

Matthew 6:16-18 (NRSV)

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. ¹⁷But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, ¹⁸so 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.”

John Wesley addressed fasting in his Sermon 27, “Upon Our Lord's Sermon on the Mount, 7,” based on today’s scripture passage. In response to some who sought to excuse themselves from fasting on the basis that Jesus never commanded his followers to fast, Wesley argues that Jesus’ directions regarding *how* to fast serve the same purpose as a direct command to fast. Wesley explains, “the commanding us to do anything *thus*, is an unquestionable command to do that thing; seeing it is impossible to perform it *thus*, if it be not performed at all.”¹ So if Jesus said, “When you fast . . .” the implication is that all who would follow Jesus should be fasting from time to time.

Discuss the following questions. If you are in a larger group, you may want to divide into groups of three for this discussion. You may then decide to report back to the larger group or to move directly to prayer time.

1. What do you make of Wesley’s logic here? Does it follow that if Jesus gave directions to be followed *when* we fast, it is implied that we should fast? Does that change your view of fasting in any way?
2. Jesus’ directions include some things to avoid in the practice of fasting. What are his followers to avoid? Why? What would be some comparable practices for us to avoid today?
3. In Jesus’ time, oil was put on the head as a part of the process of hygiene. Most of us no longer follow this practice. What was the point of Jesus’ direction on this issue? How would that look for us today?
4. As United Methodists, we believe that God’s grace is a free gift, offered to everyone without the need to earn it in any way. Based on Jesus’ description in this passage, is fasting a way to earn a reward from God? Why or why not?

Prayer suggestion:

Take time for silent prayer as each person lifts up his or her own longings and fears about fasting to God. Close with a spoken prayer by one person, asking God for guidance on the practice of fasting and for open hearts to receive that guidance.

¹ John Wesley, “Upon Our Lord's Sermon on the Mount, 7” (Sermon 27), II.12, *Global Ministries*, General Board of Global Ministries, (<http://hbs.gbgm-umc.org/umhistory/wesley/sermons/27/>).