

Matthew 9:14-17

Introduction

Jesus' answer to the question about fasting is Part 2 of the second "interlude" in this collection of nine miracle stories (Mat. 8-9). Part 1 was Jesus' answer to the question about why He eats with tax collectors and sinners. Maybe you've already picked up on the connection between Part 1 and Part 2, but if not, we'll see the connection clearly when we come to the end of this study.

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

There are different *kinds* of fasts (from food), because people fast from food for different kinds of *reasons*. A person may fast because of sin in his life and as an expression of true repentance. A person may fast when he is aware of no unconfessed sin, and so this kind of fasting is an expression of a holy longing after God – above all earthly pleasures. Or a person may fast in order to earnestly seek God for a specific answer to prayer (as Ezra fasted and prayed for a safe journey to Jerusalem; Ezra 8:21-23). Depending on the *kind* of fast, it may or may not be accompanied by mourning. If a person is fasting for repentance, there will certainly be mourning, and weeping, and sorrow over sin. But when Ezra fasted to seek the Lord's protection on a journey, there was no weeping. And, likewise, when we fast as an expression of our delight in the ways and things of the Lord (cf. Is. 58), there should also be no sorrow and sadness.

So what *kind* of fast are the disciples of John referring to? What kind of fast is it that they and the Pharisees have been observing? To answer this question we can look first of all at verse fifteen, where Jesus answers the question from John's disciples with a question of His own: "Can the wedding guests *mourn* [fast; cf. Mark and Luke] 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 [*mourn*]." So the fasting here is synonymous with mourning. The whole *point* of the fast is to mourn. And now we have to ask: Why are the Pharisees and the disciples of John mourning? Are they mourning over personal sin? Is this the fasting and mourning of personal repentance? Well, first of all, this is obviously a regularly scheduled, planned, and public fast. And second of all, we notice that this is a fast that the disciples of John and the Pharisees actually share in common (though otherwise John and the Pharisees were completely at odds with each other; Mat. 3:7). So what could the Pharisees *and* the disciples of John be fasting and *mourning* about *together* on a regularly scheduled basis? To help us answer this question, we need to go back to the Old Testament book of Zechariah and the days when Israel had only *recently* returned from exile in Babylon.

- ✓ Zechariah 7:2-5 – The people of Bethel had sent Sharezer and Regem-melech and their men to entreat the favor of the LORD, saying to the priests of the house of the LORD of hosts and the prophets, "Should I *weep* and *abstain* in the fifth month, as I have done for so many years?" Then the word of the LORD of hosts came to me: "Say to all the people of the land and the priests, When you *fasted* and *mourned* in the fifth month and in the seventh, for these seventy years, was it for me that you fasted?"

Did you notice that this specific *kind* of fast began only after the people of Israel went into exile? It was a “brand new” fast that actually *began* with the destruction of Jerusalem. Their fast was a time for weeping and mourning over their exile from the land. And this explains why the fast could be observed so regularly and so often. We’ll see in Zechariah chapter eight that the fast was observed four times a year (in the fourth, fifth, seventh, and tenth months). So as long as Israel was in exile, fasting and mourning had always been appropriate. But now that the Jews have returned to their homeland, they’re unsure about whether they should still be fasting and mourning. They’re technically no longer in exile, but the fruits of the exile are still all around them. They have no king, they are still trying to build a smaller and much humbler version of Solomon’s temple, the walls of Jerusalem are still in ruins, and they are ruled by a foreign power (politically they are simply a province in the Persian empire)! Are they still in exile? No. But the full restoration for which they have all been longing and waiting still seems very far away! And of course, most significantly of all, there was still no Messiah. So after seventy years the exile is finally over. But does this mean that the days for fasting and mourning are also over?

At first, God doesn’t answer the question. Instead, He asks the Jews a question of His own: “When you *fasted* and *mourned* in the fifth month and in the seventh, for these seventy years, was it for me that you fasted?” Of course, the expected answer is “no”. Many of the Jews had been fasting and mourning *only* over Israel’s destruction and exile and not *also* over the sin that had *led* to this destruction and exile. What they longed for was not the glory of God, but their own wealth and power. So God wants to point out first of all that this kind of fasting and mourning is utterly worthless. However, we can look at Daniel for an example of the kind of fasting and mourning that *was* pleasing to God.

- ✓ Daniel 9:1-5, 16-18 – I, Daniel... turned my face to the Lord God, seeking him by prayer and pleas for mercy with fasting and sackcloth and ashes. I prayed to the LORD my God and made confession, saying, “we have sinned... O Lord, according to all your righteous acts, let your anger and your wrath turn away from your city Jerusalem, your holy hill, because for our sins, and for the iniquities of our fathers, Jerusalem and your people have become a byword among all who are around us. Now therefore, O our God, listen to the prayer of your servant and to his pleas for mercy, and for your own sake, O Lord, make your face to shine upon your sanctuary, which is desolate. O my God, incline your ear and hear. Open your eyes and see our desolations, and the city that is called by your name.

Daniel’s fasting and mourning was truly for the LORD! So let’s return now to Matthew. We asked what the Pharisees *and* the disciples of John could *both* be fasting and mourning about on a regularly scheduled basis. And it seems almost certain that they were fasting and mourning because of the continued humiliation of Israel. Luke says that the disciples of John and the disciples of the Pharisees “fast often and *offer prayers*”. And these prayers being offered were undoubtedly for the restoration and salvation of Israel. Like the Jews who came to Zechariah (550 years earlier), the Pharisees may have been fasting over Israel’s humiliation in a self-centered way (desiring only their political independence without any true repentance for sin). But like Daniel (also 550 years earlier), the disciples of John may have been fasting and mourning over the humiliation of Israel because of a true desire to see God glorified in the salvation of His people. In any case, the disciples of John and the Pharisees were both fasting as an expression of

their mourning over Israel's long humiliation while the disciples of Jesus were not! And the disciples of John naturally want to know *why* this is.

Of course, we know that there is an appropriate place for mourning among Jesus' disciples because Jesus said: "Blessed are those who mourn" (Matthew 5:4). And we also know that in Matthew chapter six, Jesus *assumes* that His disciples are not only *fasting*, but giving alms to the poor and praying, and so He commands them to be practicing these things in secret. But *here* we are talking about a different *kind* of mourning and a different *kind* of fasting. This is more of a *communal* fast over the humiliation of downtrodden Israel and the desire to see Israel's salvation and restoration. And so the disciples of John are essentially asking the same question that the Jews asked of God five hundred and fifty years earlier: "Should we continue to weep and abstain over the humiliation of Israel, as we have done for so many years"?

Verse 15a – And Jesus said to them, "Can the wedding guests mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them?"

The expected answer to Jesus' question is obviously, "*Of course not!*" And who is the bridegroom? Well of course it is Jesus. But the disciples of John knew that in the Old Testament, the bridegroom was Yahweh. And the disciples of John knew from the Old Testament that the presence of the bridegroom could mean only one thing – the restoration and the glory of Israel, and the *end* of Israel's humiliation, and shame, and disgrace!

- ✓ Hosea 2:19-23 – And I will betroth you to me forever. I will betroth you to me in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love and in mercy. I will betroth you to me in faithfulness. And you shall know the LORD. "And in that day... I will sow her for myself in the land. And I will have mercy on No Mercy, and I will say to Not My People, 'You are my people'; and he shall say, 'You are my God.' "
- ✓ Isaiah 62:1-5 – For Zion's sake I will not keep silent, and for Jerusalem's sake I will not be quiet, until her righteousness goes forth as brightness, and her salvation as a burning torch. The nations shall see your righteousness, and all the kings your glory, and you shall be called by a new name that the mouth of the LORD will give. You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the LORD, and a royal diadem in the hand of your God. You shall no more be termed Forsaken, and your land shall no more be termed Desolate, but you shall be called My Delight Is in Her, and your land Married; for the LORD delights in you, and your land shall be married. 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.

There is certainly no place for weeping and mourning in *this* picture! And so here in Matthew chapter nine (and all throughout Matthew), we see that the bridegroom has come in the person of Jesus the Messiah. And the presence of the bridegroom can only mean the redemption and the restoration of Israel! And the redemption and restoration of Israel calls no longer for mourning, but for joy! The following three Scriptures record the words of Mary, Zechariah, and Simeon as they celebrate the birth of Jesus.

- ✓ Luke 1:54-55 – He *has* helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his offspring forever.

- ✓ Luke 1:68-70 – Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he *has* visited and redeemed his people and *has* raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David, as he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old.
- ✓ Luke 2:30-32 – My eyes *have seen* your salvation that you *have* prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel.

In light of these realities, there can truly be no more cause for the Jews to be fasting and mourning over the humiliation of Israel! On the contrary! According to Jesus *now* is the time for the “daughter of Zion” to “rejoice greatly”, and for the “daughter of Jerusalem” to “shout aloud”, for “behold, your king is coming to you; righteous and having salvation is he” (Zechariah 9:9). Can the wedding guests *possibly* mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them? This would make no sense at all. And the fact that the Pharisees and the disciples of John are still fasting and mourning shows that they have not yet understood who Jesus is and what He has come to do (cf. Matthew 11:2-6).

Verse 15b – The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they they will fast.

We’ve already seen that fasting here is synonymous with mourning. So Jesus is not so much saying that the disciples will fast as He is saying that they will *mourn*. And they will mourn specifically because the bridegroom is *taken away* from them. When Jesus was “taken away” from the disciples in the ascension, He was not really taken away, for He Himself promised that He would be *with* the disciples always, even to the end of the age (Mat. 28:20). When Jesus spoke of the ascension, He told the disciples that it was to their *advantage* that He go away (John 16:7). In the book of Acts, we see only the great *joy* and *rejoicing* of the disciples after the ascension of Jesus into the heavenly Jerusalem (Acts 13:52; 5:41) – *never* do we hear of any mourning over the absence of the bridegroom. The *only* time that Jesus was absent from His disciples in such a way that they were compelled to weep and mourn was when He lay in the grave (John 16:16, 20, 22). And so by this comparison, we see again that the mourning of the disciples of John and the Pharisees was a mourning over exile and oppression and the continued judgment of God. The disciples of John and the Pharisees are still mourning over the humiliation of Israel. But Jesus says that His disciples will mourn only during the short time when the *true glory of Israel* has been taken away and crucified.

Verse 16 – No one puts a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old garment, for the patch tears away away from the garment, and a worse tear is made.

Let’s say that someone wanted to patch a hole in their jeans. Of course, today people don’t patch holes in their jeans, but just supposing... If we sewed a patch of unshrunk material onto the jeans, then when the patch got wet, it would shrink. And, of course, when the patch shrinks, it will put extra strain on the jeans. And pretty soon, you’ll have a worse tear and a bigger hole than you had in the first place. The picture here is clear, but what exactly is the point? Well, to start with, Jesus is making the point that some things are completely and totally *incompatible* with each other. We could think of when we try to load a program on our computer, and there is an issue with compatibility, such that the program simply won’t load. Here in the context of

Matthew, we can hear Jesus saying that fasting and mourning over the disgrace and humiliation of Israel is simply *incompatible* with the presence of the Messiah and the arrival of the kingdom. And to make this point even *more* clear, Jesus goes on to give us one more example.

Verse 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.

“New wine”, here, is wine that is still fermenting. When wine ferments, it emits gases that would cause an old and brittle leather wineskin to literally explode. For this reason, new wine is always put into fresh, new wineskins which are more elastic and flexible and can expand with the pressure of the fermenting wine. Once again, the picture is clear, and once again, the point is *compatibility*. But now this point is even more clear than before! There are some things that are completely and totally incompatible with each other. And to be even more specific, Jesus is saying that the *old practices* are no longer compatible with the *new realities*. The *old* fasting and mourning over the humiliation and disgrace of God’s people is no longer compatible with the *new* age of the kingdom. In fact, the only response that is truly *compatible* with the new realities of the kingdom is great *joy and merriment* – for this is the very purpose and significance of wine!

- ✓ Isaiah 16:9-10 – I weep with the weeping of Jazer for the vine of Sibmah... for over your summer fruit and your harvest the shout has ceased. And joy and gladness are taken away from the fruitful field, and in the vineyards no songs are sung, no cheers are raised; no treader treads out wine in the presses.
- ✓ Isaiah 24:5-11 – The earth lies defiled under its inhabitants; for they have transgressed the laws, violated the statutes, broken the everlasting covenant. Therefore a curse devours the earth... The wine mourns, the vine languishes, all the merry-hearted sigh. The mirth of the tambourines is stilled, the noise of the jubilant has ceased, the mirth of the lyre is stilled. No more do they drink wine with singing; strong drink is bitter to those who drink it. The wasted city is broken down; every house is shut up so that none can enter. There is an outcry in the streets for lack of wine; all joy has grown dark; the gladness of the earth is banished.
- ✓ Isaiah 25:6 – On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wine, of rich food full of marrow, of aged wine well refined.
- ✓ Zechariah 10:6-7 – I will strengthen the house of Judah, and I will save the house of Joseph. I will bring them back because I have compassion on them, and they shall be as though I had not rejected them, for I am the LORD their God and I will answer them. Then Ephraim shall become like a mighty warrior, and their hearts shall be glad as with wine. Their children shall see it and be glad; their hearts shall rejoice in the LORD.
- ✓ Cf. Jereremiah 31:11-14; Isaiah 55:1

“The new age [of the kingdom] brings new practices appropriate to the changed circumstances... the joy of celebration rather than the sorrow of fasting” (Blomberg).

Conclusion

Let’s go back for a moment now and paint the picture at the beginning of our text. “The disciples of John came to [Jesus], saying, ‘Why do we and the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not

fast?” Mark tells us what Matthew’s readers may well have assumed: “Now John’s disciples and the Pharisees *were fasting*.” And quoting the scribes and the Pharisees, Luke tells us something else that we could also assume from Matthew (Mat. 9:10; cf. Lk. 5:29): “The disciples of John fast often and offer prayers, and so do the disciples of the Pharisees, but yours *eat and drink*.” So I don’t think the point here is simply that the disciples of Jesus aren’t fasting. The point is that while the disciples of John and the Pharisees are fasting, Jesus and His disciples are *feasting*! Remember that Matthew has made Jesus a great feast at his house (Luke 5:29), and so we are meant to see this feast as falling on one of the days set apart by the Jews for fasting. While the disciples of John and the Pharisees are mourning, Jesus and His disciples are *rejoicing*. While the disciples of John and the Pharisees are lamenting, Jesus and His disciples are drinking wine and being merry – like wedding guests in the presence of the bridegroom. The contrast could not possibly be more stark!

While the disciples of John and the Pharisees are earnestly offering up prayers and supplications for the restoration of Israel, we can assume that Jesus and His disciples were offering up praise and thanksgiving. Why? Well, remember when the Jews came to the prophet Zechariah to inquire about whether they should continue their regular times of fasting and mourning now that Israel’s exile was ended? They were torn, because even though the exile was ended, the fruits of the exile were still all around them. Israel was still sitting in darkness, and dwelling in the region and the shadow of death (Mat. 4:16). This seemed reason enough to keep on observing their regular times of fasting and mourning – in spite of the fact that they were back in the land. And so they came to inquire of the Lord. And today we rightly marvel and rejoice in what God answered.

- ✓ Zechariah 8:18-19 – Thus says the LORD of hosts: The fast of the fourth month and the fast of the fifth and the fast of the seventh and the fast of the tenth shall [one day] be to the house of Judah seasons of *joy and gladness and cheerful feasts*.

And now low and behold, we see Jesus and his disciples (including Matthew, the former tax collector) feasting with joy and gladness on the *very day* that had previously been set aside for fasting and mourning! And so Jesus proclaims by His feasting that the days of fulfillment have come. The new age of the kingdom has arrived – the glory and salvation of Israel. The fasting and mourning of the last six hundred years *must* now give way to the joy and true merriment of living as citizens of the kingdom – always in the presence of the bridegroom.

- ✓ John 16:16, 20, 22; Matthew 28:20 – A little while, and you will see me no longer; and again a little while, and you will see me... Truly, truly, I say to you, you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice. You will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will turn into joy... you have sorrow now, but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you... Behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.

I believe that Jesus would ask us again today: “Can the wedding guests mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them?” And in light of the obvious answer to His question, He would invite us to feast, to drink and be merry (*not* drunk, but definitely merry) – in other words, to be full of true joy in the Holy Spirit (Rom. 14:17). Here are two very fitting quotes from two different men as they reflected on this passage in Matthew: “The new wine of rescue and riches for all who

[are] willing to accept these blessings, even for [tax collectors] and sinners, must be poured into the fresh wine-skins of gratitude, freedom, and spontaneous service to the glory of God” (Hendriksen). “All Christians would do well to reflect on whether their demeanor, lifestyle, and words convey to others, especially the unsaved, [the] joy of salvation and the lively presence of Jesus” (Blomberg). Is this true of us? Or as Christians, are we somehow afraid to be *truly* “*merry*”?

Now we can *freely* and *gladly* admit that the *fullest* joy and feasting of the kingdom still awaits the consummation and that great marriage supper of the Lamb (Rev. 19:6-9; cf. Mat. 8:11). But what Jesus teaches us here is that “in His coming *some* of the feasting of the kingdom of heaven has *already* begun” (Bruner). And more than anywhere else, we symbolize this joyful feasting whenever we partake of that most lavish meal at which our Lord is the gracious host.

- ✓ Luke 22:14-18 – And when the hour came, he reclined at table, and the apostles with him. And he said to them, “I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer. For I tell you I will not eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God.” And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he said, “Take this, and divide it among yourselves. For I tell you that from now on I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes.”

For the early church, the Lord’s Supper was not simply a time for somber reflection, but for great joy and rejoicing! That’s why the Lord’s Supper soon came to be celebrated within the context of a full-fledged feast (cf. 1 Cor. 11:17-22)! Every time that we feast here at the Lord’s table, God is giving us a wonderful *taste* of the feast that He is still preparing – when we will gather around the table of the King, laden with rich food and well-aged wine (Is. 25:6), and *He Himself*(!) will lead in the festivities of joy and merriment for the rest of eternity (Is. 30:29). So then, let us feast, and be truly joyful!

Teaching our Children

- Q. What question did the disciples of John ask Jesus?
 - A. The disciples of John wondered why both they and the Pharisees fasted, while Jesus and His disciples did *not* fast.
- Q. Why were the disciples of John and the Pharisees fasting *and mourning* and offering prayers to God?
 - A. They were fasting and mourning because of Israel’s disgrace (ever since the exile). The disciples of John wanted God to be glorified once more in the midst of His people.
- Q. While the disciples of John and the Pharisees were fasting and mourning over Israel’s disgrace, what were Jesus and His disciples doing?
 - A. They were feasting and celebrating in Matthew’s house!
- Q. What reason did Jesus give to explain why His disciples were feasting instead of fasting, and rejoicing in stead of mourning?
 - A. ~ Wedding guests cannot possibly mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them!
 - ~ Jesus is *with* the disciples. In the salvation that Jesus brings, God is restoring His people to their true glory! (See Scriptures under II. A. & B.)
 - ~ God is taking away the disgrace and humiliation of His people!

- Q.** Review (and explain) the two parables Jesus gave about the cloth and the wineskins. Ask: What is the point of these parables?
- A. ~ It doesn't make any sense at all to fast and mourn over Israel's disgrace when Israel's Savior and King has already come!
~ Fasting and mourning must now be replaced with "feasting" and rejoicing and being merry because in Jesus, God has redeemed His people! (See Scripture under Conclusion B. 1.)
- Q.** When did Jesus say was the only time His disciples would weep and mourn?
- A. Jesus' disciples would weep and mourn only when He was taken away from them by His death on the cross.
- Q.** Today, should God's people be fasting and mourning, or feasting and rejoicing?
- A. See Scripture under Conclusion B. 4.; Also look up Romans 14:17 (The reference to "eating and drinking" has to do with not causing a brother to stumble by eating "unclean" foods. This verse does not deny that there is joyful feasting in the kingdom!)

Spend some time reflecting on the quotes under Conclusion C.

Mark 2:18-22

Now John's disciples and the Pharisees were fasting.

And *people* came and said to him,

“Why do John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?”

And Jesus said to them, “Can the wedding guests *fast* while the bridegroom is with them?

As long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast.

The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast in that day.

No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old garment. If he does, the patch tears away from it, the new from the old, and a worse tear is made.

And no one puts new wine into old wineskins. If he does, the wine will burst the skins—and the wine is destroyed, and so are the skins. But new wine is for fresh wineskins.”

Matthew 9:14-17

Then *the disciples of John* came to him, saying,

“Why do we and the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?”

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.

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.

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.”

Luke 5:33-39

And they [*the Pharisees and their scribes*] said to him,

“The disciples of John fast often *and offer prayers*, and so do the disciples of the Pharisees, but yours *eat and drink*.”

And Jesus said to them, “Can you make wedding guests *fast* while the bridegroom is with them?

The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast in those days.”

He also told them a parable: “No one tears a piece from a new garment and puts it on an old garment. If he does, he will tear the new, and the piece from the new will not match the old.

And no one puts new wine into old wineskins. If he does, the new wine will burst the skins and it will be spilled, and the skins will be destroyed. But new wine must be put into fresh wineskins.

And no one after drinking old wine desires new, for he says, ‘The old is good.’ ”