

## *Feasting and Fasting*

### *Luke 5:33-39*

Matthew Levi's banquet was almost over. But Christ's critics had just begun. The problem was not merely that the Master was eating with sinners and tax collectors. They were incensed that He was eating at all.

The Law of Moses demanded that God's people fast only on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. But over the centuries, rabbis had added other days.

Old legends declared that Moses climbed Mount Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments on Thursday and returned on Monday. So the Pharisees also fasted both Friday and Saturday.

Matthew's feast fell on one of those days. So they were fasting. And according to Mark, so were John the Baptist's disciples. But Jesus and His disciples were not fasting; they were feasting.

*John's disciples and the Pharisees were fasting; Mark 2:18*

This time the Pharisees were not alone. John the Baptist was locked in an underground dungeon in Herod's Black Fortress overlooking the Dead Sea.

So the handful of men who still considered themselves his disciples drifted back to Galilee. And they joined in when the Pharisees questioned the Carpenter's feasting on a fasting day.

*And they said to Him, "The disciples of John often fast and offer prayers, the disciples of the Pharisees also do the same, but Yours eat and drink." Verse 33*

### *A New Motive*

Jonah was a long way from home. But he was finally where God commanded him to go. At ancient Nineveh, the modern Iraqi city of Mosul, the reluctant prophet walked to the center of the city.

Then he started preaching. His skin was bleached and blotched from three days in a fish's stomach. So he instantly drew a crowd.

*...he cried out and said, "Yet forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown." Jonah 3:4*

The citizens of that city were known for their wickedness. They were savage and sadistic, vicious and violent. So Jonah expected to be berated and beaten.

But the people did the last thing the prophet expected them to. They believed his message that God would soon judge them for their sin. And they decided to do something about it.

*Then the people of Nineveh believed in God; and they called a fast and put on sackcloth from the greatest to the least of them. Jonah 3:5*

We do not have to wonder why they chose to fast, either. Jonah recorded their words when they explained why they were fasting.

*Who knows, God may turn and relent and withdraw His burning anger so that we will not perish. Jonah 3:9*

Throughout the Old Testament, that is the purpose of fasting. It is more than a ritual act of abasement and self denial. It is intended to avert God's judgement by expressing sincere sorrow over sin.

So when God declared David's infant son would die because of the king's adultery with Bathsheba, David also fasted. And after the child died, David explained his reason for fasting.

*He said, "While the child was still alive, I fasted and wept; for I said, "Who knows, the Lord may be gracious to me, that the child may live." 2 Samuel 12:22*

Fasting, as both John's disciples and the Pharisees practiced it, is a pure and perfect example of the very essence of religion. It is the same spiritual principle that is practiced from Asia and Africa to Australia and America today.

Religion always tries to please God with rites and rituals, sacrifices and self denial, clean living and good works. From animism practiced in smoky jungle clearings to Islam practiced in grand mosques, the

purpose is always the same. It is an effort to convince an angry God to turn away from His wrath and forgo the judgement sinful men so richly deserve.

But Jesus said that such religious systems are like a worn out garment or an overused leather wine skin. It is so useless it can be neither patched up nor forced into further service.

More than that, religion is incompatible with Christianity. The Gospel of grace is not merely the glorious good news that God's Son came down to this earth to live a perfect life and show men the loving heart of God.

It is the message that Christ carried all our sins to the cross. Suspended there between the earth and the sky, He endured all the blood and death our sins deserve.

*Christ also died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust, 1 Peter 3:18*

That is the real reason Jesus and His disciples were feasting rather than fasting. And that is why we who trust in Christ's cross never need to engage in efforts to avert God's wrath. Our Lord has already paid the price for our sin.

And that demands celebration, not sacrificing, struggling, and striving to please God. Our Savior has graciously granted us full and final freedom from God's wrath. So there is not only no need to try to please our God. When we do sacrifice or serve Him in a mistaken, misguided attempt to please Him, we insult Him and belittle our Savior's sacrifice.

No, everything we do as children of God is to be motivated by gratitude and fervent love for the Savior who paid the penalty for our sin by dying that we might live. Now and forever, that must be our one and only motive.

## *A New Mind*

Jesus offered a two-part parable to explain why His disciples were not fasting. The first deals with patching a worn out garment.

*And He was also telling them a parable: "No one tears a piece of cloth from a new garment and puts it on an old garment; otherwise he will both tear the new, and the piece from the new will not match the old." Verse 36*

The image portrays an act of profound foolishness. A man's coat is ragged and old. And one day he finds a tear on a sleeve. In his closet, a new coat hangs. So the man takes a pair of scissors and snips a piece off the new coat. Then he carefully sews it over the tear in his old one.

At first, everything works well. But then the coat must be washed. And while the old coat has long since shrunk from washing, the patch has not. So after the coat is washed and dried, the man finds the patch has shrunk. And the tear is much worse.

The Baptist's followers were content with their lives. But John had pointed them to Jesus. And what the Master had to say warmed them. Still, they were not willing to make a complete change.

Instead, they thought maybe they could patch a bit of what this Rabbi was saying onto the lives they had already chosen. And that, Jesus insisted, simply would not work.

We all come to Christ because we find our lives are torn. Maybe a marriage has gone from love and tenderness to regret and bitterness. Guilt has made us feel ugly and dirty inside. Or tensions and worries have begun to gnaw away at us.

So, driven by specific needs and seeking solutions to our problems, we come to Jesus Christ. But if we are to find the peace and power we need, we cannot limit our commitment to what is hurting.

Christian commitment, like love for Christ, must be complete. If we seek to snip off a bit of Christianity to mend some area of our lives that is torn, we cannot stop there. We cannot commit our guilt to God, but omit our finances and our families. We cannot give Him our worries and keep back our lifestyles and our decision-making.

Our Savior simply will not accept such an incomplete commitment. And if we do insist on attempting a patchwork commitment, we will find that our problems will not only remain unsolved, they will keep on getting worse and worse.

No, if we are to come to Jesus Christ, we cannot merely patch up our problems. We must turn over everything we are and everything we have to Him. We must commit every decision and every habit to Him.

Today, wine is stored in glass bottles. But in Jesus' day, it was kept in leather bags called wineskins. And the Master's second image focused on storing wine those skins.

*And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise the new wine will burst the skins and it will be spilled out, and the skins will be ruined. But new wine must be put into fresh wineskins. Verses 37-38*

As wineskins grow old, they stretch thin, crease and crack. But they still work if the wine has already cured.

But Jesus spoke of a man who foolishly poured wine that had barely begun to ferment into an old wineskin. And as the wine continued to cure, it released gasses, swelling the bag.

Had the bag been new, it would have been able to stretch to match the swelling, but it was old. So the bag burst, and the wine spilled.

Again, the message is simple. An old religious system cannot contain the new life Christ came to bring us. The Spirit of God cannot be bottled up in any old religious system of seeking to please God with sacrificial service and outward obedience.

In the same way, we cannot seek to serve Jesus Christ and hang onto our old ways of thinking. We must turn away from all our old attitudes, actions, and aims. We must be reborn and recreated by Christ's power. Otherwise, we are unfit as homes for His Spirit.

John's disciples were attempting the impossible. They wanted to accommodate the Master's teachings and make them a part of the age-old religious system of pleasing God by effort and obedience.

They needed to do what we must also do if we are to find the light and life, the freedom and forgiveness we need. We must repent. The Gospel of grace demands that we change our minds, not merely realign our thinking or reform our ways.

We must utterly abandon the very idea of pleasing God. That, the New Testament insists, is quite simply impossible. God cannot be pleased by anything short of a lifetime of absolute perfection. And every one of us has already fallen far short of that.

However, if we are cleansed by Christ's blood and robed in His righteousness, God is already perfectly pleased with us. We are more than our Savior's servants; we are His friends and family.

And never again are we to look upon God as a consuming fire whose wrath must somehow be appeased. If we have chosen to trust Christ, God is our Father, our Abba, our Papa, our Daddy.

And as His adopted children, we are to live our lives loving Him. That is the only acceptable motive for our giving and our goodness, for serving and sacrificing.

Yes, we are to trust Him, obey Him and serve Him. But we are not to do so that He might turn away from condemning us. Neither are we to do so that we might merit His favor, but only because we love Him with all our heart, all our soul, all our mind, and all our strength.

## *A New Master*

The Pharisees probably did not fully understand Jesus' initial image. But John's disciples had to have.

*And Jesus said to them, "You cannot make the attendants of the bridegroom fast while the bridegroom is with them, can you?" Verse 34*

John's disciples remembered. They knew Jesus was not the first one to refer to Christ as the bridegroom. In his last recorded statement, the Baptist also referred to our Redeemer as a bridegroom.

*He who has the bride is the bridegroom; but the friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly because of the bridegroom's voice. So this joy of mine has been made full. John 3:29*

John never claimed to be the Messiah. He said he was merely a voice crying in the wilderness, declaring that men should repent to prepare for the coming of the true Messiah.

And the Baptist indisputably identified Jesus of Nazareth as Messiah. That knowledge did not merely please John, either. He declared that he was filled with joy that Christ, the bridegroom, had finally come.

Most of the desert prophet's disciples had long ago left John to follow Jesus. But for some reason, the disciples who joined their criticism with that of the Pharisees had not. They were still obeying the Baptist's rigorous routines of repentance to prepare for Christ's coming.

In the end, their real problem had nothing to do with fasting. Their problem was that they had failed to obey their master's most important teaching. Unlike Levi, they had not chosen to follow Jesus.

So the question was not really why Jesus was feasting. Rather, it was why were they still mourning. The Bridegroom was with them. Yet while John celebrated that Christ had come, they did not.

Still, Jesus understood their sorrow. He knew they also mourned and fasted because their master had been led away in chains, and they were powerless to deliver him. In the same way, the Master added, His disciples would also mourn one day.

*But the days will come; and when the bridegroom is taken away from them, then they will fast in those days. Verse 35*

When Jesus was battered and beaten and led down the narrow lanes of Jerusalem to be nailed to a cross, His disciples would also weep and mourn. The same night He was betrayed, Jesus repeated that prediction.

*But now I am going to Him who sent Me; and none of you asks Me, 'Where are You going?' But because I have said these things to you, sorrow has filled your heart. John 16:5-6*

But those who loved and trusted Jesus would not live out their lives mourning His absence. When the sun rose up above the Mount of Olives on Easter morning, Their sorrow would transformed into singing.

*...you will grieve, but your grief will be turned into joy. John 16:20*

Christians are considered the bride of Christ. And we are not to live like bereaved widows, mourning His loss. We serve a living Savior not a dead martyr. So Jesus wants us to be filled with joy and celebrate His eternal presence with us.

After all, He who was taken away from His disciples and led out to die did not stay dead. He rose again. And He promised that He would never again abandon those who love Him.

*...lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age. Matthew 28:20*

*He Himself has said, "I will never desert you, nor will I ever forsake you." Hebrews 13:5*

Jewish weddings demanded celebration. Even when the wedding fell upon the Day of Atonement, Jews were not only allowed to forgo fasting. They were commanded to celebrate.

And so are we. Our beloved Bridegroom is with us, and absolutely nothing can separate us from Him.

*I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. Romans 8:38-39*

Now and forever, our great God and Savior is with us. And that demands a life of celebration and joy.

In the end, the disagreement about fasting and feasting was not the real problem that plagued Christ's critics. No, they were condemned to a life of futility and failure by simple satisfaction.

*And no one, after drinking old wine wishes for new; for he says, "The old is good enough." Verse 39*

There was a striking difference between John's disciples and Matthew Levi. That tax collector left both his business and the golden coins he had once so cherished to follow Jesus. That was the measure of both his desire for a new life and his dissatisfaction with his old one.

So a turncoat and outcast became one of Christ's chosen. But the Pharisees and even the Baptists' followers would live and die without even sipping the sweet joy of belonging to Jesus.

And the reason was simple. It is the same thing that keeps so very many of us from experiencing the life and love, the peace and power of knowing Jesus in all His fullness.

Those men simply didn't want a new life. They were not sufficiently dissatisfied with the lives they had been living. They were comfortable and content with self-sacrifice and self-sufficiency: with old wine and worn out clothes.

Death, despair and defeat were good enough. So that was their condemnation. But it was not God who condemned them.

They condemned themselves.