

Sermon Title: Travelling In The "Fast" Lane  
Scripture Text: Matt. 6:16-18 (Sermon on the Mount #24)

Speaker: Jim Harris  
Date: 2-7-21

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Let's come to Matthew Chapter 6—almost exactly in the middle of the Sermon on the Mount, which is Chapters 5, 6, and 7. And the attempt at cleverness for the day is the title: "Travelling In The 'Fast' Lane." The reason for that is that fasting is the third of the three examples that Jesus uses in the first part of this chapter to expose the hypocrisy of the Pharisees' brand of spirituality, and to teach about true worship of God. The first example was giving alms—contributing for ministries to the poor. The second example was prayer—and that gets the most ink of these three.

The theme that dominates all three of these paragraphs is obvious: True worship is focused on God; true worship *shuns* the attention of men, and turns the head and the heart toward God (Ps. 115:1; 1 Cor. 2:4-5). Hypocrisy always pays attention to who is watching (Matt. 23:5). The hypocrite wants to be sure other people see him or her acting spiritual and demonstrating who good they really are.

Well, now we come to the subject of fasting. It's a subject mentioned several times in the Bible; and really, I think, seldom understood. Most discussions about fasting fall into one or the other of two extreme positions. Some people turn fasting into a legalistic duty, and they become modern Pharisees—wanting to make sure that *everybody* fasts the way they want them to do it. It has been labelled by some as a "spiritual discipline"—and just using that terminology implies that *if you don't do it*, or if you don't do it the way that so-and-so *thinks* you ought to do it, you are obviously lacking something in the discipline of your life with God; or, at least, you're missing something, and settling for some sort of a second-best brand of a walk with the Lord.

The other extreme is to just completely ignore fasting, as if to say: "Well, that's not for us; that's just a throwback to a bygone era"—and they don't even try to deal with the Biblical material on the subject of fasting.

What we know *for sure* is: When Jesus spoke these words, He was addressing a situation in a culture of the Jews of His day where fasting *was* a common practice; and since we are now face-to-face with a brief segment—it's just three verses long, but it's from the Lord Himself, and it's on the subject of fasting—it's time for us to deal honestly with what the Bible says about it.

The starting point is to make sure that we know what fasting is. I thought about saying that once I got a ticket for fasting too much on the highway; but I thought, "No, this early in the morning, nobody will figure out what *that* is all about." Fasting is simply abstaining from food for a period of time (e.g., 2 Sam. 12:21; Est. 4:16). That's *all* that it means. Usually, it involves abstaining from all food, though almost everyone who fasts drinks water, which is medically wise to do. In various cultures throughout history, fasting has been practiced for various reasons; so fasting is *not* limited to Jews or Christians—it's done in a lot of different contexts. Some pagans in ancient times actually believed that evil spirits could enter the body through food; so when they felt that they were under demonic attack, they would fast to perhaps starve the spirits, but definitely to prevent *more* evil spirits from entering the body.

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And by the way: That very superstition attached to that belief may well have had an influence on the twisted reasoning of the Pharisees—targets of this Sermon [on the Mount]—who attached incredible significance to the proper way to do symbolic washing of hands, cups, pitchers, and pots (Mk. 7:4). Remember, Jesus *blasted* their foolishness on that subject—it's recorded in Matthew 15, and also in Mark Chapter 7.

The leaders of most eastern mystical religious have been consistently committed to fasting, and often for long periods of time. In some cases, they claim that fasting is necessary in order to achieve a spiritual level in which you can receive mystical visions and insights.

The Roman Catholic Church has its version of it. The Roman Catholic Church requires fasting on Ash Wednesday, on Good Friday, and on the Fridays during Lent. You might say, "Well, there's a Christian organization!" Well, none of those days, none of those times, have *anything* to do with *anything* that we're told to do in the Bible! So it's *fine* to fast, but that's not what the Bible teaches about it.

In our society these days, fasting has become a fad, without necessarily any spiritual significance attached to it. It is promoted in some circles for purely physical and cosmetic reasons. Some fad diets are based upon cycles of fasting. And you know what? They tend to work! When you don't eat, you don't gain weight! And if you move more and eat less, it's going to be good for your weight control program. But that's not what Jesus is talking about.

The preponderance of information on the subject of fasting actually serves to obscure and confuse what the Bible says about it. So as I have encountered fasting in the Bible, I took the time to search *every single passage* in the Bible that contains the word "fast," "fasted," "fasting," or any other possible form of that word. I love you too much to show it all to you, but let me summarize what I found.

Perhaps the most profound thing about fasting in the Bible is that there is only *one time* for a fast that is *commanded* in the Bible—it's for Israel. On the Day of Atonement—Yom Kippur—Israel was to fast, and that was *one day* per year. That was connected to the Law of Moses, to the Old Covenant; the passage is Leviticus 16:29-30—"This shall be a permanent statute for you: in the seventh month, on the tenth day of the month, you shall humble your souls and not do any work, whether the native, or the alien who sojourns among you; for it is on this day that atonement shall be made for you to cleanse you; you will be clean from all your sins before the Lord." (NASB-1995, and throughout, unless otherwise noted)

Now—you didn't see the word "fast" or "fasting" there, did you? Because *it isn't* there. But even though it's *not* there, that phrase: "humble your souls" was immediately and has always been taken to mean "fasting" (Ps. 35:13). And so, what does He say there? You're not going to eat that day, and you're going to take the day off; you're going to fast and do no work; no food, and it's an extra Sabbath for you, if you will.

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Now, that idea of having the right humble heart before God—that's at the root of it, so "humble your soul" before the Lord (see Ezra 8:21).

And of course, the rabbis got ahold of that, and they had to be very specific about it; so the rabbis ruled that you could not eat a quantity of food as large as a date on that day.

Here's the corollary to that one [commanded fast]: *All other* cases of fasting in the Bible are *voluntary*. There are many examples of people fasting at times *other* than the Day of Atonement, but they're not commanded by God. What you find as the common denominator in those situations is that there was a sense of urgency, a great sense of need, a great sense of humility before the Lord; and almost always in a time of crisis. So it is perfectly fine to fast at any of those times.

And in most of those cases, it's pretty easy to see that a couple of factors might work together. When you go through an extremely stressful time, an extremely painful time, often you're appetite goes away; you can lose your appetite in the face of extreme emotions (e.g. 1 Sam. 20:34; 2 Sam. 12:16-17).

And then, couple that with a strong desire to concentrate on seeking God, and to know His Word and to know His wisdom, to the point that earthly matters—which are temporary—are of very minor importance. So food can just drop off the radar, if you will, and you just decide: "I'll do without that" for a day or a couple of days, or whatever it is.

Without looking at all the specifics, let me show you a summary of what I observed as the types of occasions and circumstances when fasting was practiced by people in the Bible—other than on the Day of Atonement. There were times of war or the threat of war; sickness; mourning over someone's death; penitence—repentance to bring an end to God's chastening; impending danger, like the threat of an enemy attack; the commemoration of calamities; times of drought—when you don't have any water and your crops are dying, you might be calling out to God; and there are two cases in the Bible—one with Moses and one with Daniel—when they fasted in preparation for receiving special revelation from God. That gives you an example of the kinds of things that would be of such momentous significance that you might fast.

When you look at *how* to do it, the lengths of fasts varied considerably. The most common fast is one day, from sunrise to sunset; and after sunset, food can be taken. The moral of that story is: Always fast in the winter, when the days are shorter! That's how the rabbis would always think.

There are examples of other durations of fasting. Esther fasted for three days, day and night, before her big showdown with the king (Est. 4:16). There was the fast associated with the mourning of the death of King Saul in First Samuel 31; that lasted seven days. David also fasted for seven days, crying out to God for mercy for the son that was born to him and Bathsheba (2 Sam. 12:16-18); and when the baby died, he washed himself and took his food (vs. 20).

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The only two longer fasts recorded in the Bible were Moses, before he received the Law (Ex. 34:28); and Jesus, at the time of His temptation (Matt. 4:2)—and those were both *forty* days and nights. In those cases, there was obviously an element of divine protection, because you can't starve yourself for 40 days, and then do things like climb a mountain and carry some big stones back down, or face the Devil face-to-face.

There is also the boast of the self-righteous Pharisee described in Luke Chapter 18; this was the guy in the temple who "was praying this to himself: 'God, I thank You that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector.'" And what was his boast? "I fast twice a week" (Lk. 18:11-12)—*exactly* the stuff that Jesus is opposing here: boasting about how much you fast.

Although it is not technically a fast, some people have at times refrained from certain *kinds* of food. For example, Daniel said this: "In those days, I, Daniel, had been mourning for three entire weeks" (Dan. 10:2). Mourning what? Well, mourning the spiritual situation into which Israel fell, that brought about them being in captivity, where Daniel was praying that prayer. And he says: "I did not eat any tasty food, nor did meat or wine enter my mouth, nor did I use any ointment at all until the entire three weeks were completed" (vs. 3). So he just went really, really basic and simple and minimalistic in that, and that was somewhat of a fast.

In the Bible, and in most practices of fasting that you can find throughout history—whether in Biblical history or not—fasting is frequently associated with prayer. In other cases, it is associated with a strong sense of purpose for a specific cause.

The most *foolish* example of any fast anywhere recorded in the Bible is in the Book of Acts, Chapter 23, while Paul was in Caesarea and about to be shipped out to Rome. We're told this: "When it was day, the Jews"—the ones who wanted Paul killed—"formed a conspiracy and bound themselves under an oath, saying that they would neither eat nor drink until they had killed Paul. There were more than forty who formed this plot" (vss. 12-13). And all forty of them died of starvation—*it doesn't say*. You know why? They weren't successful, obviously; Paul had just been promised by the Lord that he *would* go on and give his testimony in Rome. But the rabbis taught—again, this is the system that Jesus was confronting—they taught that such vows were not binding *when they couldn't be carried out*. So that's an example of the hypocrisy and the foolishness that Jesus was confronting in this sermon. Remember: "Your yes is to be yes, and your no, no" (Jas. 5:12; cf. Matt. 5:37). I mean, I could say to you that "I vow that I will run for 175 or more yards in the Super Bowl tonight, and score three touchdowns, or I won't eat!" Well, if you did that under the system of the Pharisees, you could say, "Well, if it can't be fulfilled..." Now, *that's* an important vow, isn't it? "I solemnly swear to do this—if I can." That's *not* what it's all about! (see Num. 30:2)

We get some interesting tidbits about fasting that come to us from early church history. We have the writings of some Christians as early as the Second Century, and it shows what has been done with the subject of fasting from very early on in the church, and how quickly some in the church added things to the Bible.

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Fasting two days per week was recommended in a document called the "Didache"—that's the Greek word for "teaching"—also known as "The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles." It wasn't written by the Twelve Apostles, but it purports that some of it was handed down from the Apostles. It's not inspired; it's not authoritative; but it *is* insightful. The Didache recommends Christians fasting two days a week, on Monday and Thursday. They chose Monday the Thursday specifically to be *different* than the two days of the week on which the Jews tended to fast.

That same document says that if a person was going to be baptized—whoever was going to baptize the person, and the other leaders in the church community, were to fast prior to the baptism.

A document called Second Clement—written by a man named Clement—said: "Fasting is better than prayer." Now, that's an interesting one! He didn't say *how* it's "better." I think the gist of it is: Praying is good, but when you are *so focused* on praying that *food* becomes irrelevant to you and you're *fasting* and praying, that's maybe even *better* than you pouring out your heart to God. I *assume* that's what he meant.

A man named Hermas called fasting important; but in that same context, he declared that the "good life," *living* the "good life"—in other words: the life of good works, the life of one who is walking with the Lord—that is the *real* fast that is pleasing to the Lord. I think I would have liked Hermas the best of any of these guys, because he seems to be saying: "Look—yeah, you can do the stuff on the outside, but the *real* thing is: How are you living?" And that is what honors the Lord.

He also spoke of a modified fast in which you would eat only bread and water; and then, the money that you would have otherwise spent on groceries would be given to charity—so, again: fasting with a purpose in mind.

Now, I want to emphasize: All those things are *in addition* to what the Bible says; and I point them out just for the sake of general interest in understanding the subject of fasting, but also to demonstrate how common it is for people to take something simple and turn it into a bunch of *legalism!* (cf. Mk. 2:23-27)

So, let's summarize: There was only one fast per year *ever* prescribed by God, and it was on the Day of Atonement. Now, since the Day of Atonement is a thing of the past—we don't have that day once a year; we have the "once for all" sacrifice of Jesus that has superseded the Day of Atonement (Heb. 7:27; 9:12; 10:10)—therefore, for us, *no fasting is commanded* in Scripture. No fasting is specifically required in Scripture.

As a matter of fact, *Jesus and His disciples* did not routinely fast; and that was a contrast between them and the Pharisees and the disciples of John the Baptist; and that was brought up to Jesus as one of those pointed questions to try to get Him in trouble; it's in Matthew 9:14-15—"Then the disciples of John came to Him, asking, 'Why do we and the Pharisees fast, but Your disciples do not fast?' And Jesus said to them, 'The attendants of the bridegroom cannot mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them, can they? But the

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days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast.' " Notice: even there, He did not *command* fasting; He implied that after His return to the Father—when the Bridegroom isn't present with us anymore—that there would be times when we might want to fast. It's left to us to decide when that is.

I should point out to you: There is even an argument that *can* be made—I'm not so sure that I would agree with it—but remember that Jesus said, "When I leave, I'm going to send you 'another Comforter' (Jn. 14:16, KJV)"—a Comforter of exactly the same kind, who is the Holy Spirit (vs. 17). So some argue that, yes, the Bridegroom is gone—Jesus has gone back to the Father—*but*, He sent us "another Comforter," so we have the presence of Christ with us because we have the Holy Spirit with us (cf. Jn. 14:18), and therefore, that removes the motivation to fast. Well, you can still fast if you want to! That's what we're saying.

It was in the historical context of people who fasted for various reasons and in various ways, frequently thinking that their practice of fasting gained them better standing with God—that was the context in which Jesus confronted the subject of fasting. It's a *very* simple passage. It's only three verses long. And I want to point out to you: This is not Jesus's handbook on how to fast—that's not His point! His point is to confront the people who were applying the wrong *meaning* to fasting.

I got up this morning and was working through all of this, and praying for all of you, as I always do, and I thought, "How ironic that we arrived at *this passage* on fasting today—the high holy day of American folk religion! Super Bowl Sunday *always* sets records for food consumption! What better time to talk about fasting!

Real simple passage. Three verses: Verse 16—How *Not* To Fast. Verse 17—How *To* Fast. And Verse 18—*Why* To Fast.

So let's jump in at Verse 16. Jesus says: "Whenever you fast, do not"—so that's why I say, this is How *Not* To 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."

Frequently, the Pharisees and those who they led would, on a fasting day—and remember the boast: "I do it *twice a week!*"—many of them, when they would fast, would wear old clothes; and not only maybe not do their normal facial hygiene, but some of them would even cover their face with dirt or ashes to *show* that they were fasting. It was an act designed to let other people see it and say, "Oh, how pious that person is!" And Jesus's response: "They have their reward in full."

Now, if you're going to *give up* something in order to better serve God, the last thing you want to do is *advertise it!* Just *do it*—between you and the Lord. If you say things or do things designed to attract attention to your own sacrifice, the only reward you will ever get on Earth is if somebody notices. God is *not* impressed with phony piety.

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Remember how this chapter began? Chapter 6, Verse 1—"Beware of practicing your righteousness"—now, is practicing righteousness a good thing? Yes! But, "Beware of practicing your righteousness *before men to be noticed by them*; otherwise you have no reward with your Father who is in heaven." And then right after that, what did Jesus do? "Let Me give you an illustration! When you give your alms, don't sound a trumpet. When you do your praying, do it as *privately* and *inconspicuously* as you can. And if you fast, *don't do anything to attract attention to yourself.*"

When I was in college—most of the mud had dried from the Flood that year; it was a long time ago—I was blessed to attend a small school that was part of a cluster of schools, and we were actually allowed to register for courses at the other schools, a certain amount per year. I did that just once. My roommate knew for sure that he wanted to be a teacher, and I was thinking, "I just might"; and so we saw this class come up on the Philosophy of Education, so we signed up. It was taught by a visiting professor; I didn't know that, or who this person was, when I signed up for the class.

The visiting professor happened to be a Roman Catholic priest—and even in those days, he would not have been regarded as a particularly conservative one; he was a fulltime professor at a Catholic university not far from there. He wore the costume all the time in the class. I honestly don't remember very much about the class—if I were to rank all of the courses I took in college, this would have been in my bottom three of most favorite, most impactful ones—but I *do* remember two very vivid things about the man at that time.

I was a very young believer in Christ. I did not know the world of all the different things that fall under the label of "Christianity." I did not know very much at all about Roman Catholicism. So this guy was kind of my first exposure; I had never met a priest in person, until that time.

But, the two things that I remember *specifically* about him were, first: he mentioned *at least twice*, every single week, that he had taken a vow of poverty. Now, what's the relevance about that to teaching a Philosophy of Education course? It was *specifically* to remind us that *he* had taken a vow of poverty.

The other thing that made an impression on me was that he was a classic chain-smoker; and in those days, classrooms were not No Smoking Zones in college. He smoked *literally* nonstop through every single class; he was one of those who would light one cigarette with the end of the one before it.

Now, is *that* an indictment of Roman Catholicism? No. I'm not saying that he was typical of all priests. Now I know *a whole lot more* about Roman Catholicism; I probably *would not* have taken that class, had I done some more research. But I can say for sure that his behavior and his speech revealed two things beyond a shadow of a doubt—and *I* saw them, even in my spiritual infancy: He was more addicted to a chemical substance than he was to God. And, as far as his financial sacrifices, truly I can say to you: He has his reward in full.

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Do you understand: The whole thing is about *motivation*. Remember when we studied those earlier verses, and I said: It isn't a sin if someone finds out about your giving, or your giving to the poor. It isn't a sin if someone catches you praying. The sin is in trying to make sure that they find out! It's *you wishing* that they would find out, and it comes down to a simple dichotomy: Are you serving God, or are you trying to impress men? (see Gal. 1:10)

That's How Not To Fast—to be seen by men. Now, go on to the next verse: How To Fast. Very simple. Verse 17—"But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face..." In other words: Don't cover yourself in ashes. Don't wear your scrappy clothing that day. Do as you usually do in personal hygiene! Don't go around *trying* to look miserable so that people will know or suspect or even *ask* if you're fasting, so that you can *explain* all of your wonderful good works.

Now, Jesus *does not say* that His followers *must* fast. Neither does He say *not* to fast. He says: "*When you fast, don't do it this way; do it this way.*"

The examples of it in the Early Church—actually, they're rather sparse; but they do give us a hint at what that first generation or two of Christians thought was important enough to provoke them to fast. If you read Acts 13:1-3, you'll see that the leadership of the church in Antioch—that was the first fully-Gentile church that trained, commissioned, equipped, sent and supported, and received back missionaries; that was a significant thing, and this is the beginning of the First Missionary Journey: "When they had fasted and prayed and laid their hands on [Paul and Barnabas], they sent them away" (vs. 3). And it mentions before that—in that era when there *was* still direct revelation—as they were fasting, the Holy Spirit told them to set apart Paul and Barnabas.

What's in between the beginning of Chapter 13 and the end of Chapter 14? Well, the whole First Missionary Journey. Luke gives us this summary in Acts 14:23—"When they had appointed elders for them in every church, having prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed." So, in those two situations, which are the most prominent ones in the New Testament—in the early church, anyway—the common denominator is: commissioning leadership for Gospel ministry.

You have one more, in Acts Chapter 27; it's just Luke referring to something that Paul had done. In Verse 9, he wrote: "When considerable time had passed and the voyage was now dangerous, since even the fast was already over..." It's just a mention in passing of this fast—that was Paul, who had entered into a time of fasting with some of the Jewish brethren. That was not a recommendation of fasting, or a recommendation that *you* should all do it, but it was Paul living out his own strategy to not create cultural barriers for fellowship, but to break them down (i.e., 1 Cor. 9:19-23). So when he was with Jews, he did Jewish stuff—dressed Jewish, ate kosher. When he was with Gentiles, he ate *their* stuff (1 Cor. 10:27), he dressed their way. And that's just a passing illustration of it. There is no spiritual merit in Paul doing that, or in *you* fasting. The value, in that case, was in showing respect and opening opportunities for evangelism.



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Now: Why To Fast. Why would you *not* make a show of how miserable you were? Well, Verse 18—"...so that your fasting will not be noticed by men, but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you."

The only reason to fast, therefore, is to focus your thoughts on God, to the exclusion of mundane things of the world—even to the point of giving up food, maybe all day. It has to be for a spiritual benefit. And it's *strictly* between you and God. Do you see that? "...so that your fasting will not be noticed by men..." Go out of your way *not* to make a big deal out of it! That's His point.

I once received a brochure in the mail, sent to pastors and teachers and leaders; it was for a conference on fasting. They decided: "This is important enough—we need to have a conference about it!" I came to find out later that this was from a group of people who feel that fasting is a very important spiritual discipline; and if you're not doing it, you're not really being "spiritual," if you will. But I kid you not—I read that, and I reread it, and I looked at it, and it actually said this: "The conference will begin with a luncheon." And they gave the schedule of the time, every day, for the group breakfast, the group lunch, the group dinner, and when the evening snacks would be offered! *Somebody*, get a clue! People *read* that stuff that you put out! *How silly!*

What have we seen already? This is the *third* time now: "Your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you." Back to Verse 4—Do it "so that your giving will be in secret; and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you." And then, Verse 6—"When you pray, go into your inner room, close your door and pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you."

So now—that was three pretty simple verses...*way too early* to quit preaching! I know the question: Should I be fasting? Should this be part of my life? Well, remember: It is *not commanded*. It is something you *may* or *may not* want to do, at various times in your life.

Look back at the list of examples of times when people were motivated to fast, as we see it in Scripture: War, or the threat of war; or, maybe we would say: when you or your son or daughter is in the military and they're about to be deployed to a place where people are shooting at each other—*that* might get your attention, to pray and fast about that! A time of sickness—yours or somebody else's. Mourning over someone's death—like with the death of Saul. Penitence to bring an end to God's chastening—that seems to be what Daniel was saying; Daniel hadn't *done* all of those things, but Daniel was confessing that Israel *deserved* what they were getting from the chastening hand of God (Dan. 9:4-8).

Maybe there's some sort of impending danger—possibly even the threat of an enemy attack. Sometimes there is fasting in commemoration of calamities. I've attended a couple of services, *especially* around 2002 through 2005, in which people were commemorating the attacks of September 11th, 2001—remembering that, and how we felt as a nation then. People remember World War 1, World War 2, the Korean War, the Viet Nam War—any of those things. Sometimes that goes along with fasting.

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How about in time of drought? Well, not *here*—not *now*—but if your crops were in the ground and dying for lack of water, you might be motivated. Or Moses and Daniel, in preparation for receiving special revelation from God; not *now*—God is not going to give you special, direct, personal revelation (Heb. 1:1-2; cf. Lk. 10:16; 2 Tim. 3:16-17)—but, maybe you need to research something in Scripture; maybe you have an issue, and you want to find all of the wisdom that God has on it, like we read about in Proverbs; you want to find everything that applies to that situation, and "How can I care best for this person? What can I do that will best express the Gospel in this situation? How can I best care for my child, who is facing this thing?" Maybe you'd want to just set aside a time to pray and fast and seriously study the Scriptures.

So the conclusion to draw from that is: You can fast whenever you wish—*especially* when you're facing a crisis, *especially* when you want to devote yourself as thoroughly as possible to God and to His Word.

I want to conclude with a passage that I think deserves our attention. God had very strong words for Israel, and He delivered them through Isaiah. It's Isaiah Chapter 58. A lot of people go there when they discuss fasting. I want you to notice the emphasis on motivation, and on how God is repulsed by hypocrisy. The chapter begins this way:

"Cry loudly, do not hold back; raise your voice like a trumpet, and declare to My people their transgression and to the house of Jacob their sins"—God is telling Isaiah: "Hey, *ring this bell!* Preach it, Brother! This is serious!" He continues: "Yet they seek Me day by day and delight to know My ways, as a nation that has done righteousness and has not forsaken the ordinance of their God"—they're acting as if they haven't done anything wrong. "They ask Me for just decisions, they delight in the nearness of God. 'Why have we fasted and You do not see?'—apparently, that's what they're saying to God—"Why have we humbled ourselves and You do not notice?' Behold, on the day of your fast you find your desire, and drive hard all your workers. Behold, you fast for contention and strife and to strike with a wicked fist. You do not fast like you do today to make your voice heard on high. Is it a fast like this which I choose, a day for a man to humble himself? Is it for bowing one's head like a reed and for spreading out sackcloth and ashes as a bed? Will you call this a fast, even an acceptable day to the Lord?" (vss. 1-5) God is challenging their *motivation*, far more than the outward act of their fasting.

Now listen to God's opinion of what He would *delight* to see in His people, starting at Verse 6—"Is this not the fast which I choose"—Okay, so, *what* ought you to be doing? This should be included when you fast: "To loosen the bonds of wickedness, to undo the bands of the yoke, and to let the oppressed go free and break every yoke? Is it not to divide your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into the house; when you see the naked, to cover him; and not to hide yourself from your own flesh?" You see, He's saying, "If you're *doing things* that glorify Me, in the midst of your fasting, I will be rejoicing." Then He says: "Then your light will break out like the dawn, and your recovery will speedily spring forth; and your righteousness will go before you; the glory of the Lord will be your rear guard. Then you will call, and the Lord will answer; you will cry, and He will say, 'Here I am.' If you remove the yoke from your midst, the pointing of the finger

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Scripture Text: Matt. 6:16-18 (Sermon on the Mount #24)

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and speaking wickedness, and if you give yourself to the hungry and satisfy the desire of the afflicted, then your light will rise in darkness and your gloom will become like midday. And the Lord will continually guide you, and satisfy your desire in scorched places, and give strength to your bones; and you will be like a watered garden, and like a spring of water whose waters do not fail. Those from among you will rebuild the ancient ruins; you will raise up the age-old foundations; and you will be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of the streets in which to dwell" (vss. 6-12).

He's looking past the captivity and saying: "Look! When there is *real change*; when there is *real repentance*; when you don't just go through an act of fasting and give Me lip service, but it affects how you treat other people—*then* you're going to have My blessing!"

So, I think the question that Jesus would have asked, had He stopped and given an invitation at this point of the Sermon on the Mount—He would have been very clear: Do you have a heart that desires to know and please God?

Now, we know that can only come as we stand in His grace through His Son, Jesus Christ (Rom. 5:1-2; cf. Acts 3:16; 18:27b; 26:18; Titus 3:5-6). But do you *truly desire* to know God and please God and serve God and be a good representative of His, that people will "see your good works, and glorify"—*not you*, but "your Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 5:16)? Or, do you just like to put on a show? "I fast twice a week—*three times* during Easter week!" No...What *are* you trusting in? That's the point!

Travel in the "fast lane" *as much as you want to*—as long as it's between you and the Lord, and your desire is for His glory (Ps. 115:1).

Now, let's pray:

*Father, thank You for Your wonderful goodness to us in Christ, for the riches of Your grace in which we stand—blessed with "every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus." Father, it's so easy to get focused on ourselves—our wants, our desires, our comforts—and to miss the whole point of what it is that You want from us. And so, Father, as always, we ask You to have Your way with us. Please do not let a soul leave this place trusting in anything other than the simplicity of Christ and what He has done. Put the Gospel on our lips. Put us in places where we can serve as Your representatives, even this week. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.*