

Day Two

The right time to fast and pray

Today's reading: Mark 2: 18 - 22

The question, "when should I fast?" is as trivial as the question "when should I eat?". You eat when you feel the need to eat. Therefore, you fast when you feel the need to fast.

In Mark 2: 18, Jesus is approached by the disciples of John the Baptist with a serious allegation. Apparently, the disciples of Jesus were not seen to fast like everyone else.

Please notice their specific expectation to fast, **just like everyone else**. It seems, fasting and prayer was a set habit and a cultural expectation among the religious elite. If you were part of the religious community, you were expected to fast several times a week. In Jesus' time, fasting and prayer had become so ritualistic and burdensome, that most Pharisees were fasting out of habit and routine.

We know that from Luke 18 when Jesus tells the story of two men going to pray: one is a Pharisee and the other one a tax collector. Notice the importance of fasting in the prayer for the Pharisee: *'I thank you, God, that I am not like other people—cheaters, sinners, adulterers. I'm certainly not like that tax collector! I fast twice a week, and I give you a tenth of my income.'* - Luke 18: 11 - 12

Jesus points to the prayer of the Pharisee and concludes that it brings no justification. It is totally pointless. On the contrary, Jesus seems to encourage the humble and broken attitude of the tax collector, who does not dare look up. He keeps his distance and prays, beating his chest in sorrow: *'O God, be merciful to me, for I am a sinner.'* In spite of the Pharisee's attitude to fasting and prayer, it is important to notice that Jesus does not discourage fasting.

At the start of our journey, we looked at brokenness and how important it is to humble ourselves before God and prepare to fast and pray. It's not about how many times a week you fast. It's not about how long you fast. It's not even about whether you fast at all. It's more about what you do when you decide to fast and pray.

In our reading for today we find Jesus responding to the allegations made against His disciples. Jesus simply states: *"Do wedding guests fast while celebrating with the groom? Of course not. They can't fast while the groom is with them. But someday the groom will be taken away from them, and then they will fast."* - Mark 2: 19 - 20

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So, the best time to fast is when you need to go further with God. The Lord clarifies the fact that there will be a time when He will no longer be with His disciples. Our groom, the Lord Jesus Christ, is no longer here on the earth. This is a fact. So we understand that it is now the best time, for the church, to fast and pray.

Jesus builds his defence by using three illustrations. The first illustration is a wedding. His argument is simple: you cannot expect the friends of the bridegroom to fast while he is still around. In other words Jesus confirms that there is a time to rejoice and party and there is a time to fast and be broken.

The disciples were meant to rejoice in the presence of Jesus just like friends rejoice in the presence of a bridegroom, preparing for his wedding day. Jesus also confirms that there will be a day when the bridegroom will no longer be there. In fact, Jesus says, "the bridegroom will be taken away". Those will be the days to fast and pray.

"Jesus replied, "Do wedding guests fast while celebrating with the groom? Of course not. They can't fast while the groom is with them. But someday the groom will be taken away from them, and then they will fast." - Mark 2: 19 - 20

The second illustration, used by Jesus, is the patching of an old garment using new cloth. People were used to patching old clothes, as only the rich and powerful could afford to buy new clothes. It was therefore not unusual to see people wearing patched clothes.

"Besides, who would patch old clothing with new cloth? For the new patch would shrink and rip away from the old cloth, leaving an even bigger tear than before." - Mark 2: 21

The lesson here is that the old way of fasting (ritualistic and legalistic) would cause more harm than good. There is a new way to please God and a new way to fast and pray.

The same lesson is reinforced in the third illustration Jesus used. *"And no one puts new wine into old wineskins. For the wine would burst the wineskins, and the wine and the skins would both be lost. New wine calls for new wineskins." - Mark 2: 22*

The old way of fasting, the way of the Pharisees, was never God's idea. Their way of fasting is like patching an old cloth with new material, or putting new wine into old wineskins. In both examples the end result is disaster and waste.

"And no one puts new wine into old wineskins. For the wine would burst the wineskins, and the wine and the skins would both be lost. New wine calls for new wineskins." - Mark 2: 21-22

There was a time when the disciples did not have to worry about anything. Jesus was there to walk with them, teach them, save them from storms and drowning or feed them when they were hungry.

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"During my time here, I protected them by the power of the name you gave me.[c] I guarded them so that not one was lost, except the one headed for destruction, as the Scriptures foretold." - John 17: 12

While Jesus was with His disciples, there was no need for them to fast and pray. However, the time would come for Him to leave and return to the Father. It was in His absence, that the disciples were to exercise faith. This faith would only grow and develop as the disciples would pray and fast. It was true that they would not be left as orphans. In John 16 - 18 Jesus gives them the promise of the Holy Spirit. He would be their Helper and Advocate. But they would still need to fast and pray.

In Romans 8, the Apostle Paul reinforces the role and the ministry of the Holy Spirit. He will not just be with us but He will help us pray when we do not know how to pray. This is an amazing assurance that we are not alone as we pray.

"And the Holy Spirit helps us in our weakness. For example, we don't know what God wants us to pray for. But the Holy Spirit prays for us with groanings that cannot be expressed in words. And the Father who knows all hearts knows what the Spirit is saying, for the Spirit pleads for us believers in harmony with God's own will." - Romans 8: 26 - 27

Another amazing truth, in this passage from Romans 8, is that the Holy Spirit pleads for us in harmony with God's will. It is in the context of God's will that the next verse comes to confirm even more that we are not alone in prayer.

"And we know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them." - Romans 8: 28

Chapter Summary

Fasting and prayer, done Jesus' way, develops faith. We learn to trust God and depend on Him with our basic needs. When we fast, we worship God. When we pray, we worship God. We do not go on a "hunger strike" in order to force God's hand. We do not fast out of religious duty, we fast out of joy. We fast in order to give ourselves to God. We do all this because there are far greater joys in God.

When should I fast? Every time you need to! This should cause us to explore our own spiritual needs and reflect on our relationship with God. Do you need victory in your Spiritual life? Fast and pray for it. The best time to fast is when you want to go further with God.

Day Two

Personal Focus

Take some time to reflect on the words of Jesus in Mark 2. Do not rush away. Think about your priorities and assess how sincere is your need for God. Do you want to go further with God? Make a list of the things you want to fast and pray about this week.

Use the space below to write down your reasons for fasting and praying:

Public Focus

Take some time to discuss with one another some of the spiritual priorities of the church. It could be the youth or children ministry. Perhaps, you need to fast and pray for a new pastor (providing your church doesn't have one). If you have one, pray and fast for the one you have.

Following your discussion, in love and honesty, write down the spiritual priorities of the church as you fast and pray. Agree to pray in unity.
