# The Constitution of the Kingdom

*A 33-Session Journey through the Sermon on the Mount & the Sermon on the Plain*

## SESSION TWENTY-TWO — Fasting

*Part Four: The Practices of Piety · Text: Matthew 6:16–18*

### The Texts

> **Matthew 6:16–18** *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… But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, 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.*
>
> **Isaiah 58:6–7** *Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice… to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house?*

## The Practice We Have Forgotten

We come now to the third and last of the practices — and for most of us, it is the strangest. Giving, we understand. Prayer, we at least attempt. But fasting? A great many of us have never once done it, wouldn't know why we would, and have quietly filed it under "things ancient people did." The church, by and large, has forgotten how to fast.

And yet Jesus assumes we will. Notice his words — not "if you fast," but "whenever you fast." He takes for granted that his followers will practice this oldest and most bodily of the disciplines, just as they give and pray. So before we can hear his warning about it, we have to recover what fasting even is — and why anyone in their right mind would voluntarily go hungry for God.

*Let's search the Scriptures together.*

## The Same Warning, One Last Time

First, the warning — because it is the same one, for the third and final time. "When you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting." The actors again — only now the performance is a long face, a haggard look, a carefully advertised misery, all designed to broadcast: look how spiritual I am, look how much I'm suffering for God. And the verdict is what it always is: they have received their reward. The admiration was the payment, and it has been paid in full.[1]

And Jesus' antidote is almost playful. "When you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face" — in other words, tidy up, look bright, look normal, so that no one has the faintest idea you're fasting at all. Hide it. Let it be a secret between you and "your Father who is in secret."

[1]Unless noted, Scripture is quoted from the New Revised Standard Version, Updated Edition (NRSVue), the base translation for this course. Matthew 6:16–18 is Matthew-only; it completes the trio of practices (giving, prayer, fasting) begun at 6:1. Fasting runs throughout Scripture—Moses, Elijah, David, the prophets, Anna, Paul, and Jesus himself (Matthew 4:2).

The very thing the hypocrite advertises, Jesus tells you to conceal — not with a dismal face, but with a washed one and a cheerful head. Fasting, done rightly, is invisible.[2]

## What Fasting Is Actually For

So what is it for — this voluntary hunger? At its simplest, fasting is a bodily prayer. It is your own stomach, aching and empty, taught to say "your kingdom come." Where words can lie and the heart can wander, hunger is honest; it drags the whole body into the prayer. To fast is to let a real, physical longing stand in for a spiritual one — to feel, in the gut, the ache for God and for the world set right, and to let that emptiness become a kind of reaching.[3]

It does a few things at once. It clears space — setting aside even something as good and necessary as food, to make room for God, to say with your body that you hunger for him more than for bread. It exposes us — a few hours without eating and we discover how much we are ruled by our appetites, how quickly we grumble, how thin our patience really is; fasting shows us, mercifully, who we are. And it teaches dependence — the same lesson as the daily bread and the manna: we are not self-sufficient; we live, moment by moment, on what God gives. Fasting is the body's way of praying "deliver us," "your kingdom come," "not my will but yours."

## The Fast God Chooses

But there is a warning in Scripture even more searching than "don't do it to be seen," and we cannot skip it — because it goes to the very heart of who we are as The Confluence. Long before Jesus, the prophet Isaiah confronted people who fasted faithfully and could not understand why God seemed unmoved. And God's answer thundered back: your fasting means nothing to me while you oppress your workers and quarrel and strike with a wicked fist. "Is not this the fast that I choose," he said, "to loose the bonds of injustice… to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house?"[4]

Do you hear it? A fast divorced from justice is a fast God does not want. Empty stomachs offered up to God while the empty stomachs at your door go ignored are an offense to him. The true fast — the fast God actually chooses — always bends toward the neighbor: your hunger, joined to the feeding of the hungry; your self-denial, joined to the loosing of someone else's chains. Which is exactly the thread that has run through everything: worship and justice are

[2]As with giving and prayer, the target is the performance of the practice "to be seen"—here the deliberately "dismal" face that advertises one's piety. Jesus assumes his followers will fast ("whenever," not "if") and simply redirects it from an audience to "your Father who is in secret." See W. D. Davies and Dale Allison, and R. T. France, on Matthew 6:16–18.

[3]Isaiah 58 is the great scriptural corrective on fasting: God rejects fasting joined to injustice and calls instead for "the fast that I choose"—to "lose the bonds of injustice… share your bread with the hungry… bring the homeless poor into your house." Fasting divorced from justice is a fast God does not want. Compare Zechariah 7:5–6.

[4]Fasting is a bodily prayer of longing and dependence—the stomach's ache taught to say "your kingdom come." It is not the manipulation of God (Session Nineteen) nor a means of earning favor, and Jesus assumes it is normally hidden and even joyful ("put oil on your head and wash your face"). This session offers it only as an invitation, with the pastoral caution below.

never two separate accounts. To fast rightly is to let your own hunger make you tender to the hunger of the world.

## Not a Technique, Not a Punishment

And two more things fasting is not, because both mistakes are common. It is not a technique to manipulate God — we settled that with prayer; you do not fast to twist God's arm, to earn his favor, or to make him owe you an answer. And it is not a punishment of the body. This is important, and I want to say it plainly: fasting is never meant to be self-hatred dressed up as holiness, never a way to shame or harm the good body God gave you. Jesus tells you to wash your face and look bright — there is joy in it, not misery. It is not the body's enemy; it is the body's prayer.

So a word of real pastoral care, and please hear it as care: this discipline is not for everyone in every season. If food carries a heavy weight for you — if fasting would endanger your health, or reopen an old wound, or feed shame about your body — then set it aside, with no guilt whatsoever, and practice self-denial some other way. The whole point is freedom and dependence on God. Anything that turns it into harm has lost the point entirely.[5]

## Freedom for Others

Put it to our thread, and fasting turns out to be surprisingly outward for so private a discipline. Isaiah has already told us: the fast God chooses loosens the bonds of injustice and shares bread with the hungry. Your voluntary hunger, if it is real, softens you toward the involuntary hunger all around you — you cannot ache with an empty stomach for a day and then walk past your neighbor's empty table unmoved. And there is an old and beautiful practice here worth reviving: give away what you would have eaten. Let the money and the meal you fasted become someone else's daily bread. So ask with me: could my self-denial become someone else's provision? Could my hunger make me tender to the world's? *Freedom for others may cost us a comfort we could easily have kept — what can we lay down?*

## Around the Table — For Discussion

- Fasting is the practice most of us have never tried. What have you assumed about it — and does any of that shift, hearing it as a "bodily prayer"?
- Jesus says hide your fasting — wash your face, look bright. Why do you think he makes it invisible, even a little joyful?
- Isaiah says a fast divorced from justice is a fast God rejects. How does that reframe what fasting is really for?
- Fasting exposes how ruled we are by our appetites. What do you think a day's hunger would reveal about you?

[5]A pastoral note: the discipline of fasting is not for everyone in every season. It is not appropriate where it would endanger health, and it must never become a vehicle for shame about the body, punishment of the body, or disordered eating. Anyone for whom food carries such weight should set fasting aside without guilt and practice self-denial in another form; the aim is always freedom and dependence on God, never harm.

- Freedom for others may cost us something. What would it look like for your self-denial to become someone else's bread?

## This Week — A Practice

A gentle invitation, not a requirement — and only if it is safe and healthy for you. Consider setting aside one meal (or something else that has a grip on you — a screen, a habit, a comfort) for a single day this week, and each time the craving rises, let it become a prayer: "your kingdom come." Let the small ache turn your heart toward God, and toward the hungry. And do the thing Isaiah loved: take what you would have spent or eaten, and give it away — let your hunger become someone else's bread. Keep it hidden; tell no one but the Father. And if fasting is not right for you in this season, lay it down without guilt and simply give something away instead. Then bring back what you found. This Kingdom, like all the rest, is learned in the doing.

## Looking Ahead

With fasting, the practices of piety are complete — giving, prayer, and fasting, all pulled out of the spotlight and returned to "your Father who sees in secret." Now the Sermon turns a decisive corner. From how we practice our devotion, Jesus turns to where we keep our treasure: "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth… for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." We are moving into money, and the heart, and the great either'or that will run underneath everything that follows — "you cannot serve God and wealth."

## Benediction

So go this week and, if you can, let your body pray. Set something down for a day, and let the hunger for it become a hunger for God and for a world set right. Wash your face and tell no one; keep it a secret between you and the Father. And let it make you tender — let your small, chosen emptiness open your eyes to the involuntary emptiness at your neighbor's table, and your hand toward it. And if this is not your season for fasting, hear the freedom in it: lay it down, and give instead, and know that the God who sees in secret is glad. Blessed are those whose very hunger learns to pray — for they will be filled, and so, through them, will others.

*Love, practiced — not just professed — reveals the Kingdom among us.*

Blessings,
**Pastor Mick Finch**

SESSION TWENTY-TWO

# Introduction Video Script

*Single presenter, to camera · target 5–6 minutes · warm, steady, unhurried*

*[Begin still.]*

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And yet Jesus assumes we will. Notice — not "if you fast," but "whenever you fast." He takes for granted that his followers will practice this oldest, most bodily of the disciplines, just like they give and pray. So before we hear his warning, we have to recover what fasting even is — and why anyone in their right mind would voluntarily go hungry for God.

*[The warning, one last time.]*

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*[What it's for.]*

So what's it for — this voluntary hunger? At its simplest, fasting is a bodily prayer. It's your own stomach, aching and empty, taught to say "your kingdom come." Where words can lie and the heart can wander, hunger is honest — it drags the whole body into the prayer. And it does a few things at once. It clears space — setting aside even something as good as food, to say with your body that you hunger for God more than for bread. It exposes us — a few hours without eating and you discover how ruled you are by your appetites, how fast you grumble, how thin your patience really is. And it teaches dependence — the same lesson as the manna: we're not self-sufficient; we live, moment by moment, on what God gives. Fasting is the body's way of praying "deliver us," "not my will but yours."

*[The fast God chooses.]*

But there's a warning in Scripture even more searching than "don't do it to be seen," and it goes to the heart of who we are as The Confluence. Long before Jesus, Isaiah confronted people who fasted faithfully and couldn't understand why God seemed unmoved. And God thundered back: your fasting means nothing to me while you oppress your workers and strike with a wicked fist. "Is not this the fast that I choose — to loose the bonds of injustice, to share your bread with the hungry, to bring the homeless poor into your house?" A fast divorced from justice is a fast God does not want. Empty stomachs offered up to God while the empty stomachs at your door go ignored — that's an offense to him. The true fast always bends toward the neighbor. Worship and justice are never two separate accounts.

*[Not a technique, not a punishment — careful.]*

And two things fasting is not. It's not a technique to manipulate God — you don't fast to twist his arm or earn his favor. And it's not a punishment of the body. Hear this plainly: fasting is never self-hatred dressed up as holiness, never a way to shame or harm the good body God gave you. Jesus tells you to wash your face and look bright — there's joy in it, not misery. So a word of real care: this discipline isn't for everyone in every season. If food carries a heavy weight for you — if fasting would endanger your health, or reopen an old wound, or feed shame about your body — then set it aside, with no guilt at all, and deny yourself some other way. The whole point is freedom and dependence on God. Anything that turns it into harm has lost the point.

*[The thread and practice.]*

So here's our question this week — freedom for others: could my self-denial become someone else's provision? Could my hunger make me tender to the world's? There's an old, beautiful practice worth reviving — give away what you would have eaten; let the meal you skipped become someone else's daily bread.

So, a gentle invitation, not a requirement, and only if it's safe and healthy for you: consider setting aside one meal — or a screen, a habit, some comfort that has a grip on you — for one day this week, and each time the craving rises, let it become a prayer: "your kingdom come." Keep it hidden; tell no one but the Father. And take what you would've spent, and give it away. If fasting isn't right for you this season, lay it down without guilt and just give something away instead.

Next time — with the practices complete, the Sermon turns a corner, from how we practice our devotion to where we keep our treasure. "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." We're moving into money, and the heart, and the great either'or underneath it all: you cannot serve God and wealth.

*[Slow. Land it.]*

For now, if you can, let your body pray. Set something down for a day, and let the hunger for it become a hunger for God and for a world set right. Wash your face and tell no one. And let it make you tender — let your small, chosen emptiness open your eyes, and your hand, to the involuntary emptiness at your neighbor's table. And if this isn't your season for it, hear the freedom: lay it down, give instead, and know the God who sees in secret is glad.

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**Blessings, Pastor Mick Finch.**