

“Our Relationship with God: Fast and Live Simply” (Matt 6:16-34)

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A. Introduction

Today we address the question: How can we have a better relationship with God? In Matthew chapter six, Jesus offers five spiritual disciplines for a healthy, symbiotic relationship with God:

- Giving (1-4)
- Prayer (5-13)
- Forgiveness (14-15)
- Fasting (16-18)
- Simplicity (19-34)

What is a spiritual discipline? A spiritual discipline is a practice that enables us to experience the power of the Spirit in greater and greater degrees.

Put differently, spiritual disciplines help us transcend ego toward Authentic Self or union with God. As Paul says, “It is no longer I (ἐγώ) who live, but it is Christ who lives in me” (Gal 2:20).

That is our goal in a nutshell. Spiritual disciplines help us attain that goal

There are many spiritual disciplines. Matthew chapter six focuses of five: giving, praying, forgiving, fasting, and simplicity. Today, we look at fasting and simplicity.

B. Fasting (6:16-18)

Matt 6:16-18. ¹⁶ "And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. ¹⁷ But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, ¹⁸ so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. (NRSV)

Many Protestants have a negative view of fasting..

1. Dangers of fasting

What are the dangers associated with fasting? Simply put, fasting can turn into pride, boasting, and self-righteousness—it can make us think we are better than others. Jesus warns against being hypocritical. In Jewish culture, fasting went with outward signs of mourning, like wearing sackcloth, ashes, and tearing cloths (Dan 9:3; Jonah 3:5; Judith 8:5).

Jesus warns against such “disfigurement”—going unwashed and covering oneself with ashes. Fasting is between you and God, and for your inner benefit, not for outward display. Fasting is not for political manipulation or for gaining religious status or enhancing one’s reputation. So there are dangers to fasting.

However, Jesus assumes fasting is beneficial. Jesus says, “When you fast,” meaning that we are expected to fast. Jesus fasted (Luke 4:1-11) and so did his disciples (Acts 13:2-3; 14:23).¹

2. Benefits of fasting

What are the benefits of fasting?

This paragraph on fasting ends with a promise of reward: “the Father who sees in secret will reward you” (6:18). Many of us are embarrassed by this sort of language. It sounds like hedonism—one fasts, not for the sake of God, but for some heavenly reward. So what is going on here?

a. Christlikeness

Its not that if we fast, pray, or give alms, God will reward us with a Lamborghini or Maserati.

Rather, fasting teaches discipline, self-knowledge, and dependence on God—the reward is Christlikeness. How do we become like Christ? This passage suggests two ways: *nonattachment* and *ego transcendence*.

b. Nonattachment: Liberation from *sarx*

- The first benefit is that fasting helps us learn *nonattachment*.
- An attachment can be a behavior, an emotion, a substance, or anything else a person is not willing to give up (we may not have to give it up, but be willing to do so to be free of addiction).
- An attachment (addiction) is an emotionally backed demand—“I must have what I want and I will not be happy unless I have it.”²
- An attachment—anything we are unwilling to give up—is a compulsion, obsession, or preoccupation that controls us.

Attachments make us unhappy, steal our time, and retard our spiritual growth. Nonattachment is a catalyst for spiritual development.

When we fast, we are learning nonattachment. When we fast, we learn *experientially*—in the fabric of our brain and body—that we can give things up, even if for a brief period of time.

¹ Although sometimes Jesus did not fast and didn’t expect his disciples (Mk 2:18-19; Lk 5:34).

² Gerald May states that addictions are “caused by attachments, or nailing, of desire to specific objects. The word *behavior* is especially important in this definition, for it indicates that *action* is essential to addiction.” However, May goes on to say that “thinking is also a behavior, a ‘doing.’ Thus images, memories, fantasies, ideas, concepts, and even certain feeling states can become objects of attachment, and one can become fully addicted to them.... Some of us might even admit to having been addicted to certain moods—depression, shyness, cynicism, and the like.” See Gerald May, *Addiction and Grace* (San Francisco: Harper & Row 1988) 24-25. May identifies five essential characteristics of addiction: (1) tolerance, (2) withdrawal symptoms, (3) self-deception, (4) loss of willpower, and (5) distortion of attention (May, 1988, 25-26).

Why do we want to practice giving things up, like food? Because when we fast, we gain freedom and strength of will, which are important elements of spiritual growth—that’s the reward Jesus talks about: “Father who sees in secret will reward you” (6:18).

c. Ego transcendence: Christ consciousness

The second benefit of fasting is learning to be liberated from the *sarx*. The *sarx* is traditionally translated “flesh” in the Bible and it refers to an orientation of life focusing on one’s own self or ego. The Bible sees a war going on between the Spirit and the flesh, the Authentic Self and the false self:

Gal. 5:16-23. ⁶ Live by the Spirit (*pneuma*), I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh (*sarx*).

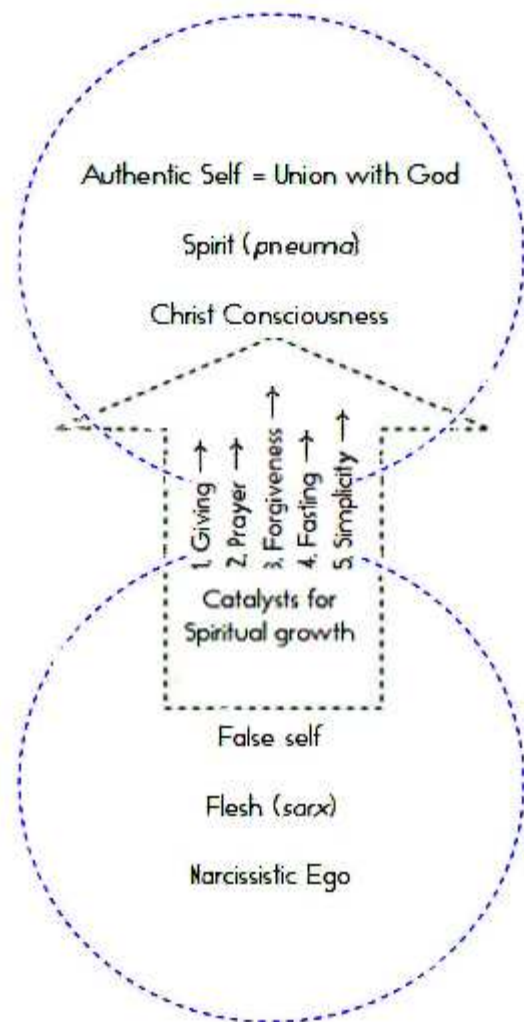
¹⁷ For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you want. ¹⁸ But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not subject to the law.

¹⁹ Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, ²⁰ idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, ²¹ envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these. I am warning you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

²² By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness, and self-control.

Let’s look at the flesh (*sarx*). To live by the flesh is self-love that shuts out everyone else. To live by the flesh is narcissism. Greek mythology, Narcissus was a young man who fell in love with his own reflection.

What I have described as the *sarx* is called the *ego* by transpersonal psychology.³ The *ego* has a deeply ingrained need to remain separate and superior to others. This is the false self, the flesh, the narcissistic ego.



³ When I talk about the ego, I’m not using the term in the psychological sense, which usually refers to our sense of self-identity.

Jesus encourages us to transcend the ego and become united to God, which is where we find Authentic Self.

Mark 8:35. For those who want to save their life (narcissistic ego) will lose it, and those who lose their life (transcend the ego) for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it (authentic self in Christ).

Let's look at the Spirit. The Spirit is the *ego-less self*—you in the power of the Spirit with the mind of Christ. Transpersonal psychologist will call this the Absolute Self. It is you in union with God and all that in God. It is the reality and the experience of having transcended your narcissistic ego.

Paul calls this the mind of Christ or *Christ consciousness*.

1 Cor 2:15-16. ¹⁵ Those who are spiritual (ὁ πνευματικός) discern all things, and they are themselves subject to no one else's scrutiny. ¹⁶ "For who has known the mind (νοῦς) of the Lord so as to instruct him?" But we have the mind of Christ (νοῦν Χριστοῦ ἔχομεν).

The point is about transcending the ego: Fasting helps us learn nonattachment and to take on Christ consciousness.

C. Simplicity (6:19-34)

Next, Jesus turns to the discipline of simplicity.

1. Treasure on Earth and in Heaven (19-21)

Matt 6:19-24. ¹⁹ "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; ²⁰ but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. ²¹ For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

Jesus tells people not to store up treasures on earth. He has two reasons:

1. Moth and rust consume them or else thieves carry them away
2. One's efforts are better put into storing up treasure in heaven

So Jesus wants us to invest in eternal things, not things that perish. Some Christians—like Anthony and St. Francis of Assisi—have thought that Jesus is telling us to give up all belongings.

However, Matthew is speaking about “treasure” (θησαυροὺς) and not earthly goods in general. The verb “store up” (θησαυρίζετε) literally means “treasure up” and refers to accumulation, not simple possession.

Matthew is not against having possessions.⁴ The type of poverty Matthew demands is “poverty of spirit,” which is humility (Matt 5:3).

⁴ Following Dale Allison, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 140.

A key phrase is: “where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (6:21). By “heart” Jesus refers to the aim and purpose of our lives.

- Is life about playing a monopoly game where the goal is to accumulate more than anyone else, or is our purpose to use our money for building the Kingdom of God?
- Is life about feeding our narcissistic ego, self-love that shuts out everyone else, or about transcending our ego and having Christ consciousness?

The point is about *simplicity*: Don’t feed your narcissistic ego by amassing material possessions (on earth), but transcend your ego by nurturing your Authentic Self (in heaven).

2. The Eye is the lamp of the body (22-23)

²² "The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy (open, honest, ἀπλοῦς), your whole body will be full of light; ²³ but if your eye is unhealthy (evil, πονηρός), your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!

The phrase, “the eye is the lamp of the body,” is a problem. For us, the eye is a window through which light comes in. But, in the ancient world, the eye was thought to have its own light. Light goes out of the eye.⁵ So Jesus is stating a basic physiology “fact” at that time.

But Jesus turns the physiological statement into a moral one. In Judaism, a “good eye” or “healthy eye” meant *generosity* (Prov. 22:9).⁶ So Jesus is saying, “If your eye is healthy (generous), your whole body will be full of light or full of God.”

In contrast, he says, “if your eye is unhealthy (evil, πονηρός)—selfish or ungenerous—then your whole body will be full of darkness or without God.”

Jesus is inviting us to examine ourselves. Am I filled with light or darkness? Am I generous and in union with God? Or am I egocentric, selfish, and without God?

The person with the “healthy eye” is generous, has Christ consciousness, is nurturing the Authentic Self. In contrast, the person with the “evil eye” is selfish, doesn’t have the mind of Christ, is feeding the narcissistic ego.

The point is about *generosity*: Be generous to others and you will lay up treasure in heaven and find your Authentic Self.

3. God and wealth (24)

²⁴ "No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.

Here, Jesus makes a basic economic statement that everyone would agree with:

⁵ Dale Allison, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 142.

⁶ Dale Allison, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 143.

A slave cannot serve two masters. Have you ever heard of a slave owned by two people? It doesn't work.

Then, Jesus turns the economic statement into a moral one: "You cannot serve God and wealth (μαμμωνᾶ)."

This amplifies the previous saying: "The 'healthy eye,' interpreted as the generous person, serves God. The 'unhealthy eye,' interpreted as the self person, serves mammon."⁷

The point is about loyalty: Be loyal to God and you will lay up treasure in heaven and find your Authentic Self.

4. Anxiety and the Father's care (25-34)

Okay, so let's add this what Jesus has been saying:

- Do not store up treasure on earth (19-21),
- Plus be generous with what you have (22-23),
- Plus serve God instead of money (24)
- And what does that equal? Anxiety!

So anxiety is what Jesus addresses next.

²⁵ "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear.

Jesus supports this injunction with three arguments. His first argument uses birds.

Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? ²⁶ Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?

His argument is from lesser to greater. God takes care of the birds, which are not as valuable as humans, so of course God will take care of you! God fed his people in the wilderness with manna; God fed poor through the jubilee legislation; God fed the multitudes through Jesus' hand; God will feed you.

What is interesting is Jesus assumes that God is active in the world. We cannot see God, but when birds eat, God is feeding them. By implication, when we feed birds or care for God's creatures, human or otherwise, we participate in God's providential care.

Jesus' second supporting argument against anxiety is this:

²⁷ And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?

His says, worrying accomplishes nothing. Jesus is not against planning or prudent concern for the future. Rather, Jesus is concerned about anxiety.

⁷ Dale Allison, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 145.

Jesus' third supporting argument against anxiety focuses on clothing.

²⁸ And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, ²⁹ yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. ³⁰ But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you-- you of little faith?

Then Jesus repeats what he has just said:

³¹ Therefore do not worry, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear?' ³² For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things.

Jesus' repetition suggests we are dealing with—not appropriate concern (which is good)—but with deeply rooted anxiety. The Gentiles (unbelievers) strive for food, drink, and clothing. But those who trust God do not need to strive. Jesus unmasks the root of anxiety and worry—unbelief or the failure to trust God.

Finally, Jesus addresses the issue of priorities:

³³ But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. ³⁴ "So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today.

One can only seek righteousness, which is the kingdom of God, when the ego is transcended... when the Authentic Self is embraced.

The point is about trust: Spiritual growth requires trust in God; especially as we transcend ego toward Authentic Self.

D. Reflections

Matthew chapter 6 addresses the question: How can we have a right relationship with God? Jesus offers five spiritual disciplines for a healthy, symbiotic relationship with God: Giving, Prayer, Forgiveness, Fasting, and Simplicity.

Each of the spiritual disciplines moves us away *ego-centered existence* toward *Authentic Self* (union with God).

The spiritual disciplines invite us to “die to self” in the sense of dying to our flesh (*sarx*) or narcissistic ego. That creates anxiety. And we ask ourselves: “If I don’t look after me, who will? And if *my* ego must go, will there even be a *me* to care for?”

Therefore, Jesus addresses anxiety. He reassures us that God cares for us. We can transcend our egos, but we must learn to trust that God is looking out for us.

Paradoxically, when we transcend ego and experience Christ consciousness, I think we will discover that we still care for our own selves, but from a higher perspective that encompasses everyone, including our selves.