

JESUS IS QUESTIONED ABOUT FASTING

Mat. 9:14-17; Mk. 2:18-22; Lk. 5:33-39

In these verses we learn that Jesus is questioned about fasting. Not only does He answer the question posed to Him, He also gives them three parables. The meaning of these three parables has bewildered many, and I have to agree that they can be challenging. I have always said that you should never limit a parable to one meaning, and I have found at least two possible meanings of what Jesus was teaching in these parables. Before we get into these parables, let's take a closer look at the context.

Just before Jesus was asked about fasting, He had just finished dealing with the Scribes' and Pharisees' question of why He was eating with sinners. They were constantly looking for an occasion to make Jesus look bad or cause problems for Him, and this occasion wasn't any different.

Mark 2:18 The disciples of John and of the Pharisees were fasting. Then they came and said to Him, "Why do the disciples of John and of the Pharisees fast, but Your disciples do not fast?"

Mark tells us that John's disciples and the Pharisees were behind this question, but according to Matthew, it was John's disciples that asked the question. However, we can safely assume the Pharisees were the driving force behind this situation based on their history of plotting against Jesus (Mat. 12:14; Mk. 3:6). Luke adds that Jesus was questioned about prayer as well, but the main focus was on fasting. Before we go any further let's talk about fasting itself. Fasting, in a Biblical sense, was abstaining from food and drink for many reasons such as:

- Times of sorrow and grief (1 Sam. 31:13; 2 Sam. 1:12, 12:16; Neh. 1:4).
- Accompanied with repentance (1 Sam. 7:6; Jon. 3:5; Acts 9:9).
- Great religious events (Ex. 34:28; Mat. 4:2; Acts 13:2-3).

- Personal service toward God (Luke 2:37; Acts 10:30; 1Cor. 7:5).
- Times of making important decisions (Acts 14:23).

Fasting was part of Paul's ministry as well (2 Cor. 6:5, 11:27). Fasting has many benefits both physically and spiritual.

Fasting:

- Benefits your health, by allowing your body to cleanse itself of toxins.
- Is honored by God when done as a token of sincere dedication.
- Can help a person to learn more self-discipline.
- Causes you to focus on what you are fasting for.
- Causes you to appreciate those things you have abstained from.

While there are many things we can fast for today, we are not commanded to do so under the new covenant. Fasting is voluntary for the Christian. However, under the old covenant, fasting was commanded once a year on the Day of Atonement as we see in the following verse:

Leviticus 23:27 "Also the tenth day of this seventh month shall be the Day of Atonement. It shall be a holy convocation for you; you shall afflict your souls, and offer an offering made by fire to the LORD." (Lev. 16:31)

This term "afflict your souls" includes fasting (Isa. 58:3-5). In fact the definition of the word "souls" includes: self, life, creature, person, **appetite**, mind, living being, desire, emotion, passion. The Day of Atonement was sometimes called "the day of fasting" (Jer. 36:6) or "the fast" (Acts 27:9), which occurred in our October or September.

As we get back to our primary text, it's important to realize that we have two different groups of people that were fasting for different reasons. Our first group, the Pharisees, were famous for making up new laws from their man-made traditions and

trying to bind them on others. One of these man-made traditions was fasting. The Pharisees would fast for many different reasons, but they ritually fasted on Mondays and Thursdays (Luke 18:12). Some scholars have suggested they started this ritual because the Jews believe that when Moses went back up the Mountain the second time to receive the Ten Commandments, he ascended on our Thursday and came back down on our Monday. Most of what the Pharisees did was for an outward show, and for seeking the praise of others (Mat. 23:1-5). In other words, their fasts were not sincere.

Now when the disciples of John fasted it was most likely done out of sincerity as they followed the example of John who did not come eating or drinking (Mat. 11:18). John's disciples had another reason for fasting at this time because John was in prison and his life was in danger (Mat. 4:12). Now that we examined the differences between these two groups, let's focus in on the question asked about fasting and prayer. The first thing that I want to point out is that it would have been difficult for these men to know whether Jesus' disciples were praying or fasting based solely on their outward appearance. We can know this by what Jesus teaches his disciples in (Mat. 6:1-18). In these verses, Jesus teaches His disciples to give in secret, pray in secret and to fast in secret. The only way that they would be able to know that His disciples were not fasting would be by observing them putting food or drink into their mouths. Now notice Jesus' response to their question.

Mat. 9:15 And Jesus said to them, "Can the friends of the bridegroom mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them? But the days will come when the bridegroom will be taken away from them, and then they will fast."

This answer would have one meaning to the Pharisees and even a deeper meaning to John's disciples. Jesus answers their question by drawing a parallel with something that they are familiar

with, a wedding feast. A typical wedding feast lasted about seven days. During this time, the friends of the bridegroom stayed with him (Judges 14:10-11). A wedding feast was a time of joy and feasting. Tradition shows that even the Pharisees and other Jews would refrain from fasting during these seven days. Both of these groups would have understood that Jesus was teaching them that it wouldn't make any sense for His disciples to fast since He was with them now.

Now John's disciples would have gained an even deeper meaning from this based on John's teaching in (John 3:22-35). In these verses, John points out how much greater Jesus is than he, and he points out that Jesus is the bridegroom. So, Jesus' answer should have reminded them of what John had taught them about Jesus.

After Jesus answers their question, He then proceeds to prophesy about his death and how it will mark the beginning of His disciple's fast because He would no longer be with them. Jesus had made His point, but He continues on and speaks three different parables. Luke is the only one that calls them parables and contains all three as seen below.

- 1) **Luke 5:36 Then He spoke a parable to them: "No one puts a piece from a new garment on an old one; otherwise the new makes a tear, and also the piece that was taken out of the new does not match the old.**
37 "And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; or else the new wine will burst the wineskins and be spilled, and the wineskins will be ruined.
- 2) **38 "But new wine must be put into new wineskins, and both are preserved.**
- 3) **39 And no one after drinking old wine desires new, for he says, 'The old is good.'"**

The question becomes, what is Jesus talking about here and how does it apply to what has just been said? As I stated in the beginning, we should not limit just one meaning to Jesus' parables, and my

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studies have led me to two possible ways to explain them. First, let's take a look at the parables themselves. In the parable of putting the new cloth on the old garment, Jesus points out this will not work. We need to keep in mind that most of their clothing back then was made from wool, and part of the process of getting wool ready to sew is to shrink it first. So, if a person tried to patch an old garment with a new unshrunk one, it would tear away from the old garment when it gets wet making the hole even bigger. This was common knowledge for the first century people. The basic message here is you cannot mix the new with the old.

The next parable about putting new wine into old wineskins is similar in meaning. These wineskins usually came from a goat. Once a wineskin is used, especially for fermenting wine, it becomes stretched out and brittle. The residue yeast that is left in the wineskin will cause the new wine to ferment faster than it should. When the new wine starts releasing gases from the fermentation process, the old wineskin will break open under the pressure and both will be lost. Again, we can see the point is that the new doesn't mix with the old.

Our final parable talks about how a person who is drinking old wine won't suddenly desire to drink new wine because he is satisfied with what he has. The message here is simple. When a person is satisfied with where they are or with what they have, they will have little desire to try something new or different.

Now, let's take a look at the two possible meanings that Jesus is trying to convey with these parables. The first way is a simple approach. When Jesus is asked about His disciples fasting, He responds by saying that they can't fast right now because He is with them. He uses the wedding feast to show them they wouldn't be fasting either if they were the bridegroom's friends during his wedding feast. One way to look at these three parables is to say that Jesus is simply using them to drive His point home of how ridiculous it would be for His

disciples to fast right now. In other words, Jesus is saying that it makes just about as much sense for His disciples to fast as putting a new garment onto an old one or putting new wine into an old wineskin. In the third parable, Jesus is saying, for my disciples to desire to fast right now, would be like a person desiring new wine when he is satisfied with the old. While this is a possible explanation of these three parables, I believe there is much deeper meaning that can be found in them. The only problem with this simple approach is that Jesus doesn't usually use parables this way. Instead, most of them are used to describe the future kingdom that Jesus would establish or they are used to teach a spiritual lesson.

Let us now consider a second way of looking at these parables. We have already established that Jesus answers the question about fasting using the wedding feast, but in that same verse, He prophesies about His death and states this is when His disciples will fast. So, the last thing that He says has His listeners thinking of the future while remaining on the topic of fasting. This is why I believe these parables are talking about the future and the new covenant that Jesus would usher in at His death. Basically, the first two parables teach us that you cannot make the old and the new work together. Now both the Pharisees and John's disciples were living by the old Law which was passing away. John was the last Old Testament prophet from the old Law. The Pharisees were also living by their man-made traditions as well. Jesus is letting them know that their teachings and the old Law will not mix with the teachings or the new Law that He will establish at His death. Jesus did not come to patch up the old Law. Instead, He came to establish a new one. Moses prophesied of this in Deuteronomy 18:15, 18-19 and so did Jeremiah in Jeremiah 31:31-34. Jesus makes it clear that He is going to establish a new covenant in Mat. 26:28. Many other passages show that Jesus was not patching up the old covenant but that He was making a new and better covenant (Heb. 8:6-7,13, 9:15, 12:24). Jesus fulfilled the Law (Mat. 5:17-18; Lk. 24:44) and He nailed the old

covenant to the cross at His death (Col. 2:14). As Jesus was looking toward the future when His disciples would fast, it is possible that this is what Jesus was teaching with these two parables.

In the last parable, I believe it is teaching that many, including the Pharisees and John's disciples, are not going to immediately desire the new teachings of Christ or the new covenant that He would establish because they are satisfied with the old Law and their man-made traditions. This certainly was the case with the Pharisees as they fought Christianity from day one. We also know that some were satisfied with John's teaching for quite some time until they heard and accepted the good news of Jesus Christ (Acts 18:24-28, 19:1-5). Another problem that arose during this time was when some of those who did desire the new wine or the new teachings of Christ began to try to mix the new wine or new covenant with the old wineskin or the old covenant or man-made traditions (Acts 15:1; Gal. 1:6-7). Peter and Paul warn us not to do this (Gal. 1:8-9; 2 Pet. 2:18-22).

In conclusion, I hope you have found this study helpful. While my first explanation is reasonable, I prefer the second one. I also believe that we can get something from these parables that would apply to us today. From this idea of not mixing the old with the new, we must be careful that we don't try to mix man-made traditions with the perfect Law of Christ. Since we have become a new creation in Christ (2 Cor. 5:17), we must do our best not to allow our old lifestyles of sin to be mixed into our new way of life.