

When the Bridegroom Is Taken Away

They Will Fast—with New Wineskins

January 8, 1995

Matthew 9:14-17

Then the disciples of John came to Him, saying, "Why do we and the Pharisees fast, but Your disciples do not fast?" 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. "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. "Nor do men 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."

Last week I called you as a church to join me in fasting one day a week through the month of January. In doing this we join the leaders of Promise Keepers and Bill Bright and Campus Crusade and thousands of others around the world in the Biblical discipline of fasting. For you it may be new. But for the Christian church throughout history it is not new.

The *Didache*, a manual of church instruction from near the end of the first century says,

Let not your fasts be with the hypocrites, for they fast on Mondays and Thursdays, but do you fast on Wednesdays and Fridays (7:1).

In other words the early church sought to distance itself of the emptiness of fasting without losing the value of the practice.

Epiphanius, a bishop in Italy in the fifth century said,

Who does not know that the fast of the fourth and sixth days of the week are observed by Christians throughout the world?

John Calvin, in the 16th century said,

Let us say something about fasting, because many, for want of knowing its usefulness, undervalue its necessity, and some reject it as almost superfluous; while, on the other hand where the use of it is not well understood, it easily degenerates into superstition. Holy and legitimate fasting is directed to three ends; for we practice it either as a restraint on the flesh, to preserve it from licentiousness, or as a preparation for prayers and pious meditations, or as a testimony of our humiliation in the presence of God when we are desirous of confessing our guilt before him (*Institutes, IV. 12, 14, 15*).

Martin Luther wrote,

Of fasting I say this: It is right to fast frequently in order to subdue and control the body. For when the stomach is full, the body does not serve for preaching, for praying, or studying, or for doing anything else that is good. Under such circumstances God's Word cannot remain. But one should not fast with a view to meriting something by it as by a good work.

In more recent times the evangelical church in South Korea has taught the rest of the world a lesson in prayer and fasting. The first Protestant church was planted in Korea in 1884. One hundred years later there were 30,000 churches. That's an average of 300 new churches a year for 100 years. Today evangelicals comprise about 30% of the population. God has used many means to do this great work. One of them is a recovery not just of dynamic prayer, but of fasting-prayer. In the OMS (Overseas Missionary Society) churches alone more than 20,000 people have completed a forty-day fast—usually at one of their "prayer houses" in the mountains.

God has confirmed in my own experience this week the value of fasting in getting long-prayed-for breakthroughs. I believe that if we seek the Lord with the hunger of fasting there will be many more such breakthroughs that we long for. Is there something you have been praying for a long time? Is there an unbeliever you would like God to awaken to spiritual things? Is there a broken relationship you would like God to reconcile? Is there a perplexity of direction on the horizon of your life? I believe that God is calling us to rediscover the place of fasting in appropriating his power.

I suggested that as a church we fast corporately for 24 hours, skipping breakfast and lunch each Wednesday in January. Thus we would not eat between supper Tuesday and supper Wednesday. Instead we would try to devote some of the time given to those meals to meditation on God's word and to prayer for spiritual awakening and for the advancement of Christ's kingdom around the world.

I realize that this will not work for everyone. Some have schedules on Wednesday that make that unworkable. Others have physical conditions that make fasting unsafe. Don't worry about that. There are many ways to join the spirit of fasting. One woman wrote me this week whose job won't fit with this schedule. So she said,

So I have a couple things that I believe are from the Spirit that may be more of a fast for some than food. I thought that not watching television for a week or a month or a night of the week when I normally watch it may be more of a fast than food. Instead of watching my favorite program I spend the time talking and listening to God. I wonder if there might be others for whom this would be a fast and would be a focused time of prayer for them.

Don't ignore God's call on your life to fast if you can't be a part of the Wednesday focus. If your heart is willing, he will lead you, as he did this woman, to something fruitful for you.

Martin Lloyd-Jones said in his great book on the Sermon on the Mount,

Fasting, if we conceive of it truly, must not . . . be confined to the question of food and drink; fasting should really be made to include abstinence from anything which is legitimate in and of itself for the sake of some special spiritual purpose. There are many bodily functions which are

right and normal and perfectly legitimate, but which for special peculiar reasons in certain circumstances should be controlled. That is fasting.

I pointed out last week from Acts 13:1-3 that the course of history was changed when the leaders of the church in Antioch were worshipping, praying *and fasting*. I suggested that in our day there has been reawakening in *worship* around the world and reawakening in *prayer* around the world. But not yet does there seem to be a reawakening in fasting, except in some places like Korea. I asked, Might God not ordain that his fullest blessings will come to the church when we prevail in prayer with the intensity of fasting. That's what I think fasting is at heart. It's an intensification of prayer. It's a physical explanation point at the end of the sentence, "We hunger for you to come in power." It's a cry with your body, "I really mean it, Lord! This much, I hunger for you."

For the next two Sundays I want to turn our attention to the words of Jesus on fasting. Does he teach us to fast? Or is it part of the old wineskins left over from the Old Testament that has no place in the new, free, celebrating people of God?

Richard Foster, who wrote the book, *Celebration of Discipline*, said in his chapter on fasting that Matthew 9:15, "That is perhaps the most important statement in the New Testament on whether Christians should fast today." That's probably true. So let's give close attention to this text and ask the Lord to teach us from it what we should know and what we should do in regard to fasting.

In Matthew 9:14 the disciples of John the Baptist come to Jesus and ask why Jesus' disciples don't fast? So evidently Jesus' disciples were not fasting while he was with them.

Jesus answers with a word picture. He says, "The attendants of the bridegroom cannot mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them, can they?" With those words Jesus teaches us two things: one is that fasting was by and large associated with mourning in that day. It was an expression of broken heartedness and desperation, usually over sin or over some danger. It was something you did when things were not going the way you want them to.

But that's not the situation with the disciples of Jesus. This is the second thing he teaches: the Messiah has come and his coming is like the coming of a bridegroom to a wedding feast. This is just too good to mingle with fasting. So Jesus was making a tremendous claim for himself here. In the Old Testament God had pictured himself as the husband of his people Israel (Is. 62:4f; Jer 2:2; 3:20; Ezek 16:8; Hos. 2:19f). Now his Son, the Messiah, the long hoped-for one, has come and he claims to be the Bridegroom—that is the husband of his people, who will be the true Israel (cf. John 3:29). This is the kind of partially veiled claim Jesus made about his identity with God. If you had ears to hear you could hear it. God, the one who betrothed Israel to himself in covenant love has come.

This is so stunning and so glorious and so unexpected in this form that Jesus said, you just can't fast now in this situation. It is too happy and too spectacularly exhilarating. Fasting is for times of yearning and aching and longing. But the bridegroom of Israel is here. After a thousand years of dreaming and longing and hoping and waiting, he is here! The absence of fasting in the band of disciples was a witness to the presence of God in their midst.

But then Jesus said, "But the days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast." This is the key sentence: "Then they will fast." When is he referring to?

Some have suggested he was referring just to the several days between his death and resurrection. They would fast just for those days. But that is very unlikely. For several reasons. One is that the early church fasted after the resurrection, as we have seen in Acts 13:1-3 (cf. Acts 14:23; 2 Corinthians 6:5; 11:27). The other is that in Matthew 25:1-13 Jesus pictures his second coming as the arrival of the bridegroom. In other words, the Bridegroom is taken away until the second coming of Christ.

So I think Arthur Wallis is right in his sixth chapter of *God's Chosen Fast*: "The time is now." Jesus is saying: Now while I am here in your midst as the Bridegroom you can't 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 you will fast. That time is now.

It's true that Jesus is present with us by his Spirit. But Paul said in 2 Corinthians 5:8, "We [would] prefer to be absent from the body and at home with the Lord." In other words, in this age there is an ache and a longing—a homesickness—inside every Christian that Jesus is not here as fully and intimately and as powerfully and as gloriously as we want him to be. And that is why we fast.

But then Jesus says something very crucial in verse 16-17. He says,

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 men 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.

The patch of unshrunk cloth and the new wine represent the new reality that has come with Jesus—the Kingdom of God is here. The Bridegroom has come. The Messiah is in our midst. And that is not merely temporary. He is not merely here and then gone. The kingdom of God did not come in Jesus and then just vanish out of the world.

Jesus died for our sins once for all. He rose from the dead once for all. The Spirit was sent into the world as the real presence of Jesus among us. The kingdom is the reigning power of Christ in the world subduing hearts to the king and creating a people who believe him and serve him. The Spirit of the Bridegroom is gathering and purifying a bride for Christ. This is the new wine.

And Jesus says, The old wineskins can't contain it. What is the old wineskin? In the context it seems to be fasting. Fasting was inherited from the Old Testament and had been used as part of the Jewish system of relating to God. Now Jesus says, the old wineskins of Judaism can't contain the new wine.

So what shall we say. In verse 15 Jesus says that we will fast when the Bridegroom is gone. And in verse 17 he says that the old fasting cannot contain the new wine of the kingdom.

My answer is that the new wine demands new fasting. Years ago I wrote in the margin of my Greek Testament beside this text, "The new fasting is based on the mystery that the Bridegroom *has* come, not just *will* come. The new wine of his presence calls for new fasting."

In other words the yearning and longing and ache of the old fasting was not based on the glorious truth that the Messiah had come. The mourning over sin and the yearning in danger was not based on the great finished work of the Redeemer and the great revelation of himself and his grace in history. But now the Bridegroom has come. In coming he struck the decisive blow against sin and against Satan and against death.

The great central, decisive act of salvation for us today is past, not future. And on the basis of that past work of the Bridegroom, nothing can ever be the same again. The wine is new. The blood is shed. The Lamb is slain. The punishment of our sins is executed. Death is defeated. The Bridegroom is risen. The Spirit is sent. The wine is new. And the old fasting mindset is simply not adequate.

What's new about the fasting is that it rests on all this finished work of the Bridegroom. The yearning that we feel for revival or awakening or deliverance from corruption is not merely longing and aching. The first fruits of what we long for have already come. The down payment of what we yearn for is already paid. The fullness that we are longing for and fasting for has appeared in history and we have beheld his glory. It is not merely future.

We have tasted the powers of the age to come, and our new fasting is not because we are hungry for something we have not tasted, but because the new wine of Christ's presence is so real and so satisfying. The newness of our fasting is this: its intensity comes not because we have never tasted the wine of Christ's presence, but because we have tasted it so wonderfully by his Spirit and cannot now be satisfied until the consummation of joy arrives. We must have all he promised. And as much now as possible.

So I urge you to join in the January fasting. Not because you haven't tasted the new wine of Christ's presence, but because you *have* tasted it, and long, with a deep joyful aching of soul to know more of his presence and power in our midst.