderstood and least practiced aspects of powerful prayer. It's something many Christians don't talk about and even fewer practice. This morning, we are going to learn about fasting.

Before we look at our text, let me give you a quick overview of what Jesus has been saying in the Sermon on the Mount where our text is found. Jesus has gathered His disciples together and is teaching them what life is like when you follow Jesus as your God and King and live as part of His Kingdom on the earth. In chapter 5, Jesus says a Kingdom life is a righteous life.

**Matthew 5:16**

*In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.*

Jesus desires for our lives to overflow with a kind of good works that don't bring glory to us but bring glory to God the Father. Good works are the outward expression of righteousness.

**Matthew 5:20**

*For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.*

The Pharisees were a group of Jews who dedicated their entire lives to keeping the Old Testament law. They prayed all the time. They fasted two days a week. They tithed on everything, including the small plants they grew in their personal gardens. You cannot imagine a more dedicated religious group than the Pharisees. But Jesus says our righteousness has to exceed the righteousness of those kinds of people or we won't ever be part of His Kingdom. That's a high bar, but Jesus raises it higher.

**Matthew 5:48**

*You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.*

Jesus isn't kidding here. To be part of His kingdom means that we must have a kind of perfection that reflects the perfect righteousness of God. That's how we will have a higher righteousness than the Pharisees. That's how we will have good works that shine like light in darkness. But, how is that possible when all of us have already sinned?

The answer lies in the very beginning of this sermon.

**Matthew 5:2–3**

*And he opened his mouth and taught them, saying: 3 "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

The first step to being part of Christ's Kingdom is to realize you are spiritually bankrupt. This sounds like the exact opposite of what we just heard Jesus say. Somehow, the only people who will see the Kingdom of Heaven are people who realize they have no righteousness in and of themselves (just broken-down sinners) but are somehow filled to overflowing with righteousness that exceeds the most religious people in the world. How does that happen?

*Matthew 5:6*

*Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.*

Jesus says the people in His kingdom are people who realize they don't have righteousness in and of themselves, but they want it. They are hungry for it. And they don't manufacture their own righteousness (they can't...they're bankrupt). (Note a connection with fasting here) Jesus says they will be satisfied (some translations say 'filled'). That's something that happens to them not something that is done by them. In other words, when we know we are sinners but want to be made righteous, if we are willing to come to Jesus as our King and Lord and Savior, to hunger for His Kingdom and His righteousness and His work, He promises to make us righteous and fill us with His own righteousness...the very righteousness of God.

That's why He says what He says a little later in this same sermon in Matthew 6:3.

*But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.*

This is Christianity. This is the gospel. Jesus is willing to take people who are broken down sinners and fill them with His righteousness, the very righteousness of God. If you will trust in Him as Savior and bow before Him as King, He will pour out the righteousness of God into you and through you. His righteousness will shine through your life to the glory of God the Father.

And that's the context for today's passage of study. Jesus is teaching us what it looks like to hunger for Him and His righteousness and to live out His righteousness in a way that is completely different than the self-righteous hypocrisy of the Pharisees.

***Matthew 6:16–18***

***“And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. 17 But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, 18 that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.***

Jesus' teaching here is pretty straightforward. Fasting is part of living the Christian life. But there is a wrong way to fast and that's the way the hypocrites did it. They didn't want their good works to glorify God; they wanted the glory for themselves. So, they fasted to be seen and celebrated by other people. Jesus says that authentic fasting is focused on God and what He alone can give to us.

And that gives us our Bid Idea for this morning.

**Idea: Authentic Fasting is a part of the Christian life in which we experience God's blessings as we express our desire for Him.**

Now, let's go through that big idea a little bit at a time.

**AUTHENTIC FASTING IS A PART OF THE CHRISTIAN LIFE**

**Matthew 6:16**  
**And when you fast...**

One of the first things that jumps out of this passage is that Jesus expects fasting to be part of His followers' lives. He says, "when you fast" not "if you fast." In verse 2, He says "when you give." And in verse 5 He says, "when you pray." So, Jesus expects fasting to be part of our lives just like regular giving and regular praying.

As a matter of fact, the Bible presents fasting as one component of passionate prayer.

- Nehemiah 1:4 (After Nehemiah heard bad news about Jerusalem) As soon as I heard these words I sat down and wept and mourned for days, and I continued fasting and praying before the God of heaven.
- Daniel 9:3 (After Daniel read the prophecy from Jeremiah about the Jewish captivity) Then I turned my face to the Lord God, seeking him by prayer and pleas for mercy with fasting and sackcloth and ashes.
- Luke 2:37 (Referring to a widow named Anna) She did not depart from the temple, worshiping with fasting and prayer night and day.
- Acts 13:2–3 While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." 3 Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off.

Throughout the Bible, fasting and passionate prayer go together.

We fast so that we can more earnestly seek the face of God in prayer. If you just give up food but don't pursue the Lord in His word and prayer, you aren't authentically fasting, you are just dieting. And there might be physical benefits of that but that's all there will be. True, biblical fasting is all about seeking the face of God in His word and prayer.

So, we shouldn't be surprised that immediately after Jesus gives us the Lord's Prayer, He says "and when you fast." Fasting is a part of the Christian life.

And I know we don't have time this morning to say everything there is to say about fasting...

So, for those of you who might want to do some more study on fasting, let me recommend two resources to you:

- Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life by Donald Whitney
- A Hunger for God by John Piper  
(available free - <https://www.desiringgod.org/books/a-hunger-for-god> )

Fasting is a part of the Christian life. But Jesus doesn't leave it at that.

**AUTHENTIC FASTING BRINGS AN EXPERIENCE OF GOD'S BLESSINGS**

**Matthew 6:17**  
***But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, 18 that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.***

Be careful how you take what Jesus is saying here. We have a tendency to emphasize what Jesus says about secrecy, like the point is that we have to keep our fasting a complete secret. But remember, He's correcting a wrong approach to fasting. The religious hypocrites fasted so that other people would see them and think they were great. It's wrong to fast in order to be seen by people. But it doesn't ruin your fast if other people find out about it. For many of us, it's nearly impossible to fast without someone knowing about it. If I skip meals or choose not to eat at dinner, that's hard to hide from my wife and kids.

Even more, the bible teaches other types of fasting that aren't private. The early church fasted together (Acts 13). The Old Testament is filled with examples of God's people fasting together (2 Chronicles 20; Esther 4; Joel 2). So, don't rip what Jesus is saying out of biblical context. While he is referring to a personal, private form of fasting, His point is about our motive and not just our method. He's saying you shouldn't fast to be rewarded by people and here's the part we often miss, you should fast to be rewarded by God.

Jesus promises that we will experience God's blessing when we fast in a biblical way – by seeking His face in His word and prayer with humble and repentant hearts.

Jesus doesn't specify one specific way God rewards fasting, but when you look through the Bible you find a number of different ways God blessed people in response to their fast. Let me share just a few.

- When the church fasted in Acts 13, God blessed them by clarifying His will for the ministry of Paul and Barnabas.
- When Paul and Barnabas fasted in Acts 14, God blessed them with discernment to choose the right leaders for the church.
- When Nehemiah fasted in Nehemiah 1, God blessed him with favor for the restoration of Jerusalem.
- When the people of Israel fasted in 2 Chronicles 20, God blessed them by giving them supernatural victory over their enemies.
- When God calls His people to fast in Isaiah 58, He says he will reward them with freedom from bondage, provision, joy, protection, answered prayers, and guidance.

Some of you deeply desire those exact things. Maybe your heart is being stirred by God to make a plan to fast and pray for one or more of those things. I pray you will. But there's one really big part of fasting that you need to know.

### AUTHENTIC FASTING EXPRESSES OUR DESIRE FOR GOD

#### **Matthew 6:16**

***“And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others.”***

Jesus says the hypocrites had a desire that drove their fasting – the praise of people. That's what they desired most. They walked around gloomy like a bunch of pouting kids just hoping someone would offer them a snack so they could turn it down. They desired the attention of men and that's exactly what they got.

So, what are we supposed to desire when we fast? It's not wrong to desire the rewards we just talked about. That's why Jesus promised God would give them. But there's a desire that should be even more central than the rewards we just talked about.

*Matthew 9:14–15*

*Then the disciples of John came to him, saying, “Why do we and the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?” And Jesus said to them, “Can the wedding guests mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them? The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast.”*

Now, make sure you hear what’s going on in these verses, because this is at the very heart of Jesus’ teaching about fasting. Some of John the Baptist’s disciples come to Jesus, and they say, “Hey, we’ve noticed that your disciples don’t fast. We fast. The Pharisees fast. All the good religious people fast. So why don’t your disciples fast?”

And Jesus answers by saying, *“Can the wedding guests mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them? The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast.”* The bridegroom is Jesus. In other words, Jesus is saying, “The reason my disciples don’t fast is because I’m with them. When I’m not with them, then they’ll have a reason to fast.”

This is the heart and purpose of fasting for followers of Jesus. This is the desire that is at the heart of authentic, biblical fasting. It’s an expression of hunger. It’s not a hunger for food, it’s a hunger for Jesus.

That’s why fasting is part of the Christian life. Because even though we can experience the presence of Jesus through the work of the Holy Spirit, in another sense, we aren’t with Him now the way we will be when this age comes to an end (2 Corinthians 5:8 – absent from the body, present with the Lord; Philippians 1:23 – to depart from this world means you are with Christ in a better way).

And if we love Jesus, we’re going to long for Him and desire to be with Him. We are going to want to see the manifestation of His glory and enjoy an intimate experience of His spiritual presence. We are going to want His righteousness to fill our hearts and flow out of our lives. Remember what we said at the very beginning of this message. When we come to Jesus with a hunger for His righteousness, He will fill our lives with it so that we overflow with Good Works that He empowers to the glory of God the Father.

And fasting expresses that desire. You go without food in your stomach to express the hunger of your heart. In a real sense, when you authentically and biblically fast, what you’re saying is, “My hunger for Jesus is stronger than my hunger for food. I need food to live, but I need Jesus even more.” That’s why eating is such a great thing that the bible says should be enjoyed. It’s a picture of how good and satisfying Jesus is when we feast on Him, so go enjoy the BBQ at lunch and as you are enjoying it, remember that it’s just a picture of how good and satisfying Jesus is!

And the truth is that many of us find ourselves so stuffed with the things of this world that the closest we can come to saying we want Jesus like that is to say we want to want Jesus that way. In that way, fasting is an act of confession and repentance in which we say, “Jesus, I don’t naturally want you the way I want food or television or my favorite hobby or football or my favorite app on my phone. I reach for those things WAY more instinctively and often than I reach for you. But I want to want you more so I’m turning to you in prayer and fasting, asking you to purge my appetite from the stuff of this world so that I would want nothing more than you.” None of the things I mentioned are wrong in and of themselves until they become idols that takes God’s place in our hearts.

And what you have to see is that this truth gets to the very heart of what the Bible teaches about our hearts. The Bible teaches that there is a great war for your heart between the flesh and the Spirit, between the kingdom of earth and the kingdom of heaven, between the things of this world and the things of God. And the great question is, “Which will you love?” Will you love Jesus and His kingdom

and in a way that passionately seeks Him and His righteousness? Or will you love this world and its kingdom and passionately seek after them? Will the hunger of your heart be for God or for this world?

And that's the primary heart behind fasting. It's an expression of your hunger for Jesus, that you want the power of His Spirit to flow in and through your life, transforming you by His righteousness.

And I want to invite you to prayerfully consider how fasting might become a more regular part of your life of prayer. Specifically, will you prayerfully consider some form of fasting for the rest of our study on prayer? The New Testament doesn't lay down any strict rules about how or how often we should fast, so be careful not to make a legalistic rule about it. Just ask the Lord to give you peace about what might be a good starting place.

Perhaps you could fast one lunch a week and spend your lunch hour praying from a passage of Scripture using the pattern we learned with the Lord's prayer. You could fast from the end of dinner to the start of dinner the following day as a 24 hour fast.

You could fast from something that isn't food. The time you normally spend watching a certain TV show. Maybe give up social media or your favorite sports app. Every time you naturally reach for your phone to open that app, stop and spend that time in prayer, asking God to stir your heart to love and desire Him.

What might God do if this church spent the next several weeks in various forms of fasting and prayer, repenting of our love of this world and seeking an outpouring of the Spirit of Christ?

Whatever you fast from, just remember that the main point of authentic fasting isn't what you give up, it's what you pursue in prayer, namely the fullness of God.

And that brings us to the Lord's Supper. It might seem a little odd to finish a sermon on fasting by eating and drinking but just think about the connection.

We fast as an expression of our desire to experience more of Jesus. We are essentially affirming what Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount. We are spiritually bankrupt on our own. We hunger and thirst for righteousness or at least we want to hunger and thirst for Jesus and His righteousness, and we believe that only Jesus can fill us with His righteousness. We need Him to do something in us that we can't do for ourselves. That's the heart of fasting and that's the heart of the Lord's Supper.

The bread represents the body of Jesus, and the cup represents the blood of Jesus. We reflect on the sacrifice He made at the cross to pay for our unrighteousness. And we take those elements into us in the act of eating and drinking as an expression of our faith that only Christ in us can make us righteous. Christ is our only hope. That's the cry of our hearts, whether we are fasting or eating this bread and drinking this cup.