

“Why Don’t Your Disciples Fast?”

Franklin Church of Christ
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PM Assembly

Introduction:

When Jesus called Matthew, also known as Levi, to be His disciple, Matthew rejoiced and celebrated with a feast (**Luke 5:29**). The Pharisees attacked Jesus for this feast from one angle and then another. According to **Matthew 9:14**, they even provoked John’s disciples to question Jesus. These two groups asked, “Why don’t your disciples fast?” In His wisdom, Jesus explained and left no room for criticism. However, since He answered in parables, we may miss His answer’s real meaning.

While the normal approach to Jesus’ reply deals with the difference between the Old and New Covenants or the difference between the old and new man, I believe the real thrust of Jesus’ answer is about true worship. Take note of Jesus’ three part reply, looking all the while at your own worship.

Discussion:

- I. To fast would have been ritualism, not true worship (**Luke 5:34-35**).
 - A. Jesus’ first response was, on the surface, simply a statement about the propriety of fasting for His disciples. As it would be inappropriate for the friends of the bridegroom to fast during the time of their friend’s wedding feast, so it would be inappropriate for Jesus’ disciples to fast while He was with them. However, Jesus had not taught His disciples that fasting was forbidden or useless. He knew full well that the time would come when fasting would not only be appropriate but also natural for His disciples. Delving a little more deeply, we get past issues of propriety and find a gentle rebuke against John’s disciples and cutting condemnation of the Pharisees.
 - B. When Jesus said His disciples did not fast because they were friends of the bridegroom, He tacitly claimed that the others fasted because they were not. This must have stung John’s disciples. After all, if John was the friend of the bridegroom, as he claimed in **John 3:29-30**, should not his followers also be friends? If John rejoiced, should not His disciples also rejoice? The scriptures do not tell us how the transition from John to Jesus was to work precisely. Nor do they tell us what God thought of those who clung to John during this time instead of turning to Jesus as the two did in **John 1:35-37**. Nevertheless, Jesus’ point must have been clear. Jesus’ disciples did not fast because they had accepted what John taught. They knew the bridegroom was indeed with them. How could they fast? Instead they would rejoice.
 - C. Additionally, Jesus’ answer cut to the heart of what was wrong with all of the Pharisees’ worship. If Jesus’ disciples fasted at such an inappropriate time, it would not be heartfelt worship, demonstrating devotion to God. Rather, it would have been ritualistic action, keeping up appearances and hypocrisy. In fact, it would have been just like the Pharisees’ fasting. They fasted twice a week (**Luke 18:12**). But it was not out of devotion to God. Nor was it worshipping in spirit and truth. It was ritualism to appear holy before men (**Matthew 6:16**). They cleansed the outside, appearing to be devoted to God, but not the inside, being truly devoted (**Matthew 23:25-26**). If Jesus’ disciples had fasted at that inappropriate time, it would have been nothing more than what the Pharisees always did, empty ritualism.
 - D. What about our worship? Are we friends of the bridegroom? Are we worshipping because we are convicted about Jesus? We are here now, but is our worship from the heart? I will be the first to say that our feelings and emotions must never govern our worship. But I will also be the foremost to say that our worship must be from the heart (**Romans 6:17**). That is to say, what I want must never dictate how I worship. However, I should want to worship properly. Worship must never become ritual. No act of worship should be rote, being done without thought or feeling. Why are you at this assembly? Is it to keep up appearances? Is it to mark assembling off your checklist of things to do this week? Or is it to be the friend of the bridegroom, devoting yourself to Him, glorifying Him?
- II. Ritualism destroys not only the worship but also the worshipper (**Luke 5:36-38**).
 - A. No doubt, John’s disciples could not be condemned for mere ritualism. I am sure they were fasting from the heart. Their master was in Herod’s prison. Their shortcoming was not insincerity but rather not following their own master’s teaching. Therefore, the second part of Jesus’ reply would not apply to them as it did to the Pharisees.

- B. In **vs. 36-38**, Jesus spoke two parables to demonstrate why His disciples did not fast. Fasting would be as useful to His disciples at that time as using a new patch to fix an old garment and putting new wine into old wineskins would be.
1. No one would put a new patch on an old garment. Why? Because when the patch began to shrink it would pull against the already shrunken old garment and instead of mending it, would make the tear worse. The patch would be worse than useless. It would be destructive.
 2. No one would put new wine into old wineskins. Why? Because no matter how tightly you seal the wineskin, you could not stop the fermentation. There would already be activated yeast in the wineskin from the old wine that would start the process. The old wineskin would burst as the fermentation process produced gas stretching the skin beyond capacity. The skin and the wine would both be destroyed.
- C. What is Jesus' point? Jesus' disciples did not fast because such fasting would be no more than ritualism and therefore would be useless to them. In fact, it would be worse than useless. It would destroy the worshipper. Fasting, when used appropriately is a wonderful act of devotion to God, turning your back on the desires of the flesh to devote yourself to the things of the Spirit. However, when an act of worship is no more than ritualism and outward appearance, it is vain. This is reminiscent of **Matthew 15:8-9**. If the disciples had fasted in this manner, they would have been honoring God with their mouths, but their hearts would have been far from Him. The worship would be useless and would have been destructive to the worshipper.
- D. This kind of worship is also mentioned in **II Timothy 3:5**. It has a form of godliness. That is, it appears to show devotion, piety and reverence to God. But, in fact, it denies the power of godliness because it is not really about God at all. Notice what kind of person worships this way by reading the context from **II Timothy 3:1-9**—selfish, ungodly blasphemers.
- III. Take care not to worship simply by “taste” (**Luke 5:39**).
- A. The third part of Jesus' reply goes in two directions. It answers both why the Pharisees and John's disciples fasted and also why Jesus' disciples did not. It is very much like a man's palette, that is, his tastes. A man who has been drinking old wine will not immediately go to new wine, because his palette has become used to the old. No matter the reality or what anyone else thinks, he will stick with what he has become used to, until by degrees his palette changes.
 - B. Just so, John's disciples would not easily accept the teaching of Jesus even though their own master had endorsed Him. They had become used to following John and his ascetic ways. Going after this new teacher who acted differently (**Matthew 11:18-19**) would not come easily.
 - C. The Pharisees would not easily accept the teaching of Jesus, because they were all too used to their empty ritualism. Their worship, not being in spirit and truth, was carnal. Since they had trained and disciplined themselves in carnality, they would not easily discern the spiritual truth of the worship Jesus taught. This is Paul's point in **I Corinthians 2:14**.
 - D. Finally, neither would Jesus' disciples be easily swayed to follow after the forms of the Pharisees or the disciples of John. They had now become used to the worship and devotion they had learned from Jesus, their Master. The asceticism of John and the ritualism of the Pharisees would not be appealing to Jesus' disciples, who really had tasted what was better.
 - E. This third reply provides comfort and issues a warning. It provides comfort for those who have become accustomed to true worship. Their tastes will be used to what is true and will stand on end when what is not true is introduced. However, it also provides a warning. We have to make sure that true worship and obedience molds our “tastes” and not allow our “tastes” to mold what we think is true worship and obedience. Far too often churches are dismantled by people who are convinced that their way is the right way, when all they are pushing is their own “palette”.

Conclusion:

What about you? Why do you worship the way you do? Is it because of ritualism, personal taste or out of true devotion to the bridegroom? The answer to this question is not just about what you will get out of this assembly. The answer to this question will determine what you hear in the Judgment. If Jesus were to return right now and you were judged based on your worship during this assembly, what would be the outcome?