FASTING

"And whenever you fast, do not look sullen as the hypocrites do. For they distort their faces so that will be seen by others to be fasting. I tell you surely, they are receiving their reward at that moment. By contrast, whenever you are fasting, anoint your head and wash your face, so that is not obvious to others that you are fasting, but only to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you."
Matthew 6:16-18

Here again, as in the preceding two examples of piety (almsgiving and prayer), the *"hypocrites"* are characterized by their desire *"to be seen by others."*

"They do all their deeds to be seen by others. For they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long.
Matthew 23:5(see Exodus 13:9, 16; Numbers 15:38 Deuteronomy 6:8, 11:18; 22:12)

Here in Matthew 6 they desire to make it plain to all that they are engaging in the righteous activity of fasting. By doing so they display that they are holy men.

The fasting Jesus speaks of here is voluntary, not the prescribed fasting associated with the great Jewish feast days like the Day of Atonement and Jewish New Year.

"Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus, God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get."
Luke 18:10-12

But as for your fasts, let them not be with the hypocrites, for they fast on the second and fifth days of the week, but do ye fast on the fourth and sixth days.
Didache 8:1

You might find this surprising, but Matthew 6 is the only place in the New Testament where fasting is actually taught.

There is another reference found in the Gospels where fasting is regarded as temporarily inappropriate.

Then the disciples of John came to him, saying, "Why do we and the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?" and Jesus said to them, "Can the wedding guests mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them? The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast."
Matthew 9:14-15

Oftentimes fasting is accompanied by prayer as in Luke 18:12 above and in the following.

and then as a widow until she was eighty-four. She did not depart from the temple, worshipping with fasting and prayer night and day.
Luke 2:37

While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off.
Acts 13:2-3

No New Testament epistle encourages its readers to fast. It is at least clear that the fasting of a disciple, who has already in some measure experienced the joy of fulfillment, must be quite different from the fasting of a Jew who grieves over the apparent failure of God to act on behalf of his people.
Hagner – Matthew, page 154

**Note in response to the statement made by Hagner above is the passage also above in Matthew 9:14-15. The Jews fasted as if still waiting for the promise of God to be fulfilled while the disciples of Jesus, having already tasted and seen that the Lord is good in fulfilling his promises through the incarnate Christ, hold an attitude of people already present at the wedding banquet and not like those who await its arrival.*

"And whenever you fast, do not look <u>sullen</u>(skoo-thro-pos) as the hypocrites do."

The word *"sullen"* or *"gloomy"* appears infrequently in the New Testament.

And he said to them, "What is this conversation that you are holding with each as you walk?" And they stood still looking sad (skoo-thro-pos -sullen).
Luke 24:17

When it refers to a sad countenance, it is also infrequently used in the Septuagint.

So he asked Pharaoh's officers who were with him in custody in his master's house, "Why are your faces downcast (sullen – skoo-thro-pos LXX) today?"
Genesis 40:7

The idea in Greek that Matthew is directing us to in the matter of a fasting countenance is that of a face *made unrecognizable.* When the Pharisees fasted, they did so with a *"distorted"* face that was clearly not the "normal" face others were accustomed to in their daily living.

This *distortion* might not just refer to the sullenness or gloomy appearance of the countenance itself via facial expression, but most likely to a face *made to look distorted* via the use of ashes. This idea would be found in the *sackcloth and ashes* rituals accompanied by the diminished alteration of the garments worn.

Understand that a wordplay exists in Jesus' speech and in Matthew's Greek that is not evident in English.

Since the *hypocrites make their faces unsightly*, they are in effect *hiding* their faces in order to be seen.

For they distort their faces so that will be seen by others to be fasting.

As in the case of the other two examples of piety, *almsgiving* and *fasting,* these hypocrites are *receiving their reward at that moment,* and it could be added, *and only in that moment.*

By contrast, whenever you are fasting, anoint your head and wash your face, so that is not obvious to others that you are fasting, but only to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you."
Matthew 6:17-18

The reference to *anointing* is not the ceremonial or religious anointing relegated to those in a special office. Rather the anointing with olive oil in view here is a special instance of grooming and personal enjoyment that signified a sign of happiness, a sign that was forbidden on fast days.

Then David arose from the earth and <u>washed and anointed himself</u> and changed his clothes. And he went into the house of the LORD, and worshipped. He then went to his own house. And when he asked, they set food before him, and he ate.
2 Samuel 12:20

Let your garments be always white. Let not oil be lacking on your head.
Ecclesiastes 9:8

Jesus exhorts an even extra measure of care to one's personal appearance so that there wouldn't be the slightest evidence that one was fasting.

In reality, Jesus is telling his disciples to *appear normal.* It was the practice of the people of God to anoint their heads and wash their faces not only for festivals and *other joyful occasions* but also for everyday hygiene.

One's fasting is to only be known by the Father. And this Father is *secret* in that he is not someone found on the streetcorners or places in the market where the person fasting can gain their approval.

**an ironic note of interest is that a meal – the Lord's Supper – rather than a fast became the identifier of the early church's public worship.*

Whereas the hypocrites did their fasting *to be seen by others,* the disciple's fasting should be done as not to be seen by anyone other than by the *One who cannot be seen.*

"The contempt of men's praise is no small fruit, for thereby we are freed from the heavy slavery of human opinion."
Chrysostom – Catena Aurea: Commentary on the Four Gospels: Collected out of the Works of the Father, page 242

When it comes to *devotions,* Jesus excludes *almsgiving (charity), prayer* or *fasting* from being a visible, even intentional means of a Believer's witness. These things are done for God's eyes only, not for the eyes of humanity.

The all-seeing Father will then reward. It is only this kind of conduct that will receive a true reward.

The manner of fasting that is pleasing to God is evident in the Old Testament.

3 'Why have we fasted, and you see it not?
Why have we humbled ourselves, and you take no knowledge of it?'
Behold, in the day of your fast you seek your own pleasure,
and oppress all your workers.
4 Behold, you fast only to quarrel and to fight
and to hit with a wicked fist.
Fasting like yours this day
will not make your voice to be heard on high.
5 Is such the fast that I choose,
a day for a person to humble himself?
Is it to bow down his head like a reed,
and to spread sackcloth and ashes under him?
Will you call this a fast,
and a day acceptable to the Lord?

6 "Is not this the fast that I choose:
to loose the bonds of wickedness,
to undo the straps of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke?
7 Is it not to share your bread with the hungry
and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover him,
and not to hide yourself from your own flesh?
8 Then shall your light break forth like the dawn,
and your healing shall spring up speedily;
your righteousness shall go before you;
the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard.
9 Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer;
you shall cry, and he will say, 'Here I am.'
If you take away the yoke from your midst,
the pointing of the finger, and speaking wickedness,
10 if you pour yourself out for the hungry

and satisfy the desire of the afflicted,
then shall your light rise in the darkness
and your gloom be as the noonday.
11 And the Lord will guide you continually
and satisfy your desire in scorched places
and make your bones strong;
and you shall be like a watered garden,
like a spring of water,
whose waters do not fail.
12 And your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt;
you shall raise up the foundations of many generations;
you shall be called the repairer of the breach,
the restorer of streets to dwell in.
Isaiah 58:3-12

The normalcy of Jesus in matters of lifestyle is astonishing. Both the superspiritual and supersecular lifestyles are often acts, and Christians are asked in the Devotions of Matthew 6 to give up all acting. Jesus prefers that we demonstrate discipleship by solid social relations (chapter 5) rather than by visible spiritual practices (chapter 6).
Brunner – Matthew, page 319

In the first century, fasting apparently provided an exceptional opportunity for impressing others with the extent of one's piety. Here, as in the previous two species of piety, the activity was carefully designed so as to inflate personal pride (Luke 18:12). Jesus tolerates no such conduct. Our righteousness is a matter of service to God and is to be directed to him. True righteousness is, in the last analysis, seen in secret. Only this kind of righteousness will be truly rewarded in any lasting way.
Hagner – Matthew, page 154