

LENT LESSONS 2026

WEEK 1

FEBRUARY 18, 2026

Lesson 1: “When You Fast” — Devotion That the Father Sees

Main Text: Matthew 6:16–18 (NASB 2020)

Expounding the Text

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus addresses three pillars of Jewish devotion: giving, praying, and fasting. Each time He says not “if,” but “when.” Fasting is not presented as optional spirituality for extremists. It is assumed covenant practice.

Yet the emphasis of Jesus is not on the abstinence itself. The issue is the audience. The hypocrites disfigure their faces so that others will notice. The Father, however, “who sees what is done in secret” is the One who rewards.

Jesus shifts fasting from public performance to private orientation. The Greek term for “hypocrites” (*hypo-kri-tai*) originally referred to actors. Thus, fasting can become theater. Christ commands authenticity. Fasting is not an announcement to men — it is an offering before God.

John Wesley, commenting on this passage in *Sermon 27: Upon Our Lord’s Sermon on the Mount*, writes:

“The thing which our Lord here condemns is not the being seen, but the desiring to be seen.” (John Wesley, *Sermons on Several Occasions*, Sermon 27)

The heart must be singularly fixed upon God. Thus, the purpose of fasting is readiness for obedience, readiness for sanctification, readiness for the appearing of Christ. Everything else, not eating, reducing media, denying pleasure is collateral.

Biblical Example: Anna the Prophetess (Luke 2:36–38)

Anna was advanced in years. She had known marriage, widowhood, grief, and likely economic limitation. Yet Scripture says she “never left the temple, serving night and day with fastings and prayers.” Her fasting was not reactionary. It was lifelong consecration. When the infant Christ was brought into the temple, Anna recognized Him immediately. Why? Because a life of fasting and prayer had trained her perception. She was spiritually awake.

Fasting does not produce revelation, but it positions the heart to recognize God’s movement.

Examples from the Historic Christian Church

Augustine of Hippo taught that fasting was not self-harm but soul-ordering: “Fasting cleanses the soul, raises the mind, subjects one’s flesh to the spirit.” (Augustine, *Sermon 207*)

Augustine emphasized that fasting without humility is empty. The early Church practiced Wednesday and Friday fasts, not to display rigor, but to imitate Christ and discipline the body toward obedience.

The Didache (1st–2nd century) instructed Christians not to fast “with the hypocrites,” but on different days (Didache 8), reinforcing that Christian fasting must be distinct in motive and orientation.

Lesson Implementation

1. Begin this fast privately before announcing it publicly.
2. Establish set prayer times during the day.
3. Remove one area of spiritual performance.
4. Ask: Who is my audience, God or people?

Prayer of Repentance and Dependence

“Father who sees in secret...

I confess that I have desired the approval of men. I have performed devotion instead of living surrendered. Cleanse me from religious pride. Remove hypocrisy from my heart. Teach me to seek You alone.

I am weak without Your grace. My flesh resists discipline. My motives are mixed. Yet I come, not to impress You, but to depend upon You.

Let my fasting be quiet but powerful. Train my heart to long for Christ more than comfort. Prepare me to stand before You with sincerity when the Lord appears. In Jesus’ name, Amen.”

Further Scriptural Study

- Joel 2:12–13 — God calls for heart-level return, not external display.
- Psalm 51 — David’s repentance after sin.
- Luke 18:9–14 — The Pharisee and tax collector contrast pride and humility.
- 2 Corinthians 6:4–6 — Paul describes disciplined endurance in ministry.
- Isaiah 58:3–7 — God confronts performative fasting.

FEBRUARY 19, 2026

Lesson 2: The Bridegroom Taken Away — Fasting as Holy Longing

Main Text: Matthew 9:14–15 (NASB 2020)

“Then the disciples of John came to Him, asking, ‘Why do we and the Pharisees fast, but Your disciples do not fast?’ And Jesus said to them, ‘The attendants of the bridegroom cannot mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them, can they? But the days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast.’”

Expounding the Text

This text is not merely about fasting frequency. It is about covenantal identity and redemptive timing. John’s disciples fasted as an expression of repentance and anticipation. The Pharisees fasted as religious obligation and public piety (cf. Luke 18:12). But Jesus introduces something radically different: fasting must align with the presence and mission of the Messiah.

The imagery of the Bridegroom is profoundly theological. In the Old Testament, Yahweh is frequently depicted as the husband of Israel (Isaiah 54:5; Hosea 2:16–20). By calling Himself the Bridegroom, Jesus is implicitly claiming divine identity and covenantal authority.

While He is present, celebration overrides fasting. But when He is “taken away,” which is a phrase that foreshadows His violent removal (the Greek *apar-thē* implies force), then fasting resumes.

This shifts fasting from ritual to relationship. Fasting becomes the language of longing for the absent Christ and expectation of His return. It becomes eschatological.

D. A. Carson observes:

“The time between the Ascension and the Parousia is characterized by longing, watchfulness, and disciplined devotion.” (D. A. Carson, *Matthew*, Expositor’s Bible Commentary, 1984)

We fast not because Christ is absent spiritually, for the Spirit dwells within us, but because we long for consummation. We long for the marriage supper of the Lamb (Revelation 19:7–9). We fast in the tension of the “already” and the “not yet.”

Thus, fasting trains affection. It recalibrates desire. It says: “This world is not my home. My joy is incomplete until Christ reigns fully.”

Biblical Example: The Church at Antioch (Acts 13:1–3)

The church in Antioch was not in crisis. It was flourishing. There were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen, and Saul. The church was ethnically diverse and spiritually vibrant.

Yet Scripture says, “While they were ministering to the Lord and fasting...”

Notice that they were ministering *to the Lord*, not merely to people. Their fasting was worship-centered, not problem-driven.

In that atmosphere of devotion, the Holy Spirit spoke: “Set apart for Me Barnabas and Saul.” Fasting sharpened corporate attentiveness. It did not produce the voice of God; it prepared hearts to hear. The result? The first major missionary expansion of the Gentile world.

Fasting, then, is missional readiness.

Examples from the Historic Christian Church

John Wesley practiced regular fasting, typically on Wednesdays and Fridays until 3 p.m. In his Journal (August 24, 1739), he noted his continued discipline of fasting as integral to ministerial strength. He viewed fasting not as legalism, but as training the body to serve the Spirit.

Francis Asbury, the great Methodist circuit rider, also fasted regularly during the American frontier revivals. His Journals reflect a deep conviction that fasting preserved spiritual sensitivity amid constant travel and hardship.

In the early Church, the Didache instructed believers to fast on Wednesdays and Fridays (Didache 8), distinguishing Christian practice from merely inherited custom. Fasting was identity-forming, which is a reminder that believers belonged to another Kingdom.

These men and women did not fast because they lacked joy. They fasted because they longed for greater conformity to Christ and greater effectiveness in mission.

Lesson Implementation

1. Examine your affections. What do you long for most?
2. During fasting, pray explicitly for Christ’s return.
3. Fast not in sorrow alone, but in anticipation.
4. Ask God to align your desires with eternal priorities.

Prayer of Repentance and Dependence

“Lord Jesus, Bridegroom of the Church...

Forgive me for loving this present world more than Your appearing. My heart has grown dull. My longing has weakened. I have sought comfort over consecration.

Awaken holy desire within me. Teach me to hunger for righteousness more than bread.

Remove complacency.

I cannot stir my own affection without Your Spirit. I depend upon You to renew my longing, to cleanse my appetite, to fix my gaze upon eternity.

Prepare me for Your return. Let my fasting testify that my deepest satisfaction is found in You alone. Amen.”

Further Scriptural Study

- Revelation 19:7–9 — The marriage supper of the Lamb.
- Philippians 3:20–21 — Our citizenship in heaven.
- Psalm 42 — Spiritual thirst for God.
- Hebrews 9:28 — Christ’s second appearing.
- 2 Timothy 4:8 — Loving His appearing.

FEBRUARY 20, 2026

Lesson 3: “Return to Me” — Fasting as Covenant Renewal

Main Text: Joel 2:12–13 (NASB 2020)

“Yet even now,” declares the LORD,
“Return to Me with all your heart,
And with fasting, weeping, and mourning;
And tear your heart and not merely your garments.”

Expounding the Text

Joel prophesies during a national crisis which was a devastating locust plague that symbolized divine judgment. The land was stripped. Crops destroyed. Worship disrupted. But God does not begin with destruction. He begins with invitation: “Yet even now.” Those three words are saturated with mercy.

Fasting in Joel is covenantal return. It is not manipulation. It is not bargaining. It is relational restoration.

“Rend your heart and not your garments.” In ancient Israel, tearing garments was a public expression of grief. But God demands internal rupture, the breaking of pride, the confession of sin, the dismantling of rebellion.

Fasting, then, is embodied repentance. It is repentance that affects appetite.

Thomas Aquinas writes:

“Fasting is practiced to bridle the concupiscence of the flesh, which is one of the chief incentives to sin.” (Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II-II, Q.147)

Fasting weakens the tyranny of disordered desire.

Notice the character of God in Joel:

“Gracious and compassionate, slow to anger, abounding in lovingkindness.”

Repentance is possible because mercy is available.

Biblical Example: Nineveh (Jonah 3:5–10)

Nineveh was violent, cruel, and pagan. When Jonah preached judgment, the people believed God. From king to cattle, they fasted. The king removed his robe, sat in ashes, and issued a decree of repentance.

Their fasting was not ceremonial. It was reformatory. Scripture says, “When God saw their deeds, that they turned from their wicked way, then God relented...”

Fasting alone did not save them. Turning did. Fasting that does not alter conduct is incomplete.

Examples from the Historic Christian Church

Jonathan Edwards called corporate fasts during seasons of spiritual awakening in colonial America. He believed fasting humbled communities and prepared them for genuine repentance (George Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life*).

In the early centuries, public penitents in the Church fasted before restoration, not as punishment, but as visible evidence of sincere repentance. Church discipline was restorative, not merely corrective.

Mary Lena Tate, founder within the House of God tradition (which Archbishop Felton came from), frequently called believers to seasons of consecration and fasting when moral laxity threatened spiritual vitality. Fasting was not extremism; it was covenant-seriousness.

The historic Church has consistently viewed fasting as repentance enacted.

Lesson Implementation

- Identify specific areas of disobedience.
- Confess them clearly before God.
- Seek reconciliation with those harmed.
- Replace sinful patterns with obedience.

Prayer of Repentance and Dependence

“Merciful and gracious God...

Yet even now You call me. I have sinned in thought, word, and deed. I have hardened my heart. I have excused compromise. Break my pride. Tear my heart open. Let my fasting be more than hunger and let it be surrender. I cannot cleanse myself. I depend upon the blood of Christ and the power of the Spirit to renew me. Restore joy. Restore obedience. Restore covenant faithfulness. Have mercy upon me, O God. Amen.”

Further Scriptural Study

- Psalm 32 — Confession and forgiveness.
- James 4:8–10 — Humbling before God.
- Isaiah 55:6–7 — Seeking the Lord.
- Luke 15:11–24 — The returning prodigal.
- Hosea 6:1–3 — Returning to the Lord.

FEBRUARY 21, 2026

Lesson 4: Ministering to the Lord — Fasting That Centers Worship

Main Text: Acts 13:1–3 (NASB 2020)

“Now there were at Antioch... prophets and teachers... While they were ministering to the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, ‘Set apart for Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.’”

Expounding the Text

This is one of the most pivotal missionary moments in the New Testament. The church at Antioch was not in decline. It was vibrant, diverse, and spiritually alive. Prophets and teachers were present. Leadership was shared. Ethnic lines were crossed. Worship was active.

Yet Scripture highlights something crucial:

“They were ministering to the Lord and fasting.”

The Greek phrase *leitour-goun-tōn tō Kyr-iō* means “performing priestly service unto the Lord.” Their primary orientation was upward, not outward. They were not fasting to solve a problem. They were fasting in worship.

In this atmosphere of devotion, the Holy Spirit spoke. Notice the divine initiative: “Set apart for Me...” Fasting did not manipulate the Spirit. It cultivated attentiveness.

Dr. Ben Witherington writes:

“The missionary expansion of the Church was birthed in worship, prayer, and fasting.”
(Ben Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*, 1998)

Thus, fasting recenters the Church. It restores vertical alignment before horizontal mission. If Lent is not worship-centered, it becomes self-improvement. If fasting is not God-focused, it becomes bodily discipline detached from devotion.

Biblical Example: Moses on Sinai (Exodus 34:28)

Moses fasted forty days and forty nights on Mount Sinai. The text says he “did not eat bread or drink water.” Why? Because he was in the presence of God receiving covenant revelation.

The result was transformation. When Moses descended, “the skin of his face shone” (Exodus 34:29).

Fasting, when joined to communion with God, alters countenance. It produces radiance — not because of starvation, but because of glory encountered. Moses’ fasting was not about absence of food. It was absorption in God.

Examples from the Historic Christian Church

The early Church Fathers viewed fasting as priestly offering. Irenaeus (2nd century) wrote of fasting as participation in Christ's obedience (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, Book IV).

John Chrysostom warned that fasting without prayer was incomplete:

"Fasting is the change of every part of our life, because the sacrifice of the fast is not the abstinence from food alone." (John Chrysostom, *Homily III on Fasting*)

Within the Wesleyan tradition, fasting was paired with the Lord's Supper and prayer gatherings. Wesley saw fasting as preparation for worship, not replacement of it.

Thus, the historic Church has consistently understood fasting as priestly devotion.

Lesson Implementation

1. Begin each fasting day with explicit worship.
2. Pray before you remove food — not after.
3. Read Scripture aloud during fasting.
4. Ask: Am I ministering to the Lord, or only asking from Him?

Prayer of Repentance and Dependence

"Holy and Glorious God...

Forgive me for seeking Your hand more than Your face. I have fasted before for outcomes, but not always for worship. Teach me to minister unto You. Remove self-centered motives. Cleanse my desires. Without Your Spirit, my devotion grows cold. Without Your grace, my worship becomes routine. I depend upon You to awaken reverence within me. Let this fast draw me into holy communion. Let Your presence be my sustenance. Amen."

Further Scriptural Study

- Exodus 34:28–35 — Moses transformed by divine presence.
- Psalm 27 — Seeking the face of the Lord.
- Hebrews 12:28–29 — Acceptable worship with reverence.
- John 4:23–24 — Worship in spirit and truth.
- Revelation 4–5 — Heavenly worship around the throne.

FEBRUARY 22, 2026

Lesson 5: True Fasting — Justice, Mercy, and Surrender

Main Text: Isaiah 58:6–9 (NASB 2020)

“6 Is this not the fast which I choose, To loosen the bonds of wickedness, To undo the bands of the yoke, And to let the oppressed go free And break every yoke? 7 “Is it not to divide your bread with the hungry And bring the homeless poor into the house; When you see the naked, to cover him; And not to hide yourself from your own flesh? 8 “Then your light will break out like the dawn, And your recovery will speedily spring forth; And your righteousness will go before you; The glory of the LORD will be your rear guard. 9 “Then you will call, and the LORD will answer; You will cry, and He will say, ‘Here I am.’ If you remove the yoke from your midst, The pointing of the finger and speaking wickedness...”

Expounding the Text

Isaiah 58 is one of the most sobering passages on fasting in Scripture.

Israel fasted, yet God said, “You do not fast like you do today to make your voice heard on high.” Why? Because their fasting coexisted with injustice.

God defines true fasting:

- To loosen the bonds of wickedness
- To undo the bands of the yoke
- To let the oppressed go free
- To share bread with the hungry

Fasting that does not transform conduct is hollow. John Frame summarizes the prophetic critique:

“The prophets consistently insist that ritual without righteousness is rebellion.” (John Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life*, 2008)

Thus, fasting must produce ethical fruit.

Biblical Example: Cornelius (Acts 10)

Cornelius fasted and prayed. He was devout, generous, and God-fearing. During fasting, an angel appeared and declared: “Your prayers and alms have ascended as a memorial before God.” His fasting was inseparable from generosity. The result? The gospel opened to the Gentiles. True fasting expands the Kingdom.

Examples from the Historic Christian Church

William Wilberforce (1759–1833), deeply shaped by evangelical conviction, regularly engaged in prayer and fasting as he pursued abolition of the slave trade. His spirituality fueled public justice.

Similarly, Basil the Great (4th century) rebuked Christians who fasted but neglected the poor:

“Do you fast? Give me proof of it by your works.”

(Basil the Great, *Homily on Fasting*)

The historic Church consistently tied fasting to mercy.

Lesson Implementation

1. Pair fasting with generosity.
2. Serve someone during this week.
3. Examine relational injustices.
4. Repent of indifference.

Prayer of Repentance and Dependence

“Righteous and Compassionate God...

Forgive me for religious habits that do not transform my conduct. I have fasted while neglecting mercy. I have prayed while withholding forgiveness. Change my heart. Let fasting break chains of selfishness. Teach me to love as You love. I depend upon Your Spirit to reorder my life. Make my devotion visible in compassion. Amen.”

Further Scriptural Study

- Micah 6:6–8 — What the Lord requires.
- James 1:27 — Pure religion defined.
- Matthew 25:31–46 — Serving Christ in the least.
- Proverbs 21:3 — Justice over sacrifice.
- Luke 10:25–37 — The Good Samaritan.