*Introduction*

We have for a number of weeks now been looking at what Jesus had to say about how we live our Christian lives.

The overall theme of what Jesus says is this:

The Christian life is a simple one of faith and obedience, and not a religious one.

By this, I believe that Jesus is telling us how to live in such a way that it glorifies Him and not us. He slams the Pharisees and scribes, the religious leaders of the day, for their 'outward displays' of false humility and instead tells us to do - in secret.

The point is that you can have the praise and adoration of men NOW, or you can have the rewards of the Father at some stage, but you will have them, but you will not get both.

So far in this chapter, we have looked at giving to the poor and prayer, and all through this we have seen that Jesus is concerned with our hearts, about putting Him first.

This morning we come to fasting. I was going to leave it out, to skip over it and get on with storing up treasure and worry and other things that we might find more important.

But I did feel that I shouldn't in the end because fasting is actually something we should be more aware of, not because we have to do it, but because there are reasons when spiritually it can help us to do it.

Jesus shows us that our Christian lives can be divided into three areas:

1. The area where we do good to others - our giving, our works because of our faith.

2. Our intimate personal relationship with God - our prayer life

3. Our own personal discipline in our spiritual lives - seen through fasting, but actually it is an example that shows us we need to be disciplined in every part of our spiritual lives.

So I have my contact with others, my contact with God and my contact with myself.

But before we look at this subject of fasting this morning, let me spend a moment explaining why we are going through this sermon on the mount.

***John 14:5Thomas said to him, “Lord, we don’t know where you are going, so how can we know the way?”***

***6Jesus answered, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.***

If Jesus is the way and the truth and the life, it is obvious that we need to know Him and know what he wants us to do in our lives.

What Jesus says in this sermon is everything we need to know in order to live as HE wants us to live and how we can affect those around us by the way we live so that they glorify God our heavenly Father.

So it is important that we have the right relationship with the Father, a right relationship with others and a right relationship with ourselves in order for us to be the salt and light that Jesus calls us to be.

We are going to answer a number of questions this morning.

1. What is fasting?

2. What is its purpose?

3. What is the right way and the wrong way to approach fasting?

**1. What is fasting?**

very simply, fasting is the absence of food for spiritual purposes or for spiritual reasons.

Jesus did not directly teach fasting, but he did indirectly.

***Matt 4:1 Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted[***[***a***](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew+4&version=NIV#fen-NIV-23211a)***] by the devil. 2After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry.***

***Matt 9:14Then John’s disciples came and asked him, “How is it that we and the Pharisees fast often, but your disciples do not fast?”***

***15Jesus answered, “How can the guests of the bridegroom mourn while he is with them? The time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them; then they will fast.***

So Jesus himself fasted and he implied that after he was gone, so would his disciples.

Fasting was also part of the early Church

***Acts 14:23Paul and Barnabas appointed elders[***[***a***](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Acts+14:22-24&version=NIV#fen-NIV-27438a)***] for them in each church and, with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord, in whom they had put their trust.***

**2. What is its purpose?**

Fasting was only commanded by God on one occasion - The Day of Atonement.

It was to be like a Sabbath but with fasting as well.

***Lev 23:26The Lord said to Moses, 27‘The tenth day of this seventh month is the Day of Atonement. Hold a sacred assembly and deny yourselves,[***[***d***](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=leviticus+23&version=NIVUK#fen-NIVUK-3430d)***] and present a food offering to the Lord. 28Do not do any work on that day, because it is the Day of Atonement, when atonement is made for you before the Lord your God.***

David, when his child through Bathsheba, was sick, fasted, but when the child died, he stopped fasting, because he could do no more.

As we look through the scriptures and see what Jesus says about fasting and what its purpose is, it would appear that it was done to bring us directly into the presence of the Father. Jesus fasted for 40 days and nights before coming face to face with the devil himself, David fasted until the child died - he had his answer, the early church fasted when committing people to the Lord, all these things are spiritual reasons and so its purpose is wholly spiritual.

**3. What is the right way and the wrong way to approach fasting?**

Quite clearly the wrong way to approach fasting is to bring attention to what you are doing. Jesus clearly tells us that we are to 'carry on as normal', washing ones face and combing ones hair were normal.

*Also fasting as part of a diet is not true fasting* in the Biblical way - there is a fasting diet, but this is not what it means.

*It must not be mechanical or part of a discipline of life.*

What I mean by this is that we do not fast because we have become a Christian and it is part of our religion, and that I have to do on such and such a day or time of the year.

If we look upon it in that way, the 'special' part of fasting is lost. The spiritual aspect is gone.

This can actually be said for praying, if we say that we must pray as part of our daily routine at a certain time, why are we praying?

We have made it a discipline, it has become mechanical and not a part of a true relationship with the Father.

God wants us to pray to him all the time, not just at a specific time on a specific day... God wants you to pray because out of the depths of your heart YOU want to pray.

*Fasting is not about getting immediate results.*

It does not make your prayers jump the queue as it were . We don't have a quicker conveyor belt for prayer and fasting than just prayer alone.

We cannot look back at events such as where people have had all night prayer and fasting and revival breaks out, so that's what we must do to get revival!!

It is not a means for obtaining blessing from God.

Some people take this attitude with tithing. There are certain preachers and teachers that advocate that if you tithe, God will bless your income, he will bless your business, your financial troubles will disappear.

This is known as Prosperity Gospel. Some people will link their tithing to their success but it is not in scripture.

So we are not to use fasting in this way.

Lastly, their are benefits for the physical from fasting. That is that your body can benefit, and so can your mind. But do not confuse what is physical with what is spiritual.

So that is the wrong way to approach fasting, so what is the right way.

The way to approach fasting is this - when you feel impelled or led to it for spiritual reasons.

It is not to be done because the Church is doing it, it is not to be done for Lent for instance or as part of our discipline.

I must, you must, discipline myself at all times, but must fast only when I feel led by the Holy Spirit of God to do so, when I am seeking a mighty spiritual purpose, because there is a need for an entire concentration of my whole being upon God and my worship of Him.

That is how we should approach the matter of fasting.

Jesus is saying in this passage of Matthew, when you fast - be natural, be normal, look normal.

Some Christians are so afraid of being regarded as miserable, or foolish, or dowdy, that they go to the other extreme, they try and give the impression that they are happy and bright. They go out of their way not to dress drab.

Jesus is saying, forget other people altogether, forget your face, forget yourself, forget other people altogether. It is our interest in other peoples opinions of us that is wrong, just forget about it all and give yourself entirely to God. be concerned about God and pleasing him, bring Him honour and glory.

When we are living for God, we will not need to be told when to fast, we will know when to fast.

*Conclusion*

Jesus' attitude to giving, praying and fasting is all about our relationship with Him, its all about our walk with Him.

If our whole lives are taken up with wanting to please Him and not other peoples opinions of us, then we will be the living witnesses he wants us to be, we will not be hypocrites, we will not be just empty sounding vessels.

Instead we will be the light that is on a hill for all to see, we will be salt that brings flavour, we will do good works that just occur naturally because we have a love for others.

But it comes from a personal relationship with him, a relationship that is different from anything the world knows, different from religion.

Do you have a real personal relationship with Jesus Christ, one that is based on faith in Him, trust in Him, a reliance on Him, no matter what.

Faith is not just a belief that Jesus is real and was a good man, it is a complete trust in Who He is and His saving work on the cross of Calvary.

***Heb 11:6 And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.***

***James 2:14What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them?.......***

***18But someone will say, ‘You have faith; I have deeds.’***

***Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by my deeds. 19You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that – and shudder.20You foolish person, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless*** - AMEN