

MATT 6 Fasting and Atonement

16“Moreover, when you fast, do not be like the hypocrites, with a sad countenance. For they disfigure their faces that they may appear to men to be fasting. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward. 17But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, 18so that you do not appear to men to be fasting, but to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly.

What “Moreover” means (simply)

“In addition to what I’ve just said...”

“Continuing this same idea...”

“And now, this also...”

It’s a connector, not a new topic.

Why that matters

Jesus is not suddenly switching subjects to fasting.

He is continuing a pattern:

Matthew 6 flow:

1. Giving
2. Prayer
3. Fasting

Each one starts the same way:

- “When you give...”
- “When you pray...”
- “Moreover, when you fast...”

So “Moreover” is Jesus saying:

“Fasting belongs in the same category as giving and prayer.”

What category is that?

These are all:

acts of devotion (or better yet, Relation) toward God

And in every case, He is correcting the same problem

- doing them to be seen
- performing righteousness
- seeking human approval

So what is Jesus really saying with “Moreover”?

This is powerful for your talk:
“Just like giving...
just like prayer...
fasting has also been distorted.
So let me correct that too.”

The First Explicit Fast in the Bible

The first clear, intentional fast recorded in Scripture is by Moses:
Exodus 34:28 –

“So he was there with the Lord forty days and forty nights; he neither ate bread nor drank water...”

This happens when Moses is on Mount Sinai receiving the Law.

What’s significant:

- This is a complete fast (no food and no water)
- It happens in the direct presence of God
- It is tied to revelation, covenant, and holiness

So in terms of recorded, deliberate fasting, Moses is the first.

The First Communal Fast

After Moses, fasting becomes more established.

One early example:

- Israelites fasting together in Judges 20:26
- They fast, weep, and seek God before battle.

What This Reveals Spiritually

The pattern is really powerful:

- Fasting begins in the presence of God (Moses)
- It becomes a response to need, repentance, or seeking guidance
- Later, it becomes part of regular spiritual life (e.g., Day of Atonement)

Fasting is not required because God needs your hunger. It is asked of people because we need humility, clarity, and surrender.

In the Bible, fasting is usually connected to a few things:

Humbling yourself before God

Fasting weakens the flesh in a very plain, honest way. It reminds a person, “I am not self-sufficient.”

Scripture connects fasting with humility:

“I humbled my soul with fasting...”

— Psalm 35:13

So one reason for fasting is that it brings the heart low enough to listen.

Seeking God more seriously

Fasting is a way of saying, “This matter is more important than my comfort.”

People fast when they are:

- grieving
- repenting
- seeking guidance
- crying out for mercy
- preparing for spiritual battle

It is an embodied prayer. Not just words, but the body joining the cry.

Breaking attachment to appetite

Food is good, but human beings are easily ruled by appetite, habit, comfort, and impulse. Fasting helps reveal what controls us. It exposes cravings, impatience, fear, irritability, and dependency. In that sense, fasting is not just about food—it is about mastery, order, and freedom under God.

Repentance and mourning

In Scripture, people often fast in times of sorrow over sin or disaster. It becomes an outward sign of inward grief. Not a performance, but a visible lowering of oneself before God.

Making space for spiritual focus

Fasting removes one normal part of life so attention can be given more fully to prayer, seeking, reflection, and obedience. It clears space. That is why it often appears before major moments of revelation, deliverance, or ministry.

But fasting is not magic

God does not require fasting as if hunger earns His love. That is very important.

The Bible also warns that fasting can become empty if the heart is wrong. Isaiah 58 makes this very clear: God rejects fasting that is outward only, while injustice and selfishness remain. In other words, the fast God wants is not just “skip food,” but “turn your heart, do justice, walk rightly.”

So the deeper answer is:

God does not require fasting because He enjoys deprivation. He gives fasting because it helps put the human being back into proper order before Him.

What the Day of Atonement actually commands

On the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur), God says:

“You shall afflict your souls...” (Leviticus 16:29, 23:27)

This is given to Israelites through Moses.

Important detail:

- The phrase “afflict your souls” is traditionally understood as fasting
- It becomes the one day where fasting is explicitly commanded for the nation

“You shall humble / bring low your whole self.”

What “afflicting your soul” can include

1. Fasting (the physical expression)

- Denying food (and sometimes drink)
- Lowering the body to reflect inward humility

This is why fasting became the traditional interpretation.

2. Humbling yourself inwardly

- Letting go of pride
- Acknowledging sin honestly
- Standing before God without defense

This is the core meaning.

3. Self-denial beyond food

In ancient practice, this could include:

- no bathing or luxury
- no perfumes or comforts
- abstaining from marital relations
- wearing simple or even rough clothing

The idea: remove comfort, face reality

4. Sorrow and repentance

It also carries the sense of:

- grieving over sin
- feeling the weight of brokenness
- not distracting yourself from it

Why fasting became the main expression

Because it is:

- visible (you feel it)
- unavoidable (you can't ignore hunger)
- humbling (it exposes your weakness)

So fasting became the embodied way to fulfill the command.

But God clarifies the deeper meaning

In Isaiah 58, God essentially says:

“You’re fasting... but your hearts are unchanged.”

Then He defines the real “affliction” He desires:

- loosen injustice
- care for others
- walk rightly

Meaning:

You can fast and still not “afflict your soul” in the way God intends.

So... is fasting “required” here?

Yes—but not in the way people often think.

It is required as a posture, not as a payment.

The key distinction: posture vs. payment

Not this:

- “If you fast, God will forgive you”
- “Hunger earns atonement”

But this:

- “On this day, you must come low before God”
- “You must participate in repentance with your whole being”

The actual atonement was made through:

- sacrifice
- the high priest’s mediation
- God’s mercy

—not the people’s fasting.

Why God commanded fasting on that day

Because atonement is about confronting sin honestly.

Fasting forces three things:

1. It removes distraction

No feasting, no celebration—just stillness and awareness.

2. It humbles the body

You feel your need, not just think it.

3. It unifies the nation

Everyone enters the same posture:

- no one is above repentance
- no one hides behind comfort

Why a command was necessary

Without a command, people would:

- go through ritual outwardly
- but remain inwardly untouched

So God essentially says:

“On this day, you will not treat sin lightly.

You will stop, humble yourselves, and face Me honestly.”

The deeper spiritual truth (this is important)

Later, God actually confronts Israel about misunderstanding fasting:

In Isaiah 58, He says:

“Is this the fast that I have chosen...?”

And then explains:

- true fasting = justice, mercy, freeing the oppressed

Meaning:

Even when fasting is commanded, it is never the goal—it is the doorway.

1. Reaffirmed in the Law (multiple times)

The command to “afflict your souls” isn’t said just once—it’s repeated to make it permanent.

In Leviticus

- Leviticus 16:29
- Leviticus 16:31
- Leviticus 23:27–32

Each time:

- tied to the Day of Atonement
- described as a “statute forever”

So God is saying:

“This is not temporary—this is built into your rhythm.”

2. Confirmed again later

It appears again in Numbers 29:7

- Same instruction
- Same day
- Same expectation

This shows continuity:

It wasn’t a one-time command—it became established law.

Atonement required humility—fasting was the form that humility took.

To “afflict your soul” means to willingly bring your whole self low before God—physically, emotionally, and spiritually—without hiding, distraction, or pride.

Additional to The Day of Atonement

- Once a year
- National, mandatory
- “Afflict your souls” (understood as fasting)

So by command alone: 1 fast per year

2. Additional national fasts (later in history)

After events like the exile, more fasts were observed by the people of Israel.

The prophet Zechariah mentions several:

- Fast of the 4th month
- Fast of the 5th month
- Fast of the 7th month
- Fast of the 10th month

These were tied to tragedies (like the destruction of Jerusalem)

So now we have:

- 1 commanded fast
- + several historical/remembrance fasts

3. Personal and situational fasting

Throughout the Old Testament, people fasted as needed, not on a fixed schedule.

Examples:

- David fasts in repentance and grief
- Esther calls a 3-day fast in crisis
- Daniel fasts for understanding

This kind of fasting was:

- irregular
- purpose-driven
- deeply personal or communal

4. By the time of Jesus (Second Temple period)

Things changed quite a bit.

Some groups—especially the Pharisees—had developed regular fasting habits.

Common pattern:

- Twice a week (traditionally Monday and Thursday)

This is referenced by Jesus Christ in Luke 18:12:

“I fast twice a week...”

Important:

- This was not commanded by God
- It was a religious tradition / discipline

You can actually see the progression:

1. Commanded humility (Yom Kippur)
2. Remembered sorrow (national fasts)
3. Personal seeking (prophets, kings)
4. Structured discipline (Pharisees)

And this sets up something important

By the time Jesus arrives, fasting had:

- drifted toward routine and visibility
- sometimes became a sign of righteousness

Which is why He redirects it:

- not if you fast... but how

When you get to Jesus Christ:

- He does not abolish fasting
- but He removes the idea that it earns anything

Instead:

- fast quietly
- fast sincerely
- fast as relationship, not ritual

The pattern across Scripture

1. Given (Law) → afflict your soul (commanded)
2. Established (repeated) → permanent rhythm
3. Distorted (people) → becomes external ritual
4. Corrected (prophets) → heart over form
5. Refined (Jesus) → sincerity over display

WHAT IS GAINED THROUGH FASTING

Not:

- Not earning God's favor
- Not "unlocking" God

But:

- Clarity
- Sensitivity
- Alignment
- Authority (spiritual)

You don't fast to change God—you fast to become aware of Him

What He says:

- Do not:
- make it visible
- seek approval
- perform suffering
- Instead:
- anoint your head
- wash your face
- be hidden

Core Teaching:

Fasting is relational, not performative

WHY SOME DEMONS REQUIRE FASTING

(Referenced in Jesus' teaching to disciples)

Not all spiritual resistance is equal

Key Insight:

Fasting does not:

- give power over demons

Fasting does:

- remove interference within us

What fasting affects:

- weakens fleshly impulses
- sharpens spiritual awareness
- strengthens focus in prayer

Some battles aren't resisted by God's absence—but by our distraction

After His baptism, Jesus Christ is led into the wilderness:

He fasted forty days and forty nights...

and afterward, He was hungry.

— Matthew 4:1–2

FIRST KEY OBSERVATION

Jesus didn't fast randomly
He didn't fast ritually
He fasted before confrontation

WHY THIS FAST MATTERS

This is not:

- mourning
- repentance
- ritual obedience

This is preparation

THE PARALLEL (very important)

Jesus is stepping into a pattern:

- Moses → 40 days (receives Law)
- Elijah → 40 days (encounters God)
- Jesus → 40 days (faces the adversary)

Same duration

Different purpose

“Afterward, He was hungry”

Meaning:

- the hunger came after, not during

This suggests:

- He was sustained through the fast
- but entered the temptation in real weakness

WHY THAT MATTERS

Jesus faces temptation:

- not at full strength
- but at human vulnerability

This is critical:

The victory is real, not staged

THE THREE TEMPTATIONS

1. Turn stones to bread

Attack on physical need

Jesus responds:

“Man shall not live by bread alone...”

2. Throw yourself down
Attack on identity and trust

3. Bow and gain the world
Attack on authority and desire

WHAT FASTING REVEALS HERE

Each temptation targets the flesh:

- hunger
- fear
- desire

And fasting has already done something:

It has weakened the authority of those demands

Fasting doesn't remove temptation—
it removes its leverage

and proves something for all of us:
that man is not sustained by bread...
but by God alone

The spirit does not need food
God sustains life—not bread

Fasting is putting our spiritual connection to God before ALL other things.