

# The Sermon on the Mount (Part 2)

## The New People of God

### Study 11 – Fasting

#### Introduction

At one level Jesus' teaching in the passage before us in this study is very simple indeed. Addressing His Jewish disciples in the hearing of a Jewish crowd, Jesus warns against 'fasting' which is done in order to be seen by men – fasting done not in heartfelt and humble repentance before God or as an expression of dependence upon God and His grace, but done in order to impress others with how pious we are. In this passage as in the earlier passages in Matthew 6, Jesus uses something that was practiced by the Jews of His day to warn against the trap of religious hypocrisy. He is not commanding fasting in this passage but reminding those who fast how to conduct themselves so that the glory might go to God and not to them.

By the same token however (and as we saw in our study of the Lord's Prayer) Jesus does seem to be assuming that His disciples will continue to practice fasting. He does not say 'if you fast' but 'when you fast'. And it is at this point that questions arise for believers today. What is fasting? What does fasting signify? Should Christians fast or is fasting a practice that was restricted to 1<sup>st</sup> century Jewish believers? If Christians fast are there set times and rules for when and how they are to fast (e.g. Lent or the eating of certain foods on specific days) or is it all down to personal decision and choice?

Given the uncertainty that many Christians feel about the question of fasting, it thus seems wise for us to extend this study beyond the teaching of Matthew 6:16-18 and to look at what the Bible as a whole teaches about fasting. This will lay a good foundation for our thinking about the place that fasting can have in our walk with the Lord. It will also provide us with the opportunity to reconsider the question of personal Christian liberty and remind us of the importance of not forcing our views upon others when it comes to questions of personal conscience.



**Read Matthew 6:16-18**

1. What do's and don'ts does Jesus lay down in this passage?
2. What is the key point that Jesus is making in this passage?
3. How do you think Jesus' teaching about fasting is linked to His teaching about prayer?
4. In your opinion what is the purpose of fasting?

**Read Leviticus 16:1-34**

5. What was the purpose of the Day of Atonement?
6. What role do you think that the fasting prescribed in verse 29 played? (the word translated *deny yourselves* is the word for *fast*)

7. According to this passage what would one purpose of fasting be?

**Read Nehemiah 1:1-10; 8:9-11; 9:1-3.**

8. What was the purpose of Nehemiah's fast?

9. Nehemiah 8:9-11 & 9:1-3 speak of feasting and fasting. What was significance of each of these in these passages?

**Read Isaiah 58:1-7**

10. What does this passage teach about Israel's hypocrisy?

11. What does this passage teach us about true fasting?

**Read Joel 2:12-13**

12. What does this passage teach about the significance of fasting?

