

Hungering for God

A Biblical Examination of Fasting

Part A- Should 21st Century Believers Fast? Is Fasting Biblical?

Lesson 3- An Exegesis of Luke 5:33-39

Luke 5:33-39

33 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."

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

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

36 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.**

37 "**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.**

38 "**But new wine must be put into fresh wineskins.**

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

To Eat or Not to Eat- That is the Question

Now this exchange recorded for us by Doctor Luke was on the heels of the preceding Passage that reads:

Luke 5:27-32

27 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.

29 And Levi gave a big reception for Him in his house; and there was a great crowd of tax collectors and other *people* who were reclining *at the table* with them.

30 The Pharisees and their scribes *began* grumbling at His disciples, saying, "Why do you eat and drink with the tax collectors and sinners?"

31 And Jesus answered and said to them, "***It is not those who are well who need a physician, but those who are sick.***

32 "***I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance.***"

So it is when the *first* condemnation by the Pharisees was rejected (**Luke 5:30**), that these self-righteous hypocrites rebuked Jesus the second time by saying, **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.

So it is true that in context- the main point of this entire setting and 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 and the actions of true disciples of the Lord.

But it is also true that the subject at hand is eating and not eating (fasting), and why. And the main point of *that* part of the issue is what Jesus said in verses 34&35:

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

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

Israel's Husband is Here

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) and the Pharisees (who were not) from *that* perspective.

But as we correctly do that- we must then join these two groups back together from *another* perspective- that the reason behind *why* the disciples of John fasted and the supposed reason *why* the Pharisees fasted was the same. In other words- the logic behind *why* the disciples of John were fasting and the logic of *why* the Pharisees fasted was identical- even if it is true that the Pharisees were hypocrites and the others were not. So if you asked a disciple of John why he fasted and you asked a Pharisee why he fasted- they would both give you the same answer. And one of the aspects that Jesus is discussing here is that the reason behind *why* the "**attendants of the Bridegroom**" fast is *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. So let's break this down.

When the Pharisees make the accusation:

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 are not "of" God because they are not following the traditional Old

Testament design for fasting that has been practiced among the Jews since the days of Moses.

And this calls in question Jesus' Authority for not following the established Pattern. And so it is Jesus' Divinity, His Place, Who He is- that is in question here. And so Jesus answers the charge with a word picture that is designed to both refute the charge and to re-affirm Who He is.

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

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

So by identifying Himself as "The Bridegroom" here, Jesus is establishing that He is God and 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 "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 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.

7 "For a brief moment I forsook you, But with great compassion I will gather you.

8 "In an outburst of anger I hid My face from you for a moment, But with everlasting lovingkindness I will have compassion on you," Says the Lord your Redeemer.

9 "For this is like the days of Noah to Me, When I swore that the waters of Noah Would not flood the earth again; So I have sworn that I will not be angry with you Nor will I rebuke you.

10 "For the mountains may be removed and the hills may shake, But My lovingkindness will not be removed from you, And My covenant of peace will not be shaken," Says the Lord who has compassion on you.

11 "O afflicted one, storm-tossed, *and* not comforted, Behold, I will set your stones in antimony, And your foundations I will lay in sapphires.

12 "Moreover, I will make your battlements of rubies, And your gates of crystal, And your entire wall of precious stones.

13 "All your sons will be taught of the Lord; And the well-being of your sons will be great.

14 "In righteousness you will be established; You will be far from oppression, for you will not fear; And from terror, for it will not come near you.

15 "If anyone fiercely assails *you* it will not be from Me. Whoever assails you will fall because of you.

16 "Behold, I Myself have created the smith who blows the fire of coals And brings out a weapon for its work; And I have created the destroyer to ruin.

17 "No weapon that is formed against you will prosper; And every tongue that accuses you in judgment you will condemn. This is the heritage of the servants of the Lord, And their vindication is from Me," declares the Lord.

So by making this association, Jesus is teaching two things:

1. Fasting was associate with mourning in that day. 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 His Coming was to be *celebrated*- not mourned.

All that the Jews understood about the Bridegroom was the vague generalities of the inspired Prophecies like:

Isaiah 62:5

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.

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" (**Genesis 48:15&16**), the longed hoped for "Prince of Peace" (**Isaiah 9:6**), and "Ruler in Israel" (**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" Israel or 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:

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- God Almighty- the One Who betrothed Israel to Himself in Covenant Love- has finally come!

You *Cannot*... Fast Now

And this Event is so stunning and so glorious and 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. So Jesus is saying that the Coming of the Lord completely *overwhelms* any personal tragedy and any personal disappointment and any personal spiritual goal- to the degree- that it would actually be *wrong* (sinful) to fast in this setting.

Fasting is for times of yearning and longing and hungering after God. How could anybody even think about any of that when God in human flesh stands before them? One reason- they deny Who He is. After thousand years of praying and hoping and looking for the Messiah- He is now here! And yet these religious hypocrites *continue* to fast as though nothing important has happened. So what Jesus is saying here by using the word “**cannot**” in verse 34 is that the Pharisees were *evil* in their hearts for fasting now- because by engaging in this ongoing longing for the Messiah to come- they were denying that He was already here! And the absence of fasting on the part of Jesus’ disciples was correct and proper because it was a witness to the fact that God Himself was “with them” (Immanu-el).

Then They Will Fast

Now if Jesus had stopped talking at that point- then those who suggest that the New Covenant precludes all fasting would be correct. But Jesus did *not* stop talking at that point. He went on to say,

Luke 5:35

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

This is the key for us today as it pertains to fasting. Jesus said,

... then they will fast in those days.

... so what did He mean by that? What are the “days” in which believers are to fast?

Some have suggested that Jesus was only referring to “those days” between His Death on the Cross and His Resurrection. These 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 days (3) that the disciples would fast.

These people go on to teach that *after* that one time when Jesus was “**taken away from them**” fasting would be *excluded* because Jesus had said 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."

These people suggest that having our joy to be "full" and mourning over some spiritual issue through fasting are mutually exclusive. In other words- the "Church Age" (Last Days/Last Time) would begin after the Resurrection, and during that time- there would be indescribable joy among Christ's disciples because of His finished Work- thus no reason to fast.

So does this mean that fasting is now excluded? Is Jesus prophesying that the need for fasting under the New Covenant would exist for only three days? No, for at least two reasons:

- A. The early Church fasted
- B. Fasting has been part of historic Christianity

Let's examine these quickly.

A. 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 and 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 the Resurrection.

B. Fasting has been a Part of Historic Christianity

There is a *second* reason- that holds less weight- but that nonetheless should be considered. And that is the indisputable historical fact that fasting has been part and parcel to the very fabric of the Christian Church throughout its 2,000 year history.

Now I say that this second reason holds 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 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 all the various "ages" of the Christian Church would *all* be wrong about something like this. So to that degree- this fact holds *some* weight.

Until He Returns

So what did Jesus mean when He said,

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

He means that after His Resurrection- the Lord will return back to the Father in Heaven and will remain there until His Second Coming. And it is during "those days"- when Jesus is with the Father- that disciples will fast. The retired professor of New Testament Studies and Koine Greek at Westmount College got it right when he said,

"The entirety of the Church Age constitutes 'those days' that will come when the Bridegroom is taken away"¹

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,

¹ Robert H Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1982) p. 169

“Bridegroom” is to refer to Himself coming back at the end of the Church Age. In **Matthew 25:1-13**, Jesus portrays His Second 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- not only for three days- but until the Second Coming. And this is the “days” He has in mind when He says,

... then they will fast.

Arthur Wallis entitled the sixth chapter of his book, *God's Chosen Fast*, “The Time is Now”. And 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.”

What about the Holy Spirit?

Those who oppose fasting as a viable current activity 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, we may experience great intimacy with God precisely because God the Holy Spirit dwells in us. And that lends credibility to this view on fasting until we consider that the New Testament 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 in 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 in Him. 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 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 war is still with us.

In other words- in this 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 intimately and as powerfully and as gloriously as we want Him to be. We hunger for more. And that is why we fast.

Next Lesson- the explanation of the Old and New Wine and Wineskins.

Recap

1. What is the main point of **Luke 5:33-39**? _____

2. What was the issue that Jesus used to illustrate that point? _____
3. What was the logic behind both the Pharisees and the disciples of John to fast? _____

4. In what way is the fasting of the "attendants of the Bridegroom" different than either the Pharisees and the disciples of John? _____

5. Why did the Pharisees make the accusation in **Luke 5:33**? _____

6. What was Jesus doing by identifying Himself as "The Bridegroom"? _____

7. What two things was Jesus teaching by saying that He was the Bridegroom and that is why His disciples didn't fast? _____

8. In light of all this- why was it wrong for the Pharisees (and the disciples of John) to fast at that time? _____

9. What have some people taught as to the meaning of Jesus' Statement at the end of **Luke 5:35**? _____

10. What are two arguments that can be given to refute that logic? _____

11. In what way is the historic actions of the Christian Church useful in determining Truth? _____

12. In what way are those actions *not* helpful? _____

13. Based on this- what is the correct meaning of the phrase at the end of **Luke 5:35**?

14. What about the argument that the indwelling Holy Spirit eliminates the need for fasting? _____

Notes