

THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW

Matthew 9:14-17

The Groom

Matthew 9:14–17 [14] Then the disciples of John came to him, saying, “Why do we and the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?” [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. [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. [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.”

In verse 14, some of John the Baptist’s followers approach Jesus to ask a question. They had assumed, like most people in Israel, that the model they should follow for living a godly life was the model of the Pharisees.

The Pharisees, had built a tradition for the religious life that they had been adding upon for 200 years. And it included the practice of fasting twice a week, plus on special occasions.¹

It was a life heavy on mourning, on hunger, and on asceticism, or severe self-discipline. But that was not the pattern being followed by Jesus and His disciples.

If you remember the context from last week, Jesus had just attended a great

¹ Luke 18:12

feast full of tax collectors and sinners at Matthew's house. This wasn't normal behavior for the most pious religious leaders of their day. Feasting with sinners was strange.

They thought the holiest people were ascetics who mostly mourned and fasted. But here are Jesus and his disciples walking out of the party at Matthew's house. Peter has Turkey drumsticks in each hand and gravy in his beard.

And the disciples of John say, *"So you guys don't fast."*

Why is that? That question in verse 14 frames everything Jesus says about a wedding, a garment, and new wine. (Context is always key in interpreting these sayings - Jesus uses these analogies to answer this specific question: why don't Jesus and the disciples fast like the Pharisees?)

Jesus's first answer is in verse 15:

Matthew 9: [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."

Can the wedding guests mourn while the bridegroom is with them?

So Jesus is saying something about who He is here. He's calling himself the bridegroom (we'd just call him the groom - we have a bride and groom, they had a bride and a bridegroom - same thing.)

Jesus is calling Himself the groom here.

God had promised:

Isaiah 62:5 “For as a young man marries a young woman,so shall your sons marry you,and as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride,so shall your God rejoice over you.”

God had promised He would come to His people and be like a groom to them. Like a groom on his wedding day is beaming with joy as he sees the bride come down the aisle, so would God rejoice over His people.

The whole marriage relationship of a man marrying a woman was designed, according to Ephesians 5, to show the kind of love that Jesus has for his bride, the church.

The whole storyline of the Bible is that God is the groom, His people are the bride, and Jesus goes to His bride to bring her to Himself, and all of history will culminate with this scene in the future:

Revelation 19:6-9 “Then I heard what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude, like the roar of many waters and like the sound of mighty peals of thunder, crying out,

“Hallelujah!

**For the Lord our God
the Almighty reigns.**

**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.”

So at the end of history, Jesus will come as a groom and His people who have believed are His bride. All of history is wrapped up with a wedding feast to celebrate the everlasting, perfected union between God and His people.

And Jesus says that the reason they aren't fasting and mourning right now is because the Groom is here! This is one of many places where Jesus claims to be God - He is the Groom that Isaiah predicted.

And though that future, final wedding ceremony is still to come for all of us, when Jesus came to earth 2000 years ago He was making all the preparations for that day.

So Jesus says, “These are days to celebrate. Fasting wouldn't be appropriate right now.”

If you are at a lavish wedding reception, and a groomsman gets on the microphone and says, “I think we should fast, and fast right now,” everyone would say, “Not now. Now is the time for a feast and the dancing, not mourning and fasting. If we all decide to mourn, we'd be saying something about this union. If the mother of the bride is wearing black with a black veil and weeping at the wedding, she is saying something about what she thinks about this wedding.

You can't mourn when you're supposed to be celebrating.

Fasting has its purpose at the right time in the Christian life. The church fasted at least 4 times in the book of Acts. Fasting is good to train ourselves to resist appetites, to humble ourselves for intense times of prayer, to mourn

over our sin.² It is for times of emptiness and longing and waiting for God to do something better, but there is nothing better than God being with His people. And while Jesus was there in the flesh with His bride - that just wasn't the right time.

So you'd expect Jesus to say, "After the wedding, then we can get back to the normal routines and fast." But He says, instead, "**The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast.**"

That phrase, "Taken away," is defined as a "violent and unwelcome removal."³

That's not a normal part of a wedding.

If you meet with a wedding planner, and they're planning out the day, planning for every possibility, the wedding planner might say, "Now what will we do if one of the bridesmaids get sick? What's our backup plan for the outdoor wedding if it rains." But it would seem extreme if they said, "Now what do we do if somebody violently kidnaps the groom?" You'd say, "Does that happen enough to where that's a thing we need to prepare for?"

But Jesus includes that as part of his wedding analogy. He says that, right in the middle of the wedding festivities, the groom is going to be taken away.

When Jesus thinks about Himself as the groom and His people as the bride, He also thinks about what it is going to take for Him to prepare His bride for that day. He's going to need to be taken away:

Isaiah 53:8

[8] By oppression and judgment he was taken away;

² These three are modified a bit from the 3 presented by Calvin in Institutes of the Christian Religion: IV.12, 14, 15

³ France, R.T., The New International Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew. (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2007). Page 356.

**and as for his generation, who considered
that he was cut off out of the land of the living,
stricken for the transgression of my people?**

Before the celebration could be complete, the Savior would have to be stricken, taken away for a time before the wedding. And when Jesus is thinking about His own wedding to His people, the church, He knows it will be an unusual, interrupted wedding. He knows what He is going to have to do to prepare His bride.

This is similar to something that happens in John 2 at the wedding feast in Cana. This is the wedding where they run out of wine...

John 2:3–4 [3] When the wine ran out, the mother of Jesus said to him, “They have no wine.” [4] And Jesus said to her, “Woman, what does this have to do with me? My hour has not yet come.”

And in John, Jesus’s “hour” is the hour of His death. So they run out of wine, Mary is looking for someone to provide wine, and Jesus says, “It’s not time for me to die yet.”

He knows that to prepare His bride for his wedding, He is going to have to bleed and die. To provide the wine He will have to make an incredible sacrifice.

When Jesus is at the wedding in Cana He is thinking about His death. When He describes a wedding in Matthew 9, he speaks about a violent taking away of the groom.

Because for Jesus to prepare His bride for the wedding, she would have to be purified.

Revelation 7:13-14 “13Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, “Who are these, clothed in white robes, and from where have they come?” 14I said to him, “Sir, you know.” And he said to me, “These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

For Jesus’s bride to be prepared fully, He would have to be taken away, cut off from the living, crucified on the cross. And His spilled blood would be necessary to prepare His bride.

The groom would so love His bride that He would give His life for her.

And that’s the central storyline of the Bible - the love of God for His people, the spilled blood of the Son of God to forgive and redeem His people. True, final, ultimate holiness wouldn’t come through asceticism and fasting and self-affliction, but it true holiness - the white wedding garments that we wear - would be provided completely by the Groom.

And here’s the trap the Pharisees fell into, the trap that some of the disciples of John were falling in to, and that we could fall into:

We can make the central story all about us and believe we have to do the work to prepare ourselves for that day, we ultimately make ourselves holy, and we could, if we afflict ourselves enough, achieve enough righteousness to be worthy of the Groom on that day.

But we can’t.

The Pharisees had so intertwined the idea of holiness with fasting and self affliction that you almost couldn’t distinguish it from what God really required, and they totally skewed what a life for God would look like.

And we often do what they do here.

There are a few errors we make that make us like the Pharisees - three problems with their fasting that are also problems in our lives:

1) They took the life of faith and piled on what was hard and painful about it to squeeze out the joy.

We can do this. We can take the hard parts of Christianity (and there are certainly hard parts), and multiply and add to them, while minimizing the joy and the refreshing parts. Because somehow it feels more holy to us to be afflicted and lack than to rejoice.

And following Jesus is hard. It is a life of taking up a cross to follow Him. There is real suffering in the life of a Christian. That's true and we should be prepared for it.

We should be prepared for loss, for the world not feeling like home, for growing opposition to the faith we hold dear. We should be ready for real sorrow.

But Jesus is the Groom.

The message of Jesus is the message of joy!

So the problem with the Pharisees wasn't that they fasted. It was that they were so unbalanced in their fasting that a life for God was only a life of self-affliction. There wasn't joy. Their spiritual disciplines were all fasting, no feasting. They squeezed out joy.

And we can be with them - we forget that the main story we're part of is the story of a wedding, and we can be mainly very afraid, we can lack joy, we can be always only overwhelmed with the deficiencies in others, in church, and in the world. We can fail to see God's goodness. And we can be

imbalanced in the way we pursue the Lord: heavy only on sorry and light on joy.

There are real difficulties and real restrictions in the Christian life. But the Pharisees piled restriction upon restriction, looked for the dark cloud behind every silver lining, and couldn't rejoice with the Groom because they were so concerned about the diet they were supposed to be on.

So the first problem with their fasting was that it was imbalanced, there was too much of it, it squeezed out joy.

2) Another problem with their fasting regimen is they set a bar for the holy life that they made up, and then they required Jesus and everybody else to fit their mold.

Missing who Jesus was, they measured Him by their standard, and missed the fact that He is the ultimate standard. He is the True Holy Man, the only one. And if Jesus doesn't measure up to your standard, the standard is wrong!

But they thought it meant Jesus was wrong.

Which ties into the next thing Jesus says:

Matthew 9:[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.

He says you can't sew new cloth as a patch on an old garment. It'll shrink and tear the garment. You can't sew the new on the old.

So look at what he is saying. You guys have this garment. Your system of religion with all of your requirements and teachings added to God's word has been a big deal around here for 200 years. So you expect me to be the

next teacher to come and patch whatever hole I perceive in the garment. I'll be a better kind of Pharisee who fixes the problems with your Pharisaism and improves it. I'll take your fasting to the next level, I'll be more ascetic than you, I'll take your power to the next level and remove Rome - I'll take your system and enhance it.

But, He says, that's not what I'm about. I'm not just the latest patch on your garment. I don't intend to be sewed onto this system you guys are in charge of. I'm a whole new garment, a whole new system.

Jesus won't just be the next popular teacher, but he is something altogether new, something they've never seen. He is saying to them, "I won't be playing by your rules." If you try to sew me on to the system you have, it will just rip it.

And in case they didn't get it, he tells another story, and uses wine as the object lesson:

Matthew 9: [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." (ESV)

Wineskins were animal skins sewn together to hold wine. And new wine that wasn't fermented yet couldn't be put in old, stiffer skins. Because when it fermented, it would burst the skins. They couldn't hold new wine.

So you put new wine in new skins that had more flexibility so they could handle the fermentation.

And Jesus is repeating the illustration of the garment here. He is saying "I'm a new thing, and you can't put this new thing in your old thing."

I won't fit in your religious system. There's too much joy for your rigid fast 100 days a year system. There's too much authority in Me for me to submit to your oral traditions like they have authority. Jesus is too new and different for what they've got going.

Jesus is not trying to patch up their worn out religious system, He is something altogether different. He's not just a groomsman at their wedding, He's the Groom!

Shouldn't they be thrilled?

He's bringing a true holiness that isn't earned by afflicting yourself and fasting. He is going to die to put to death all of our sin. He's going to give us His goodness and righteousness - garments of white. He's going to give us real access to God that we don't earn by making ourselves miserable.

Jesus is bringing a cure for sin, but also a cure for our religious hypocrisies: our virtue signaling, our arrogance, our self-righteousness, our joylessness. You'd think the Pharisees would say, "This is what we've been waiting for! Let's chuck the old garment!"

But you'll see as the story unfolds that the Pharisees don't all joyfully drop the old wineskins and get on board with the new.

But why?

And this is the big error they made, and a big one we can make, that can be more than stifling to our joy, it can be deadly for our souls.

3) They Missed the Savior

They had found a comfortable place in their religion and didn't want Jesus to come and burst those skins or rip that garment. They liked what they had

going religion-wise and felt pretty righteous. So they didn't have room for a Savior.

The reason that don't drink down the Gospel is because they are drunk on the old system. They missed Jesus because of the sense of self-righteousness their religion gave them.

And this is a real risk.

I'm sure there are people here today that have been avoiding God by numbing themselves through wild living and sin. But a more prevalent danger is that we have people among us who are numbing ourselves to our need for Jesus through our religion and our good works and self-righteousness. Who are avoiding our need for Jesus by feeling pretty good on our own.

There is a life-and-death difference between the new wine that Jesus brings and the old system of moralism and righteousness by religion.

SELF-RIGHTEOUS RELIGION says I am good and valuable because of what I do. I can work my way to salvation with the good things I do. Every major world religion teaches this, including most of what calls itself Christianity.

Religions say do good things to earn salvation: whether that salvation is heaven or nirvana or a better reincarnation. Do good stuff to be a good person and be saved. Fast twice a week, tithe, go to church, be moral, do right, and you'll be good enough for God.

THE GOSPEL says, "I am more sinful than I could ever see or imagine." So God sent His son as the Groom to rescue us and prepare us for eternal union with Him. We couldn't do it on our own. Freely by his grace I'm saved, not by anything I do.

Religion is the big way that many who call themselves Christians avoid having to deal with their sin and change and trust God.

We use our own righteousness as an alternative to Jesus. Instead of dealing with the reality that we need Jesus and confessing to Jesus our sinfulness and helplessness, instead of giving up our sense of being better than everyone and cutting out the pride and kneeling before Jesus, we INSTEAD become moral enough or religious enough or right enough to feel better than others and assume we're right with God.

Religious rigor can be very good - fasting can be good, Jesus did it. But not when it's used as a way to feel like we're drawing close to God but being far from him in our hearts.

This is why so many religious people are miserable - they are obeying the rules, doing the outward things, but what they really want to be doing is the same stuff the wild people are doing. They are, in their minds, giving up the "GOOD STUFF" for this "GOD STUFF", and that makes them heroes for making a sacrifice.

We can avoid God just as much by being religious as we can by being irreligious. So the question today is, "Are you a Christian, or are you just moral and religious. Are you a good churchgoer, or are you a Christian."

Because Jesus wants to burst the old wineskins of good churchgoers to give them something better.

Jesus doesn't want to patch you up and just help you become more moral, he wants to give you a whole new garment, a garment of His righteousness to wear.

And the risk is that we can be so drunk on church, so drunk on our own righteousness, so drunk on our own virtue, that we, like many Pharisees, miss out on Jesus.

So is that us?

Do we resemble the Pharisees here?

A few signs might be:

#1) Our lives are characterized by JOYLESS obedience.

A call to become a Christian is a call to a wedding feast. There are hard days, there are times for a fast. But God hasn't called us to joyless observance.

Do you ever remember a time when you read the Bible because you loved to, you came to church because it was your joy to get around your brothers and sisters, you prayed because you just had to talk to God? Is it still like that? Or do you read so you can check off today's box and feel good about yourself, know more than others? Do you serve so you can signal to everyone else that you serve.

Jesus is offering better wine.

#2) We do good works to cleanse our conscience.

The Gospel says that we can't wash ourselves, but we sometimes believe the lie that, "You've done bad stuff, now do good stuff to make up for it." You just sinned and rebelled against God, so to make it up to him you FAST or PRAY or GIVE MORE in the offering.

Those works of penance are all really clean looking but we are missing Jesus. When we sin, we can only say, "God, I've done it again! Your word is true, I'm a wretch, I'm selfish. THANK YOU FOR THE CROSS that cleanses me! Forgive me, have mercy on me. I marvel at your grace to a sinner like me! I stand amazed that I of all people am clean before you! What a wonderful Gospel. That's the Christian response, not "I have to do something good now to feel better about myself."

#3) We hate ourselves or inflate ourselves.

There are really only two ways religious people can feel about themselves. One is total self-hatred because we didn't live up to the standards that we're supposed to live up to to be loved by God. God said don't lie and I lied so now he doesn't love me, there's no hope for me, I'm too sinful.

Or, we think we are living up to the standards (I'm a better witness, I give

more, I serve more) and nobody else is living up to the standards, so I'm better than them. I'm better than them and I deserve something from God! That's not Christian talk.

Jesus wants to burst that system and spill that old wine all over so he can give us something better. A whole new system that is centered not on us but on Jesus.

The call today is to wear the new garment, to drink the new wine, to celebrate with the Groom. And to not let the old wine of moralism keep us from the new wine of the Gospel.

Repent today and believe.

Prayer of Confession:

Heavenly Father, we confess that we often seek holiness through our own efforts, piling burdens on ourselves and missing the joy of Your presence. Forgive us for when we focus on our righteousness instead of Your saving grace, and use our own works as a way of elevating ourselves over others.

Jesus, we thank you for being the groom who was taken away for us, paving a new way for us to come to God. Thank you for being the new garment, the new wine and the new wineskins so that we might know Your grace.

Holy Spirit, renew our hearts to embrace the joy and freedom found in Christ, not in rigid religiosity. Guide us to live in Your love and grace, and to know your love, believe in your love, and reflect that love to those around us..

Assurance:

**Revelation 7:14-17 “They have washed their robes and made them white
in the blood of the Lamb.**

**15“Therefore they are before the throne of God,
and serve him day and night in his temple;
and he who sits on the throne will shelter them with his presence.**

**16They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore;
the sun shall not strike them,
nor any scorching heat.**

**17For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd,
and he will guide them to springs of living water,
and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”**

Sermon Questions for Discussion:

- 1.) What are the values in the rigorous “religious” life? What is the good that can come of disciplines like fasting, church attendance, bible reading, etc.?
- 2.) In what ways do we show that we believe that sorrow is more holy than joy?
- 3.) In what ways are we suspicious of joy?
- 4.) What mandates do people create for others in regards to the holy life?
- 5.) How can our rigorous “religious” life be deadly? What is the solution for that?