

Introduction

Weddings change everything. Well, they should change everything. These days they don't really change much for a lot of people. But that is not the way God intended it. With a wedding in mind, Karen Carpenter sang these words: “We've only just begun to live, white lace and promises, a kiss for luck and we are on our way. We've only begun . . .” Jesus refers to the presence of the bridegroom in our text for this morning, and it makes me think how things had only begun for him and his bride and yet what important things he was teaching by making that reference.

[Read Text; Pray]

After Jesus called Matthew to follow him and Matthew left it all to do so, Matthew threw a banquet for Jesus at his house. He invited his friends who were notorious in the community for their wickedness. But it was a great opportunity for these friends to meet Jesus and hear the gospel. Perhaps some of Matthew's friends became Christ followers as well that day.

But when the Pharisees looked on, they were not impressed. They looked at this party the way they looked at most people who appeared to be having fun. They were judgmental. Why in the world would someone claiming to be sent from God be mixing with tax collectors and other sinners in such a celebratory atmosphere? Jesus informed them that this is precisely the kind of people he for whom he came. He pointed out that God is much more interested in mercy than a display of sacrifice.

Another group then approached Jesus. These were disciples of John the Baptist but not THE disciples of John the Baptist. The truest disciples of John the Baptist became disciples of Jesus. And though John had been arrested, these men were still following him. And yet they saw themselves more closely associated with the Pharisees than Jesus. They asked why the disciples of Jesus did not fast although both they and the Pharisees did fast. In fact the OT called for one day a year for the Israelites to fast. But the Pharisees followed manmade law that called for fasting twice a week.

Perhaps this party was taking place on a fasting day for them. But certainly the fact that Jesus and his disciples were feasting was a contrast to the typical pattern followed by these disciples of John and the Pharisees. It seems to me that the comment Jesus had made to the Pharisees was still at issue. These men were consumed with a ritualistic practice that was publicly recognized. We fast. The Pharisees fast. But your disciples do not fast. As Jesus had just said, God desires mercy not sacrifice. But okay. Here is an opportunity to make additional points. And so Jesus proceeds to answer their question. In doing so, he clarifies the nature of the good news of the kingdom of heaven that he embodies. So this morning I want to unpack this text and two characteristics of the gospel that emerge as Jesus replies to these disciples.

First, I want you to see that . . .

I. The Gospel is Truly Good News.

The first part of Jesus' reply makes use of wedding imagery. Jesus asks a question of his own. "Can the wedding guests mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them?" This question functions to establish several points.

A. Jesus associates fasting with sorrow. Why don't your disciples fast? Can wedding guests mourn? Fasting is prescribed once in the law of Moses. It was on the day of atonement. That is a sorrowful day because sacrifice is being made because human beings sinned against God. The day on which Jesus hung on the cross was also a sad, sad day. It was the true day of atonement to which the ceremonial law pointed. While Jesus hung there, the sky turned dark and he cried, "My God, My God why have you forsaken me?" It was a day for mourning. Even as we observe regularly the Lord's Supper, there is a tinge of mourning that accompanies the observance. His body was broken. His blood was shed. It was shed for our forgiveness, and that is certainly glad, but if we had not sinned it would not have needed to have been shed. It is an occasion for sorrow over our sins. This is one reason we examine ourselves at the Lord's table. Are we conscious he died for our sins? Our sins took him to the cross. Our sins are reasons for sorrow. James speaks powerfully and bluntly about how we should act in light of our sin. He says (James 4:8-9) "Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Be wretched and mourn and

weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom." This is the spirit reflected in Psalm 51 where David says the sacrifices of God over sin are 'a broken spirit;' God will not despise a broken and contrite heart.

Fasting is appropriate at certain times. Jesus himself fasted 40 days being tempted. Fasting is especially appropriate in conjunction with brokenness over our sins. The truly sad thing is that the fasting of the Pharisees and the disciples of John was not over sin. It was a program of religious ritual. It was rule-keeping designed to earn favor with God.

B. Meanwhile, Jesus explains that the times in which they were having this conversation were not times for sorrow. They were times for joy. These were times for feasting. It is a rhetorical question that Jesus uttered. It was a question to which everyone would answer resoundingly, "Of course not." And here is the question. "Can the wedding guests mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them?" Weddings are a time for feasting and rejoicing not for sadness and fasting. White lace and promises are a time for joy and celebration. I read where even the Pharisees would allow themselves the freedom not to fast during a wedding feast. So Jesus knew just where to point these inquirers.

But he is not only using wedding imagery in general, Jesus in particular speaks of the presence of the bridegroom. The bridegroom is here; therefore, it is not a time for mourning. It is not a time for fasting. Rather it is a time for feasting and celebrating and enjoying his presence. The bridegroom metaphor is strategic. For in the Old Testament, there are several instances in which God beautifully depicts himself as the husband of his people Israel.

One such place is Isaiah 54:5-9. Listen.
For your Maker is your husband,
the Lord of hosts is his name;
and the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer,
the God of the whole earth he is called.
6 For the Lord has called you
like a wife deserted and grieved in spirit,

like a wife of youth when she is cast off,
says your God.

7 For a brief moment I deserted you,
but with great compassion I will gather you.

8 In overflowing anger for a moment
I hid my face from you, but with everlasting love I will have compassion on
you," says the Lord, your Redeemer.

In Isaiah 62:5, the Lord declares,
As the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over
you.

In Jeremiah 2:32, the Lord puts himself in the place of a jilted husband.
Can a virgin for get her ornaments, or a bride her attire? Yet my people
have forgotten me days without number.

Speaking of his people whom he brought put of Egypt, the Lord says in
Jeremiah 32:31, "I was their husband."

Then moving to the New Testament, we see this theme continuing. There
came a time when the disciples of John the Baptist became concerned that
Jesus was gaining more followers and many were leaving John to follow
Jesus. And this is what John said to them: "I am not the Christ, but I have
been sent before him. 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. He must
increase and I must decrease." John declares Jesus is the Christ and he is
the bridegroom.

Further in the NT Jesus is seen as the bridegroom and his people are the
bride. Paul says to the Corinthians, (2 Cor 11:2) I betrothed you to one
husband, to present you as a pure virgin to Christ." In Ephesians Christ is
the husband and his church is the bride. All the way to Revelation, the
church, the New Jerusalem is the bride, the wife of the Lamb.

So when Jesus refers here in Matthew to himself as the bridegroom, it is not
simply for the beauty and strength of imagery but indeed for truth. The

Lamb is here to betroth his wife, and his friends are present with him. It is a time of joy not sorrow.

C. Jesus does reference a time for sorrow. It is not on this particular day but on the occasion when the bridegroom would be taken away. What could Jesus be talking about then but his crucifixion and days subsequent to his ascension. But now he is here and it is time to rejoice. Jesus is asserting that current days of rejoicing should not be wasted worrying about the time when sadness will be gripping their hearts. And that is what they are doing.

D. But the lesson for believers in Christ is clear and exciting. The gospel is indeed good news. Jesus is present and he is bringing joy all around him. He is preaching truth. He is healing the sick. He is freeing captives from the power of the evil one. He is stilling storms. He is forgiving sins and calling tax collectors away from their debauchery to be transformed as they follow him. Now here he is in fellowship with the very ones he came to save. He is coming to his people as the bridegroom to betroth them and it is a happy time. It is a joyful time. It is a time for feasting. It is a picture of how it ought to be every time the people of God get together and how it will be when we all get to heaven.

Followers of Christ ought to be the happiest people in all the world. Our happiness ought to far surpass that of those around us who do not believe. Indeed this is a time also for mourning because we are longing for the return of our bridegroom. But he has left us his Spirit. He has not let us as orphans. He is here and he will never leave us or forsake us. And so even our saddest experiences now are assuaged by those assurances. And yet the anticipation of the future day in which the bridegroom will come to take his bride home can fuel much rejoicing every day.

Every Christ follower should dwell upon these realities. We should meditate much on them. And out of our meditations will come abounding joy and gratitude that will itself speak to this world which is so full of sorrow and angst and apprehension. The gospel is truly good news.

If you are struggling with happiness and you are a follower of Jesus, then you need to lay fresh hold of the gospel and of its beauty. Christ came and has betrothed his bride. He paid her dowry at the cross and he is preparing a place for us. And the Father is preparing one whole of a celebration called the marriage supper of the Lamb, and that is what makes life not just worth living but worth being happy for in all the things he has given us to rejoice.

Secondly we see from the reply of Jesus that . . .

II. The Gospel Is Completely Incompatible with Ritualistic Religion.

A. The question of the disciples of John reveals an attitude about their fasting. The fact that they ask this question, "why don't your disciples fast?" shows that they have undue confidence in it. They portray some inherent value in the fasting itself. And they are missing out on the joy and freedom Jesus came to bring. So Jesus takes the opportunity to explain to them that his kingdom does not consist of religious ritual.

If they are fasting because they think the ritual makes them righteous, that it commends them to God, then they are bearing a heavy joy-sapping burden, and they are on the outside looking in. And what they need to do is chuck all of that and see the real substance of the kingdom of heaven.

B. Jesus expresses this point through two illustrations.

1. He first draws attention to an old garment with a hole in it. If you put a patch of unshrunk cloth on the hole, it will shrink and pull at the old garment and the result is a worse hole than it had before.

The teaching to which the particular disciples of John are adhering cannot be patched with the gospel of Christ. It is old and worn out, and it will never work to merge the two together. They need to throw the old garment out. They need to abandon their useless notions that base acceptance with God on their practice of fasting.

2. Jesus then turns attention to wineskins. Wineskins were literally animal skins that were tanned and sewn for the purpose of storing wine. Over time skins dried out and lost their elasticity. New wine as it ferments

creates increasing pressure on the wineskin. Having lost its elasticity, an old wineskin would burst due to the increasing pressure and lose the wine and be completely beyond usefulness.

Jesus is saying to these misguided disciples of John and their Pharisee friends that the rituals and ritualism on which they are depending are at odds with the gospel of the kingdom. They cannot hope to keep the mindset they have and somehow fit the gospel Jesus is preaching into it. They have got to chuck religious ritualism altogether and embrace the living breathing person of Jesus. Ultimately they will have to embrace the dying Son of God, and the living, resurrected and reigning Son of God, as well.

They are going to have to chuck any idea that they obtain right standing with God through what they do, through religious rituals they perform.

Even the Old Testament system of sacrifice is going by the wayside as Christ is the embodiment of all that. He is the new and living way and all those rituals which were designed to instruct people about God's provision for sin are now irrelevant and unnecessary.

God hinted at this in the Old Testament. In Isaiah 58, the Lord charged his people with fasting for their own purposes. He told them there was no way this kind of fasting would get his attention. What they needed to do instead was the kind of fast that looses the oppressed, unstraps the yoke, shares bread with the hungry, brings the homeless into one's house, and covers the naked. It echoes what Jesus had just said to the Pharisees, "go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy and not sacrifice.'"

God is not impressed by religious ritual, but what he wants is heartfelt obedience, what he wants is people to stop beating their own chests with pride for what they have done and humble themselves before him and stoop to serve others. When people serve each other it glorifies God.

C. If you are thinking that performing sacraments makes you right with God, think again. This thought is completely incompatible with the gospel.

Everyone has a blood type. And if you are going to receive blood or give blood it is essential that your blood type is identified. You may have A or B or AB or O. A can give to A. B can give to B. AB can only give to AB. But AB can receive from anybody. O can only receive from O. But O can give to anybody. If you are going to receive blood, it is essential that you receive only what is compatible with your type. Otherwise your immune system attacks the transfused blood, and a life-threatening situation can occur.

If your viewpoint is incompatible with the gospel of grace and salvation by faith through the sacrifice of Christ, then your heart will attack and reject that gospel. And the situation is a soul-threatening one. And that is what is going on when people put faith in their religious performance.

The gospel of the kingdom is completely incompatible with the idea that a person can contribute in any way to his salvation. You know the parable Jesus told of the Pharisee and the tax-collector, right? Remember the Pharisee? He prayed like this, "God I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all I get." But the tax collector, standing far off would not even lift his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast saying, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" Jesus concluded saying, "I tell you this [tax collector] went down to his house justified, rather than the other." Your heart is hard against the gospel until you are willing to bring nothing to Jesus Christ but your sins and seek his mercy.

Conclusion

Followers of Christ, we cannot hear these truths and not be instructed about the way we approach God ourselves. God's acceptance of us is not ever based on our performance or our feelings or our works. Sometimes we get over the freeness of the gift of salvation and then we get a mentality that thinks we relate to God on some basis other than grace. It can lead to a lot of frustration and heart-ache. But we need to remember, that our acceptance with him is always based on the finished work of Jesus and not our rituals. As crucial as it is for us to have daily fellowship with God through his word and through prayer, we can't think God owes us because we do it or that things will be more acceptable to our desires because we do

these disciplines. If we are not careful, prayer and Bible reading, study, and meditation can quickly devolve into check-off lists rather than opportunities to spend time joyfully in the presence of the Lord. That is incompatible with the gospel of freedom and joy.

Seek God not under compulsion or for selfish gain, but eagerly and willingly and with the joy he intended.