



Lesson 232

Jesus and the Fasting Controversy

Story Elements

- **Text:** Mark 2:18-22 (also Matthew 9:14-17 and Luke 5:33-39)
- **Setting:** circa AD 27 in Capernaum, Galilee
- **Characters:** God, Jesus and his disciples, and some disciples of John the Baptist and of the Pharisees
- **Plot:** Jesus defends his disciples in their abstaining from fasting.
- **Key word(s):** “_____” – for Jesus (and his disciples) fasting is not a legalistic requirement but a spiritual desire expressed at appropriate times.
- **Climax:** **Mark 2:20** *But the days will come, when the bridegroom shall be taken away from them, and then shall they fast in those days.* In this climactic verse, Jesus not only shows his critics that the time for his disciples to fast will come, but he also gives the reason why.

Fasting Question

1. REVIEW: Levi (Matthew) the tax collector, answered Christ’s call to discipleship and forsook all to follow Jesus. To celebrate his new life in Christ, Matthew held a feast and invited his new friends (Jesus and his disciples) and his old friends (publicans and “sinners”). The Pharisees were angry that Jesus would dare eat with publicans and sinners, but Jesus responded to their self-righteous finger-pointing by stating *I am not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.*
2. (Mark 2:17-18) The Pharisees continued to find fault with Jesus and his disciples, but now instead of questioning why Jesus ate with sinners, they wondered why his disciples did not _____. The disciples of John the Baptist wondered the same thing (but perhaps with an attitude of genuine interest instead of the Pharisees’ accusatory tone).
 - (a) Fasting played an important role in the religious lives of many Jews – the really pious would fast on Monday and Thursday every week. (cf. Luke 18:12)
 - (b) It is possible that Matthew’s feast was held on one of these fasting days, triggering the contempt of the Pharisees and the curiosity of John’s disciples.

APPLICATION → Here we see the dangerous tendency of legalism: using our own rules as the metric by which we measure other people’s _____. Matthew Henry explained it this way: “Thus apt are strict professors to make their own practice a standard, and to censure and condemn all that do not fully come up to it.”¹

3. Jesus addresses this fasting controversy with three parables about a wedding feast, a worn-out garment, and a wine bottle.

A Wedding Feast

4. (Mark 2:19) The first parable involves a wedding² party:
 - (a) The bridegroom represents _____.
 - (b) The children of the bridechamber (the guests of the wedding ceremony and celebration) are Jesus’ _____.

¹ Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry’s Commentary, VOL V, Matthew to John* (Iowa Falls: Riverside Book and Bible House, N.D.) 462.

² It is noteworthy that Jesus uses the imagery of a wedding to teach about his relationship to his disciples – just as John the Baptist used the same to teach about his relationship to Christ. (cf. John 3:29)

➔ Spurgeon sums it up this way: “He is ‘the Bridegroom’ who came to woo and win His bride. Those who followed Him were the guests, the Bridegroom’s best men, and attendants. It was for them to rejoice while the Bridegroom headed their company, for **sorrow is not suitable for wedding-feasts.**”³

(c) (v 20) But the days are coming, Jesus said, *when the bridegroom shall be taken away from them, and then shall they fast in those days.* These days have arrived.

APPLICATION➔ The Christian feasts spiritually when in communion with Jesus, but fasts physically as an expression of our longing for his return and to mourn how unlike him we are in our earthly lives. Therefore, we pray: *Even so, come, Lord Jesus.*

A Worn-Out Garment

5. (Mark 2:21) The second parable is that of a new patch being used to mend an old garment.
 - (a) An old garment would have been washed frequently and shrunk over time.
 - (b) New cloth, being used as a patch, would shrink after the first wash, weakening the mend and tearing the old garment even more. The hole is made worse by _____.

A Wine Bottle

6. (Mark 2:22) The third parable is about new wine being put into old bottles (or *skins*).
 - (a) An old wineskin has already expanded during the fermentation process of its original contents.
 - (b) If new wine is put into an old wineskin, as the new wine ferments the old wineskin would be unable to expand further and would burst. The wine would be spoiled because of _____.

APPLICATION➔ With these parables Jesus shows how inherently different the legalism of the Pharisees was to the liberty of the Gospel. “Jesus did not come to patch up our old outward religiousnesses, but to make a new robe of righteousness for us. All attempts to add the _____ to legalism will only make the rent worse.”⁴

7. (Luke 5:39) Luke includes an additional statement by Jesus: *No man also having drunk old wine straightway desireth new: for he saith, The old is _____.* The three parables explained the attitude of the disciples of Christ; this statement in Luke describes the attitude of the disciples of the John the Baptist and the Pharisees.

APPLICATION➔ John Gill notes, “Scribes and Pharisees, who have drank of the old wine of the law, and the traditions of the elders, do not desire the new wine of the Gospel, but prefer the former...”⁵ Why did the Pharisees (and really all unbelievers) reject Christ’s gospel? **Because they do not have the taste for it.**

Answer Key: Key word(s): “fast” • 2. fast; ➔ holiness • 4. a) Jesus; b) disciples • 5. b) shrinking • 6. b) expansion ➔ Gospel • 7. better

³ Charles Spurgeon, *An Exposition of Matthew, the Gospel of the Kingdom* (Springfield: Particular Baptist Press, 2015) 59.
⁴ Ibid., 60.
⁵ John Gill, *John Gill’s Exposition of the Bible*, <https://johngill.thekingsbible.com/CommentaryVerse/42/5/39>