



# Fasting When the Bridegroom is Gone

Jesus' Authority Over Religious Routines

**Scripture:** Matthew 9:14-17

**Sermon Series:** Matthew

**Topic:** Fasting

**Matthew 9:14-17 (ESV)** <sup>14</sup> Then the disciples of John came to him, saying, "Why do we and the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?" <sup>15</sup> And Jesus said to them, "Can the wedding guests mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them? The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast. <sup>16</sup> No one puts a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old garment, for the patch tears away from the garment, and a worse tear is made. <sup>17</sup> Neither is new wine put into old wineskins. If it is, the skins burst and the wine is spilled and the skins are destroyed. But new wine is put into fresh wineskins, and so both are preserved."

## Introduction

Matthew now turns our attention to an event that is also recorded by both Mark (2:18-22) and Luke (5:33-39). We turn from concerns about feasting (v.10-13), to those about fasting (v.14-17).

The previous paragraph had to do with Jesus sharing the table with sinners and tax collectors at a great feast in the home of Matthew, the former tax collector, whom Jesus had just called to be one of his disciples. The Pharisees saw this and were concerned about Jesus' conduct. Therefore they asked his disciples why he "was eating with sinners." Jesus answered by explaining that he came to call sinners out of their sin and to follow him in righteous living. He needed to be near them in order to do this. And since Matthew was so happy at having his sins forgiven by Jesus, he threw a large feast in honor of Jesus, and invited all his sinner-friends to meet this kind and holy teacher.

The Pharisees came asking Jesus' disciples why he was feasting with sinners and now we meet the disciples of John who apparently saw this same scene and they too were curious about

conduct, but of Jesus' disciples, not of himself. These came to Jesus asking him why his disciples were feasting and not fasting like them? We move from questioners asking the disciples about a practice of Jesus to questioners asking Jesus about a practice of his disciples.

By this time John the Baptist is already in prison (4:12). However, his disciples remain very much active. They too are watching Jesus and his disciples and how they conduct themselves. Just as, last week, we saw that the Pharisees were confused by Jesus feasting with sinners, so now we see the disciples of John the Baptist are confused by the disciples of Jesus joining him in his feasting rather than practicing the religious discipline of fasting.

## Why Don't You Fast? (v.14)

The disciples of John come to Jesus with a question.

**Matthew 9:14** (ESV) Then the disciples of John came to him, saying, "Why do we and the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?"

The first question is *What is fasting?* We ought to define it and understand the term. The word 'fast' (νηστεύω *nēsteuō*) refers to "one who has not eaten, who is empty."<sup>1</sup> It is the practice of "abstention from food on religious grounds;" and "generally to be hungry, without food."<sup>2</sup> Fasting in this context means "*to go without food for a set time as a religious duty.*"<sup>3</sup>

The disciples of John are skipping meals out of religious duty to God. Even the disciples of the Pharisees made fasting a regular practice, but not the disciples of Jesus.<sup>4</sup> The disciples of John were curious and confused by this. The disciples of Jesus were feasting at large tables filled with lots of food. Thus, the disciples of John go to Jesus and ask "Why are your disciples not fasting like us?" They were not following the normal religious routine of their day.

## Fasting in Old Testament (OT) and Elsewhere

The OT law required only one fast for one day out of each year and that was on the Day of Atonement, also called Yom Kippur (Lev 16:29-31). The Pharisees added to that and made a habit of fasting twice each week (Lk 18:12) on Mondays and Thursdays.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Johannes Behm, "Νῆστις, Νηστεύω, Νηστεία," ed. Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, and Gerhard Friedrich, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964-), 924.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 925.

<sup>3</sup> Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), 540.

<sup>4</sup> Mark 2:18; Luke 5:33.

<sup>5</sup> Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to Matthew*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press, 1992), 223.

However, fasting was not unique to Jews. Both religious and non-religious<sup>6</sup> people fast. We see this even today. Some people fast for dietary reasons. Intermittent fasting is among the most popular dietary trends today. Others fast for political reasons, such as Gandhi did. Muslims fast during Ramadan. Hindu Brahmins also practice strict fasting. Lots of different people practice fasting for lots of different reasons.

Except for Jesus and his disciples. So why not?

## It's Not the Right Time (v.15)

Jesus gives one answer using three illustrations. Jesus answers by explaining that *this is not the right time to fast*. He illustrates his answer by first looking to a wedding, then to clothing, and the third he talks about wine.

### Illustration 1: A Wedding

**Matthew 9:15** (ESV) And Jesus said to them, "Can the wedding guests mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them? The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast."

### Mourning = Fasting

First, notice that Jesus likens fasting with '*mourning*.' Jesus does this because fasting is almost always found being practiced in grievous situations. The practice of fasting is typically found in situations of great danger and apparent imminent death. We see this in many places in the OT.

- King David fasted when his newborn son was near death (2 Sam 12:16).
- King Jehoshaphat fasted when two massive armies came up against Israel to destroy them (2 Chr 20:3).
- Ezra fasted in preparation for a long journey in which he feared he was vulnerable to attack and potentially his life was in danger (8:21).
- The king of Nineveh proclaimed a citywide fast after hearing Jonah preach that God's judgment was about to fall upon the city (Jon 3:6-7).
- Queen Esther and all the Jews in Susa fasted when Heman successfully passed legislation that permitted the plundering and slaughtering of Jews (Est 4:16).
- Joel called for a fast when the land was being destroyed by locusts and plundering enemy nations because of their sin.
- Zechariah mentions fasting that took place when the siege of Jerusalem began, another when the wall was breached, a third when the city fell to its invading enemies, and a fourth when their governor was assassinated (Zch 8:19).<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Jezebel ordered the proclamation of a fast 1 Kings 21:9, 12.

<sup>7</sup> See *ESV Study Bible* note at Zechariah 8:19.

There was a deep historical connection between fasting and weeping and mourning. Thus, in Jesus' understanding fasting primarily takes place when things are not as you wish they would be. Fasting is a practice you do when something good or needful is missing.

### Wedding Guests = Disciples

Second, notice that the Jesus likens his disciples to guests invited to a wedding. Jesus asks a question, "*Can wedding guests mourn while the bridegroom is with them?*" The expected answer is of course, "No!" Wedding guests do not fast and mourn when with the bridegroom. When they are together they feast and celebrate. Weddings are happy occasions, not sad. Thus, fasting is not fitting during seasons of gladness and joy.

### Bridegroom = Jesus

Third, notice to whom the bridegroom is likened. Who is the bridegroom in this illustration? Jesus likens *himself* to the bridegroom. This is not an haphazard illustration or a thoughtless notion. Jesus did not randomly pluck this illustration out of the air. This illustration is a *calculated declaration*, for those who have eyes to see. This illustration is an *oblique revelation* of Jesus' true identity. Oh that we would have eyes to see what Jesus is saying here. *In the OT, the bridegroom of Israel is none other than God himself.* The prophet Isaiah declares to Israel,

#### Isaiah 54:5-6 (ESV)

<sup>5</sup> For your Maker is your husband,  
the LORD of hosts is his name;  
and the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer,  
the God of the whole earth he is called.

<sup>6</sup> For the LORD has called you  
like a wife... like a wife of youth...

If God is Israel's husband, then when did they get married? Israel's wedding to God the Father took place at Mt. Sinai after God brought them out of Egypt. They were married when God spoke his covenant promises to the entire nation, calling them his one and only "treasured possession among all the peoples of the earth," and three times they said yes<sup>8</sup> to him as their one and only God (Ex 19:5-8). Remember that the very first commandment is essentially a pledge of exclusive fidelity. God the Husband/Bridegroom said to them,

*"You see how I have rescued you from Egypt, out of the house of slavery, and how I carried you on eagles wings and brought you to myself"* (my summary of Ex 19:4; 20:2). Therefore, he said, *"You shall have no other gods before me"* (Ex 20:3).

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<sup>8</sup> Exodus 19:8; 24:3, 7.

This essentially means, *"You shall love no other husband than me."* And when Moses repeated<sup>9</sup> this command in the ears of Israel he summarized this first and greatest of all commandments as, *"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might"* (Dt 6:4). Isaiah goes on to quote God the Husband saying,

**Isaiah 62:4-5 (ESV)**

...but you shall be called My Delight Is in Her,  
and your land [shall be called] Married;  
for the LORD delights in you,  
and your land shall be married.

<sup>5</sup> For as a young man marries a young woman...  
and as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride,  
so shall your God rejoice over you.

God's rejoicing over Israel is likened to a bridegroom rejoicing over his bride. This is how much the LORD God loves his people. This notion of God being like a bridegroom is found repeatedly throughout the OT. We see this all over the place for when they were unfaithful to God, their unfaithfulness is likened to the unfaithfulness of a wife to her husband. The LORD says to Israel through Jeremiah,

**Jeremiah 2:2 (ESV)** "Go and proclaim in the hearing of Jerusalem, Thus says the LORD, 'I remember the devotion of your youth, your love as a bride, how you followed me in the wilderness...'"

And in the sinful disobedience and rebellion of Israel God says,

**Jeremiah 3:20 (ESV)** "Surely, as a treacherous wife leaves her husband, so have you been treacherous to me, O house of Israel, declares the LORD."

Many more examples could be given, such as Ezekiel 16<sup>10</sup> or the entire book of Hosea.<sup>11</sup> **John the Baptist** apparently understood this about Jesus. He made the connection between Jesus and the symbolism of him being like the bridegroom of Israel. When his disciples came to him lamenting that crowds of Israel were going out to him (Jn 3:27). John responded saying,

"I told you that I am not the Messiah. I only came to prepare the way for him. The people are the bride, who naturally belong to the bridegroom. I'm just a friend of the bridegroom, I'm like the best man, who is glad to stand by him and hear him make his

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<sup>9</sup> Deuteronomy means, literally "second law" or "second telling of the law."

<sup>10</sup> See 16:8.

<sup>11</sup> See specifically Hosea 2:19-20.

vows. Therefore, I am filled with joy that people are going out to him. He must increase and I must decrease.”<sup>12</sup>

Thus, by likening himself to the ‘bridegroom,’ Jesus is likening himself to God. He is claiming to have come in a role that is equal with God the Husband. He is obliquely identifying himself as the Savior/Redeemer of the nation of Israel. And if the Savior/Redeemer of Israel has come, then this is no time for fasting and mourning. This is a time for celebration! This is a time and season of joy and gladness. The Husband of Israel has come in person. He who was prophesied long ago at last has come! Fasting is inappropriate for such a time as this.

### When Bridegroom Is Taken Away, Then They Will Fast

But also notice that Jesus is fully aware that though he is now present with his disciples in joy, there will come a time in future when he will be absent from them. Jesus explain that *then* fasting will be appropriate. Look at the last half of v.15.

**Matthew 9:15b** (ESV) The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast.

Jesus clearly understands, from very early in his ministry, that though he is the Bridegroom/ Redeemer of Israel, even so at some point he will be “*taken away*” from his disciples. There will be a time in the future when he will depart from his disciples. When that time of separation comes, “*then they will fast.*” When his disciples are with him, this is no time to fast. However, when he will be taken away, “*then his disciples will fast.*” Jesus expects that his disciples *will* certainly fast in future, when he was no longer with them, but while he is with them, fasting is *not* appropriate. When he is not with them, *then* fasting is appropriate.

### Should Christians Fast?

This raises the question, should Christians practice fasting today? There are those who have argued that this only applies to the three days that Jesus’ body was in the tomb. They argue that because of his victorious resurrection, and his bodily presence before God the Father, and the indwelling presence of his Holy Spirit, that thus fasting is not appropriate for Christians today. They say, “He is with you by his Spirit, thus Christians are not to fast.” I think this is wrong for five reasons.

1. **The apostles fasted after Jesus’ ascension.** The apostles (i.e. Paul and Barnabas<sup>13</sup>) taught “*in every church*” that fasting was an appropriate part of seeking the Lord’s will for whom he would chose as elders in the local church (Acts 14:23). Paul reports that he was “*often without food*”<sup>14</sup> but the word used here is the word that is always used to refer to fasting

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<sup>12</sup> My summary of John 3:28-30.

<sup>13</sup> Acts 14:14.

<sup>14</sup> See ESV footnote at this verse. The preceding phrase says, “in hunger and in thirst,” which most likely means involuntary hunger, while the next word (*nēsteiais*) refers to fasting for religious purposes.

for religious purposes, thus the translation “often fasting” would better capture Paul’s true meaning (2 Cor 11:27).

2. **The early church embraced the regular practice of fasting.** The *Didache*, a short document containing instructions on church-life, written at the end of the first century, assumes that Christians will fast and instructs them, “Let not your fasts be with the hypocrites, for they fast on Mondays and Thursdays, but do you fast on Wednesdays and Fridays.”<sup>15</sup>
3. **The early church fasted for other reasons** as well. It was in a worship service that included fasting that the church in Antioch sensed the Holy Spirit saying them to “*Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the [missionary] work to which I have called them*” (Acts 13:3).
4. **Paul fasted when his life was in danger.** When he was being taken to Rome to try his case before Caesar, the ship he was on endured two weeks of typhoon like weather. The whole ship went on a two week fast until the storm was over. Paul lead them in breaking the fast with a prayer of thanksgiving to God for sparing their lives (Acts 27:13-36).
5. **James calls for fasting to remove sin.** James writes, “Draw near to God and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves before God and he will exalt you.” (4:8-10). We ought to mourn because of the sin that remains within us and fasting for the purpose of more deeply pursuing holiness is surely good in God’s eyes, for he says through Isaiah, “Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness” (Isa 58:6).
6. **Jesus himself is currently fasting** of a certain kind. Recall what Jesus said to his disciples after offering them the bread and the wine at the Last Supper. “*I tell you I will not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father’s kingdom*” (Mt 26:29).

If Jesus deems it presently appropriate to fast until he can be together with his people, then certainly we Christians ought to deem it presently appropriate to occasionally fast until we can be fully with him. Yes, we have his Holy Spirit within and with us now, and certainly he gives us all that we need in order to “*fully enjoy abundant life and embrace godliness*” (John 10:10; 2 Ptr 1:3). Nonetheless, we only see him darkly. As Paul well expressed, we long “to see him face to face.” We see him now only darkly, but one day we will see the glory of his sweet face shining brighter than the sun at high noon. Until that day comes, we will occasionally fast.

## It is Time for Fasting to Change (v.16-17)

The second part of Jesus’ answer to the question of the disciples of John is that *it is time for the meaning of fasting to change*. While Jesus is present it is not the time to fast, but when he is gone, fasting will resume, but with a different meaning. The coming of Jesus as messiah changes everything, including the meaning of fasting. Because of the coming of Jesus in the

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<sup>15</sup> Pope Clement I et al., *The Apostolic Fathers*, ed. Kirsopp Lake, vol. 1, The Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge MA; London: Harvard University Press, 1912–1913), 321.

flesh, the old meaning of fasting will forever be changed and a new meaning will be added. Jesus uses two examples to illustrate this one truth. The first is about old cloth and new cloth. The second is about old and new wine and wineskins.

**Matthew 9:16-17 (ESV)** <sup>16</sup> “No one puts a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old garment, for the patch tears away from the garment, and a worse tear is made. <sup>17</sup> Neither is new wine put into old wineskins. If it is, the skins burst and the wine is spilled and the skins are destroyed. But new wine is put into fresh wineskins, and so both are preserved.”

### **Illustrations 2 and 3: Patching Clothing and Pouring Wine**

This is two ways of illustrating the same truth. New things do not mix well with old things. New fabric does not long last peacefully patched to old fabric. New wine does not long remain fresh and usable when put into old wineskins.

With Jesus came a new kingdom. A new kingdom has come and it will not long last peacefully patched together with the old kingdom. The Messiah has come and with him comes a new power for a new way of living. Old ways of living cannot peacefully remain with the newness that Messiah brings. Jesus came bringing with him a new power and new presence of the Holy Spirit. Jesus has paid the price required to atone for sin. The wall of separation has been torn down. The barrier that once kept us far from God has now been removed. Jesus has accomplished all that God ordained for him to do in order to receive the right to pour out the Holy Spirit into the hearts of the people of faith in order to begin the transformation of the new creation. It would be wrong to live as though that had not happened.

Jesus has come, not only as the bridegroom—representing God—but also on behalf of the bride—representing man. Jesus comes not only as God, but also as man. Yes, he is fully divine, but he is also fully human. And as a human, he was completely faithful on our behalf. He was faithful on behalf of those who would put faith in him. He never sinned, where we often sin. He succeeded where we have frequently failed. Thus, he changes everything! Behold, he makes all things new. For those of us who would love to draw near to God, but fear being near his Holiness, Jesus comes with hand stretched out to us saying, “Come to me, and I’ll take you to Him.” This is new. This is different.

Jesus said to his disciples, “*This is the cup of the new covenant in my blood.*” The shedding of the pure, unstained blood of Jesus as our Passover Lamb has effected a new reality that cannot be ignored. Thus, the fasting that took place under the Old Covenant cannot abide under the New Covenant. A New Covenant requires new fasting.

- The Old Covenant looked forward to the coming of Messiah. The New Covenant announces that Messiah has come. He is here and now. Jesus poured out the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost as way of demonstrating that new power and presence are now resident within God’s people. Thus, the meaning of fasting much change.



- If fasting before was a longing for messiah to come and bring life, fasting now is a hopeful trust that through Jesus *life has been given*.
- If fasting before was longing for the enemy to be defeated, fasting now must contain that certain knowledge that *he has been decisively defeated*.
- If fasting before was longing for sin to be atoned for, then fasting now must entail the knowledge that *sin has already been atoned for* through Jesus.
- If fasting was once a plea for God to grant us acceptance, then fasting now must include the confidence of knowing that through Christ we *are already accepted*, adopted, and transferred into the kingdom of God and his Son.
- If fasting before was a desire to receive God's grace, then fasting now we must do so as those who have already received grace through Jesus.
- If fasting before was a means of punishment for personal sin, then fasting today must confess that Jesus has already borne our punishment for personal sin.

## Conclusion

Right now, Jesus is "taken away" from us. Thus, fasting is appropriate. Fasting is appropriate when seeking God's guidance for significant decisions, or appointing church leaders, or to worship Him more deeply, or in times of distress, or during the loss of loved one, or in order to grow in holiness, or simply as an expression of love that we yearn to be with Jesus more than our necessary food. But embedded in the Christian fast is confident assurance that Jesus has for us all that God requires for anyone to boldly come into his presence.

Essentially Christian fasting is foregoing food or anything else that would keep you from experiencing and enjoying the presence of Jesus. Fasting is hungering for more of Jesus and forfeiting anything that would keep you from him.

Will you join me in fasting a meal this coming Tuesday that the Lord Jesus would come and step into our war-torn world in such a way that all nations will see his glory and surrender to his will and not our own?

## Discussion Questions

1. This event is also recorded by both Mark (2:18-22) and Luke (5:33-39). What are the similarities and differences between them?
2. How would you define fasting?

3. In the wedding illustration used by Jesus, who did the wedding guests represent? Whom did the bridegroom represent? What one word did Jesus use to describe the emotional meaning of fasting?
4. In the OT who is described as the bridegroom of Israel? As that term is used by Jesus, what is Jesus communicating to his listeners? What claim, if any, is Jesus making about himself?
5. Should Christians practice fasting? Why or why not?
6. When does Jesus say is the appropriate time for fasting?
7. What new meaning to fasting does Jesus bring?
8. How is Christian fasting different from other kinds of fasting?

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