

## Luke 5.27-39

### *Feasting and Fasting in the Kingdom of God*

It's interesting how frequently the theme of *eating* comes up in Scripture. It's the thing that Satan used to tempt Eve and Adam into sin. It's what caused the Israelites to grumble in the wilderness. It's the first temptation Satan used against Jesus.

And here in Luke 5, it's the center of a debate between Jesus and his antagonists. *With whom should one eat? How often can we feast? How much should we fast? Are feasting and fasting mutually exclusive?*

Now, we can often have a pretty cavalier attitude towards such things. But they're actually pretty important. Because eating isn't just some morally neutral physical activity. But it's profoundly spiritual.

And in a culture such as ours, where food isn't just a means of sustaining life, but is even a source of entertainment—where we even have whole TV networks devoted to food!—these are questions that are relevant for us as a church to consider.

And here's the main point I want us to see from this passage before us in Luke 5.27-39: *The Kingdom of God is made up of repentant sinners, who in this present age both feast and fast in remembrance of Jesus and in anticipation of his return.*

#### 1. Jesus Feasts with Sinners (verses 27-32)

Now, before we get to the conflict *between* Jesus and the Pharisees and Scribes, there's his calling of Levi the tax collector in verses 27-28. And this really goes hand in hand with the previous passage about the healing of the paralyzed man we looked at last week.

Because in the case of the paralyzed man, Jesus forgave and then healed someone who was in a *physically hopeless* condition. And here with Levi the tax collector, Jesus forgives and accepts someone most people would've considered *morally hopeless*.

Because Tax Collectors were a *particularly despised* group or people. And they were hated for a couple reasons. First, patriotic Jews saw people who collected taxes from their own people for the Roman Empire as traitors. Because they were doing a service against their own people in the employment of the enemy.

And second, there was the nature of collecting taxes in the first century. Tax collectors often took more than was necessary in order to make more money for themselves. And so even if a tax collector *did* deal ethically with people, there was always that *underlying suspicion*.

And that's why we read about John the Baptist's commandment to tax collectors earlier in 3.13: when they asked him what they should do, John responded, "*collect no more than you're authorized to do.*"

And all this of course led to a stigma being placed on all tax collectors as being hopelessly corrupt. There was great cynicism about anything they did, *just like* with modern day politicians.

So, animosity towards tax collectors was often seen as both a patriotic and religious duty. That's why tax collectors were lumped in with sinners as one category of people—"*tax collectors and sinners.*"—verse 30.

And so, this Levi's a despised tax collector—Hopeless. But, when he was called by Jesus, he rose and followed. *Had he* seen Jesus as he was teaching and healing? We don't know for sure. But it's most likely that he did.

There was almost certainly something going on in Levi's mind and heart that led up to this point. And here, as he's sitting at the tax booth—doing the very thing that led people in his society to despise him, Jesus notices him. *Points him out*. And simply says, "*follow me.*"

And *without hesitation* Levi got up, left everything, and followed Jesus. And this meant leaving behind everything *for good*. Because there wasn't any turning back for a tax collector who abandoned his office.

But we see in the *very next scene*, starting in verse 29, that this wasn't some morose decision by Levi. Because what's the *very first thing* he does? He *throws Jesus a huge party at his house*.

And this feast at Levi's house sort of conditions what Luke means when he says Levi "*left everything*," doesn't it? You see, it's not that Levi necessarily got rid of everything he had—sold all his possessions, and gave up his house.

No. The point of saying he left everything is that he *entirely changed his direction in life*. And the possessions he had after making that decision to follow Jesus, he now used in *service to Jesus*.

You see, Jesus' calling to give up everything and follow him doesn't necessarily mean you need to *get rid of everything* you have. But it *does mean* that since you're now a follower of Christ, you need to use the gifts he's given you in service to him.

*Has the Lord blessed* you with wealth, with a house, with a lot of stuff? Then put it all to use in service to him! Show hospitality to other people, and *especially* to your brothers and sisters in Christ.

Invite people into your home whenever you have the opportunity. Give to others joyfully. Be purposeful and generous in how you use what you've been given. Because that's the *very reason* you've been given it.

Remember the words of Peter in 1 Peter 4.8-9: "*Show hospitality to one another without grumbling. As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace.*"

And surely now that Levi's decided to follow Jesus, he'd only want to spend time with religious, morally acceptable people, *right*? Wrong!

Notice in verse 29 who's present at this party! He invited his former colleagues. "*And there was a large company of tax collectors and others reclining at table with him.*"

And at this scene the Pharisees and Scribes were *aghast*! Surely, this was a clear sign that this Jesus was a fraud. *Eating with tax collectors and sinners!* —associating with the *lowest of the low*!

And so they grumbled and complained. But they didn't have the courage to complain to Jesus' face. Luke tells us they grumbled *at his disciples*. Verse 30: *And the Pharisees and their scribes grumbled at his disciples, saying, "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?"*

Now, notice that when Jesus responds to this question in verses 31-32, he doesn't deny their basic assessment of the people he's eating with. He doesn't say, *"Hey, listen guys, these people aren't really that bad. If you'd just get to know them you'll see they're really moral people."*

No. He just says: *"Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance."*

In other words—*"I came for such as these*. And if you think you're so good that you don't need any help.... If you think you're so much better than these people I'm eating with right now.... *then I didn't come for you."*

You see, Jesus' mission was to restore sinners and reconcile them with God. And the *line of demarcation* between the group that's known as "Sinners" and the Pharisees and Scribes *isn't* that one group was *more righteous* than the other.

The difference is that the people in the one group were those who, when confronted with the reality of who Jesus is, acknowledged their *need for forgiveness* and repented. While the other group remained stubborn and self-righteous, and *saw no need to repent*.

And so, the Pharisees and Scribes were *so consumed* with their own righteousness that they neglected the one thing that's *absolutely necessary* for membership in the Kingdom of God.... *Repentance*.

Remember the parable of the *Pharisee and the Tax Collector*, which Jesus will tell later in chapter 18, verses 9-14:

He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt: <sup>10</sup> "Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. <sup>11</sup> 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. <sup>12</sup> I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.' <sup>13</sup> But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' <sup>14</sup> I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted."

That's *exactly* what Jesus is pointing out here to the Pharisees. They're in need of forgiveness just as the tax collectors are. And as long as they continue to reject that, they'll remain alienated from the very God they presume to be serving.

So just as he previously demonstrated with the paralyzed man, so now Jesus declares—he *doesn't require* obedience in order to be forgiven. But rather he forgives sinners and heals them in spite of their disobedience and inability.

And he specifically calls them *to repentance*. You see, his calling isn't just one of mere acceptance—but *transformation*! *Leaving everything* to follow him! And his calling for each of us who've been baptized in his name is "*Follow me, and sin no more!*"

## 2. Fasting and Feasting, Old and New (verses 33-39)

Well, they got nowhere with the question about eating and drinking with tax collectors and sinners. So in verse 33 they raise another question. "*And they 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.'*"

This is sort of an extension of the last question. Because again, the issue here is about eating and drinking. The previous question was about the company they kept as they ate and drank. And this one's about how much and how openly they eat and drink!

Now, it's no coincidence that this particular question's asked right on the heels of Matthew throwing Jesus a big party.... The disciples of Jesus were just too joyful.

They were leaving everything *and* happily celebrating. *The sheer audacity! What did they have to be so happy about?* The Pharisees and John's disciples fasted and prayed and showed how righteous they were by their austerity. But here's this rag tag group of sinners eating and drinking in public!

I mean, obviously, truly religious and righteous people can't have a good time *can they?* The Pharisees and Scribes here are scandalized! They can't figure it out!

And notice how illogical their statement is. They draw a false dichotomy between religious duties like fasting and prayer, and eating and drinking. As if the one *necessarily* cancels out the other.

And so Jesus' responds in verses 34-39 to the charge that his disciples didn't fast. And his response is given in 3 parts: 1. The wedding metaphor (verses 34-35). 2. The parable of the Garment (verse 36). 3. The Parable of the Wine and Wineskins (verses 37-39).

In the first part of his response, Jesus draws a comparison between his coming and the coming of a groom for his bride. Since Jesus, the groom, has come, he says his disciples are like guests at a wedding.

*And wedding guests don't fast!* They feast! They celebrate! That's just common sense. And Jesus' presence among his wedding guests is a time for just that—celebration!

But there's of course some irony in this response. Because there *will* come a time when his disciples will fast. As the groom will eventually be taken from them.

That's just what he says in verse 35: *"The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast in those days."* Here he's indicating what the end result of his mission will be. He'll be called to die. He'll be taken away from them.

And the second thing that's ironic about Jesus' response is that *even when* his disciples do fast, no one should know about it anyway. Remember what he says about fasting in Matthew 6.16-18:

And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward.<sup>17</sup> But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face,<sup>18</sup> that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

You see, Christian fasting doesn't draw attention to itself. It doesn't engage in self-glorification like the Pharisees practiced.

And so, it's assumed that we ought to fast. Just as it's assumed that we ought to pray. The question isn't whether or not you should fast. But it's rather, are you fasting the way the Lord desires you to fast?

And then the two parables Jesus gives in verses 36-39 are both meant to illustrate a similar but more wide ranging point: *When something new comes, you don't try to force it into old structures.*

So, Jesus says in verse 36 that you don't try to patch up a tear in an old garment with a piece from a new one. If you do, the new one will be destroyed. And that old one won't look right.

And the *parable of the wine and wineskins* in verses 37-39 illustrates the same point. You don't put new wine into old wineskins. Because new wineskins were pliable. But when they got old they hardened.

And so, putting new wine into old wineskins meant that the inflexible old skins would likely burst. Because new wine was still in the process of fermenting. So, new wine was put into new wineskins, because their flexibility allowed for expansion.

But if you tried to put new wine into old wineskins, then you'd ruin both the old wineskins and the wine. As the skins would burst and the wine would spill out onto the ground.

Now, the larger point Jesus is making with both these illustrations is that he's bringing in a new age. And while it's inseparably connected with what went before, it's nevertheless something new.

And as the reality of God's Kingdom has come in Jesus Christ, those things that pointed forward to his coming are about to disappear. So you can't see Jesus as just some sort of patchwork to throw onto the old structures. If you do you've missed the significance of his coming.

In other words, the disciples of Jesus are those who've seen that the one all the prophets and promises and everything in the Old Covenant pointed toward has come. And it's *him* they've chosen to follow.

But the Pharisees and Scribes were satisfied with the way things were going. They *thought it was the substance*—an end in itself.

And they figured that when the Messiah did come, what he'd do would be to *get rid* of all the tax collectors and sinners, *confirm* their own righteousness, and *establish* Israel's supremacy.

They didn't see that it was all pointing to something greater. And that greater thing had come in Jesus. And that was being proven by healing the sick and the lame, casting out demons, and sinners repenting of their sins. And the Pharisees and Scribes ought to have rejoiced at all this!

*The new wine was here!* And that required new wineskins. Not stubborn, mechanical maintenance of the *status quo*!

Hebrews chapter 8 is helpful here. There the author of Hebrews makes it clear that the New Covenant foretold by Jeremiah in Jeremiah chapter 31 has come in Christ.

And it concludes by saying this in verse 13: *In speaking of a New Covenant he makes the first one obsolete. And what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away.*"

You see, that's the point Jesus is trying to get across to the Pharisees and Scribes here in Luke 5. *"I, the Lord of the Covenant, have come. And I'm bringing in the new age of fulfillment. So stop clinging to your old wineskins! Get on board with God's kingdom that's come in my person."*



OK, so that's all well and good. But then what do we do with verse 39? "*And no one after drinking old wine desires new, for he says, 'The old is good.'*"

That's not easy. Because it's common knowledge that the older wine is in fact *better* than new wine. *So doesn't this concluding statement imply that the old covenant is somehow better than Jesus' ministry?*

Well, it's not the case when it comes to parables that *each and every detail* needs to line up *exactly* with the point that's being made. And all the concluding statement in verse 39 does is drive home Jesus' point about the Pharisees' stubbornness.

They're so enamored with the *status quo*—with their established way of doing things, that they can't see that what Jesus came to bring is in reality much, much better.

It's what all the ages up to that point have been moving toward. And to cling to the old just because you assume it's higher quality is to miss what everything's been working toward all along!

That's the irony here. The new is *actually better* than the old. And another irony is that it's Levi the tax collector who saw this. While the Pharisees and Scribes—the leaders and teachers—*did not*.

### 3. A Time to Feast and a Time to Fast

And we can transfer all this to our own lives, *can't we?* Because this isn't just a 1st century debate. It's all pretty relevant for the church in the 21<sup>st</sup> century too.

Notice that the disciples exemplified this transition from the *old to the new* in how they followed Jesus. They left behind everything and got up and followed him *wholly and without hesitation*.

They didn't try to use Jesus as a sort of patchwork onto their lives to just throw in there with everything else. No. They forsook what they left behind and entrusted every aspect of their lives entirely to him.

*What about you? What old wineskins are you still clinging to? Are you following Jesus without reservation? Think about it. Are you trying to fit Jesus into your story? Or are you living your life for him?—fitting yourself into his story?*

*Are you trying to build your own little kingdom? Or are you striving to play your part in his great Kingdom? What's the driving force behind your personal narrative? Is it you? Or is it Him?*

You see, the Kingdom of Jesus is a Kingdom of Tax Collectors and sinners. It's a Kingdom of those who understand their desperate need for the grace and forgiveness of Jesus, and who resolve to live their lives for him. *Is that you?* Or are you stubbornly trying to maintain the *status quo*?

And in Christ's Kingdom of Grace there's both *a time for Feasting* and *a time for Fasting*. Since Jesus has been taken from us, we fast. But since he's also risen and present with us by his Spirit, we Feast!

You see, as his disciples in this age between his first and second comings, we're called to do both. And we're called to do both well.

And when we feast, we do it recognizing that this present age and what it has to offer isn't an *end in itself*. And that the *ultimate feast* we're looking forward to is the great wedding feast we'll enjoy when Christ returns.

Here and now our bridegroom is both absent in a sense, but also *really present* by his Spirit. But when he returns he'll be *fully and visibly* present among us. And as John tells us, *in that day we'll be like him, for we'll see him as he is*.

But, of course, there's much joy in our feasting *even now*. Because Christ *is* present. He's conquered sin and death. And in our *feasting*—particularly in the Lord's Supper—we proclaim that victory in the Lord's death until he comes again.

And at the same time, there's joy *even* in our fasting. Because we know what David says in Psalm 30.5— *"His anger is but for a moment, and*

*his favor is for a lifetime. Weeping may tarry for the night, but joy comes with the morning."*

And as we fast in the Kingdom of God, we do it knowing that all the struggle of this life is truly but for a moment. And we fast now because we remain *for a time* in a land of sin and death.

But we await the coming of that great day of *everlasting joy and peace*—when our Lord returns to take us as his bride.

And so, until that day comes, *let us feast*, and *let us fast*. And may we *do both well*, in remembrance of *Christ our Bridegroom*, and in anticipation of his return for us.