

Faith in Christ: Feast or Fast?

Mark 2:18-22 ¹⁸ *The disciples of John and of the Pharisees were fasting. Then they came and said to Him, "Why do the disciples of John and of the Pharisees fast, but Your disciples do not fast?"* ¹⁹ *And Jesus said to them, "Can the friends of the bridegroom fast while the bridegroom is with them? As long as they have the bridegroom with them they cannot fast.* ²⁰ *"But the days will come when the bridegroom will be taken away from them, and then they will fast in those days.* ²¹ *"No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old garment; or else the new piece pulls away from the old, and the tear is made worse.* ²² *"And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; or else the new wine bursts the wineskins, the wine is spilled, and the wineskins are ruined. But new wine must be put into new wineskins."*

I have before me the words from a letter 1800 years old. Back in the third century, a man named Cyprian wrote to his friend Donatus: "It is a bad world, Donatus, an incredibly bad world. But I have discovered in the midst of it a group of quiet and holy people who have learned a great secret. They have found a joy which is a thousand times better than any of the pleasures of our sinful life. They are despised and persecuted, but they care not: they are masters of their souls. They have overcome the world. These people, Donatus, are the Christians,—and I am one of them."

What I find striking is that as Cyprian described Christians to his friend, the thing he singled out first was: they have found a joy a thousand times better than any of the pleasures of sin. You know an apple tree by the visible apples growing on its branches. You know a lemon tree by the lemons on the tree. For Cyprian, you could tell Christianity from all other religions by its joy.

We can tell false religion apart from true religion not simply by what it believes, but also by what it feels. There is a mood that belongs to the faith of the Bible, and a mood that belongs to false religions. True biblical Christianity is not simply right doctrine – orthodoxy. It is not simply right behaviour – orthopraxy. True biblical Christianity is also right feeling – orthopathy. We are not only to give, we are to give cheerfully. We are not only to show mercy, we are to love mercy. We are not only to confess sin, we are to sorrow over it. We are not only to understand God's glory, we are to admire and delight in it. Christianity is right doctrine, right actions and right affections.

A lot of people would like to shove the emotions to the side, because of how wrongly they've been viewed and used in modern Christianity. They want to **make** them peripheral, or by-products of Christianity. They want to relegate all talk of emotion and affection to those sentimental, fluffy, touchy-feely extremists. But you have to cut out huge sections of the Bible to do that, because the Bible continually teaches this trinity: right doctrine, right action, right affection, head, hands and heart.

And as often as He wants to tell us what the true faith believes, and how the true faith behaves, God also wants to contrast the true faith with the false in the area of affections. God wants His people to know what the mood of the Christian life is supposed to be.

Right affections are not just salt and pepper to spice up the dish of Christian doctrine. If we do not feel for God as we ought, it might be a symptom of a heart that is not born again. Paul said it this way:

1 Corinthians 16:22 ²² *If anyone does not love the Lord Jesus Christ, let him be accursed*

You and I have a responsibility to use the spiritual thermometer of Scripture, to take the temperature of our heart. A certain temperature is a sign of life. If your heart lacks the affections that are signs of life, that is a bad sign.

This Scripture in front of us is one such spiritual thermometer. It reveals crucial details about right affections for God.

The scene here carries right on from what we considered last time. Jesus had called the wicked tax collector, Matthew, to Himself, and Matthew had left everything and followed Jesus. He held a celebratory reception, inviting many of his friends and fellow social outcasts to join him. Jesus reclined at table with them, rejoicing with them that they had come back to God.

But standing in the doorway with sneering expressions, shaking their heads and muttering to one another were some Pharisees. They saw this feast as a grand endorsement of sin. They asked why Jesus ate and drank with sinners. Jesus had to teach them again what free grace truly is. All sinners are sick, but only those who recognise their illness rejoice when Jesus, the Doctor, arrives.

But now the conversation moves from whom Jesus is eating with to the whole idea of eating. In their opinion, there is way too much enjoyment going on wherever Jesus goes. He is busy feasting and enjoying meals with these men. And if they can't condemn him for eating with sinners, they'll condemn him for eating as often as he does. It's not just whom Jesus eats with, it's the way Jesus conducts himself.

⁸ *The disciples of John and of the Pharisees were fasting. Then they came and said to Him, "Why do the disciples of John and of the Pharisees fast, but Your disciples do not fast?"*

Here were some of the disciples of John the Baptist – and you remember John's life style of eating locusts, wearing camel's skin and living in the desert – as well as some Pharisees. Some of them come to Jesus and ask, "Why do we fast, but your disciples do not?"

What is the hidden question inside that question? If you were asked, why do we discipline ourselves and deny ourselves food, but you do not, what is the implication? The implication is, you are not serious about your faith. The question behind the question seems to be why are you and your disciples not as serious and dedicated and committed as we are?

That's a serious challenge. Is Jesus some kind of unserious pleasure-seeker? Are his followers just hedonists? Is this whole teaching of Jesus an excuse to eat, drink and pleasure ourselves in the name of Jesus? Jesus responds to this challenge with two answers, explained through three images. In His answer, we will see two pictures of the mood of the Christian life. Here we will see some of the kinds of emotions and affections that true believers have, contrasted with those which the spiritually dead have. These two pictures will help us understand how to recognise the true faith from the false, the genuine article from the counterfeit.

I. The Christian Life is More like a Feast than a Funeral

⁹ *And Jesus said to them, "Can the friends of the bridegroom fast while the bridegroom is with them? As long as they have the bridegroom with them they cannot fast. ²⁰ "But the days will come when the bridegroom will be taken away from them, and then they will fast in those days.*

Jesus paints a picture. It is the picture of a Jewish wedding. All Jews knew, and even the rabbis commanded, that weddings be a time of undiluted joy. Try to see in your mind's eye what Jesus' hearers would have seen as soon as they thought of a wedding. The bride and groom were betrothed but not living together for a few months. On the evening of the actual wedding, the bride was led from her father's home to her future husband's home. First would come the sounds of joyful music, followed by people giving away gifts – wine and oil to the people, nuts to the children, then the

bride, covered with her veil, surrounded by her friends, those called the children of the bride-chamber or the friends of the bridegroom – simply friends and guests of the couple. They would have been dressed in festive clothes, some had torches, some lamps on poles, some branches, some flowers. As the procession came, people got up, some joined it, and it was considered a duty to loudly praise the beauty and the virtues of the bride.

When she arrived, she was led to her new husband, a formula would be spoken, and both would be crowned with garlands. They would sign some legal documents, fill a cup, speak a blessing over it, and the marriage supper would begin - a feast which could go on for more than one day (Edersheim, 366)

Weddings were the height of celebration. Jewish wedding festivities went on for a week, and during that week, all mourning was to be suspended. Even some of the prescribed daily prayers ceased. Everyone was supposed to gladden the bride and bride-groom.

Nothing could be more opposite than fasting and a wedding. In Scripture, people fasted when they were in deep distress, when they were wracked with anxiety, when they were in mourning. Fasting is a sign of grief, of loss, and of deep longing. Jesus is saying, can you expect the wedding guests to mourn during the wedding? The only answer is, No! For us, this would be like a wedding where the bride arrived in a hearse, with everyone sombre and quiet, tears being wiped away and sobs stifled as sad organ music plays while the minister dressed almost completely in black spoke in sad, compassionate tones.

What does this have to do with Jesus and His disciples, with eating or not eating? Well, look closely at this image. There is a bridegroom, and there are his wedding guests. Whom does the bridegroom stand for in this parable? Jesus. And recall in the Old Testament – who was the bridegroom of Israel? Jehovah Himself. Jesus makes the allusion to being Jehovah. Who do the friends of the bridegroom stand for? His disciples. Jesus is saying, as long as I am here, it is like a wedding feast. Every time one comes to follow Me, like Matthew and his friends, it is cause for more celebration. Mourning, fasting, grieving, is not appropriate when I am here. To mourn or grieve when the Saviour of the world is here, is like bawling at a birthday, grieving at a graduation, frowning at a feast.

Remember what the angels said at His birth:

*“**Luke 2:10** Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people.*

The point is, how can you fast in the presence of Jesus? The life lived in the presence of Christ is not a funeral, it is a feast – a celebration of the grace and kindness of Christ.

But Jesus said something else. He said "But the days will come when the bridegroom will be taken away from them, and then they will fast in those days." What was Jesus pointing to here? When would He be taken away from them? The word for taking away is a word which means to be violently snatched away. Jesus would be taken away from his disciples when He would be crucified. And indeed, what was the emotion in the heart of the disciples when He died? On that Friday, on that Saturday, was there not the grief, the sadness, the pain, the anguish that goes with fasting?

Interestingly, when Jesus appeared to His disciples after His resurrection, what does He often do? He breaks bread with them, he eats honeycomb in front of them, he roasts fish for them. It seems the message is – the two-day fast is over, I am with you again.

The point seems to be, the normal Christian life is one of rejoicing. This is Jesus' reply to the Pharisees, and it His invitation to us. For the Christian, to know Christ as Saviour is to live in celebration of having been forgiven and now living as the bride of Christ. To be able to live in Christ's presence is to be able to live with joy.

Perhaps you say, "But Jesus is not with us. He ascended."
Ah, but Jesus told us how He would deal with that problem.

John 14:16-20 ¹⁶ "And I will pray the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may abide with you forever -- ¹⁷ "the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees Him nor knows Him; but you know Him, for He dwells with you and will be in you. ¹⁸ "I will not leave you orphans; I will come to you. ¹⁹ "A little while longer and the world will see Me no more, but you will see Me. Because I live, you will live also. ²⁰ "At that day you will know that I am in My Father, and you in Me, and I in you.

After Christ's ascension, the way He would continue to be with us is by being in us through the Holy Spirit. A Christian can always live in Christ's presence because the Holy Spirit comes to live within us. It is possible for you to enjoy a continual feast of daily communion with Christ. So when do we fast? When His felt presence seems missing. When in times of deep distress or anguish and it feels as if we have lost sight of His presence. This is when we fast. The normal mood of the Christian life is enjoying Christ.

What do we enjoy? We enjoy His promises; we enjoy His provisions; we enjoy His protections; we enjoy His comforts; we enjoy His guidance; we enjoy His wisdom; we enjoy His attributes; we enjoy His beauty; we enjoy His gracious love.

So we need to ask ourselves, does the average day in my Christian life feel more like a fast or a feast? If a camera tracked a normal week in your life, would it seem like a week of grieving, mourning, and pained longing, or would it seem like a week of thanksgiving, praise, and joy?

Friedrich Nietzsche said of Christians, "I would believe in their salvation if they looked a little more like people who have been saved."

"It is an unfortunate thing for the Christian to be melancholy. If there is any man in the world that has a right to have a bright, clear face and a flashing eye, it is the man whose sins are forgiven him, who is saved with God's salvation." Charles Spurgeon

One of the problems we have today is that there are so many people calling themselves Christians doing so many opposing things in the name of Christ. Everyone agrees we must rejoice in the Lord, but what kind of joy is that? Is it being flippant? Is it hilarity? Is it a party/ amusement? Is it exulting? Is it celebration? What kind of joy is the joy we have in Christ?

What happens is that one group over here says that joy in the Lord equals partying, and so another group over here reacts to that, and says that the remedy to such foolishness is a Christianity which is sombre and gloomy. One group over here reacts to the gloomy and sombre group and says that joy in the Lord is being silly and comical and ridiculous. Another group over here reacts to the Christians acting silly and comical and their remedy is a Christianity which is severe and grim. Another group reacts to the severe and grim group and makes their group playful and amusing. And so the pendulum goes back and forth.

What we need to do is not to react to what goes on in professing Christianity, but to be in the presence of the bridegroom. When we are spending time with Christ, adoring Him as a church or as

individuals, our joy will be joy in Him. It will be the kind of joy you have in a Wise King, a Good Shepherd, a Brave Saviour, a Gentle Master, a Splendid Bridegroom. Don't run after joy for itself, or you will miss it every time. Don't seek joy as an emotion in itself and for itself. Seek Jesus Christ.

Christ welcomes us to a celebration of Himself. Enjoy Christ. Enjoy the bridegroom. Fast only when His presence seems missing.

Jesus has answered His critics one way. His first image has shown what following Him is not like and what it is like. It is more like a feast than a funeral. Jesus goes on to give more images which explain why His disciples are not fasting like the Pharisees.

II. The Christian Life Cannot Be Mixed With False Religion

²¹ "No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old garment; or else the new piece pulls away from the old, and the tear is made worse. ²² "And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; or else the new wine bursts the wineskins, the wine is spilled, and the wineskins are ruined. But new wine must be put into new wineskins."

Here are two images which don't seem to make immediate sense to us? First, there is an old garment with a hole in it. Jesus says, if you take some new cloth, which has not yet shrunk, and you use it to patch the hole, when that new cloth begins to shrink, it is going pull away from the old cloth, and the tear will be worse than before. More than likely, your new piece of cloth will be ripped and so will your old piece. You lose everything.

The second image is similar. Here is new and old coming into contact, and you lose everything. The Israelites would kill a goat, take the hide, sew it up and fill it with new wine, They would leave it and let the dregs settle to the bottom, and then they would pour it into a new wineskin. They would repeat the process, and keep pouring and pouring, using the dregs for vinegar, until they ended up with a clear wine with no dregs. But if you had a wineskin that had been used and reused and left lying around, it would tend to crack and become brittle. And if you poured new wine in there, let it settle, and the gases caused expansion, an older skin would just crack, and everything would pour out – and once again you lost everything wineskin and wine.

What does Jesus mean here? In both parables we have something old and something new. And when the old and the new are combined or mixed, instead of a happy combination, there is a violent repulsion and everything is lost.

What could Jesus be talking about – old and new, that do not combine, to explain why He and His disciples do not fast like the Pharisees?

The answer is, Jesus is saying, the Christian life cannot be mixed with the old, rotting religion of the pharisees. The religion of Pharisaic Judaism, what it had become, what it had done to the biblical faith, was now so far off course, that Jesus could not come and just add to it, or renovate it, or modify it. He came to restore the original faith of Israel, and expand it to all people. There could be no combination between true Christianity and what Judaism had become.

And throughout the Gospels, we see Jesus deliberately provoking controversy with the Pharisees to distinguish His message from theirs. He wanted them and the listening people to know, these two religions do not mix.

Take fasting: In rabbinic Judaism, fasting was a form of self-punishment which satisfied God's anger and prevented His punishing you. In one legend, a Jewish person was prevented from going to hell because of his fasting. For many of the pharisees, Monday and Thursday were days of fasting every week, all year round. Painfully detailed rules abounded about how you could wash on a less strict fast, but on the strictest fast, you could not even greet others.

This is what Pharisaic Judaism had done to the Word of God and to the Law, which is holy and good. This is what they had done to the true faith of Abraham, Moses, David and Isaiah. They had made laws out of their traditions. They had made commandments out of their self-made rituals. They had twisted the Law from its original purpose to do something it was never meant to do – save the soul. They had diverted attention away from God and onto human merit and performance.

So could you combine what fasting meant to Christ with what it meant to the Pharisees? Could you combine the mood and attitude of pharisees with that of Christ-followers? Jesus is making the point, and probably as a gentle rebuke to the disciples of John, what I am bringing cannot be combined with Judaism. The Christian life is nothing like the empty forms of false religion.

And the application is still the same. The joy-giving new wine of Christianity cannot be poured into the old wineskins of Judaism, Hinduism, Islam, Roman Catholicism, or ancestor worship. If you try to combine this glorious life of joyfully knowing the Person of God in Christ, with those human systems of works and forms, you will end up with neither Christianity nor the other religion.

If you try to sew the new material of a living relationship with Jesus Christ, onto the old garment of secularism, where God may exist but He doesn't really matter, the result will be a tearing, where you end up with neither.

Be careful of trying to combine Christianity and Judaism. Christianity is for Jewish people! But Christianity and Judaism cannot mix. You cannot try to mix grace and human merit. You cannot mix works done for our own atonement and faith alone in Christ.

Just like in Christ's day, there is plenty of self-made religion today. There is plenty of religion that has various kinds of forms, practices, rituals, ceremonies, traditions, with no biblical support, and no biblical meaning. To mix it with Christianity is to destroy them both.

And here is a reliable test to find out if a religion is a soulless, dead one: Does it have the joy of the bridegroom?

False religion usually has a false seriousness, and therefore a false joy. It is not celebrating a Person, it is just supporting a practice.

“Some people have just enough religion to make themselves miserable.”- Harry Emerson Fosdick.

Habakkuk 3:17-18 ¹⁷ *Though the fig tree may not blossom, Nor fruit be on the vines; Though the labor of the olive may fail, And the fields yield no food; Though the flock may be cut off from the fold, And there be no herd in the stalls --* ¹⁸ *Yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will joy in the God of my salvation.*

And because its joy is not in a living Person, it rises and falls with circumstances. If things go well, it is happy. If things turn sour, then joy evaporates.

If you are a Christian, then you are privileged to enjoy the uniqueness of biblical religion. You are not serving dead principles, but knowing a living Person. You are not keeping heavy duties, you are pursuing heart desires. You are not enduring piles of rules, you are enjoying a personal relationship. You are not burdened by Laws that crush, you are carried by the Lord's Spirit. You are not in

bondage to your own warring conscience and passions, you are free to obey a loving Master. You are not trying to earn or keep God's favour, you are resting and enjoying the finished work of Christ. This is the uniqueness of biblical religion, of the true faith, of true Christianity. And it cannot be combined with the works-based, human-driven, pride-infested human religions. There is no mixing, mingling or compromise between the two.

The Christian life is nothing like false religion. And one of the symptoms of mixing the joy-giving, free grace of God in Jesus Christ with the old-wineskins of false religion is that the joy begins to evaporate. When you try to mix the unique faith of the Bible with any humanly-devised religion, there is a tearing, a tension between the two. You must either go all the way to a works-based religion, or stop trying to embrace both and place all your faith and hope again in the free grace of a living and loving Saviour.

Even the great Reformer, Martin Luther, suffered from joylessness at times. On one morning, his wife Katharine came out wearing black clothes of mourning. She didn't say anything, and he hadn't heard that anyone had died, so he asked her, "Why are you wearing clothes of mourning?" She replied, "It seems that someone has died." Martin asked, "I hadn't heard. Who has died?" "Judging by the mood in this home, it seems God must have died, for only that could explain how little joy there could be in this Christian home."

Perhaps her rebuke had too much sarcasm in it, but the point was made. Why do Christians act like their whole life is a fast, when the Bridegroom lives with us by the Holy Spirit? Why do we live without joy, when the best is yet to come? If we have truly embraced the living faith of the true religion, not the dead forms of a false religion, then we have every reason to celebrate with our Saviour.

True Christianity has all the potential to have the mood of a feast. If you are not experiencing that, then two questions should be asked.

- 1) Have you ever embraced the Bridegroom, Christ, as your Lord and Saviour? In other words, have you begun the relationship of joy?
- 2) Have you embraced Him, but begun to drift from Him, no longer celebrating His presence? Perhaps you've mixed in some of the old wine of human pride, man-made religion, man-centred habits, and you're feeling the tear. Get back to celebrating Christ Himself. How do I do that? In our Lord's Supper service, I am going to give you some examples.