

Who Do You Say That I Am?

Seeing and Delighting in Jesus through an Expository Journey through the **Gospel of Matthew** 82- Hungering for God through Fasting- Part 3 Is Fasting Biblical? Is it Applicable Under the New Covenant?

Church January 14, 2024

Matthew 9:14-17

14 Then the disciples of John came to Him, asking, "Why do we and the Pharisees fast, but Your disciples do not fast?"

15 And Jesus said to them, "The attendants of the bridegroom cannot mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them, can they? But the days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast.

16 But no one puts a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment; for the patch pulls away from the garment, and a worse tear results.

17 Nor do people put new wine into old wineskins; otherwise the wineskins burst, and the wine pours out and the wineskins are ruined; but they put new wine into fresh wineskins, and both are preserved."

*To the Glory of God the Father; God the Son;
and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

Now as I told you last week- it has been my Custom for a number of years now- to begin each new Year by taking a short Vacation from going verse-by-verse through whatever Book we are in and take a particular Subject that we could explore down to the roots and up toward the branches. And we have done that for almost twenty years.

But in God's Providence this Passage on Fasting in our "Journey" through Matthew has fallen on the beginning of the year. So, instead of taking another Subject- I want to take time to explore the Subject of Fasting- what it is; how to do it; and whether New Testament Believers should engage in it.

And the first Sermon was back on December 17th of last year; the second Sermon was last week and today is the third Sermon in that Series. So, if you haven't heard the first two Sermons- I believe our faithful Brother Don has already

put them on the Church Website and uploaded them to YouTube and Sermon Audio as well.

Now this Exchange between the Incarnate God and the Pharisees was recorded for us by the Apostle Matthew on the heels of the *preceding* Passage that reads:

Matthew 9:9-13

9 As Jesus went on from there, He saw a man called Matthew, sitting in the tax collector's booth; and He said to him, "Follow Me!" And he got up and followed Him.

10 Then it happened that as Jesus was reclining at the table in the house, behold, many tax collectors and sinners came and were dining with Jesus and His disciples.

11 When the Pharisees saw this, they said to His disciples, "Why is your Teacher eating with the tax collectors and sinners?"

12 But when Jesus heard this, He said, "It is not those who are healthy who need a physician, but those who are sick.

13 But go and learn what this means: 'I DESIRE COMPASSION, AND NOT SACRIFICE,' for I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners."

So, it is when the *first* Condemnation by the hypocritical Pharisees was rejected (**Matthew 9:11**), that the Disciples of John came to Jesus and asked Him,

... "Why do we and the Pharisees fast, but Your disciples do not fast?" (Matthew 9:14)

Now the "sister Passage" over in **Luke 5:33-** tells us that the Scribes and Pharisees asked Jesus,

"The disciples of John often fast and offer prayers, the disciples of the Pharisees also do the same, but Yours eat and drink."

... so, which one as it? The Scribes and Pharisees or the Disciples of John? And before you imagine that you have found a Contradiction in the Bible- the Answer is, obviously, *both* Groups asked the SAME Question. And to both Groups- Jesus' Answer was the SAME:

... The attendants of the bridegroom cannot mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them, can they? (Matthew 9:15b)

So, it is true that- in Context- the main Point of this entire Setting as well as Jesus' Comments is NOT about Fasting per se- but about the great *Distinction* between the Old and the New Covenants. And- even more specifically- between the hypocritical Religiosity of the Pharisees; the Deception that the Disciples of John were in; and the Words and Actions of the incarnate God.

But it is also true that the Subject at hand is, obviously, "Eating and *not* Eating" (Fasting) and *why*. And the main Point of *that* part of the Issue is what Jesus said in verse 15b:

...The attendants of the bridegroom cannot mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them, can they?

Now we need to understand that the Pharisees didn't care one whit about the Disciples of John- they were simply using them as a Means to condemn Jesus and His followers. So, we must *separate* the Disciples of John (who were sincere but deceived about this Subject) from the Pharisees (who were not sincere at all).

But as we correctly do that- we must then join those two Groups back together from *another* Perspective: The Reason behind *why* the Disciples of John fasted and the supposed reason *why* the Pharisees fasted was the very SAME Reason!

In other words- the Old Covenant Logic behind *why* the Disciples of John were fasting and the Old Covenant Logic of *why* the Pharisees fasted- was *identical*- even though it is true that the Pharisees were Hypocrites; and the others were not.

But we cannot discount the Influence that the Pharisees had on the Disciples of John- especially about this particular Subject of Fasting. Because the Pharisees fasted all the time. And so, if you asked a Disciple of John, "*Why do you fast?*" and you asked a Pharisee, "*Why do you fast?*" they would BOTH give you the very *SAME* Answer. And that Answer would be: "*Because the Scriptures command that we fast!*" And by the word, "*Scriptures*" they were referring to the 39 Books of the Old Testament.

But what I pray you will see in this Sermon is that the Reason behind *why* the "**attendants of the Bridegroom**" fast- is totally *different* from *both* of these other Groups.

So, the first thing we must understand about New Testament Fasting is that it is entirely *unique* from Old Testament Fasting. And we **MUST** labor to always make that true. Because if our Fasts are fashioned after the Covenant that looked forward to the Coming of the Messiah and NOT the Covenant that taught that the

Messiah has already come; and lived; and died; and risen again- we would fast amiss. So, let's break this down. When the Disciples of Jesus asked,

**... "Why do we and the Pharisees fast, but Your disciples do not fast?"
(Matthew 9:14)**

... and when the Pharisees *accused* Jesus in **Luke 5:33:**

... The disciples of John often fast and offer prayers, the *disciples* of the Pharisees also do the same, but Yours eat and drink.

... they are doing so with the intent to paint the Picture that Jesus and His followers were NOT "of God"- because they were NOT following the *traditional* Old Testament Design for Fasting that had been practiced among the Jews since the days of Moses.

And this called into Question, Jesus' Authority for NOT following the established Pattern written down in the Old Testament. And so, it was Jesus' full Divinity; His absolute Authority; in other words, Who He was- that was in Question here.

You see, if God, through Moses, *commanded* that the Jew fast- then ONLY God Himself can change that.¹ So, the Question on everybody's mind was, "*Who does Jesus think He is- by disobeying an inspired; inerrant; and infallible Command of God recorded in Scripture? Does Jesus think He is God?*" And Jesus answered that Rebuke with a "Word Picture" that was designed to both *refute* the Accusation and to *re-affirm* Who He is.

... The attendants of the bridegroom cannot mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them, can they?

Now by identifying Himself as, the "*Bridegroom*" here, Jesus is *establishing* that He absolutely is God Almighty in human Flesh! And, as God, He is also the "*Husband*" to Israel. And while we might not pick this up so easily in the 21st Century- the Jews of that Day certainly understood it because God was *always* likened to the "*Husband*" to His chosen people:

Isaiah 54:1-6

1 "Shout for joy, O barren one, you who have borne no *child*; Break forth into joyful shouting and cry aloud, you who have not travailed; For the sons of the

¹ This also applies to several other Issues that God gave to Moses- like the Sabbath and animal Sacrifices. If God gave it- only God could change it.

desolate one *will be* more numerous Than the sons of the married woman," says the Lord.

2 "Enlarge the place of your tent; Stretch out the curtains of your dwellings, spare not; Lengthen your cords And strengthen your pegs.

3 "For you will spread abroad to the right and to the left. And your descendants will possess nations And will resettle the desolate cities.

4 "Fear not, for you will not be put to shame; And do not feel humiliated, for you will not be disgraced; But you will forget the shame of your youth, And the reproach of your widowhood you will remember no more.

5 "For your husband is your Maker, Whose name is the Lord of hosts; And your Redeemer is the Holy One of Israel, Who is called the God of all the earth.

6 "For the Lord has called you, Like a wife forsaken and grieved in spirit, Even like a wife of one's youth when she is rejected," Says your God.

So, by making this Association, Jesus was teaching two things:

1. Fasting was associated with Mourning under the Old Covenant. It was an Expression of Broken- heartedness and Desperation- usually over Sin; or some Danger; or some deeply longed for Blessing. So Fasting was something that Old Testaments saints did when things were not going the way they wanted them to.
2. The long- awaited Messiah (Jesus) had come! And His Coming was like the Coming of a Bridegroom to his Wedding Feast. And so, His Coming was to be *Celebrated*- NOT Mourned.

All that the Jews understood about the "Bridegroom" was the vague generalities of inspired Prophecies like **Isaiah 62:5** that said,

For *as* a young man marries a virgin, *So* your sons will marry you; And *as* the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, *So* your God will rejoice over you.

... and **Hosea 2:19&20:**

19 "I will betroth you to Me forever; Yes, I will betroth you to Me in righteousness and in justice, In lovingkindness and in compassion,

20 And I will betroth you to Me in faithfulness. Then you will know the Lord.

And now here- the Son of God- the Messiah- the redeeming “*Angel*” of **Genesis 48:15&16**; the longed hoped for “*Prince of Peace*” from **Isaiah 9:6**; and the “*Ruler in Israel*” of **Micah 5:2**- has come! And He claims to be the “*Bridegroom*”- the “*Husband*” of His people- Who will bring in a new and infinitely *superior* Covenant for His people- who will become the “true”, spiritual Jew and the “*Israel of God*”.

Romans 2:25-29

25 For indeed circumcision is of value if you practice the Law; but if you are a transgressor

of the Law, your circumcision has become uncircumcision.

26 So if the uncircumcised man keeps the requirements of the Law, will not his uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision?

27 And he who is physically uncircumcised, if he keeps the Law, will he not judge you who though having the letter *of the Law* and circumcision are a transgressor of the Law?

28 For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh.

29 But he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter; and his praise is not from men, but from God.

Galatians 6:15&16

15 For neither is circumcision anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation.

16 And those who will walk by this rule, peace and mercy *be* upon them, and upon the Israel of God.

And John the Baptist had *initially* recognized this- even though he later doubted. And when his Disciples asked him about Who Jesus was- he responded like this in **John 3:28-36**:

28 "You yourselves are my witnesses that I said, 'I am not the Christ,' but, 'I have been sent ahead of Him.'

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.

30 "He must increase, but I must decrease.

31 "He who comes from above is above all, he who is of the earth is from the earth and speaks of the earth. He who comes from heaven is above all.

32 "What He has seen and heard, of that He testifies; and no one receives His testimony.

33 "He who has received His testimony has set his seal to *this*, that God is true.

34 "For He whom God has sent speaks the words of God; for He gives the Spirit without measure.

35 "The Father loves the Son and has given all things into His hand.

36 "He who believes in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not obey the Son will not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him."

... and if you had ears to hear- you understood what John was saying here- that God Almighty- the One Who betrothed Israel to Himself in Covenant Love- has finally come!

And this Event is so stunning; so glorious; so unexpected in this Form- that Jesus said you simply CANNOT fast now- in fact- you MUST NOT fast!

The Event of the Incarnation is far too happy; and too spectacularly exhilarating to Mourn. It MUST be celebrated! So, Jesus is teaching that the Coming of the Lord completely *overwhelms* any *personal* Tragedy; any *personal* Disappointment; and any *personal* spiritual Longing- to the degree- that it would actually be *wrong*- yea it would be *SINFUL* to fast in that Setting!

Fasting is for Times of Yearning; and Longing; Desiring; and Hungering after God. How could anybody even *think* about any of that when God in human flesh stands before them? There is ONLY one Way: they MUST deny Who He is!

After thousands of years of Praying; and Hoping; and Looking; for the Messiah- He is now here! Immanuel has come! And yet, those religious Hypocrites *continued* to fast as though nothing Important has happened! And you simply CANNOT *insult* God the Father; God the Son; as well as God the Holy Spirit any more than that!

So, what Jesus was saying here by using the word, “cannot” in **Matthew 9:15** is that the Pharisees as well as the Disciples of John (whom the Pharisees had taught) were *Evil* in their Hearts for fasting. Their *continual* Engagement in that ongoing Longing for the Messiah to come- meant they were categorically *denying* that He was already here! And the Absence of Fasting on the part of Jesus’ Disciples was absolutely Correct and Proper- because it was a Witness to the Fact that God Himself was now “*with them*” (Immanuel)!

So, BOTH the Pharisees and the Disciples of John were sinning against the Reality of Jesus’ first Advent. But now we have another Wayward Teaching that

MUST be dealt with. Because there are those, within the modern Church in our Day, who teach that Jesus' first Advent *eliminates* ALL Fasting- *forever!* And if Jesus had stopped talking at that Point- then those people would be correct. But Jesus did *NOT* stop talking at that point. He went on to say in that SAME verse (**Matthew 9:15c**),

... But the days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast.

... and this is the Key for us today as it pertains to Fasting. Jesus said,

... But the days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast.

So, what did Jesus mean by that? What are the “**Days**” in which believers are to fast?

Some have suggested that Jesus was only referring to the literal “Days” between His Death on the Cross and His Resurrection. And those people suggest that the “Bridegroom” was “**taken away from them**” in Death and then “given back” three Days later in a glorious State. And it was during those 3 Days that the Disciples were supposed to fast.

And those people go on to teach that *after* that one Time when Jesus was “**taken away from them**” Fasting would then be forever *excluded* because Jesus had said this in **John 16:22-28**:

22 "Therefore you too have grief now; but I will see you again, and your heart will rejoice, and no one *will* take your joy away from you.

23 "In that day you will not question Me about anything. Truly, truly, I say to you, if you ask the Father for anything in My name, He will give it to you.

24 "Until now you have asked for nothing in My name; ask and you will receive, so that your joy may be made full.

25 "These things I have spoken to you in figurative language; an hour is coming when I will no longer speak to you in figurative language, but will tell you plainly of the Father.

26 "In that day you will ask in My name, and I do not say to you that I will request of the Father on your behalf;

27 for the Father Himself loves you, because you have loved Me and have believed that I came forth from the Father.

28 "I came forth from the Father and have come into the world; I am leaving the world again and going to the Father."

Those people suggest that having our Joy made "full" and Mourning over some spiritual Issue through Fasting are *mutually* exclusive. In other words- the "*Church Age*" (Last Days/Last Time) would *begin* at the Resurrection of Jesus and during that Time- there would be indescribable Joy among all of Christ's Disciples- *all the Time*- because of His finished Work- thus, there is NO Reason for anyone to ever fast.

So, is that true? Is Fasting now *completely* excluded? Are those people correct and the Need to fast under the New Covenant was limited to ONLY the 3 Days Jesus was Dead? And it is important that we answer this- because if those people are correct- then we are actually sinning if we fast today.

The Answer is, "NO! Those people are NOT correct. And we may fast- in fact we SHOULD fast- for a number of Reasons today. And that is so- because of at least two Reasons:

1. The early Church fasted
2. Fasting has been part of historic Christianity

Let's examine these quickly.

1. The Early Church Fasted

First of all- according to the "*Diary of the Early Church*" (**The Book of the Acts of the Apostles**)- the Church fasted.

The Acts 13:1-3

1 Now there were at Antioch, in the church that was *there*, prophets and teachers: Barnabas, and Simeon who was called Niger, and Lucius of Cyrene, and Manaen who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul.

2 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.

The Acts 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 Events, recorded here, occurred long AFTER the Resurrection of Jesus as well as the installation of the New Covenant. And this tells us that the earliest believers did *not* think that Jesus taught that Fasting would be done away after His Resurrection.

2. Fasting Has Been a Part of Historic Christianity

But there is a *second* Reason for us to believe that Fasting is still a Means of Grace we should engage in. And that Reason helps us- even though it holds much LESS weight than the other one. And that Reason is the indisputable, historical Fact that Fasting has been part and parcel to the very Fabric of the Christian Church throughout its over 2,000- year History.

Now I say that this second Reason holds much *less* Weight- *not* because it can be disputed- because it can't. Devout believers have, in fact, fasted since the very *Beginnings* of the Church Age continuing on to this present Day. I say that this Argument holds *less* Weight simply because what the various people of the Church have done *may have* been in Error- even though they did it. The historical Actions of Believers- however sincere- are *not* Infallible. But Scripture is.

But because Fasting is woven in with over two millennia of recorded Acts of Christianity shows that the orthodox Understanding of *all* the major Leaders throughout *all* of Church History is that they didn't think that Fasting had been done away either- even though they may have been in Error. And it is beyond the Realm of Possibility (and statistical Probability) that *ALL* the Leaders throughout the *entirety* of the AGE of the Christian Church- would *ALL* be wrong about something like this. So, to that Degree- this Fact holds *some* Weight.

Okay if those who think Fasting is still in force- are correct- what did Jesus mean when He said,

... But the days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast.

He meant that after His Resurrection- the Lord will return back to the Father in Heaven. And He will remain there until His 2nd Coming.² And it is during those

² **1Thessalonians 4:13-18** is NOT teaching a "Rapture" in the sense of another separate Event. It is merely teaching about the 2nd Coming of Jesus to this earth.

“Days”- when Jesus is with the Father in Heaven- that His Disciples will fast. The retired professor of New Testament Studies and Koine Greek at Westmount College, Robert Gundry, got it right when he said,

“The entirety of the Church Age constitutes ‘those days’ that will come when the Bridegroom is taken away”³

The *strongest* Reason for taking this View comes from the Fact that the only other place in the entire **Gospel of Matthew** where Jesus uses the term, “*Bridegroom*” is to refer to Himself coming back at the End of the Church Age. In **Matthew 25:1-13**, Jesus portrays His 2nd Coming as the “*Arrival of the Bridegroom*”:

- 1 "Then the kingdom of heaven will be comparable to ten virgins, who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom."**
- 2 "Five of them were foolish, and five were prudent."**
- 3 "For when the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them,**
- 4 but the prudent took oil in flasks along with their lamps.**
- 5 "Now while the bridegroom was delaying, they all got drowsy and *began* to sleep.**
- 6 "But at midnight there was a shout, 'Behold, the bridegroom! Come out to meet *him*.'**
- 7 "Then all those virgins rose and trimmed their lamps.**
- 8 "The foolish said to the prudent, 'Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.'**
- 9 "But the prudent answered, 'No, there will not be enough for us and you *too*; go instead to the dealers and buy *some* for yourselves.'**
- 10 "And while they were going away to make the purchase, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him to the wedding feast; and the door was shut.**
- 11 "Later the other virgins also came, saying, 'Lord, lord, open up for us.'**
- 12 "But he answered, 'Truly I say to you, I do not know you.'**
- 13 "Be on the alert then, for you do not know the day nor the hour.**

So, Jesus clearly thinks of Himself as a Bridegroom- Who is gone-

³ Robert H Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1982) p. 169

not only for three Days- but until the 2nd Coming. And this is the “Days” Jesus had in mind when He said,

... But the days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast.

Arthur Wallis entitled the sixth chapter of his book, *God’s Chosen Fast*, “The Time is Now”. And in that Chapter, he said,

“Jesus is saying: ‘Now while I am here in your midst as the Bridegroom you cannot and should not fast. But I am not going to remain with you. There will come a time when I return to my Father in Heaven. And during that time (those days) you will fast.’ That time is now.”

Those who *oppose* Fasting as a viable and current “*Means of Grace*” teach that the Presence of God the Holy Spirit means that we are *not* alone; and that God and Jesus are with us in the third Person of the Trinity- God the Holy Spirit- Who is fully Deity- and Who lives and dwells *inside* all genuine Believers. Thus, we have no Reason to fast and should Celebrate rather than Mourn. So, does that Argument hold water?

Yes, it is true that we may experience great Intimacy with God precisely because God the Holy Spirit dwells in us. And that lends Credibility to this View of Fasting until we consider that the New Testament also promises an infinitely *greater* Intimacy than anything we may experience now- when we enjoy Christ *Personally* in Heaven! And *that* Experience over there will be so great; and so glorious; that it will make this Experience down here- to pale by Comparison.

So, in *that* sense- Christ is NOT with us- but is *away* from us. And that is precisely why the Apostle Paul wrote:

2Corinthians 5:6-8

6 Therefore, being always of good courage, and knowing that while we are at home in the body we are absent from the Lord —

7 for we walk by faith, not by sight —

8 we are of good courage, I say, and prefer rather to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord.

... and ...

Philippians 1:21-24

21 For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.

22 But if *I am* to live *on* in the flesh, this *will mean* fruitful labor for me; and I do not know which to choose.

23 But I am hard-pressed from both *directions*, having the desire to depart and be with Christ, for *that* is very much better;

24 yet to remain on in the flesh is more necessary for your sake.

Paul said that it was “preferable” and “very much better” to physically be in Heaven in the actual Presence of Jesus than it was to live here on the earth- as a saved person with God the Holy Spirit dwelling inside us. Now that doesn’t, in any way, *minimize* what we have been given now- it simply puts that glorious Experience in Perspective with the far *greater* Experience of being in Christ’s literal Presence- with none of the fleshly Filters and Hindrances and Sins that we struggle with now.

The Point being that- as far as Fasting is concerned- Jesus is still considered to be “away” from us in *that* sense; and therefore, the *Need* to fast along with the Need to Grieve; and Mourn; and Repent; and Struggle; and Desire; and Long for God- is still with us.

In other words- in this Age- the Church Age- when we walk by Faith and not by Sight- there is an Ache inside every genuine Believer that Jesus is *NOT* here as fully; and as intimately; and as powerfully; and as gloriously; as we want Him to be. We *hunger* for *more*! And *that* is *why* we fast!

Amen. Let’s pray.

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