

Text: Lk 5.29-35 [Parallels: Matt 9:14–15; Mark 2:18–20]

As we return to the topic of fasting, I want to remind you of the definition we are basing our study on:

Definition: Fasting is a practice where one goes without food (and sometimes all liquids) for religious purposes.

We have moved into the New Testament and considered the Lord's teaching in the Sermon on the Mount, "keep your fasting secret."

The Pharisees made a show of their fasting. They wanted to appear pious in the eyes of men, and Jesus said, "They have their reward."

Fasting, *or any other spiritual exercise*, is a private matter. We fast, we pray, we give — privately, without calling attention to ourselves.

During the Lord's ministry, an occasion arose where John's disciples raised a question about fasting. This is the other time that the Lord gave instruction about fasting, though in response to a question rather than initiating it himself.

Read Lk 5.29-35

As you will notice, I'm giving more than just the bit about fasting, because I want you to have that context.

I am also stopping in the middle of the passage because I want to come back to the last part of this for a future message. I had thought last week that I only have two more messages, but probably there is one more... so it is *still* two more to go ... I think.

We have basically taken this line about fasting:

Fasting is not commanded, nor is it prohibited. Rather, it is regulated as a matter of private devotion.

Given that understanding, during the Lord's ministry, it seems the disciples *did not fast* ... at all. Why?

Proposition: In the New Testament, something new is changing the way men worship, so that we serve more in joy than in lament, in rejoicing rather than fasting.

I. The question of context (29-32)

A. The cultural context

1. We mentioned last time the fasting that came about after the captivity

Zech 8.19 “Thus says the LORD of hosts, ‘The fast of the fourth, the fast of the fifth, the fast of the seventh and the fast of the tenth **months will become** joy, gladness, and cheerful feasts for the house of Judah; so love truth and peace.’”

They were commemorating “the day of the beginning of Nebuchadrezzar’s siege in the tenth month, the day of the capture of the city in the fourth month, the day of its destruction in the fifth month and the day of Gedaliah’s murder in the seventh month”¹

- a. Notice the prophecy “will become”
 - b. It seems that these fasts were ongoing in Zechariah’s day
 - c. The prophecy indicates there is a time when fasting will become feasting
- ## 2. During the post-exilic period, Pharisaism rose as a powerful influence among the Jews
- a. It is also during this period that fasting seems to be more prevalent among the Jews

“Fasting as a practice of the pious seems to have been a late development. Literature of the Second Temple period records this association (see Grimm, *From Feasting*, 21), commending fasting accompanied with prayer as an act of devotion (Tobit 12:8; *Testament of Joseph*, 3:4) that would be rewarded with divine favor (Judith 4:9–13).”²

¹ Geo. B. Eager, “Abstinence,” in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, ed. James Orr et al. (Chicago: The Howard-Severance Company, 1915), 24.

² “Fasting” in John D. Barry et al., eds., *Lexham Bible Dictionary* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016).

- b. Some of this rose through exposure to Greek dualism, which sees the body as evil, thus fasting would “afflict the body and strengthen the soul”
- c. The Pharisees came to require fasting twice a week
 - 1) Monday and Thursday, all year round
 - 2) Reason: “Moses was supposed to have gone up the Mount for the second Tables of the Law on a Thursday, and to have returned on a Monday.”³
- d. Among the Essenes, fasting was a regular feature as well

Little wonder, as our text says, that the disciples of John likewise practice fasting

B. The immediate context

1. We are in the conversion of Matthew (Levi in our text)

Lk 5.27-28 ¶ After that He went out and noticed a tax collector named Levi sitting in the tax booth, and He said to him, “Follow Me.”²⁸ And he left everything behind, and got up and began to follow Him.

2. After his conversion, Matthew holds a feast in his home, inviting many of his friends among the sinners (the tax-collectors)
 - a. The Pharisees criticize Jesus for *feasting* with sinners
 - b. Jesus responds that he came to *call* sinners to repentance

Edersheim suggests that the feast of Matthew could have occurred on the very day of one of the Pharisee’s weekly fasts.

- c. The next question, then, has to do with fasting
 - 1) It appears that the Pharisees put John’s disciples up to it
 - 2) John isn’t antagonistic to Jesus, but there are differences

³ Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, vol. 1 (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1896), 663.

- 3) John's disciples genuinely would find the differences confusing (John's asceticism would inspire imitation)

II. The impossibility of mourning (33-34)

A. How John identified Jesus (near the end of John's public ministry)

Jn 3.29 "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.

1. Jesus picks up on this answer in his reply to John's disciples
2. The friends of the bridegroom cannot fast when the bridegroom is present

B. More context

1. The presence of the bride-groom "marked the marriage week"
2. The Rabbi's granted exceptions to fasting during the marriage week
 - a. Marriage week was a time of "unmixed festivity"
 - b. "Even on the Day of Atonement a bride was allowed to relax one of the ordinances of that strictest fast."
 - c. The festivities of the marriage week superseded all requirements of asceticism, including fasting

"It was regarded as a religious duty to gladden the bride and bridegroom."⁴

C. The Lord's rationale: when the bridegroom is present, his friends *cannot* fast

Lk 5.34 And Jesus said to them, "You cannot make the attendants of the bridegroom fast while the bridegroom is with them, can you?"

⁴ Edersheim, 1:663.

III. The possibility of constraint (35)

A. However, ... there will come a time when the bridegroom *is* absent

1. Then they *will* fast
2. What time would that be?

Clearly, the arrest, trial, and crucifixion created a time when the bridegroom was absent.

- a. No doubt the disciples mourned, and prayed, and fasted
- b. The scriptures do note food being present, at least
 - 1) Jesus blessed the bread with the disciples when they got to Emmaus
 - 2) Jesus asked in the upper room for some food to prove he wasn't a spirit
- c. Nevertheless, those days would no doubt be days of fasting

They would be crying out to God, questioning their understanding, wondering what they had missed.

Peter, in particular, would be much mortified for his own failures.

B. What about the disciples following the resurrection? Did they fast then?

1. In Acts 13, when the elders sent Barnabas and Saul on their mission, they fasted and prayed

Ac 13.2-3 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."³ Then, when they had fasted and prayed and laid their hands on them, they sent them away.

2. In Acts 14, when Paul and Barnabas appointed elders in every church, they fasted and prayed

Ac 14.23 When they had appointed elders for them in every church, having prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed.

These are the only *clear* mentions of fasting in the New Testament after the resurrection

- But 39 references to prayer

Ac 2.42-47 They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. ⁴³ ¶ Everyone kept feeling a sense of awe; and many wonders and signs were taking place through the apostles. ⁴⁴ And all those who had believed were together and had all things in common; ⁴⁵ and they *began* selling their property and possessions and were sharing them with all, as anyone might have need. ⁴⁶ Day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart, ⁴⁷ praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved.

C. What is the difference?

1. Mourning when Jesus was taken from them (post-crucifixion)
2. Joy when the Holy Spirit was given to them

Jn 14.16-17 "I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may be with you forever; ¹⁷ *that is* the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it does not see Him or know Him, *but* you know Him because He abides with you and will be in you.

Conclusion:

Now, I have said that fasting is not prohibited. Here is our proposition:

Proposition: In the New Testament, something new is changing the way men worship, so that we serve more in joy than in lament, in rejoicing rather than fasting.

Edersheim's explanation:

"The Bridegroom would be violently taken from them, and then would be the time for mourning and fasting. Not that this necessarily implies literal fasting, any more than it excludes it, provided the great principles, more fully indicated

immediately afterwards, are kept in view. Painfully minute, Judaistic self-introspection is contrary to the spirit of the joyous liberty of the children of God. It is only a sense of sin, and the felt absence of the Christ, which should lead to mourning and fasting, though not in order thereby to avert either the anger of God or outward calamity.”⁵

- When we sin, fasting may be appropriate, we have distanced ourselves from Christ.
- When we especially need the Lord's presence (big decisions, some calamity) fasting may be appropriate

⁵ Edersheim, 1:664.