Matthew 6 (Part 3) :16-18 - Jesus Teaches on Fasting

Pastor Paul LeBoutillier · April 18, 2026

SERMON TRANSCRIPT

All right, Matthew chapter 6, we're picking it up in verse 16. It says, When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show men they're 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.

Stop there, please, let's pray. Heavenly Father, open our hearts to the ministry of your word. Lord, we look to you, we look to you to speak to us this morning. In Jesus' precious name, amen. Before we get started, just a quick word to those who are watching this morning over the internet.

We had some snafus going on with our web host. So the slides that they normally click on to see that I'm showing you up here, some other verses, they're not able to see this morning. So I apologize to those of you that are watching live right now. We'll try to get that. Well, I know we'll get it squared away by next week.

So anyway, I'm sure as you've looked through the first sections of chapter six here, you've noticed a pattern, have you not? We've seen here that Jesus has been bringing up the issues of giving, talking to us about praying, and now dealing with the issue of fasting as to say to us and actually denounce for us those who would do such things just simply for show, to garner the attention, appreciation of people so that they might be impressed by their spirituality or something like that. And in each situation, Jesus said whatever appreciation they were given is all the reward they're going to get. So he said to you and I, when you do those things, when you give, when you pray, when you fast, do it in such a way that people can't tell you're doing it so that your father who sees what is done in secret will in fact reward you. He talks about putting oil on your head.

That's obviously not for today, is it? We don't put oil on our head. Now if I was reading this back in the 60s, back when guys were putting that greasy kid stuff in their hair, it might apply or something like that.

But the basic idea here is don't look all weird and disheveled and looking kind of pain. Because you see, the Pharisees would fast every Monday and every Thursday, even though it was not in the word of God for them to do that.

You know what's interesting? The only fast related to one of the feasts was on the Day of Atonement. And that was pretty much it. I mean, that was pretty much the extent of how Israel was commanded to fast. And yet the Pharisees, always wanting to kind of one-up God, decided they were going to do it on Mondays and Thursdays, and they wanted everybody to know that they were doing it.

You know what I mean? It's like, we want you to realize just exactly how spiritual we really are. And so we're going to kind of make sure that you know that we're fasting and we're taking great pains to do so. And aren't we all spiritual and that sort of thing. So he basically says, don't ever do these things so that you might, you know, to just outwardly and overtly impress other people and so forth.

Now, I decided as I was looking at this passage, you know, I was thinking about this all week long while I was camping, believe it or not. I'm up in McCall, I'm reading through this passage, and I'm just kind of thinking, fasting, fasting, fasting. Kind of like, what's this all about? And I thought, you know, there's, there's, I know that there are questions in the body of Christ about the subject of fasting because I've had them come up a lot over the years. In fact, I think I even wrote a, I've lost track of the brochures that I've written on the Info Center, but I think I've even got one out there on the subject of fasting.

But I wanted to do it because I think there's a lot of question, you know, about why we do it and so forth. Technically speaking, fasting means to abstain from food. No big surprise there. In fact, the Greek root word from which we get our English word fasting literally means not to eat. So, on a technical physiological level, fasting is just not eating.

However, biblically speaking, fasting is much more than that. Fasting is always connected with prayer, all right? Always connected with prayer. Now, sometimes fasting is done for health reasons, medical reasons, to diet or something like that. We're not talking about that.

That's not, I want you to kind of put that aside this morning. Fasting, we're going to look at fasting from that biblical point of view. Now, you all know our word breakfast is, of course, a compound word using the words break and fast because it originally meant that with that meal, we break our fast from nighttime. And so, we have our break fast in the morning. Now, those of you that get up in the middle of the night and raid the refrigerator, it doesn't apply to you.

It's not breakfast. It's just the first main meal of the day or something like that. But that's where, anyway, that originates from. Just talking, though, about fasting and saying this is what it is, frankly, still isn't enough for some people. They want to know more.

They understand that people pray and they understand that sometimes people abstain from eating, but they don't really understand why people would abstain from eating while they pray or abstain from eating to pray or something like that. And that's a little bit of what I want to talk about here. When you think about it, eating is pretty important to the sustaining of life. I mean, we have to eat to live. And we also spend a huge amount of time and energy and effort doing it.

I mean, we talk about food. We spend a lot of time going out buying food. We spend a lot of time talking about how we're going to prepare it and then actually preparing the food. And we even spend a lot of time and money eating that food, consuming it, and so forth. So it's a huge part of our lives.

When a believer in Christ takes the time to set all that aside and just come to God and devote themselves to God in prayer, it basically is a way of saying, God, I mean business here. And I'm going to set aside for this time even those necessary to sustain life things for a moment that I might come to you and talk to you. It's kind of like saying, right now, eating is not as important as this. Fill in the blank, whatever area is pressing on your heart, needful for prayer, or whatever the case might be. I found a fantastic quote, as I often do, on the subject of fasting, and I wanted to share it with you.

Andrew Murray, who many of you have read and know, fasting, he says, helps to express, to deepen, and to confirm the resolution that we are ready to sacrifice anything, our very selves, to attain what we seek for the kingdom of God. Isn't that a great quote? I put quotes up here, by the way, because they're always better than I could put it. And I look at these, I read these quotes, and I go, Al, I can't top that, so I'll just let them read it for themselves. I love that, though.

It is an expression, an expression of our lives to confirm that we are resolved and ready to sacrifice everything, in fact, our very lives, to come before God, to press in on God for that which we are bringing or that which we are seeking from Him, and so forth. I really love that. And therefore, to withhold sustenance, food, is an expression of humility in my life. It's a way of humbling myself before God. We don't put on things like sackcloth anymore.

I haven't seen sackcloth for sale on the shelves of any clothing store today. They used to do things like that in biblical times, put on sackcloth, they'd put ashes on their heads, you know, it was a sign of mourning or sorrow or even humility. But there's something that you and I can still do to humble ourselves

before God, and fasting is one of them. In fact, let me show you some verses that are kind of tied to it here from the Psalms. David writes, yet when they were ill, speaking of his enemies, he says, I put on sackcloth, there's a reference to that, and look at what he says, and humbled myself with fasting.

Interesting, huh? He says, I humbled myself with fasting. And then from Joel chapter 2, it says, even now, here's God speaking, declares the Lord, return to me with all your heart. Look at this, with fasting and weeping and mourning, rend your heart, or in other words, rip your heart and not your clothes, not your garments, return to the Lord your God for He is gracious and compassionate and on and on and on, the rest of the verse. Notice that the element here is come to me return to me and do so with fasting Rend your garment or rather rend your heart not your garment meaning me humble yourselves before your God and show that With your expression of fasting and so forth We also see fasting in the New Testament.

By the way, you remember There was one point where the disciples of John came to Jesus's disciples and they said, you know The Pharisees fast and we fast but how come you know, you guys don't fast and they went to Jesus and remember that they said they asked us this question and So we're just kind of wondering why don't why don't we fast and you remember Jesus's response? He said well, how can the guests of the bridegroom? Fast while the bridegroom is among them when he's with them. You don't have to seek the Lord. He's right here in your midst Right, but then you know what Jesus said.

He said there's coming a time when he will be taken away and then you'll fast Then you will seek the face of God So, you know Jesus was kind of saying that at that point when he when he leaves a new dynamic would take place when in the body of Christ whereby our hearts would long for and Seek after the presence of God and we would even apply the the humbling aspect of fasting to to to to seek his face But seeking God's direction seeking God's will we see some of these things in the New Testament in the book of Acts We find this going on on the screen for you from Acts 13 3 It says so after they had fasted and they means the church at Antioch It says after they'd fasted and prayed they placed their hands on them and sent Them off and them refers to Paul and Barnabas on their very first missionary journey so we see that the church in Antioch as They're laying hands on these literally ordaining these men and sending them off on their Their their mission to bring the gospel to these areas They did so with fasting and prayer speaking of the humbling of themselves and saying God we submit to you to your plan and and so forth, but this fasting was again an expression of humility and the setting aside of something that is so basic to our lives as Eating to focus ourselves before the Lord and express our Devotion to that which we seek and so forth now As I thought about this idea of fasting and of course fasting as I said goes with prayer, which we talked about last week. I Thought to myself in Realistically speaking how applicable is this to the body of Christ? I mean, I got to tell you and I don't I mean I say this with a with with sadness If we want to

make sure we're gonna have a really small crowd All we got to do is invite people to come to a prayer meeting People have a hard time gathering together to pray the body of Christ is very difficult to get people to gather together and pray Well, I thought well that being the case how many Christians are realistically ever gonna fast I mean for biblical reasons in their lives, maybe 10% Maybe 10% of the body of Christ is ever gonna fast and pray seeking the face of God that way Well, I kind of I don't know. That's my guess. Okay, I could be wrong But I so I thought in light of that How applicable is us this morning talking about fasting and just exactly how much time should I spend talking about this?

you know and Then I got to thinking about the reason why fasting is so kind of abhorrent to us and The reason is is because you have to deny yourself You have to say no to yourself And I don't know about you, but I don't like saying no to myself. I like saying yes to myself I don't like telling my flesh. No, you can't have that But you know what? That's the essence of fasting is in fact, it's the essence of prayer I've always got something else to do instead of pray and Believe me when dinnertime rolls around I got something better to do than fast And I don't like Withholding things from my life and you know what? I don't think I'm alone in fact, I Believe that in our culture in our society today we have been I Think saying programmed goes way beyond what I want to accomplish here.

We've been influenced though Pretty pretty powerfully by our culture by our society the world in which we live To really not have to say no to ourselves because you see saying no to myself is called self-denial but we live in a culture that is really predicated upon self gratification, isn't it and self gratification is the kind of the Extendedness of saying yes to my flesh when whenever I want to whatever whatever need is in my life Yes, whatever issue if I'm tired, I'm going to go, you know lie down if I'm if I'm Cold I'm gonna put something on to warm up if I'm hot I'm gonna take something off to cool off if I've got a headache I'm gonna take this if I've got this, you know We're constantly saying yes to ourselves and the world encourages us to do this all day long Commercials and books and movies and television shows and we're constantly just being hammered with this with this message of self-gratification You deserve it your rights get out and do it, you know Be all that you can be love yourself and all these other things to go along with it And and then we could you know, here we are Christians and we've absorbed all that stuff from the world, right? I mean, let's just let's admit it and some of you in this room are like me you came to Christ as an adult And you learned well the ways of the world just like I did We learned how to dance with the world. We learned to adopt and accept the message of the world, which is take care of yourself And then we become a Christian And we start hearing things about Self-denial and it's kind of like What oh, don't get me wrong. We appreciate it. I mean we I appreciate self-denial.

I appreciate self-sacrifice I mean as a culture will even build monuments to people to do it, but we're gonna make real sure that we don't have to participate You know, I mean we really look up to people that give all and In a self-sacrificial way. We don't want to do it We'll appreciate him for what they did So you see the world's focus is on our comfort Not not self-sacrifice not self-denial Not putting up with something that's challenging or painful or difficult. That's not what we're all about and Self-denial is something to be avoided in the world It's the world we live in the world is rife with it and And Paul the Apostle Said it would be that way prophesied. In fact that it would be that way He wrote to Timothy in his second letter. And this is this is what he said 2nd Timothy 3 But mark this there will be terrible times in the last days people will be lovers of themselves Have we seen a fulfillment of that passage or what do you want me to describe how somebody acts when they love themselves?

They're constantly talking about being happy It's their goal in life. They want to be happy Jeremy Christians have said to me over the years. I just want to be happy To be happy People that is that that is what comes out of someone's mouth when they love themselves and They want to serve themselves and they want to gratify themselves Not when they want to deny themselves not when they're willing to say no to themselves But you know what's interesting about this Is that whole idea of self-denial is the very model the very pattern that Jesus Christ laid down for you and I and It encouraged us told us exhorted us To walk in and Paul echoed that exhortation. Let me show you from Philippians chapter 2 very popular passage He says your attitude should be the very same as that of Christ Jesus who? being in very nature God Did not consider equality with God something to be held on to or grasped But made him self Nothing.

Did you catch that who made Jesus Christ? Nothing when he became incarnate as a man who did it who did it to him? Nobody did it to him He did it to himself. Look what it says. He made himself Nothing.

Do you know what that is? That's self-denial that's Self-sacrifice and that is the attitude that you and I are called to emulate That's the model that he's given to us and isn't interesting when God becomes a man. He has to become nothing You and I think we're really something but yet when God becomes us he has to become nothing All right, it's kind of puts us in our place, doesn't it? But anyway, it goes on to says that to say he was he Made in human likeness and being found in appearance as a man He further humbled himself and became obedient to death even death on a cross Wow self-denial Self-sacrifice That's the model you see So here we are now we're Christians, right? I'm trusting that we're all Christians in this room and what that means Of course isn't just that we go to church or read the Bible means we've accepted Christ and what he did for us on the cross We believe that his death on the cross was enough to save us from our sin.

We've invited him into our heart We now have his Holy Spirit living in us, right? so The Holy Spirit is now speaking to all this stuff that we just read here from Philippians this model of self-sacrifice Self-denial and he's working that in our hearts and yet our flesh is trying to do the opposite Right. Our flesh is still leaning towards self gratification. We Love gratifying our flesh. We love saying yes to our flesh and we love being happy I want to be happy all my life, you know, well, it's all flesh It's all my flesh and the Holy Spirit is doing a work in my life And he wants to do way more than just happiness.

He wants to bring joy and fulfillment You know and he even shows me in these little snippets along the way that as I give myself Away as I spend myself on behalf of others. There's a joy that just overflows in my life There's a fulfillment in my life that nothing can match and then I'll kind of listen to my flesh for a while that wants to Gratify itself and I'll start to live for myself. I'll start to you know, do things that I want I want to make myself happy. I want to and you know what, you know what the result is. It's just emptiness Isn't it number?

We all you know we could all probably stand up at some point here if I gave you the opportunity and just talk about how Before you met Jesus you just lived for yourself. You lived for your personal self gratification And you thought if I just make enough money, you know Or if I just have this new car or if I just get that position or if I marry that person or if I you know Do this or do that or whatever or be able to take vacations, you know in in Hawaii or something to whatever whatever your goal was and then I'll and then I'll be happy and what happened you were miserable and you were empty and You were like good grief And and some of some of you took a little bit longer to come to terms with the reality of this thing Some of you just kind of went. Whoa, this is ridiculous. Others just kept striving for something better something bigger You know, it must be that over the next hill that happiness lies And then eventually we just get tired of it and we'd start going. Wait a minute.

This is ridiculous. I Am I have I have attained all these things in my life, and I'm not happy. I Am NOT fulfilled. I'm empty as a matter of fact Living for myself filling up my tank and I'm still empty And God comes along and we we give our hearts to Jesus and we recognize the work of the cross for what it is And then he begins to speak to us about a whole new way of filling our tanks He says you really want to have your tank full You want to be full of joy? You want to be full of energy?

Give your life away do what I did. You know the model that I showed you That's the path The path is not self-gratification. The path is self-denial deny yourself Give your life give your time give your energy Give it away. You've been given a gift by the Holy Spirit. Give that away to use it for him That's where

real fulfillment real joy and true biblical happiness lies So this is the pattern and Paul talks about it elsewhere to actually there's another passage in Ephesians I wanted to show you here.

Look at this. Look at this. I love this. He says be imitators of God therefore as dearly loved children and He says live a life of love just as Christ loved us and look what I emphasized here I put it in caps for you and gave him self up For us as a fragrant offering and what? sacrifice to God He gave himself up as a fragrant offering a fragrant sacrifice to God he gave himself up and you and I are to be imitators of that kind of selfless giving and Self-denial now Fasting is just one way we practice self-denial You know is one little small way when you stop and think about it self-denial really comes into play in the whole of the Christian Life it comes into play in my marriage Comes into play in parenting it for me it comes into play in pastoring everything I mean the the constant necessity of Dying to self setting self aside and giving deference and preference to other people is just a constant thing It is for all of us our Christian lives our Christian walk is never really going to be powerful until we learn this concept that if we want to live we must die Just like Jesus.

He showed us the pattern to live. You must die and For you and I that means dying to self literally denying self day by day little by little on and on and You know fasting may be a blip on the radar screen of self-denial, but it's a great way to practice When a meal comes along and I'm and I'm I'm so want to take care of the appetites of my flesh and Yet God is calling me to devote myself to prayer for something that has been laid upon my heart and is You know just powerfully present burdened on there and And he says why don't you deny the flesh? Why don't you deny self? Why don't you? Sacrifice for me for this thing Wow But I don't want to You know, I Don't think I ever will I don't think you ever will either and if we wait around for wanting to We'll never get around to it It comes because we know That if we don't say no to the flesh somewhere, we'll never be able to Remember what the Apostle Paul said about his body about his flesh He actually used kind of weird Terms he said I beat my body to make it my slave and that interesting terminology So that after I finished preaching the gospel, he says I myself will not be disqualified But he says I literally I I I I push my body to the point where I tell my body What it's gonna do my body doesn't call the shots for me.

Oh I so want to be there. Don't you I mean, I just so want to be there I'm so tired of being tied to the to the dominion of my body and and and the constant Needs and appetites and stuff like that and I want to practice this idea of self-denial I want to practice this idea of saying to my body tough You know tough you're hungry tough, and that's not we're not talking about self abasement or Self-abuse or something stupid like that. We're simply talking about being in control of Our bodies of our flesh Because you see if we never ever Practice that level of control if we never practice saying no to our appetites and our desires

and so forth Then what happens this temptation to sin comes along and we're just we're just like I've been used to saying yes, so yes Right. I've never ever spent any time in my life saying no to my body When my body goes I'm tired or I want to do this I want to eat what's there to eat or something like that? And I just just kind of just obey my body and walk into the you know kitchen and get what I need Oh, you know, whatever sort of a thing, you know, and it's like hey, you know, my body calls the shots You know, you're you're in charge buddy.

Just give it, you know And then what happens sin comes in or the potential for sin wells up in my life and where am I I Mean no position to even begin to say no I'm not practiced I'm not practiced saying no So you see fasting is just kind of one of these interesting sort of little expressions of No, I'm in charge But it's also a way of just showing The importance of what you are praying for and it's the model that Jesus gave us and so you and I need to Recognize that the Holy Spirit living within us has given us the power that we need to be Able to say no to the flesh Whether it's denying ourself a meal or a portion of a meal or you know There's even other ways to fast Paul talks in first Corinthians. You guys remember this he talks about a husband and a wife Withholding Sexual activity in their marriage for the purpose of prayer Now he warns them in that passage. Don't go to don't go. Don't go too long Because you know temptation will result in such a way that will cause problems But he said, you know, don't don't withhold yourself from one another in marriage except for prayer and just for a time so, you know There are other things that we can fast Sue and I on our vacation decided that we needed to have a at least a day where we're just fasting from technology It's like keep the computer off Keep the cell phone off Keep the tablet off turn them off and just Be disconnected You know That's hard to do Yeah, we're so connected today that it becomes this addictive sort of a thing in our lives You