

Should Christians fast...? ... Fasting is a temporary denial of something that is (in itself) – good... like **food**. (Skipping meals for a day or two is a common fast.) ... You and I probably know a lot of Christians who fast – as a spiritual discipline – and perhaps you have wondered whether or not YOU should. ... Maybe you have at one time done some fasting – and some of you regularly do it (now.) ... Often... believers who do **not** fast... think they should... and feel *guilty* because they don't. Should they?

Our passage today in Luke would have us examine this issue. Let's get right to our passage for today.

Luke 5:33

The purpose of these questioners of Jesus was not to criticize His disciples... as much as it was to criticize Jesus. ... In last week's passage... we saw that the Pharisees tried to divide Jesus and His disciples... by going to Jesus' **disciples** and asking **THEM** why Jesus ate with tax collectors? They raised the issue of who Jesus kept company with – NOT to Jesus – but to His disciples... when He ate at Levi's house with all of Levi's despised tax-collector friends. ... And now this... is another crafty tactic... an indirect way of discrediting Christ. "*What kind of a holy man could Jesus be... if He doesn't make His disciple's fast?*"

There was also (no doubt) quite a bit of pride in their question. These critics wanted recognition for their pious acts of fasting. ... Fasting was a prominent form of outward piety. The Pharisees and John's disciples fasted often. ... But in the Old Testament Law... God only commanded it to be done once a year on the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16:29).

We do read about voluntary fasting in other places of the Old Testament – but it was only commanded in the law to be done on the Day of Atonement. (For example) in the Book of Esther... the Jews thought that fasting would be the appropriate thing to do... as they mourned Xerxes' edict to kill all Jews. They fasted and cried out to God (Esther 4:1-3). At least two of the Old Testament prophets called for Israel to repent... (and in doing so)... to fast before God. Joel called for this... as did Isaiah.

But along with these appropriate uses came abuses, like those who supposed that their fasting brought a self-achieved holiness, a works-righteousness, despite the fact that the prophets warned against such thinking.

Predictably... by Jesus' time... the Pharisees had decreed that godly people fast twice a week (on Mondays and Thursdays). ... For them fasting meant mourning. ... Some Pharisees viewed it as a sacrifice... a mournful offering of one's own flesh to God... that would gain God's attention.

The overall effect of this... was to view true religion as solemn... joyless... and gloomy. ... Therefore... when fasting... the Pharisees tried to look as forlorn as possible. ... Some actually whitened their faces to effect an emaciated look... refused to wash... and wore their clothes in shoddy disarray. ... The supposition was that you could not be spiritual... unless you were uncomfortable. ... Spirituality... they thought... consists of doing things you do not want to do... and refraining from the things you want to do. (But do you know what?) ... This idea of self-denial came MORE from Greek philosophy... than from God's word.

We have our parallels of it still existing in our churches today.

Do you remember Erma Bombeck? I cite her in my college classes that I teach... and students (today) show no recognition of that name. ... I have sat under pastors who quoted her often (although I am not aware of her taking a stand for Christ in her newspaper columns.) ... But she often made profound statements of truth... and in one article she wrote about sitting in church one Sunday when a small child turned around and began to smile at the people behind her. ... When her mother noticed... she told her daughter in a stage whisper: “*Stop that grinning—you’re in church.*” She gave her a swat... and said: “*That’s better!*” ... Bombeck concluded that some people come to church looking like they have just read the will of their rich aunt... only to learn that she left everything to her pet hamster!

I don’t know why so many people think that “Joylessness” and “SOMBER” is somehow spiritual. All through my Old Testament... I see God over and over telling His people to get together and celebrate. Do this feast... do that feast. (And you know what?) - no one is somber at a feast. And then in the New Testament – we read verses like this in Philippians.

Philippians 4:4 (ESV)

⁴ Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice.

And...

Romans 14:17 (ESV)

¹⁷ For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.

Joy is a fruit of the Holy Spirit...

Galatians 5:22 (ESV)

²² But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness,

Looking somber does not show that someone is spiritual. Joy shows that the Holy Spirit is active in a believer's life.

The pharisees... John's disciples... and many believers today see it the other way around. They equate righteous living with being gloomy and dismal. ... So Jesus and His disciples (who refused to fast)... were contrasted with the disciples of John and the pharisees (who were presented as righteous people.) ... Jesus' response was that *the new way* (His way)... and the old way (the way of John and the Pharisees)... simply do not mix. ... He gave three examples. (Here is the first.)

Luke 5:34-35

Jesus answered their question with an allusion to the wedding practices of His day. A wedding feast was the most vivid picture of joy and happiness in that culture. "*Can you expect the members of a bridal party to fast at the wedding when the bridegroom himself is present? Of course not!*" The explanation was divinely bold and packed with meaning for his Jewish listeners.

A newly married Jewish couple did not honeymoon but stayed home for a week-long open house during which there was continual feasting and celebrating. ... The bride and groom were treated like king and queen that week (sometimes they even wore crowns). ... They were attended by chosen friends known as "guests of the bridegroom." ... These wedding guests were **exempted** from all fasting *through a rabbinical ruling*. There was a popular rabbinic text called "The Scroll of Fasting" and it said, "*All in attendance on the bridegroom are relieved of all religious observances which would lessen their joy.*"

Jesus was the Bridegroom... and He was present on earth. ... It was no time for fasting. ... When He was gone... however... it would be a different story. ... When the bridegroom goes away... then fasting might well be appropriate.

Of course... we are now living in a time when the Bridegroom is no longer physically present on earth. It wasn't appropriate for His disciples to fast while He was with them... but now He has gone away.

Look at the end of verse 35. "*and then they will fast in those days...*" (What days?) ... The days that you and I are living in right now! He has gone back to Heaven and we are waiting for His return. Luke 5:35 seems to show that Christ expected you and I **would** fast... "*and then they will fast in those days...*" ... [P A U S E] ...

Fasting is found OFTEN in both the Old and the New Testaments. But let me say that there is no Scripture that commands believers to fast. I have just pointed out that Luke 5:35 indicates that Jesus seems to expect it... and so does another passage found in Matthew's Gospel.

Matthew 6:16-18 (ESV)

¹⁶ "And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. ¹⁷ But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, ¹⁸ that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

Notice that it says TWICE – "**when** you fast"... not "**IF** you fast..."

In the book of Acts it is seen that it was part of the early church's worship. In Acts 13:1-3 God interrupts the church at Antioch's normal practice of praying and fasting and tells them that He wants Paul and Barnabas to be

sent out as missionaries... Fasting was also normal worship at Corinth... according to 1 Cor 7:5... 2 Cor 6:5... and 2 Cor 11:27.

So fasting is not commanded – but Jesus seemed to show that He expected it... and the early church is shown to be doing it. ... If WE were to fast... why would we do it...? (What is its purpose? What are we trying to accomplish?)

Let me take a few minutes right now to explain some good reasons for fasting. First of all... let me define it a little more clearly. ... I like the way John Piper defines it:

Fasting is a temporary renunciation of something that is in itself good, like food, in order to intensify our expression of need for something greater — namely, God and his work in our lives.

Fasting is a way of saying with our stomach and our whole body... how much we need and want and trust Jesus. ... It is a way of saying Jesus is our ONLY Master. We are not going to be enslaved by food. Food is not our highest source of satisfaction. ... We might use the refusal of food (from time to time) to express that Jesus is better than food. Jesus is more needful than food.

Food is good. (Let there be no mistake about this.) We do not deny the goodness of God's creation. (Food is good.) ... It is a gift of God... and we can glorify God with it - in two ways... not just one way. ... We feast on it with gratitude for God's goodness... and we forfeit food as a statement of our submission to God as our true Master... and ultimate yearning.

Both feasting and fasting are worship for the Christian. Both magnify Christ. Of course... both have their peculiar dangers. The danger of feasting is that

we fall in love with the gift... and the danger of fasting is that we belittle the gift and boast in our willpower... our discipline.

But let me say this clearly. I do not believe that fasting is for every Christian. Some believers have health issues that make it – a risky proposition. It is not commanded. It is voluntary. It is not for those who are trying to earn God’s special attention. It is for those who know that they already have it... and who want to declare: “*I love you, God. I need you more than I need food — more than I need life.*”

Let’s return (now) to our passage. ... Jesus continues to answer His critics by explaining that what He offers is so new... that it cannot be mixed with the old system. Trying to do so would only destroy BOTH.

Luke 5:36

Jesus’ answer is intended to come across a little absurd. If you take a patch from a new garment... and sew it to an old garment... you ruin both of them. ... The new garment (now) has a hole in it... and the old garment has a patch that does not match. The patch will look ridiculously conspicuous. Why would someone cut a hole in a new garment and then use that piece of new cloth to repair an old article of clothing? ... Furthermore... the new patch will tear away when the garment is washed. No. The old and the new do not mix.

What Jesus offers is decidedly new and distinct. ... It is (in every sense of the word) a new approach to viewing how people can come to God... a new period... and a new dispensation. ... It will take the disciples and the early church a little time to see the implications of what Jesus is saying.

The Book of Acts will chronicle story after story about how the early church had to realize this. Luke's next book shows the growth of understanding... especially as it related to circumcision... food laws... and Gentiles.

Luke 5:37-38

The Lord's second analogy pictures the process of making wine. Grape juice was poured into a sack created from sheepskin... which is supple... flexible... and stretchy... but only for a short period of time - when it has first been sewn together. ... As the grape juice ferments the live culture yeast eats the sugar of the grape... and just as our bodies have an elimination process of waste from what we eat... the live culture yeast expels alcohol and carbon dioxide gas... as waste. The gas bloats the new wineskin which stretches to contain the increased volume.

Because an old wineskin is brittle instead of elastic... when yeast expels carbon dioxide gas... the old wineskin splits under the pressure. Old wineskins are perfectly suited for old wine in which the fermentation process is complete. But it will burst if you try to ferment grape juice in it a second time.

What Christ brought was full of expanding life and power. (And) Jesus produces an expanding joy in the hearts of His followers. The new wine of life cannot be restrained by old... unyielding structures. When Christ fills our lives... the swelling life within... expands us beyond our imagining. Once Christ takes up residence in our lives... every aspect of our being — from our intellect to our emotions to our will — undergoes change. ... And Christ keeps increasing our spiritual capacity... so that we will always be able to hold more of his fullness.

The religious institutions consisted of the temple... the Sanhedrin... and the synagogue. ... They were too far gone for reform. ... The members of the establishment were steeped in **dead ritual**... hairsplitting controversies... and endless man-made rules and regulations. ... The Lord had no intention of pouring the new wine into their old wineskins of legalism... prejudice... and exclusivism.

The Gospel cannot be contained within Judaism without destroying both.

The focus is on something NEW. ... This does not mean that some forms of the old worship - like fasting - cannot continue. ... But it does mean that they are seen differently. ... We do not fast because we are commanded and we do not fast because we are trying to earn favor with God. ... If a believer chooses to fast – it is as an expression of love because we already have His favor.

Some believers in Christ and some denominations (today) that consider themselves to be Christian... are still trying to mix what Jesus said cannot be mixed. They believe that Saturday is the day for worship. They incorporate Old Testament dietary law into their attempts to honor the Lord... and other elements of the Old Testament Law. But look what Paul wrote to the Colossian church.

Colossians 2:16-17, 20-23

¹⁶ *Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath.*

⁷ *These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ.* ²⁰ *If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the world, why, as if you were still alive in the world, do you submit to regulations—* ²¹ *“Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch”*

²² *(referring to things that all perish as they are used)—according to human precepts and teachings?* ²³ *These have indeed an*

appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh.

How sad – that people don't want the New... they only want the Old. Our final verse of our passage acknowledges that.

Luke 5:39

There is a note of rebuke here in the realization that some people will not alter the way they look at Jesus. They reject the new way he brings. Some people will not taste the new wine of the gospel, since some tastes never change. Rejection of the new message by many in Judaism is very likely. One will not try what one does not sense the need for.

Many tragically stick with the good - when God wants to give them the best.

Many people who have not tasted the new are determined never to try it, because they imagine that what they have is “better” (literally, “good”). They will not even taste the new for sake of comparison. What arrogance... what stubbornness... what folly!

Many of the Pharisees would investigate Jesus' teaching but cling to the old traditions. Many who check out Christianity will reject it... preferring their old ways. Loyalty to the old life may prevent people from believing and certainly will keep them from growing.

God still gives sinners an incredible offer: the presence of Christ — boundless joy — fullness of soul — new wine! The condition? The realization that your old life is not adequate... and the acceptance that

Christ is everything — that He is the *Lamb* of God... Who fulfilled all that the Old Testament sacrificial system pointed to...that He is the *bridegroom*... the source of unending joy.

Have you made this discovery...?