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Your Fasts will Become Feasts (Mark 2:18-22)

As Jesus' teachings began to spread, His opponents became more committed to putting an end to His career. The claims Jesus made for Himself were becoming increasingly offensive. One reason the religious leaders took offense at Jesus was because He challenged, redefined, and reinterpreted Israel's sacred and national symbols. Symbols, especially those connected to patriotism, carry enormous emotional power, and the temple was Israel's greatest national symbol. When Jesus claimed to have the power to forgive sin, He was certainly claiming a divine prerogative, but forgiveness was also something that was obtained only through the process of Temple worship. If forgiveness could be granted without temple worship, without the sacrificial system or sacrificial animals (Day of Atonement), and without priests, it rendered these things irrelevant. Talk like that was interpreted to undermine the nation's most sacred place and practices and threatened those whose livelihoods were connected to its success. Moreover, His claim to forgive sins threatened the economic life of Jerusalem whose regional economy was dependent on temple visitors. If people stopped going to the Temple, Jerusalem's revenue would dry up. So, Jesus' claim to forgive sins was enormously disturbing to the religious leaders. Their belief about God was being challenged, their most sacred symbol was being undermined, and their livelihoods and way of life were at risk. Surely this man is leading Israel astray (cf. Deut.13). Not only that, He brings tax collectors (traitors) into his inner circle of disciples. He was making friends with sinners. Jesus' opponents recoiled. Jerusalem began to send delegations of Scribes and Pharisees up into Galilee to investigate and to gather evidence that would put an end to this threat.

FASTING

In our text for today, Jesus is questioned about His apparent disrespect for fasting. And once again, Jesus challenges one of the sacred symbols of Israel's faith by not practicing the discipline of fasting. Matthew records that John's disciples wanted an explanation and Luke says the Pharisees were asking for an explanation. Mark seems to include both. He says, "John's disciples and the Pharisees fast but your disciples don't...why not?"

I want us to consider three pieces of Jesus' response to their question about fasting. His first answer amounts to, "No you're right we don't fast" and then He explains with a short illustration. Second, in that same illustration, He says, "Yes, my disciples will fast ...in the future." Finally, He gives them two proverbs that illustrate how the new work of the gospel is incompatible with the Pharisaic fasting.

Fasting? No!

First, when Jesus was asked about why He and His disciples do not fast, He gave them an illustration that suggested that fasting is inappropriate and incompatible with the circumstance of His presence.

Why was fasting incompatible with Jesus' ministry?

Why did Jesus and His disciples ignore one of Israel's sacred and national symbols?

First of all, Israel's practice of fasting, in Jesus' day, wasn't primarily a discipline where a person deprived themselves of food to be reminded of their dependency on God. Fasting was practiced primarily to commemorate and mourn the destruction of Solomon's Temple. It was a way to *remember the pain* and to *mourn* the loss of Israel's supremacy in the days of Saul, David, and Solomon and the loss of her national independence. Even though Israel was back in the land, and even though Herod built Jerusalem a beautiful temple, because Rome continued to occupy Israel and to rule her with an iron fist, Israel still thought of herself as exiled. Her exile could not be complete until Rome was ousted. The promises God made to Israel about bringing her back into the land with all her glory, independence, and supremacy had not yet been realized. Fasting was about mourning the loss of her independence and the destruction of Solomon's temple that symbolized Israel's religious and national supremacy over the land.

Now, the law of Moses (Lev. 16) commanded fasting only one day a year, on the Day of Atonement. However, after the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in 586 BC, and after Israel was taken into exile, the priests established four national fasts at different times of the year specifically to commemorate the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple.

In Zech.7-8, , 70 years after Israel had been taken into captivity, many Jews had returned to the land rebuilding the temple. From the North (and now that the temple had been rebuilt), some sent a delegation to Jerusalem asking if two of the four fasts, which had been specifically designed to mourn the loss of the temple should be continued. Zechariah answered by saying that they were really asking the wrong question. In reality, their fasts had nothing to do with following God. Instead, they were marking their hypocrisy before God. In reality they were acting unjustly, oppressing the widows and the orphans, turning their backs on the immigrants in the land, and acting towards each other without mercy. Zechariah, in essence charged Israel to fast from injustice, iniquity, and sin. He called them to fast from turning a deaf ear to the cries of the widows, orphans, and strangers in the land. Zechariah called Israel to fast from unkindness and malice. In other words, Israel's fasts had become occasions to mourn the loss of Israel's days of prosperity and political power and gave an appearance of following God. Zechariah said that their motive for fasting

had little or nothing to do with following God; it was about grieving the loss of their prosperity, nationalism, and making a show of religious observance. So he redirected their thinking about fasting.

In the days of Jesus, the Pharisees required that every pious Jew would fast two days each week. The law of Moses said to fast once a year. Now it was required two times per week. It's critical to understand that fasting was a way of increasing one's sense of mourning and specifically the loss of Israel's political independence and the destruction of Solomon's Temple. 1[1]

Now, the significance of Zechariah's prophesy is that through it, God would, one day, *transform these fasts over the destruction of the temple into feasts of joy, gladness, and joyful feasting* for the house of Judah. In this new day that God was preparing for Israel, the nations would come to Judah and seek the Lord with all their hearts and to seek His favor. In that day, the nations would grasp the garment of the Jew and say, 'Let us go with you for we have heard that God is with you.' (Zech. 8:19-23). In that day, Israel's mourning was changed into feasting. In Christ's day, a wedding was to be so filled with joy that the Rabbis ruled that the attendants of a bride groom were forbidden to fast during the week of the wedding.

By not fasting, Jesus is claiming that His presence marks the end of these fasts! He is claiming that He is now Israel's fundamental reason for celebrating, rejoicing, dancing, singing, and feasting. He is claiming He is that which turns Israel's fasting into feasting. The loss of Solomon's temple was a terrible loss but compared to who is now tabernacling among them, it was only a shadow. The temple in all its glory didn't amount to a hut made of mud compared to the Temple of His body which now lives among them. So in Him, while the bridegroom is with them, the attendants of the Bridegroom do not fast. So long as they have the bridegroom with them they cannot fast. Jesus was announcing that this was not a time for mourning the loss of the temple, it was not a time for fasting and not a time for weeping and despairing. It was a time for celebrating, dancing, rejoicing, eating, drinking, and feasting, for in Christ, God has revealed the ultimate Temple to which Solomon's and Herod's temples are only a shack and a dim shadow. In fact, in a few short years Herod's magnificent edifice would be destroyed.

Beloved Jesus' answer has little here to do with a disregard for the spiritual discipline of fasting. Jesus is claiming that *in Him* and through faith in Him all our personal, nationalistic, and ethnic ambitions become secondary and are eclipsed by the sheer wonder of the fact that in Christ, God is now with us. In Him, Israel's exile is over. He is that to which the Temple worship pointed. Therefore, the temple was becoming obsolete. Jesus is the ultimate sacrifice that makes all other sacrifices for sin obsolete. He is the Living Water and those who drink from it will never thirst. He is the Bread of Life and those who eat His bread will never go hungry. Jesus is the Good Shepherd and whoever comes to Him will find good pasture, care, protection, discipline, and plenty. He is the Resurrection and the Life and anyone who believes in Him, though he dies, he will yet live for eternity. He is the Light of the world and whoever believes in Him will never walk in darkness. Jesus is the Lord of the Sabbath and if you are weary and heavy laden you may come to Jesus and learn from Him and you will find rest for your souls. Jesus is claiming to be the fulfillment of every righteous hope and expectation spoken by God's prophets. Paul said, "All the promises of God find their 'Amen' in Christ." These were enormous claims and ones that, according to the prophets, could only be fulfilled when the LORD Himself came into Jerusalem ushering in the new Messianic age. By saying that He was the bridegroom, Jesus was claiming for Himself the analogy God made for His relationship to Israel in Ezk.16 where YHWH called Israel His bride. How could His disciples fast or mourn over Israel's desperate circumstances? In Christ, God had come among them with His promises that were rich and full. How could they fast? They couldn't fast. No one mourns at a wedding feast. At least not as a rule.

Through Jesus God pours out His blessings of grace upon grace, reconciling sinners of every stripe and nation to God, liberating us from the tyranny and penalty of sin, and teaching us the true nature of the kingdom. God's kingdom is not about national or personal superiority but rather about love, grace, truth, humility, service, and mercy. The kingdom of God is about following Jesus as the King and nothing could make us more glad and create more joy than that. His disciples couldn't fast while the bridegroom was with them.

Fasting? Yes!

However, Jesus went on to say that a time will come when His disciples will fast. And, that is when the bridegroom is taken away. Although Jesus' presence brings great joy, the fullness of that joy is postponed while the bridegroom was taken away...for a season. Although the joy of the gospel is unspeakable, fills us up over and over, and defines us as optimistic, hopeful, resilient, and persevering, it is not yet what it yet will be. Until the Bridegroom returns, there is much to mourn, and weep over. Jesus is giving a severe blow here to any portrayal of *Christian triumphalism* that denies the fittingness of weeping or mourning until Christ returns. Those who advocate only positive thinking among Christians, those who advocate no mourning and no weeping and no grieving are not following the Lord *as He is*; they are not following the real Jesus. Though there is much value in remaining positive and having an optimistic attitude, Christianity is not a human potential movement advocating the power of positive thinking or positive confession as our hope. If there is no fasting among us that identifies with those who weep, grieve, or mourn there is no real Christianity. We are called to weep with those who weep and rejoice with those who rejoice. Until Jesus comes back, there must be both. Worship services

that are only triumphalistic without any weeping or mourning are not Christian. Even though God is with us in His Spirit and His word, He is not yet here in the fullness of His presence until He comes back. That's why the early church cried out "Maranatha." which means, "Lord come quickly."

When people come to church if all they hear from us is of happy times, they simply cannot relate, because their lives nor ours are always happy. This is the one place where we can be free to express our griefs, disappointments, fears, and failures and then bring them before the risen Lord and let the gospel give us hope and gladness. Until Christ comes back, there will be times when the goodness of God will be hidden from our eyes. And in those times when we can't see God's goodness, we must grieve and weep. Then, in worship and faith, we must turn to the goodness of God that we know is true even though we cannot see it and we rejoice. This rhythm of weeping and rejoicing with the power of the gospel to give us hope is the way things ought to be until our Lord returns. The idea of perpetual rejoicing without any serious grief does not come from Christ. So, when the bridegroom is taken away Jesus says that they will fast and there will be reasons for us to mourn and to identify ourselves with those who mourn..

Jesus teaches us that His disciples didn't fast. How can one fast and mourn during the celebration of a wedding? And He teaches us that His disciples will fast when He is taken away.

A Different and Compatible Fast

Finally, Jesus gives two proverbs to tell us that the fasts of the Pharisees were incompatible with the fasting as a believer in Christ. (21-22). The point of His two proverbs is that of *incompatibility*. It is not fasting *per se* that Jesus is criticizing. However, the newness of the gospel is incompatible with the Pharisaic *practice* of fasting. No one puts a new patch of material on an old garment. When you wash it, it will shrink and tear the garment. And no one puts new wine in an old wineskin, because when the new wine ferments and the gasses begin to expand, it will break open the old and brittle wine skin.

Why can't Jesus' gospel be fitted into the Pharisaic practice of fasting? Well, their goals and motives are mutually exclusive. Let me bullet four reasons taken primarily from Luke 18:9ff and Mtt. 6:17-18.

1. Since the fasts had become identified with mourning, and the destruction of Solomon's temple, they were filled with the expectation that God would grant them political and national superiority and power. Instead, God was about to judge Israel for her unfaithfulness. Her political and national identity was about to be destroyed. The new wine of the gospel will break the old wineskin of self-promotion and pride that puts personal and national ambition before God. Humility, lowliness, and servanthood are incompatible with this old wineskin. There simply isn't room for two God's in the wineskin of your soul.

2. Pharisaic fasting was practiced to merit God's favor and became a way to treat others with contempt. Before Jesus told the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector at prayer in Luke 18:9, we're told this: "*and he also told this parable to certain ones who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and viewed others with contempt.*" In the parable, the Pharisee honored himself by saying that he fasted twice each week. He used his practice of fasting to prove that he was more worthy than the tax collector he despised. The gospel is about acknowledging our unworthiness before God and loving others. These two practices are incompatible. The new wine of the gospel will burst open the old wineskin of self-justification before God and any merciless condemnation we have for others. These things are incompatible.

3. When the Pharisees fasted, they made themselves look gloomy and sad so that others would feel sorry for them and the sacrifice they were making by fasting.

"Whenever you fast, do not put on a gloomy face as the hypocrites {do,} for they neglect their appearance so that they will be noticed by men when they are fasting. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, so that your fasting will not be noticed by men, but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees {what is done} in secret will reward you." (Mtt. 6:17-18) The new wine of the gospel will burst open the old wineskin of hypocrisy. Christian fasting is incompatible with the motive to be seen and noticed by others. To do your religion to be seen or noticed by others is incompatible with the new wine of the gospel that calls us to seek God for himself not as a means to get others to think well of us. Both Jeremiah and Zechariah brought this charge against Israel. It is an old and persistent wine skin.

4. Finally, Christian fasting is a way that we can say to God that we desire Him more than the gifts He gives. So, the new wine of the gospel is incompatible with using God for our own selfish ends and it will break open the old wineskins of using God to fund our own ambitions instead of loving God simply for who He is. Christian fasting is a way of telling God that He is more important to us than the infinite number of gifts He gives us. To fast is to deprive ourselves of God's gifts for a season so that we can fill ourselves with God and God alone. It is to say to God that we love Him more than the gifts He gives to us.

So beloved, May the Lord help us to learn how to fast as Christians. May we fast or deprive ourselves of malice, greed, immorality, gossip, hypocrisy, sin, injustice, pride, cowardice, and merciless judgment of others. May we find the faith to fast from the many

good gifts God has given to us, for a season, so that we can say to God, that we do love Him more than the gifts He gives to us. And may our fasting always be funded by the joy of the Lord who turns our weeping in to rejoicing, who gives the oil of gladness for mourning, and the mantle of praise for the spirit of heaviness. For His glory and our joy. Amen