

Jesus Wow! Series Part 12

Jesus and Fasting

Mark 2:18-22

Pastor Andrew Neville 28/6/20

Sermon Summary

Do we fast today? For Christians, is fasting mandatory, voluntary, or even necessary?

In the past, many churches practiced some form of fasting for the 40 days of Lent – that period leading up to Easter. Churchgoers made a “Lenten sacrifice” and gave up: food, drink, chocolate, social media and the like. Many and varied – both as to type and length of time – were the sacrifices.

Today, fasting is seldom observed. Any fasting must be God-honouring and must have a spiritual purpose behind it.

Only one compulsory **fast-day** occurs in the Bible – the Jewish **Day of Atonement** – an Old Testament observance and still honoured by many Jews today. Pharisees were required to fast twice a week during daylight hours. They were honouring the practice during the moment recorded in Mark 2:18, and so it was quite natural for some to question Jesus, why were His disciples not fasting?

There are 2 parts to Jesus’ answer recorded in Mark 2: verses 19-20 and 21-22. Both are critical to understanding Jesus’ reply. In the first 2 verses, Jesus is referring to Himself as the bridegroom – and, by saying that, is implying (literally) that He is the Son of God. That was a stupendous statement. And one which would have astonished His incredulous audience.

In the Jewish culture of the times, a wedding could last a week since it invariably included the entire village. A wedding was a time of great joy and merriment with a lot of *Hava Nagila* going on! So, this answer from Jesus is that not only the town of Capernaum should be rejoicing, but the entire nation of Israel, for her bridegroom had come.

Jesus concludes the piece by saying that the bridegroom will be taken from them (implying his crucifixion) and on that day they should fast. But that begs the question for us – now that Christ is risen, risen indeed – is fasting obsolete?

But Jesus moves his answer to a deeper level in verses 21-22. Overall, whilst this moment is a time of celebration, it is also a time **for change**. He explains this by narrating an experience that all would know – you cannot repair an old wineskin. There is a time when a new one **must** replace the old. It’s a metaphor meaning that Jesus’ time on Earth is to create a complete change in thinking as well as practice.

Jesus did not come to make an amendment to the old 'constitution.' He brought a new one, and fasting – as per the old custom – was not included.

So, is fasting still applicable today, now that Jesus is risen?

Some scholars argue that fasting was only mandatory for the 3 days Jesus was in the tomb. And once the early Christians understood the full effect of the resurrection, fasting was finished because now was to be a time for continual joy!

Nowhere in the New Testament is fasting mentioned as **commanded**. Jesus seldom mentioned it during his ministry and therefore it does not come under His mandatory command to believers, "If you love me you will obey my commands" (John 14:15).

However, there are times when fasting is **commended**. Jesus does not cut it off completely. In Matthew 6:16-18 He instructs a change in the way fasting must be carried out, and in Mark 2:20 He indicates a fast will be carried out on the day of His crucifixion.

But, we are now in the **Church Age**, a time of rejoicing, so there is no longer need for fasting, or is there?

In 2 Corinthians 5:8 Paul says, "we would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord." Since we are currently still in our body, we should still be able to fast.

Any newness of fasting needs to revolve around knowing more of the joy and wonder of Christ. And that has a more powerful effect than the Old Testament style of fasting.

What about fasting for us today?

1. It is not compulsory.
2. Any desire to fast must come from something that is truly personal.
3. It is not something to parade. It is not a show and tell event (see Matthew 6:8).
4. Do not announce your fasting to others.
5. Never fast just because others are doing it.
6. Fasting must be prompted by the Holy Spirit; it has a spiritual purpose.
7. To stop eating, but carry on shopping, is **NOT** fasting.

When fasting, you stop **everything** so that you can focus solely on God and the purpose of your prayer the entire time. You let nothing get in the way. Fasting may open your weaknesses to your soul. You cannot come to God unrepentant. Otherwise you are kidding yourself.

But remember, salvation is by grace alone, through faith (Ephesians 2:8).

While this sermon is about fasting, over it all hangs a banner that says: **The King of the universe has come to us.**

Discussion Questions

Read Mark 2:18-22.

1. Have you ever fasted? Why? What did you give up? How did the experience make you feel?
2. **Read Leviticus 16: 29-34 and 23: 26-32.** What is your understanding of: (a) The Day of Atonement and (b) Denying yourself? Check your definition with **Mark 8:34.**
3. Mark 2:19 is Jesus' way of telling them he is to be regarded as the bridegroom. Would his listeners have understood the meaning behind the parable? Would they have understood from O.T. prophecies: **Isaiah 62:5 and Hosea 2:19-20?** Discuss.
4. Should the church age always be one of celebration and rejoicing with never a thought to fasting?
5. As individuals, should we fast today, and if so, what should it be about?
6. As a church, should we fast together as a unified body, and, if so, what events might prompt such a moment?
7. Do you think, after hearing this sermon, that you will be more or less likely to fast in the future? Why?

Prayer Points

Life Group Prayer Suggestions for the week beginning June 29 2020

1. As child exploitation continues in Cambodia and as Thailand lifts Covid 19 restrictions and returns to normal: pray that God will work through Child Rescue, protect field workers and work in the hearts of officials to combat sex slavery.
2. Pray for Christians to be raised into positions of authority including the police and that we love our neighbours as ourselves.
3. Pray for Christians to continue to share and give generously to others in difficult and uncertain economic times.
4. Pray for the provision of additional leaders and helpers for the Under 5's on Sundays.