



The Mission of Jesus Christ (Part 2)

Matthew 9:14-17

1. Religious Criticism (verse 14)

2. Righteous Fasting (verse 15-17)

This morning we find ourselves returning to the exposition of the gospel of Matthew after spending the last five weeks with other studies, including a visit to another church. It would be good to read this passage again to remind ourselves of the context in which Jesus speaks these words. Let us begin reading at Matthew 9: 9.

Matthew 9:9-17

And as Jesus passed on from there, He saw a man, called Matthew, sitting in the tax office; and He said to him, "Follow Me!" And he rose, and followed Him. And it happened that as He was reclining at the table in the house, behold many tax-gatherers and sinners came and were dining with Jesus and His disciples. And when the Pharisees saw this, they said to His disciples, "Why is your Teacher eating with the tax-gatherers and sinners?" But when He heard this, He said, "[It is] not those who are healthy who need a physician, but those who are sick. "But go and learn what this means, 'I DESIRE COMPASSION, AND NOT SACRIFICE,' for I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners." Then the disciples of John came to Him, saying, "Why do we and the Pharisees fast, but Your disciples do not fast?" And Jesus said to them, "The attendants of the bridegroom cannot mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them, can they? But the days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast. But no one puts a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment; for the patch pulls away from the garment, and a worse tear results. Nor do men put new wine into old wineskins; otherwise the wineskins burst, and the wine pours out, and the wineskins are ruined; but they put new wine into fresh wineskins, and both are preserved."

In the text before us, we see two events unfolding. Jesus is twice presented with questions from religious people. These two events go together in several ways:

1. In all three synoptic gospels (Matthew 9:14-17; Mark 2:18-22; Luke 5:33-39), these stories are included right next to each other. The three writers recount the events in much the same manner as we have just read. We are told of Matthew being converted and throwing a party for Jesus. While reclining at the table, Jesus is questioned about the fact that He was associating himself with sinners and tax-gatherers. Jesus is questioned again concerning the fact that Jesus' disciples were not fasting.
2. In both events, Jesus was questioned by religious people, who were accusing Jesus of doing wrong in His practices. In verse 10, the Pharisees came and questioned Jesus concerning eating with sinners. In verse 14, it is the disciples of John who join the fray and ask Jesus about fasting.
3. In responding to these questions, Jesus gives answers that relate to His purpose for coming upon the earth. In verses 12 and 13, Jesus tells the Pharisees that His mission was to go and to call sinners to repentance. In verses 15-17, Jesus tells John's disciples that His mission as the Messiah was to create something new, rather than add to the old.
4. These events probably occurred during the same occasion in the life of Jesus. Not only did these religious leaders object to His dinner guests, but they also objected to the fact that He was having dinner at all!

It is because these two events in Scripture are so closely related that I have entitled my sermon this morning "The Mission of Jesus Christ (Part 2)." Six weeks ago, we examined the first of these two sections, specifically verses 9-13. In those verses, we studied Jesus' explanation of why He was eating with sinners. He was eating with sinners because He came to save them. Jesus did not come to earth for the righteous people who think that they can merit entrance into heaven simply because of their religious duties. On the contrary, Jesus did come to earth for those who see and know their sin full well. Jesus came for those who hate their sin and have repented of their sin. Six weeks ago, I challenged all of you to keep this in mind. Realize that our purpose is similar to the purpose of Jesus. We are not here simply to enjoy the presence of God in our own holy huddle. We are called as His ambassadors to go into the world and speak forth the gospel of reconciliation that sinners may experience with God, through Jesus (2 Cor. 5:19-20). When you see

someone who is lost in their sin, does your heart fill with compassion for them? Or, is your heart hard toward them? Do you desire to see them repent from their sin and find a Savior? Or, is your desire to run from them and not speak with them of the marvelous grace that is found in Jesus? Jesus frequently mixed with the riff-raff of society to the point that He was accused of being "a gluttonous man and a drunkard, a friend of tax-gatherers and sinners!" (Matt. 11:19). Those accusations did not come from nowhere. They came from Jesus' willingness to go to the house of Matthew, where many drunkards and sinners were. Those accusations were a result of Jesus' willingness to show forth His compassion for these sinners, and to call them to repentance so that they might find life in Him.

It was not only Matthew whom Jesus associated with. Do you remember Zaccheus, the rich tax collector? Zaccheus was the one whom all the people called, "a sinner" (Luke 19:7). Jesus went to Zaccheus' home and spent time with him. Do you remember the woman who Jesus met at the well? She had been divorced five times. Even in our society today where divorce is so common, being divorced five times is considered bad. But in their society it was all the worse! The woman was living in sin with a man at the time Jesus spoke with her, and Jesus knew that full well. Yet that did not stop Jesus from being concerned about her soul and speaking to her. Jesus was also willing to spend two days with the despised Samaritans (John 4:40). Do you remember the immoral woman who poured perfume on Jesus' feet and wet His feet with her tears? (Luke 7:36-39). Everyone at the feast where Jesus was knew that she was a sinner. Jesus knew that she was a sinner. Everyone despised the fact that Jesus would allow her to touch Him. Yet, Jesus received her gladly because of her faith. Jesus went to be with the down and out of society and called them to repentance and faith. **The mission of Jesus Christ was to call sinners to repentance.** We need to do likewise.

Let us focus our attention now upon our text this morning. We see first,

1. Religious Criticism (verse 14)

The religious criticism comes in the form of a question. We read in verse 14, "Then the disciples of John came to Him saying, 'Why do we and the Pharisees fast, but Your disciples do not fast?'" Similar to the question in verse 11, this is not a question whose purpose is to seek information from Jesus. It is a question of accusation. Jesus was being accused of wrongdoing. The accusation was raised because those who were religious were offended at Jesus' actions. In verse 11, the offense was a result of Jesus associating Himself with sinners. In verse 14, the offense was the result of Jesus failing to act religious.

In Mark's account of this situation, we are told that both the Pharisees and the disciples of John had joined forces against Jesus with this question. Mark says that "John's disciples and the Pharisees were fasting and they came and said to Him, 'Why do John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but Your disciples do not fast?'" (Mark 2:18). It is somewhat disappointing for us to find John's disciples linking arms with the Pharisees to accuse Jesus. The disciples of John the Baptist actually had little in common with the Pharisees. If anything characterized John's disciples, it was their mark of repentance. The opposite was true of the Pharisees; they were characterized by their proud refusal to repent. Furthermore, John the Baptist had strongly denounced the Pharisees. He called them a "brood of vipers" (Matt. 3:7) and a "den of snakes." When we think about these terms, we realize they are not nice names to be called. But to a religious Pharisee who had some knowledge of the Old Testament, being called these names would have been far worse. In the Bible, serpents are never seen in a good light. They are always bad. To speak of a snake was to conjure up the image of Satan himself who had seduced Eve in the garden (Gen. 3:1). These Pharisees knew that David had described evil and violent men by saying, "poison of a viper is under their lips" (Ps. 140). The Proverbs compare the terrible end that comes upon a drunkard as though it were like the bites of a serpent and the stings of a viper (Prov. 23:32).

John's message as the forerunner to the Messiah was one of repentance. John preached, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matt. 3:2). Those who followed John were identified by their repentance. When the Pharisees and Sadducees came for baptism by John, John rebuked them and told them to "bring forth fruit in keeping with repentance" (Matt. 3:8). That was something the Pharisees obviously were not doing. As a result, John said that the axe of God's wrath is laid at the root of the tree of their religion. God was ready to cut them off!

While the Pharisees were greatly concerned about their appearance before men, John the Baptist sought a place of seclusion. The Pharisees "loved the place of honor at banquets, and the chief seats in the synagogues, and respectful greetings in the market places" (Matt. 23:6,7). John secluded himself in the wilderness of Judea (Matt. 3:1). While the Pharisees were very careful in their clothing, to portray themselves as righteous, John clothed himself with clothes of humility. The Pharisees "broadened their phylacteries, and lengthened the tassels of their garments" (Matt. 23:5). But John came wearing "a garment of camel's hair" with "a belt about his waist" (Matt. 3:4) which was a sign of repentance. While the Pharisees loved celebrating their feasts, John ate "locusts and wild honey" (Matt. 3:4). John drank "no wine or liquor" (Luke 1:15). Certainly John's disciples followed him in these tendencies. Alfred Edersheim, the famous Jewish historian,

believed that the Pharisees were in many ways responsible for the imprisonment of John (Edershein, *Life & Times of Jesus the Messiah*, p. 453). If that were true, it certainly would be a cause of friction between John's disciples and the Pharisees.

Although the Pharisees and John's disciples seem to be entirely opposites, they did have one thing in common: they both practiced fasting. The Pharisees fasted every Monday and every Thursday (Didache 8:1; See also Luke 18:12). It is also certain that John frequently fasted in his seclusion in the wilderness, for Jesus said that John came "neither eating nor drinking" (Matt. 11:18). Luke tells us that John's disciples fasted "often" (Luke 5:33). Their one common practice is precisely the topic of their joint question to Jesus. Perhaps it was the only thing in which they could be united.

In Mark's account, we are told that "John's disciples and the Pharisees were fasting" (Mark 2:18). The question of fasting most likely came up, because Jesus' disciples were feasting at precisely the same time that John's disciples and the Pharisees were fasting. Have you ever seen a hungry dog watch his master eat food at the dinner table? There is great sorrow in the dog's eyes and longing on the dog's face. This was probably the situation that we have here with John's disciples and the Pharisees. They were in the middle of a fast, while Jesus was at Matthew's home enjoying a steak. They had hunger pains in their stomachs, while Jesus was feasting with His friends. As a result, they complained to Jesus, "Why do we and the Pharisees fast, but Your disciples do not fast?" The fact that Jesus is not fasting here is not a chance occurrence. This was a pattern in the life of Jesus. We know of only one time in which He fasted; it was during His temptation in the wilderness (Matthew 4:1-11). Other than that, we know of no other time when Jesus fasted. The Pharisees and John's disciples simply used this occasion to voice their criticism of Jesus. They were involved in their religion at great cost to their own bodily comfort, while Jesus, who professed to be a great religious leader, was satisfying His flesh with dainty morsels in Matthew's home. Fundamentally, I believe that their complaint against Jesus was that they were sacrificing greatly in their religious exercises. They were fasting and experiencing hunger pains in their bellies, while Jesus was enjoying the good things that God has given all of us to enjoy.

This passage holds great application for us here this morning. Religious criticism is a tremendous problem! The attitude of complaining at the lack of religious commitment of others is wide-spread, especially in legalistic circles. In commenting on this passage, John Calvin astutely observed, "It is an easy matter to distress about a trifle. ... [a man can] willingly compel the whole world to copy

his example. If any thing pleases us, we forthwith desire to make it a law, that others may live according to our pleasure."

One good example of religious criticism in our day is one's preference in style of music. Personally, I am pretty convinced that the Bible is silent regarding musical styles which can be used to worship God. I will admit that there are some styles of music which are so closely associated with sinful behavior, that over-involvement in them can easily lead the listeners to sin. But there are many in the church today who have come to a conviction that there is a certain circle of music that is acceptable to God, but that God hates and will not accept any music that is outside of that circle. There is often a highly judgmental attitude that comes along with such convictions, and it is similar to that of John's disciples and the Pharisees.

School choice is another example. I do not believe that people are more godly because of their schooling choices for their children. I believe that each case varies according to the home. Some factors that may influence schooling choices are the temperaments of the mom and of the children, the financial status of the family, and what schooling options are available. I have heard some people who are absolutely convinced that home-schooling is the only godly option we have available to us as Christians. I have heard people argue that Christian schools are the best choice, and I have even heard some people argue for public schools. When people become convinced their arguments are so right, then they can become highly judgmental at others who fail to live to their standard of righteousness.

Another good example of personal convictions that leads to judgmental attitudes is the attendance patterns at church services. I am aware of churches that have a Sunday morning service, a Sunday evening service, and a Wednesday evening prayer service. When people become members of these churches, they are often expected to attend each of these services. There is nothing wrong with this. In fact, I could easily argue that there is much good in this. The early church naturally assembled whenever they could. We are told not to neglect the assembling together (Heb. 10:24-25). However, your own spiritual commitment to attend church whenever it meets can easily cause you to become judgmental or complain toward those who do not attend all of the services like you do. At times, you may follow through on your own personal commitment to attend certain church services at great sacrifice to yourself (especially if you had a strenuous week). And so you begin to reason that people, who do not have the same commitment to attend church services as you do, must not be as spiritual as you are. This will only foster a religious criticism similar to the Pharisees and John's disciples. Simply

remember that when the heart becomes hungry for such activity, and the difficulties with attending are moved out of the way, there will be no stopping them from attending such activities. May we never come to judge others based upon our own legalistic convictions of commitment to Him.

The concern of John's disciples and the Pharisees flowed from a legalistic standard to which Jesus was not attaining. The Law had given commands for only one fast day, The Day of Atonement (Lev. 16:29-31), which is known by the Jews as Yom Kippur. Even here, the command to fast is only implied, as God told them to "humble your souls." The Jews understood that fasting was an appropriate expression of such humility that God commanded. Yet, over the centuries, the Jewish tradition added several other fast days to show how zealous and pious they were. This tradition had become so much a part of the culture that all were expected to fast on these days. But Jesus was never swayed by the traditions of men. His heart of compassion for Matthew led him to transgress the traditions of the Jews, and that prompted the question we see in verse 14.

We turn our attention from the Religious Criticism (verse 14) to Jesus' explanation of

2. Righteous Fasting (verse 15-17)

Jesus gives a two-fold answer to the religious criticism. First, Jesus says that ...

a. His Presence is a Reason to Rejoice (verse 15)

In verse 15, Jesus said, "The attendants of the bridegroom cannot mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them, can they? But the days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast" (Matt. 9:15).

The illustration that Jesus uses is a simple one. He describes a wedding ceremony. At a wedding ceremony, there is not normally any mourning or weeping. Thus, fasting is inappropriate. Tears that are shed at a wedding are normally tears of joy shed by the mother of the bride, as a man and a woman join their lives together and become one flesh. More particularly, Jesus focuses His attention upon the "attendants of the bridegroom." The literal rendering of that phrase is the "sons of the bridal-chamber". He is describing those who are the friends of the bridegroom, who are to take care of all of the arrangements surrounding the wedding. Most people attending a wedding have thought very little about the marriage taking

place. However, the "sons of the bridal-chamber" have been involved in the wedding celebration for weeks or months ahead of time, as they helped to make all of the proper arrangements.

Of all the people involved in a wedding, it is frequently the groom's attendants who have the reputation of enjoying the experience and being the spice of the wedding! Aren't the groomsmen the ones who take the initiative to do something to the car in which the bride and groom will travel away? They are the ones who tie the tin cans behind the car. They soap the windows with signs that read, "Just Married!" They wrap the car with toilet paper. They fill the car with balloons. I have been the best man in only one wedding (that of my brother). I certainly saw to it that this was done. Aren't the groomsmen the ones who write something on the bottom of the groom's shoes, so that when he kneels during the ceremony, his shoes say something for all to see? Perhaps you have heard of the standard prank that groomsmen have played on many grooms. At that key time in the ceremony when the bride and groom are going to exchange rings, the best man expresses great shock on his face, and frantically begins to search his pockets, looking for the ring. Finally, he turns to the next man in line, who is equally shocked. And also searches all of his pockets for the coveted ring. The same thing is repeated and repeated until it gets down to the last groomsmen who is standing up. When he searches his pockets and cannot find the ring, he finds a box of Cracker Jack, and reaches inside to finally pull out a ring!

The groomsmen at my wedding were no different. Through their means, they helped arrange an athletic challenge event. I was known for being an athlete among my friends. A few days before my wedding, I went out to dinner with some friends. After dinner, they took me to a park, where there were probably 20 guys ready to "compete" with me. They first dressed me up in a pink sweatshirt and a polyester Hawaiian shirt, along with a tie. My first event was to run a race against a man who ran track for UCLA. The race was probably a little more than a half mile. They tried to tire me out. They made up various other activities: races, chin-ups, basketball, Indian wrestling, bubble-gum blowing, burping, and so forth. In all, there were about ten different events where I competed against two different people. After each competition, there was a punishment waiting for me if I lost. I was pelted with water-balloons, had a shampoo with whipped cream, was forced to eat eggs and raw onions, had eggs cracked over my head, was dog-piled by 12 guys! Yesterday, I showed the video tape of the event to my children for the first time. They laughed quite a bit and really enjoyed it. Carissa especially wanted to see what my punishments were.

My point is this: a wedding is reason to rejoice! Jesus says here that the groomsmen in a wedding cannot help but to rejoice. They are not mourning, they are rejoicing. He said, "I am the bridegroom. My disciples are my attendants. We must rejoice." Thus fasting would be totally inappropriate. Jesus said that His presence among His disciples was a reason for them to rejoice.

In this illustration, Jesus describes His mission. He is the bridegroom. Certainly such a claim must have filled the minds of the Pharisees and John's disciples with many images from the Old Testament. In the Old Testament, God (or the Messiah) is compared to being Israel's husband. Let us look at a few instances:

- "Your husband is your Maker, whose name is the LORD of hosts. And your Redeemer is the Holy One of Israel, who is called the God of all the earth. For the LORD has called you, like a wife forsaken and grieved in spirit, even like a wife of one's youth when she is rejected" (Is. 54:5-6).

- "As the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so your God will rejoice over you" (Is. 62:5).

"I was a husband to them" (Jer. 31:32).

"'It will come about in that day,' declares the LORD, 'that you will call me 'my husband,' and will no longer call Me 'my master'" (Hosea 2:6).

In the New Testament, this imagery is used as well. Jesus uses verbal cues to foreshadow His mission. When Jesus described the kingdom, he described it as a wedding feast, in which many people were invited, but not many came (Matt. 22:1-14), some of whom were unprepared (Matt. 25:1-12). Paul described Jesus as the bridegroom to the church, sanctifying and purifying for Himself a spotless and blameless people (Eph. 5:25-27). Of course, when the church is finally gathered to be presented to Christ, it is described as "the marriage supper of the Lamb" (Rev. 19:9). When Jesus says these words, it is a Messianic claim for Himself. He said, "I am the groom! I'm the Messiah! The Messianic Age has arrived! This is a glorious time for me! This is a glorious time for my followers! We should not fast while I am here! Fasting at this point in time would be totally inappropriate because of my mission to redeem and gather a bride for myself!"

Jesus' claims did not matter to the Pharisees. They had established consistent fast days when they would regularly abstain from food as a part of their normal, religious exercise. No matter what Jesus said, they were not going to be interrupted. They often neglected their appearance and put a sad countenance upon their face to demonstrate to others that they were being religious. Jesus rebuked them in Matt. 6:16, "And whenever you fast, do not put on a gloomy face as the

hypocrites do, for they neglect their appearance in order to be seen fasting by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full." A little, trivial thing such as the Messiah being in their midst was not going to harm their nice, religious practice! "Let the fasts go on!" was their motto. And in so doing, they missed their Messiah! They liked their fasting instead.

Some of John the Baptist's disciples missed their Messiah also. We might have more of a heart for them, because of their heart of contrition before the Lord. But, they missed the Messiah as well. When Jesus spoke these words, their leader, John the Baptist, was in prison (Matt. 4:12). They had no leader. They were wandering about. But before he went into prison, John the Baptist had testified of Jesus. In John, chapter 3, beginning in verse 26, there was a crisis in the lives of John's disciples, because many were coming to Jesus, rather than to John. We read in John 3:26-30, ...

And they came to John and said to him, "Rabbi, He who was with you beyond the Jordan (i.e. Jesus), to whom you have borne witness, behold, He is baptizing, and all are coming to Him." John answered and said, "A man can receive nothing, unless it has been given him from heaven. You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, 'I am not the Christ,' but, 'I have been sent before Him.' He who has the bride is the bridegroom; but the friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly because of the bridegroom's voice. And so this joy of mine has been made full. He must increase, but I must decrease."

John said, "Jesus is the bridegroom! I'm just a friend of the bridegroom. He is the Messiah! I need to decrease in influence, but He needs to have greater influence." The implication of John's words is that his disciples should start following Christ, not John! They were disciples of the friend of the bridegroom! Of anybody, they should have received Jesus' words! But they did not understand what John was saying. When Jesus used this bridegroom metaphor, it is probable that John's disciples would have remembered John's words to them. Jesus used the perfect illustration for them; it was an illustration that was rich in Old Testament pictures and one that John the Baptist taught personally to his disciples.

Jesus' disciples did not fast because the bridegroom was in their presence! But, Jesus did foreshadow the time when His disciples would fast. Just as the presence of Jesus was time to rejoice. So also the departure of Jesus would resume a time when fasting would be appropriate. Continuing on in verse 15, we read, "But the days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and **then they will**

fast" (Matt. 9:15). Notice that Jesus spoke about the bridegroom being "taken away." This is an obvious allusion to His death. He did not say, "when the bridegroom goes away." Rather, the sense is that the bridegroom will be removed unwillingly. Almost every commentator that I read in regards to this phrase quoted Isaiah 53:8, which implies a violent, and unwilling death, "By oppression and judgment He was taken away; And as for His generation, who considered that He was cut off out of the land of the living, for the transgression of my people to whom the stroke was due?" Jesus was speaking about the time in which He would be rejected by the Jews. The Jews would falsely accuse Him before the Romans. The Romans would crucify Him upon a cross, but Jesus would save those who would believe in Him. Jesus knew that He was going to die. He knew that He would bear the wrath of God for sin in His body upon the cross. He knew that it would be difficult, but He also knew of the joy of sitting down at the right hand of the throne of God (Heb. 12:2), having accomplished everything that God had commanded Him to do. Jesus knew that when He finally departed, His followers would indeed fast once again. But He knew that their fasting would be different, because He has come and "was slain and purchased for God with His blood men from every tribe and tongue and people and nation" (Rev. 5:9). I believe that this is the key to understanding verses 16 and 17, in which Jesus gives His second answer to the religious criticism that was directed His way.

b. His Mission Calls for New Fasting (verses 16-17)

Jesus says in verse 16, "But no one puts a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment; for the patch pulls away from the garment, and a worse tear results." If your family has little boys, then your mothers probably have some firsthand knowledge about what Jesus is talking about. If you have a garment that needs patching, you do not patch it with an unshrunk patch. It may last for a little bit, but over time, the garment will need to be washed. In the washing process, the patch will shrink and will tear away from the garment. As a result, you have made a bad situation worse.

In verse 17, Jesus uses a similar analogy, "Nor do men put new wine into old wineskins; otherwise the wineskins burst, and the wine pours out, and the wineskins are ruined; but they put new wine into fresh wineskins, and both are preserved."

I do not think that any of us have firsthand knowledge of this process. But the principle with the wineskins is the same as with the patches. In Jesus day, they used animal skins to hold wine which was fermenting. They would kill the animal,

cut off its head and feet, skin the carcass and sew it up, so that the only opening in the animal hide was the neck. They then filled the skin with wine and allowed it to ferment. When the skins were new, they were pliable and elastic to accommodate the pressure of the fermenting wine. However, in time, the skins became hard and brittle. To put new wine into these skins would crack the skins and allow the wine to pour out. You would lose your wine and would have a big mess to clean up (see D. A. Carson, Expositors Bible Commentary, Matthew, p. 227).

These "parables," as Luke calls them (Luke 5:36), are not difficult for us to understand. The difficulty lies in figuring out what they mean. The interpretation is difficult. For help, I looked in the margin of my Bible for any cross-references, but I found none. Perhaps a few observations would help...

1. In both of these illustrations, there is a contrast between something old and something new. The patch was new and unshrunk, while the garment was old and shrunk. The wineskins that worked were the new and could stretch, while the wineskins that would crack were old and were not stretchable.
2. In both of these illustrations, their difficulty comes when you attempt to mix old and new things. The patch tears, because it is a new patch on an old garment. The wineskins break, because the new wine cracks the old.

The thrust of Jesus' illustrations, then, must be a contrast between something new and something old. Jesus is communicating how the old and the new cannot mix. The question then becomes, "What is Jesus talking about? What is old? And, what is new?" The context is undeniably linked to fasting. Jesus is saying these things in response to a question regarding fasting. I believe that Jesus is saying that this old system of Pharisaical fasting has got to go! You cannot fast the way the Pharisees fasted and be a follower of Jesus. Their fasting was highly regulated by their own traditions. They fasted twice per week (every Monday and Thursday). On the strictest fast, you could neither wash, nor greet another person. On a less strict fast, you might wash yourself (Edersheim, Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah, p. 456). Because their fasting was so deeply connected to tradition, they missed the heart of the matter. Their fasting was filled with superficial sorrow which was evidenced in the neglect of their appearance. Any right heart would have been looking forward and longing for Messiah to come! They missed it!

The coming of Jesus changed everything. When Jesus Christ came, His mission was to initiate the New Covenant, which obviously has implications on how we

live. This New Covenant was prophesied by Jeremiah. "Behold, days are coming," declares the LORD, "when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah, not like the covenant which I made with their fathers in the day I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, although I was a husband to them," declares the LORD. "But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days," declares the LORD, "I will put My law within them, and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. And they shall not teach again, each man his neighbor and each man his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' for they shall all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them," declares the LORD, "for I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more" (Jeremiah 31:31-34).

We can see similarities from Jesus' response in Matthew 9 with the passage in Jeremiah 31. In both passages, there is an emphasis upon God's presence among the people of Israel. In both passages, God views Himself as the husband (or bridegroom). In both passages, there is an emphasis upon something that is new and better than what was before. In both passages, there is a link to the coming of the Messiah. As Christians, we no longer need to look forward to our redemption and long for God to come and redeem us. He has already come and has redeemed us! We can look back to the cross! We can know the assurance of sins forgiven, through faith in Jesus Christ's death on the cross! Our sins have been paid! Our debt has been cancelled! We are free! We can rejoice in the forgiveness of our sins! This was the Mission of Jesus! His mission was "to give His life a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45).

Understanding the mission of Jesus in bringing forth the New Covenant has implications on our fasting. It does not remove fasting altogether, for Jesus said at the very end of verse 15, "they will fast." But it does give fasting a fresh twist! As the disciples were rejoicing in Christ's presence as the attendants in a wedding, so too can we rejoice in Jesus' coming for our sins. There is also a sense that Jesus Christ is always with us (Matt. 28:20). We do long for a future culmination, but our longing is different than that of the Jews.

Last August, when I preached on Jesus' words on fasting in Matthew 6:16-18, I surveyed the Scripture and found that Biblical fasting occurs for two reasons: (1) To demonstrate humility before God in times of confession. (2) To seek help from God in times of crisis. With the advent of the New Covenant, there is a newness that has come to each of these reasons. As we confess our sins, we know that "He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all

unrighteousness" (John 1:9). Our hope in Messiah is not a vague hope that he is coming sometime, somehow, and someday. When the LORD said, "I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more," we now know how God did that; He did it through the work of Jesus. We know that the cross is where God was just and was the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus (Rom. 3:26). God has accomplished redemption for His people! In this we can rejoice.

After the crucifixion of Jesus, we find only two mentions of fasting in the Bible. The first is recorded in Acts 13:2, when the leaders at the church in Antioch were fasting before the Lord in seeking guidance for the ministry of their church. The second is recorded in Acts 14:23, when the elders were appointed to lead the church. Such events are appropriate times of fasting, as we seek help from God in times of crisis. The apostles knew that Jesus had promised to build His church (Matt. 16:18). Their fasting enabled them to eagerly seek God's will with respect to the churches He established. We ought to fast during similar occasions in the life of our church as well, knowing that our Savior is ever pleading before God for us on our behalf (Heb. 7:25).

Let me close by asking you, "Do you fast?" Since preaching on fasting last August (when we were studying Matt. 6:16-18), I have been more aware of opportunities in which it would be entirely appropriate to seek the Lord in fasting. As a result, I have fasted a few times since then. How about you? Have you been aware of opportunities to fast? Have there been times in which you have felt the need to have a season of repentance? Have there been special times of crisis in your lives? Have you taken advantage of such opportunities to fast in a way consistent with the coming of Jesus? Jesus' mission has guaranteed that our humility and confession of sin will fall on ears willing to forgive. Jesus' mission is to build His church. As you fast for God's direction in this purpose, He will guide you.

This sermon was delivered to Rock Valley Bible Church on January 26, 2003 by Steve Brandon.

For more information see www.rvbc.cc.
