

The Discipline of Fasting

By Matt Harrison

Pre-Session Assignments

One week before the session, participants will take the following assignments.

Assignment One

Read Matthew 6:1–18; then read the comments related to the **Introduction** to Matthew 6:16–18 in the section **It's in the Book**. Prepare to share your answer to the following question: What are the three righteous practices Jesus addressed?

Assignment Two

Read Matthew 6:16–18 and notice how Jesus addressed hypocrites. Then look up the term *hypocrite* in a Bible dictionary, study Bible, Bible concordance, or regular dictionary. Prepare to share your answer to the following question: What is the definition of *hypocrite*?

Assignment Three

Read Matthew 6:1–18. Prepare to share your answers to the following questions: How many times did Jesus mention the Father? Why is His repeated reference to the Father significant?

Scripture to Memorize

“Yet even now,” declares the LORD, “return to Me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning.” Joel 2:12

Session Goal

Consistent with God's Word and in the power of the Holy Spirit—by the end of this session, disciples will understand biblical motives for fasting and will commit to being open to the Spirit's leading in the practice of this discipline.

Matt Harrison is instructor of Foundations of Education at Southwestern Seminary. He is married to Ruth, and they have three children: Tyler, Megan, and Noah.

It's in the Book

30 minutes

Real-Life Scenario

Steve was faced with an important decision. Application deadlines were approaching, and he needed to decide which college to attend and which major to focus on in his studies. He felt confused and anxious about this decision.

How would you counsel Steve on how to come to a decision? Would fasting be a part of what you would suggest to him?

Discussion Question

What comes to your mind when you think about fasting?

Introduction

Some think fasting is an exercise reserved for spiritual or even health fanatics. They think only those who are extreme in their spirituality or in their focus on their body practice such a thing. When we consider fasting, consulting Scripture is essential so we view the discipline in a sound way.

In the Bible, generally speaking, fasting is the spiritual discipline of going without food for a time and for a specific purpose. However, in some cases, fasting involved going without both food and water. Such a fast, however, appeared to last no more than three days (Ezra 10:6–8; Esther 4:15–17).

Old Testament law required that God's people fast on the Day of Atonement (see Leviticus 16:29–31; 23:27–29). Fasting was associated with humbling or afflicting oneself. Sometimes fasts were undertaken by an individual (2 Samuel 12:22; Daniel 9:3) and sometimes by a group (Esther 4:16; Joel 1:14).

Fasting was practiced for specific purposes in Scripture. For example, God's people sometimes fasted when they experienced grief (Nehemiah 1:4), when they were gripped with the need to confess and turn from their sin (Joel 1:14; Nehemiah 9:1–2), when they worshiped and served the Lord (Luke 2:37), and when they needed guidance on whom to choose as leaders (Acts 13:1–3; 14:23).

Fasting and prayer are regularly coupled together in Scripture. In each situation, God's people fasted to seek the Lord and to draw closer to Him. Biblical fasting is a matter of devotion to Him.

Read Matthew 6:16–18 out loud.

Studying the Passage

Not all fasting is blessed by the Lord. There are sound uses of this practice, as well as unsound uses. Jesus Himself spoke about the correct way to fast. Therefore, it is essential that we hear His words and obey them on this matter.

Disciples need to understand the context of Matthew 6:16–18. This passage is part of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount that begins in chapter 5. In Matthew 6:1, Jesus gave His hearers a warning through the pointed word "Beware." This term suggests that we are to be cautious or to

be on guard against something. Jesus warned His hearers to guard themselves against practicing their righteousness before men to be noticed by them. Then, in Matthew 6:2–18, He addressed three righteous practices.

Assignment One Feedback

The person who completed **Assignment One** during the week may now share answers to the following question: What are the three righteous practices Jesus addressed in Matthew 6:16–18?

This lesson focuses on the third righteous practice Jesus addressed.

Studying the Passage

Verse 16. When you fast. Notice that Jesus did not say *if you fast*. Instead, He said “when you fast.” Jesus assumed His hearers would practice the discipline of fasting. Fasting is an acceptable part of each disciple’s walk with the Lord.

At the same time, we need to note that Jesus does not tell us how often or how long we should fast. This is a matter that is different for each disciple as he or she is led by the Holy Spirit.

Discussion Question

Do you think fasting is a common practice among believers? Why or why not?

On Your Own

In Matthew 6:16–18, Jesus contrasts two different ways of fasting. This contrast is noted by the phrase “But you” in verse 17. Refer to Matthew 6:16–18 and fill in the chart below. When everyone is finished, the group can compare answers and make changes where needed.

How Not to Fast

How to Fast

The chart above contrasts the fasting of the hypocrites with the fasting of a disciple who pleases Christ.

Assignment Two Feedback

The person who completed **Assignment Two** during the week may now share an answer to the following question: What is the definition of *hypocrite*?

Discussion Questions

1. Why do you think Jesus addressed hypocrisy when He talked about fasting? As you consider Matthew 6:16–18, what can disciples do to guard against hypocrisy when they practice spiritual disciplines such as fasting?
2. In this passage, one of the most important points Jesus is making is that our *motives* are important in fasting. Why are motives so important? What are examples of motives that please the Lord in fasting?

Assignment Three Feedback

The person who completed **Assignment Three** during the week may now share answers to the following questions: How many times did Jesus mention the Father in Matthew 6:1–18? Why is His repeated reference to the Father significant?

Verse 18. your Father. In the first eighteen verses of Matthew 6, Jesus mentioned the Father repeatedly. This emphasis should help us see that spiritual disciplines (whether giving, praying, or fasting) must be carried out in relation to *our* Father. When we fast, we do it as a means of fellowship with Him. We fast in a Godward direction.

Fasting is not a matter of legalism, where we seek to earn His favor. Nor is it a practice we use to gain the praise of those around us. We fast under His gracious and watchful eye and do it in secret. This means that fasting needs to be between us and Jesus. When we fast in secret, Christ graciously gives us a reward.

Discussion Question

Based on Scripture, how would you summarize fasting that truly honors the Lord?

On Your Own

Think about what God's Word says about fasting. In the space below, write what the Holy Spirit is leading you to do regarding this discipline. Commit to follow His leading through the power He gives you.

Heart and Hands

8 minutes

Read again the **Real-Life Scenario** near the beginning of the lesson. Consider whether your answers have changed during the session.

Be silent for two or three minutes. Thank Jesus for His sacrifice and for the gospel. Adore Him for His glorious reign on the throne of heaven. Then ask the Holy Spirit to reveal to you:

1. A way the Scriptures you studied today will change your heart for the glory of Christ.
2. Or a way those Scriptures will lead you to stop doing something for the glory of Christ.
3. Or a way those Scriptures will lead you to do something for the glory of Christ.

Write what the Spirit reveals to you below and then be ready to share what you have written with the group.

Since Last Week

5 minutes

Grace-Filled Accountability

5 minutes

Planning for Evangelism, Missions, and Service

5 minutes

Prayer

7 minutes

At Home: Nail It Down

Before you began this lesson, perhaps you never considered fasting as a legitimate practice for a disciple of the Lord. Perhaps your thinking has changed as you have considered His Word. Fasting is not reserved for spiritual and health fanatics. However, when you think about the topic and fast as the Lord leads, make sure to do so in a biblical way.

Whenever you fast, do so with a God-honoring purpose. As God's people did in the Scriptures:

- You might fast in a situation where you experience grief (Nehemiah 1:4).
- You might fast when you are gripped with the need to confess and repent of your sin (Joel 1:14; Nehemiah 9:1–2).
- You might fast as part of simple service and worship to the Lord (Luke 2:37).
- You might fast when you need His guidance in a life issue (Acts 13:1–3; 14:23).

Be sure to couple your fasting with prayer and seek the Lord in it. Make your fast a matter of devotion to Him.

As Jesus taught us in Matthew 6:16–18, embrace solid motives when you fast. Never fast to draw attention to yourself or to gain the praise of men. Such fasting is done by hypocrites who pretend to be something they are not. Do not make the discipline of fasting a matter of legalism, as if God's favor can be earned. Instead, fast as the Holy Spirit leads you.

Pursue a Godward orientation and fast out of a heart of devotion. When you fast in a sound way, remember that *your Father* will reward you (Matthew 6:18). Will you commit now to follow the leading of the Holy Spirit when it comes to the discipline of fasting?

Follow up Question

What are some biblical motives for fasting, and have you committed to follow the leading of the Holy Spirit on practicing this discipline?

The Making Disciples curriculum is a gift from Southwestern Seminary to those who, for the glory of the Father and in the power of the Spirit, will spend a lifetime embracing the full supremacy of the Son, responding to His kingly reign in all of life, inviting Christ to live His life through them, and joining Him in making disciples among all peoples.