

“HUNGERING FOR GOD’S KINGDOM TO COME”

One of the things that we see over and over again in the Gospels is Israel’s religious leaders questioning Jesus about something that he did or did not do. In the preceding passage, the issue was Jesus’ willingness to share a meal with tax collectors and sinners. In this passage, the issue is Jesus’ failure to make his disciples follow the practices of other devout Jews of his day. In both passages, Jesus exposes the mistaken thinking of those who questioned him. And in each instance, the mistake had to do with a failure to understand who Jesus is and why he had come.

The question asked of Jesus in this passage had to do with fasting. Certain people pointed out to him that his disciples were not fasting like the disciples of the Pharisees and John the Baptist, and they wondered why this was the case. The practice of fasting, or “abstinence from food for spiritual purposes” (Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*, 160), is mentioned a number of times in the pages of holy Scripture. Most of the time, the fasts that we read about were voluntary. That is, they were not done in order to fulfill a specific command from the Lord. There was one fast that was required of all Jews: the fast held each year on the Day of Atonement. But it is clear that that is not the fast being referred to in this passage. Jesus and his disciples certainly would have kept a fast that was commanded in God’s Word.

In both the Old Testament and the New Testament, fasting is an important aspect of biblical piety. It is an outward expression of repentance and dependence upon God, and it serves as an aid to prayer. Of course, as with other acts of piety, fasting can degenerate into a mere outward performance that is not truly expressive of what is in the heart.

However, this does not mean that there is something inherently wrong with the practice of fasting itself. It simply demonstrates our sinful tendency to drift towards a purely external form of religion, a religion in which rituals are detached from a living faith in God.

In the Old Testament, we read about a variety of fasts. Ezra proclaimed a fast for those whom he was about to lead back to the promised land (Ezra 8:21-23). Nehemiah responded to a troubling report about Jerusalem by fasting and praying (Neh. 1:1-4). And the prophet Joel called the people of Israel to express their repentance by fasting (Joel 2:12-15).

In the first century world in which Jesus lived, Jews like the Pharisees adopted a code of religious devotion that was much more demanding than what was required of ordinary Jews. One part of this code involved fasting twice per week, on every Monday and Thursday (see Luke 18:12). They did not do this in order to save money on groceries, but to consecrate themselves to God, with the hope that their acts of devotion might help trigger the start of the messianic age. They were seeking the renewal of the nation. In all

likelihood, John the Baptist's disciples would have fasted for similar reasons. John was preaching the imminent arrival of God's kingdom, and they wanted to help speed its arrival.

It is not hard to see why it would have seemed strange that Jesus' followers were not keeping the fasts of these other Jews. After all, the message that Jesus proclaimed at the start of his public ministry was virtually the same as the message proclaimed by John: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Mt. 3:2; 4:17). Of all the people who might be expected to be rigorous in the discipline of fasting, Jesus' disciples would be near the top of the list. But they were not fasting. And this prompted the question: 'Jesus, why aren't those disciples of yours fasting like these other devoted Jews?'

Now, we should first observe what Jesus did not say in response to this question. He did not denounce the disciples of John and the Pharisees for their fasts. He did not say that their fasts were empty rituals, or evidence of a works-oriented religion. Those things may have been true, especially in light of what we learn about the Pharisees elsewhere in the New Testament. But Jesus did not say such things here. Instead, he gave three illustrations to show why it would have been inappropriate for his disciples to fast.

First, he likens his disciples to guests at a wedding. A wedding is a time of joy and festivity. Imagine a person arriving at a lavish wedding reception only to announce to

everyone that he will not be eating any of the food. Such behavior would be out of place. A wedding is an occasion for feasting, not fasting. A person who fasts at a wedding fails to recognize that something worth celebrating has just taken place. That is Jesus' point. By comparing himself to a bridegroom, he is saying that the long-awaited day had finally arrived, the day foretold in passages like the one we read earlier from Isaiah 62. The Lord had come to take his people to be his bride. This was the day that the Pharisees were fasting for, the day that John proclaimed as being at hand. It would make no sense for Jesus' disciples to fast in light of this reality. There will come a time when they should fast, as Jesus says in verse 20, but that time had not yet come.

The other part of Jesus' response is the two mini-parables contained in verses 21 and 22. Jesus likens himself to a patch of new cloth and a batch of new wine, or wine that is still fermenting. And he compares the practices of these other Jews to an old garment and an old wineskin. The point is clear: these things are incompatible with each other. If you sew a new, unshrunk piece of cloth onto an old garment, the patch will tear away when the new cloth shrinks. And if you put new wine into an old, brittle wineskin, the pressure from the fermentation process will cause the skin to burst. Jesus was saying that the fasting of these Jews was out of sync with what was happening in his ministry. It is not that he was against fasting. He himself fasted for forty days in the wilderness, and he says in this passage that there will be a time when his disciples should fast. But the problem with the fasting being done by Jesus' contemporaries was that they were fasting

for something that had already arrived. They were fasting in order to hasten the day of the Lord's coming, but that day was already at hand because of the presence of Jesus. Had they understood this, they never would have expected Jesus' disciples to fast. Jesus' disciples did not keep the fasts of the Pharisees because their Master taught them that the time of anticipation was over. Now was the time of fulfillment. The Bridegroom had come to his bride.

That was the answer that Jesus gave in this passage. But what if he was asked the same question today? What if he was asked why we do not fast? What kind of an answer would he give? One thing is certain - he would not give the answer that he gave in this passage. We do not live in the same age as Jesus' disciples. We do not have Christ present with us in the way he was present with them. Rather, we live in the time period that Jesus was speaking of in verse 20, the time in which the Bridegroom has been taken away, the time in which Jesus said his followers would fast.

Yet we do not fast. Or at least, very few of us do. I would venture to guess that the vast majority of us here today have either never fasted, or have only done so on a few sporadic occasions. (I should clarify that I am speaking of fasting for spiritual purposes, not in preparation for a medical test or as a way to try to lose weight fast.) For most of us, fasting is not a regular part of our life. But Jesus said that it should be. And it has been

an important part of the piety of many Christians throughout church history. Why is it not so today?

There are a number of reasons. For one thing, ours is a highly self-indulgent age. The notion of denying ourselves of anything, let alone such a basic need as food, goes against the grain in our culture. In fact, many would look upon the idea of purposely going without food for spiritual purposes as something very strange and perhaps even psychologically unhealthy.

Another reason why we do not fast is the problem of what could be described as ‘guilt by association.’ Many of us think of fasting in terms of the things that we have seen our Roman Catholic friends do - such as giving something up for Lent or not eating meat on Fridays. Often, such things strike us as manifestations of a works-oriented religion, and Roman Catholic theology certainly does encourage that mindset.

And one other reason why we do not fast in private is because of the virtual disappearance of fasting as an act of public piety. It was not very long ago that church leaders, and sometimes even civil leaders, would proclaim public times of prayer and fasting, especially during times of crisis or decision. The fact that this sort of thing has become so rare means that fasting remains a strange, mysterious and unfamiliar practice for most of us.

It does not have to remain this way, and I do not want this to be the case for you. So here are a few basic principles about fasting. First, it is of the utmost importance that we remember that fasting is worthless apart from the right heart attitude. The person who thinks that his commitment to not eating meat on Fridays somehow earns favor from God would be better off enjoying a Big Mac with a thankful heart. Fasting needs to be accompanied by a living faith, by genuine repentance and by a humble heart if it is to be acceptable to God. Thomas Boston writes:

“In vain will ye fast, and pretend to be humbled for your sins, and make confession of them; if your love of sin be not turned into hatred; your liking of it into loathing; and your cleaving to it, into a longing to be rid of it” (cited in Whitney, 171-2).

True fasting must be done out of a humble and repentant heart.

Second, do not fast for the sake of fasting. Fasting is not an end in itself. Its purpose is to lend strength and urgency to our prayers. Calvin writes, “Whenever men are to pray to God concerning any great matter, it would be expedient to appoint fasting along with prayer” (cited in Whitney, 165). Fasting goes hand in hand with prayer. When you fast, use the time that you would have spent eating in prayer. Fasting can help focus and

intensify our prayers, especially prayers for guidance, forgiveness, and deliverance, as well as prayers for the mission of the church. This was the experience of David Brainerd, the missionary friend of Jonathan Edwards. In his diary, Brainerd writes of a time that he spent in prayer and fasting as he was preparing to enter into his ministry as a missionary to Native Americans. He wrote,

“I felt the power of intercession for precious, immortal souls; for the advancement of the kingdom of my dear Lord and Savior in the world; and withal, a most sweet resignation and even consolation and joy in the thoughts of suffering hardships, distresses, and even death itself in the promotion of it...My soul was drawn out very much for the world, for multitudes of souls...I enjoyed great sweetness in communion with my dear Savior. I think I never in my life felt such an entire weanedness from this world and so much resigned to God in everything.” (cited in Whitney, 167-8)

That should be motivation enough to start fasting. And that is the last point I want to make: it would do the church good if more Christians sought to recover the practice of fasting. You could begin to do so by skipping one meal and devoting that time to prayer. You might want to do it the next time you have something urgent or burdensome to bring before the Lord. Or you could set a regular time to fast and pray for the advance of the

gospel. When we consider both the role that fasting has played in the lives of believers throughout history and the self-indulgent age in which we live, how could it possibly be a good thing to be a church that does not fast?

The theme at the heart of this passage is the principle that true piety must always be vitally connected to Jesus Christ. When Christ is present, the thing to do is rejoice. When Christ is absent, the thing to do is long for his appearing. For us, there is a very real sense in which Christ is absent. Yes, he did promise to be with us to the very end of the age. And he keeps that promise by making himself present to us by the working of his Spirit, who unites us to Christ through faith. However, this does not change the fact that the Bridegroom has been taken away. Jesus is not with us in the same way that he was with his first disciples. He has ascended back into heaven, where he sits at God's right hand until his enemies are made a footstool for his feet. And so we must long for his return, just as Old Testament saints yearned for the dawn of the messianic age.

Are you longing for that? Are you hungering for the consummation of God's kingdom? Do you look forward to the moment when you will see Christ not by faith, but by sight? Do you long for the day when your fellowship with Christ will no longer be broken by sin? Can you say, with Samuel Rutherford,

“O that I were where I shall sin no more! O to be freed of these chains and iron fetters, which we carry about with us! Lord, loose the sad prisoners! Who of the children of God have not cause to say, that they have their fill of this vain life? and, like a full and sick stomach, to wish at mid-supper that the supper were ended, and the table drawn, that the sick man might win to bed, and enjoy rest?” (*Letters*, 177)

The table of this world is spread with many delicacies. And there is nothing wrong with enjoying these good things, if we keep them in proper perspective. But that is the problem, isn't it? We cannot keep them in proper perspective. Fasting can help temper our craving for the things of the world and cultivate an appetite for the things that belong to eternity. There is something very radical about the discipline of fasting. We need food in order to live. But when we fast, we are telling God that we realize that there are things that are even more important than that. Fasting can be a means by which we increase our hunger and thirst for God, for his righteousness, for his kingdom.