

Sermon – 06/02/2011 am

Jesus on Fasting

Study Text: Luke 5:33-39

Have you ever fasted – gone without food or water for a day or so? Maybe you fast regularly? Maybe you have taken part in a 40-hour famine. Should Christians fast on a regular basis?

All adult Muslims are required to fast during the month of Ramadan. Many are impressed by this discipline of the body – although this fasting is only for the daylight hours. Still we knew a man in India who found it hard when this month of fasting was in the hot season and he was not allowed even to drink during the day.

In Judaism ritual fasts are also important. In the Old Testament the only fast commanded was on the Day of Atonement. In Leviticus 16:29 ‘affliction of souls’ is understood to mean fasting. After the Exile fasting became more common. There were regular fast days and also special fasts associated with prayer (Ezra 8:21). In New Testament times the Pharisees, a strict sect of the Jews, fasted twice a week (Luke 18:12).

Fasting is a ritual practiced in the Roman Catholic Church. It is done as an act of penance, especially during the season of Lent. Their fasting may mean refraining from solid food for a day or just having one meal a day. Many believers fast regularly but they do so voluntarily. The apostles and others fasted on occasions, usually during times of prayer (Acts 13:3). Yet fasting is not commanded in the Bible.

1. Fast

One day some people asked Jesus why his disciples did not fast like the disciples of John and the disciples of the Pharisees (5:33). According to Matthew it was the disciples of John who asked this question (Matthew 9:14).

John the Baptist came into Judea preaching a baptism of repentance. He had his own disciples but when Jesus came along he pointed them to *the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world* (John 1:29). Some of these disciples, however, remained loyal to John, even after he was put in prison. These disciples may have been fasting and praying in earnest because John was in prison.

The Pharisees did not have their own disciples as such but they had their followers. Some were scribes and teachers of the Law. They were legalists for whom fasting was a very important religious duty – even though it was not commanded by Moses.

The disciples of Jesus were feasting rather than fasting. Jesus may have been leaving the feast hosted by Matthew at this particular time. Matthew was rejoicing because Jesus had called him to follow him. The Pharisees had already complained about Jesus eating with tax collectors and sinners. Now they were criticizing him for not fasting like the disciples of other religious leaders.

2. Bridegroom

Why do people fast? Why do they afflict themselves in this way? Fasting may be an expression of grief. People fast at funerals not at weddings. People fast and pray in times of difficulty or

suffering. Some think that fasting is a way of getting God's attention, or even of twisting his arm as it were. I knew a man who prayed for a long time and then decided to fast and pray when his prayer was not answered. He thought fasting would make his prayer more powerful.

Isaiah condemned fasting that was aimed at twisting God's arm. The people said *we have fasted ourselves but you (God) take no notice* (Isaiah 58:3). The Pharisees liked to make a show of fasting. They were proud that they fasted. But Jesus was not impressed. Fasting should be an expression of humility not pride.

Jesus disciples did not fast – they did pray of course. Why did they not fast? Because the bridegroom was with them! They were feasting and rejoicing because the long awaited bridegroom had come. *We have found the Messiah (Christ) Andrew exclaimed to his brother Simon Peter* (John 1:41). *When Messiah comes he will tell us all things* said the Samaritan woman (John 4:25). Matthew was so excited when Jesus called him that he called his friends to come and feast with Jesus.

In the Old Testament the Lord is spoken of as a husband of his people Israel. Here were a people who were betrothed to the Lord. Now their beloved had come. The bridegroom had come. This was no time for sorrow or grief. This was a time to rejoice.

The Jews and others have reason to fast because they live in unbelief. They do not know that God has sent his only begotten Son into this world to take away our sin. They do not believe that the Word became flesh and dwelt among us and that we have seen his glory, the glory of the only begotten of the Father (John 1:14). They have no reason to rejoice but you who believe have every reason to rejoice. You know that the Saviour of the world has come and has taken away your sin by his death and resurrection.

But the days will come said Jesus *when the bridegroom will be taken away* (5:35). Here is the first mention of Jesus death, even though it may not be obvious. The word translated 'taken away' carries the idea of violence. The disciples did become very sorrowful and full of grief when Jesus was crucified and his body placed in the tomb.

But then came the news that he was risen from the dead. He ascended into heaven but not before promising the Holy Spirit, the counsellor and comforter. Jesus did not leave them alone. We have no need to mourn separation from Christ because he is with us by his Spirit. We mourn because of our sin but when we turn to Jesus and confess our sin we are forgiven. We rejoice in the forgiveness of our sin and in God's presence with us by his Spirit.

We must 'reject fasting as a religiously meritorious ceremony bearing a compulsory ceremonial character'. We must not think that by fasting, by cutting ourselves, by waving our arms and screaming that we can force God's hand in any way. God looks upon the heart. He looks for evidence of a humble and contrite heart and for obedience to his commands. When you pray you should go to a place where you can quietly communicate with God. If fasting assists you in prayer, by all means fast and pray – but do so with humility and not with pride.

3. New Dispensation

Jesus took the opportunity to speak a parable at this time. With two simple illustrations he pointed out that in him a new dispensation had come. 'Jesus was not simply patching up Judaism. He is teaching something radically new. If the attempt is made to constrict this within the old wineskins of Judaism (e.g. by imposing fasting) the result will be disastrous.

When the bridegroom comes he takes his bride away from her home to start a new life with her. When a newly married couple live in the family home it can be disastrous! The Bible says *leave your father and your mother and cleave to your wife*. Disciples of Jesus must leave their old ways.

Jesus cannot be an addition to your old ways or old religion. Some Hindus take a cross or other icon and add it to the collection of gods they worship. Some Christians start worshipping Jesus but do not leave their old ways. This is often a tendency in some tribal religions – as with polygamy in Africa. Some Christians take Jesus but continue in their old way of thinking and old way of life in our western societies.

The Bible says *if anyone is in Christ he is a new creation; the old has gone and the new has come* (II Corinthians 5:17). There must be a radical change in our lives when we enter the kingdom of God.

Jesus was aware of the pull of the past. He was aware of our reluctance to change. ‘The old is good’ we say of wine and of many things (5:39). Have you seen people sliding back into old ways after setting out on the new path as a believer in Jesus? It is tragic is it not? It is disastrous. It is like sowing new or unshrunk cloth onto an old garment. It is like putting new wine into old, dry and hard wineskins. The old inflexible wineskins will soon burst. New wineskins made from soft animal hide must be used for new wine.

We must be on the alert and not go back to the old way of works salvation. Is this not what lies behind much of the fasting that we see in the world and even in the church? People may be impressed by those who make a thing of fasting, but Jesus wasn’t. It is by grace you are saved though faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God (Ephesians 2:8).

We must pray and pray always. By all means fast and pray, but remember the Lord hears your prayers because of Jesus not because of your works or even your sincerity. You are praying to the sovereign Lord of the universe who knows all things and who has a perfect plan and purpose for you (Romans 12:2). You who believe are his child and he knows what is best for you. You do not have to twist his arm as it were to do good things for you.

What God wants is for you to love him with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind. What he wants is for you to love your neighbour as yourself. Fasting that God wants is to act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God (Isaiah 58:6f, Micah 6:8).

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