

Matt. 9:14-17 - Feast or Fast?

Written by Tim Black
Sunday, 29 March 2009 02:00

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Body

1.

Question: Feast or Fast? v. 14. First we hear the question.

1.

Text

1.

14 Then the disciples of John came to him, saying, "Why do we and the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?"

2.

Two parties, two intents. This question came from two parties, with two intents.

1.

Parties. Matthew says the question was asked by "the disciples of John," but Luke says it was the Pharisees who asked, and Mark says it was both. So whodunit? Here is an example of an apparent contradiction in the Bible which is easily resolved by recognizing that each Gospel writer tells only part of the story, yet each tells the

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truth

. The question came from

both

the Pharisees and the disciples of John the Baptist, as Mark makes clear.

2.

Intents. The Pharisees and John's disciples each had a different reason for asking.

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John. John's disciples sought to determine whether Jesus was the promised Messiah by comparing Jesus' ministry to John the Baptist's.

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John's Austerity. Matthew tells us John came "neither eating nor drinking" (**Matt. 11:18**).

John's disciples imitated John's practice of an austere lifestyle, and did so as one way to obey his call to repentance. They followed John's doctrine and practice. They also mourned that John was unjustly imprisoned.

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Jesus Is Loose? Because Jesus' disciples did not fast, their obedience to God's law appeared to be less strict than it ought to be; Jesus' disciples appeared to be playing fast and loose with the requirements of true religion. "Jesus, do your disciples worship God the way they should? If they don't, then are you really the Messiah?" John taught his disciples that Jesus was the Messiah, and they wanted to believe it.

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Pharisees. But the Pharisees had a different purpose. They sought to condemn Jesus, and so likely incited John's disciples to ask the question. They take an opportunity to create a rift between the disciples of Jesus and John.

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Do you remember how Jesus characterized the Pharisees' fasting in a parable? He said,

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Luke 18:12

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11 The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. 12 I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.'

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From this we learn the Pharisees fasted regularly, as a discipline. We also learn they boasted of their fasting as a badge of honor before the Lord. In their question, they boast of their own fasting, and blame the disciples for not fasting. But Christ told His disciples to fast in secret, and not make a public show of their fasting. So the Pharisees' charge is unwarranted.

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Answer: Feast with Christ, fast without vv. 15-17. The Pharisees deserve a rebuke, and John's disciples deserve an edifying answer to their fair question. Christ gives His defense. First, with regard to Himself, fasting was not timely, second, with regard to His disciples, fasting was not merciful.

1.

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When to feast or fast: It was not the right time to fast: Two Periods v. 15. First Jesus teaches us when to feast or fast, saying it was not the right time for His disciples to fast.

1.

While Christ was on earth it was not the season for fasting. Jesus highlights two periods of time in redemptive history which each have their own place. The contrast between John and Jesus is not due to their following two different and opposing religions, as the Pharisees hoped to prove, but rather it was due to a rightful change in the one religion. Christ's answer does not condemn John's disciples for fasting, but it does call them to join in the feast, and become disciples not only of John, but of Jesus as well.

2.

There is a time to fast, and a time to feast! Fasting was prescribed as a regular event only on the Day of Atonement (see Lev. 23:27; Acts 27:9). Now in the NT it is not intended for us to practice on a set day. Rather, we are to practice it when it is the right time; when the occasion warrants it. What kind of occasion warrants fasting? Jesus says in v. 15:

3.

Text

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15 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.

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Jesus' Earthly Ministry – Feast!

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A wedding isn't the right time for mourning! How backwards and troubling it was when Samson's wife wept the whole week of their wedding feast!

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Fast in mourning. In this parable, Jesus is the bridegroom, and His disciples are the wedding guests. Jesus is with His disciples, but John the Baptist was in prison, so it was the right time for John's disciples to mourn. It was also the right time for them to depart from following John, in order to follow Christ, whom John directed them to follow. In these things we learn that one of the right times to fast is when we are in mourning. When you fast you are saying, "What I lost is more important than my food. Seeking God in prayer is more important than my food."

You say with Asaph, "

25 Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you. 26 My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.

" (

Ps. 73:25-26

)

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Feast during Jesus' earthly ministry. But Jesus says now is not the time to mourn! Now is the time of the wedding party, because Jesus is present with His disciples. So His disciples are right to feast! Hendricksen puts it this way, "Disciples of the Lord mourning while their Master is performing works of mercy and while words of life and beauty are dropping from his lips, how utterly incongruous!"

was right to feast during Jesus' earthly ministry

. That is the first period of which Jesus speaks. But we should draw from Christ's words a more general principle. The wedding guests should feast "

when the bridegroom is

with

them

!"

Feast when you are with Christ; fast when you are without Christ

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So when are you with Christ? You are with Christ spiritually during the general period between Christ's first and second coming. The wedding feast Jesus speaks of was not only for the twelve apostles; it was for all who followed Christ during His earthly ministry. John the Baptist himself had described Christ as the Bridegroom of the church, in whom the church should delight!

John 3:29

26 And they came to John and said to him, "Rabbi, he who was with you across the Jordan, to whom you bore witness- look, he is baptizing, and all are going to him." 27 John answered, "A person cannot receive even one thing unless it is given him from heaven. 28 You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, 'I am not the Christ, but I have been sent before him.' 29 The one who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice. Therefore this joy of mine is now complete. 30 He must increase, but I must decrease."

The joy of knowing Jesus Christ is for the apostles, the disciples of John, for the whole church; for all who come to Christ by faith. We should celebrate the blessing of knowing Jesus Christ!

Jesus' Heavenly Ministry – Fast!

But Jesus tells us our life between His first and second comings will not be one of unbroken joy. "The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast. " During the time of Jesus' heavenly ministry there will be times when we should fast. Notice that Jesus is not making a distinction between the time of the OT and the time of the NT here, as if fasting was only appropriate during the OT, because He clearly says the time to

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fast was in His disciples' future, not their past.

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John's disciples fasted before they followed Jesus. One day Jesus' disciples would mourn in a similar fashion to John's. This happened in various stages, and continues today. Jesus' disciples mourned when He was crucified on the cross. They mourned when they were persecuted in Acts and during the time of the early church. We mourn now as well because it is better to be away from the body and at home with the Lord. Even the whole creation groans in eager expectation for the final day of resurrection when the sin and sufferings of this fallen world will be removed. We mourn for many reasons, and on many occasions. We mourn when we or someone we know suffers death, divorce, poverty, great danger, serious injury, a serious crime. We should and do mourn over the evil of our own sin. These are all right occasions for fasting. Jesus teaches you in this passage, though, that at the heart of all these reasons to mourn, and to fast, is that they all partake of the same nature as Christ the Bridegroom being "taken away."

east with Christ, and fast without

Whether you know this fully or not, your joy—true joy—increases or decreases based on how close you are to Christ.

Psalm 104:27-29

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These all look to you, to give them their food in due season....When you open your hand, they are filled with good things. When you hide your face, they are dismayed.

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As we see the flowers and grass spring up in response to the rain, so our hearts should rise and fall with the presence of Christ our Savior. But the Pharisees' hearts were hard against the Savior. Their fasting was not out of mourning for sin or even suffering. They rejoiced in their fasting

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and not in their
God

How does your heart work? Do you mourn every thing that separates you from God and His blessings? Do you rejoice in God, in His worship, and in fellowship with Him?

Christ's disciples would grieve at His death, and after His ascension, because these events separated them from Christ for a time. We must grieve when our sin separates us from God. We should be grieved in some ways at Christ's bodily absence today, and long for the day when we will see Him face to face. But take heart, that day will come, and we have a foretaste of it in God's blessings through His word and Spirit today.

Rev. 19:7-9

7 Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his Bride has made herself ready; 8 it was granted her to clothe herself with fine linen, bright and pure"- for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints. 9 And the angel said to me, "Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb." And he said to me, "These are the true words of God."

There is a time to mourn and a time to laugh. There is a time to feast and a time to fast. Jesus teaches us to feast when we are with Christ, and fast when we are without Him

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Who should feast or fast: These were not the right people to fast: New vs. mature believers vv. 16-17. Jesus gives a second part to His answer, in two parables.

1.

Two interpretations. There are two interpretations of these parables about new cloth and new wine. They refer either to a new dispensation or to new people – either to the New Testament or to new believers. Some commentators say Christ's meaning is that fasting was right in the OT but is not in the NT. I cannot agree, because of the passages in the NT which approve of fasting: Matt. 6:16-17, Acts 13:2-3, Acts 14:23, 2 Cor. 6:5, and 2 Cor. 11:27. It is better to consider these parables to be describing new people. Both parables teach that just as Christ's earthly ministry was not the right time to fast, Christ's disciples were not the right people to fast.

2.

The two parables.

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New Patch v. 16. The first parable compares Christ's disciples to new patch made of unshrunk cloth.

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Text

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16 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.

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Have you ever had clothes shrink in the wash? Cloth made out of wool shrinks when you wash it. Even in Jesus' day some cloth was pre-washed before it was sold so that the clothes you bought in the market will still fit after you wash them. If you take a patch made of cloth that hasn't been pre-shrunk yet and use it to cover a hole in an older garment which has already shrunk, the patch will shrink and won't fit anymore; it will tear away and make a worse tear than the hole you began with. That patch wasn't ready for that washed and worn garment.

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Jesus' disciples weren't ready yet for the days of suffering they would face, and they weren't prepared as other men are to engage in fasting as a spiritual discipline. They were new believers, and their faith and obedience would shrivel up under the physical rigor of fasting. Jesus had just called Matthew, and not long before Jesus rebuked His disciples' weak faith saying "Why are you afraid, O you of little faith?" (Matt. 8:26) They had much to learn, and not yet by suffering! But by Christ's gentle and merciful teaching, showing them the works of the kingdom, and shepherding their tender souls. Even near His crucifixion, Jesus told them, "I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now.

" (
John 16:12

) This is God's way with new believers, and with those young in the faith. " When Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines, although that was near. For God said, 'Lest the people change their minds when they see war and return to Egypt.'

" (
Exodus 13:17

) Paul told the Corinthians, " I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it.

" (
1 Cor. 3:2

) Following Christ's example we must ground those young in the faith in the first principles of the gospel. Read them Bible stories, lead them to memorize scripture memory, teach them the catechism! We must not place upon them a doctrinal or practical yoke that is too great for them to bear. Jesus says "

My yoke is easy, and my burden is light.

" (
Matt. 11:30

) Don't withhold fasting from new believers when the occasion warrants it, but don't load them down with its doctrinal and practical difficulty when their faith and obedience are weak. Not only will they shrink and shrivel, they may even break.

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New Wine v. 17. That is exactly what happens with the wineskins. Jesus said,

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Text

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17 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.

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In Jesus' day wine was stored in many kinds of containers. One kind of container was the skin of an animal closed off to form a bag, and this was called a wineskin. New wine is just plain grape juice, freshly squeezed from the grape. New wine does not yet contain alcohol, because it has not yet fermented. Once it is poured into a wineskin or other container, new wine ferments over time and as it does it generates carbon dioxide, which makes it carbonated like soda pop today, and creates pressure against the container holding the wine. That pressure would stretch a new wineskin. But an old wineskin has already been stretched, and won't stretch any more if you pour new wine into it. Instead of stretching, it will break.

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You can break the heart, the mind, and the will of a new believer by loading them down with obligations they can't handle. It's often better for them to take one thing at a time when it comes to when and where they need to clean up their life. I tell you, if you force a new believer to fast when they haven't even learned to pray, they will break. But a bruised reed Jesus will not break, and a smoldering wick He will not snuff out. Do you see the mercy of your Savior Jesus Christ? Do you show that mercy to the younger believers around you? Think of your children. The young adults in our church. The visitors. Even the older adults who have not known the Lord as long as you. Jesus told the Pharisees "I desire mercy and not sacrifice," but they hadn't learned it yet.

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But Jesus shows a better way. For our children there is the protected harbor of "the nurture and admonition of the Lord.

" For our young adults there is the wisdom and safety net of their parents and older adults in the congregation according to Titus 2. For our visitors there should be a welcome, the gospel clear and simple, an invitation to know Christ more, and a membership class to lead them to unite with Christ's church. "

New wine is put into fresh wineskins, and so both are preserved.
"

"There may be *over*-doing even in *well*-doing, a being *righteous over-much*; and such an *over*-doing as may prove an *un*doing through the subtlety of Satan."

[2](#)

[1](#) William Hendricksen, 428.

[2](#) Matthew Henry, 122.