

# Life of Christ

A study of the life and teachings of Jesus

## The Third Pillar: FASTING

—by Marc Turnage

I hope you're growing in our journey through the life of Jesus! I want to encourage you to lean into every teaching and devotional. Most importantly, look for opportunities to implement what you're learning every day within your family, work, and community.

Today we continue talking about the three pillars of Jesus' faith, found in Matthew 6. We've already spent time learning about the first two pillars, charity and prayer, and today we're talking about the third pillar: fasting. Let's read about it in Matthew 6:16-18:

“And when you fast, do not look dismal like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces, that their fasting may be seen by men. Truly I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, that your fasting may not be seen by men but by your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

As we began learning at the outset of walking through Jesus' three pillars, these are the three principal behaviors that He outlines for His followers. It's not only that these three are essential, but there is an order to them, as well. As we stated, charity is preeminent for Him, but then we also find prayer and fasting. We think of fasting as keeping ourselves from eating, and though that was indeed a part of biblical fasting, the questions we need to explore are these: “Why did people in Bible times fast? People were already fasting in the Old Testament, so why do they do that?”

Of course, they abstained from food, but they would often put on sackcloth for clothes and put ashes of dust from the ground on their heads. Why? Because fasting is ultimately about repentance. The way that you repent is to turn from your current behaviors toward God, remove your fine garments, and even put dust and ash on you. The entire purpose of this is simply to humble yourself and demonstrate to God that you are serious about changing your ways. So, when Jesus talks about His disciples fasting, He's really talking about repentance.

### ***Fasting is ultimately about repentance***

We begin hearing the call of repentance in the New Testament through Jesus' forerunner, John the Baptist. All four gospels associate a passage from Isaiah 40:3 with John the Baptist: "A voice cries in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way of the Lord.'" In Luke 1, at his son's birth, we find John's father, Zechariah, predicting that his son will go before the Lord to prepare his way. When we read that about John, we often think it means John himself was the one preparing, but we forget that the verb "prepare" in Isaiah 40:3 is not written in the singular form. John is not the one preparing the way! "Prepare" is a plural verb, meaning that the people prepare the way of the Lord.

We see this articulated even more clearly in Luke 3, where we find the preaching of John the Baptist, when he tells the people, "Do not begin to think and say that we have Abraham as our father" (meaning they're ultimately saying, "We're okay because we're of Abraham's seed"), because he says, "God can raise up from these stones children for Abraham. Rather, bear fruit that befits repentance."

Please understand something essential: in the Bible, repentance has nothing to do with, "I'm sorry." Repentance is about changing your behavior, and John will call the people to do that, to bear fruit that befits repentance. Then he instructs them what that looks like: "To the one who has two coats, let him give to the one who has none." To the tax collectors, he says, "Do not defraud." To the soldiers, he says, "Do not extort money." In other words, the way that you bear the fruit of repentance, according to John, is how you live your life in relationship with others. And John will prepare the people for God's coming, for God's Messiah, Jesus.

John calls upon the people to serve a role. He calls the people to do this because repentance and fasting in the Bible is not an individualistic activity. It's not just something that I do for me, myself, and I. One of the significant differences between our culturally western world and the world of the Bible is that we tend to focus on our spirituality and our faith very much on our individualism when we usually ask questions like, "How does this impact me? What does God want from me? What can God do for me?"

Understand that in both the Old and New Testaments, the “we” is always more important than the “me.” Therefore, whenever we hear these ideas about fasting and repentance, it was about the community coming together. Then, by their change of behavior, they’re calling upon God to act redemptively on their behalf.

We’ll see this, for example, in Isaiah 58, which we encountered earlier when we talked about the Gospel according to Jesus because Isaiah 58 is the text that He sows into His citation of Isaiah 61. The setting of Isaiah 58 may even be the holiest Jewish day of the year: the day of fasting, Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. In this passage, the people have been fasting. They’ve been denying themselves food and putting on sackcloth and ashes, but their cries have not affected God.

So God, through the prophet, says to them, “Is this the fast that I have chosen: to disfigure your bodies, to put on sackcloth and ashes? Or rather, is this not the fast that I have chosen: to clothe the naked, to open your homes to the homeless, to care for those who are sick? When you do this, then your righteousness will go before you, and the glory of the Lord will be your rear guard.” In other words, “You’re doing all the mechanics of fasting right, but the reason why God isn’t responding to you is that your behaviors towards those around you haven’t changed.”

Let me ask you. Is sometimes our fasting, even as a church, not effective because our behaviors aren’t changing? Jesus expected that his disciples’ fasting would bring about corporate repentance and that God would respond to that corporate repentance. This idea of repentance is big in Jesus’ teachings. We find several of his parables have the central theme of, “Get ready! Be ready because you don’t know the hour when your number will be called.” We see this in several Gospel parables, such as when He talks about a master coming when the servants don’t expect it, or a master preparing a banquet and sending his servants out to invite the guests in, but the guests are not prepared. In the story of a wedding, ten virgins are waiting for the bridegroom to return, and he returns late in the night. Five have enough oil because they were prepared; five do not because they were not prepared.

***Life is fragile, and none of us knows that moment  
when we are going to meet our Maker.***

One of Jesus’ Jewish contemporaries was fond of saying, “Repent the day before you die.” The obvious response at that moment would be, “Well, who knows the day of his death?” To which he would say, “That’s right! Therefore, repent every day.” Jesus’ parables illustrate that people need to be ready through their repentance because life is fragile, and none of us knows that moment when we are going to meet our Maker.

Are you ready? How do you make yourself ready? By living a life of repentance. Again, this doesn't mean walking around in a life of guilt. That is not repentance! Repentance means daily orienting ourselves, humbling ourselves, and submitting ourselves to God, His will, and His commands. Do we do that? That's what Jesus is calling His disciples to do. That's what John the Baptist was preparing the way for because the people's repentance moves the hand of God.

We, of course, remember the very famous Scripture from the book of Second Chronicles: "If My people who are called by My Name will humble themselves and pray, I will hear from heaven, and I will heal their land." Jesus' contemporary sages understood that humbling was fasting and repentance. And that is what He expects of his disciples—to live a life of daily submission to God.

He expects the same for you and me, to daily walk in circumspect humility before God. And there will even come times where we need to come together corporately and prepare the way of the Lord. But notice what He is essentially saying in Matthew 6:16–18: We don't go around disfiguring ourselves. We don't go around drawing attention to what we're doing because, ultimately, fasting and repentance is about the changing of our behaviors.

When you fast, don't just stay off food, although that can be part of it. But when you fast, identify those behaviors in your life that need to change, that create a barrier between you and God. Remember, two weeks ago, I asked you to write on a piece of paper what your list of three spiritual practices was. We've now learned about Jesus' three pillars of faith. How does that list that you wrote need to adjust to align with Jesus' three pillars?

Most importantly, how do our behaviors need to change to make us more in line with Jesus' pillars of faith? That is the pathway to redemption and preparing the way of the Lord.

**Question** What would you like to see changed in you through prayer and fasting? What do you need to repent from?

**Family Chat** Is there an area in your life that you need to repent from? Maybe God has been talking to you about this your heart, but you haven't done it yet.

**Take Action** Choose one day to fast with your accountability partner, your family, or your life group. On that day, a day of repentance, identify and pray together through those behaviors in your life that need to change, those things that are creating a barrier between God and you.