

Focus Text

“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, “Can the wedding guests mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them? The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast. No one puts a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old garment, for the patch tears away from the garment, and a worse tear is made. Neither is new wine put into old wineskins. If it is, the skins burst and the wine is spilled and the skins are destroyed. But new wine is put into fresh wineskins, and so both are preserved.” **(Matthew 9:14–17, ESV)**

1. Presence Transforms Practice

“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, “Can the wedding guests mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them? The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast.” **(Matthew 9:14–15, ESV)**

Following the argument that Jesus feasts with sinners, Matthew presents a more friendly question posed by the disciples of John the Baptist. It was customary in the first century for Jews to fast on Mondays and Thursdays as a call of mourning for the state of Israel. It had lost its splendor and was occupied by Rome; therefore, the religious leaders instituted fasting twice a week as a form of sorrow and mourning. Others are starting to notice that Jesus doesn't abide by the religious rules of the day. He speaks to Romans, touches lepers, and feasts with tax collectors. Jesus separates His ministry from those around Him. John was sent to call the people to repent and turn away from their sinful lives. Now that the King has arrived, Jesus sits as the Groom ready to receive His Bride (The Church). Once one has turned from sin, the wedding feast begins, and Jesus invites humanity to join the groom at the wedding feast. Jesus doesn't want His followers bawling around in fasting because for this moment the groom has come, and this feast is a celebration in preparation for His marriage. Jesus then foreshadows the coming days when He will not be with them, and they will need to mourn. What everyone isn't able to see is that the marriage that will bring humanity back toward God will be the Son's atoning work on the cross. But as Jesus walks the earth proclaiming the coming of the Kingdom of God, it is a joyful time, and His followers don't need to hang their heads in mourning; they should instead celebrate. This is highlighted in the healings, deliverances, and the forgiveness of sins that Jesus has pronounced!

For the modern Christian, we walk the path of mourning and hope. The groom has gone away with the coming of His return, and so we do fast and hold times of somberness and sobriety; however, we also look forward to the wedding, whether on the day we meet Jesus in paradise or when Jesus returns to the earth in His glory.

“The fasting in view is not that required by the Law on the Day of Atonement,¹⁷⁸ nor the private fasting of individuals in their own engagement with God (see 6:16–18; and 4:2, with discussion there). What is envisaged is a voluntary (as far as the Law is concerned) but collective and regular discipline of piety, as was the Pharisaic practice of fasting on Mondays and Thursdays.¹⁷⁹ Matthew’s use of ‘mourn’ (πενθεῖν) in 9:15 indicates that he sees these corporate acts of fasting as expressions of sorrow, presumably in connection with the parlous state of the people of God.¹⁸⁰ It was visible for all to see that the piety inculcated by Jesus was not focussed on self-deprivation (cf. 11:19, where, however, we must allow for an element of caricature).”¹

“In Matthew chapter 9, Jesus refers to himself as the bridegroom, a statement that distinguishes his ministry from other forms of Second Temple Period Judaism[1]. The context involves a celebration hosted by Levi, where Jesus is eating with tax collectors and sinners. When questioned about why he and his disciples do not fast like the Pharisees, Jesus explains that it is inappropriate for the “sons of the bridegroom” to fast while the groom is still present[1].

Jesus describes his table fellowship as a joyous wedding feast, contrasting fasting (which is associated with mourning) with the celebration of a wedding[1]. He places himself in the role of bridegroom, with his disciples as “friends of the bridegroom,” and is not necessarily equating this metaphor directly with his messianic role, but rather making a contrast with John the Baptist’s ministry[1].

By calling himself the bridegroom, Jesus expressed his purpose of bringing about God’s marriage with humanity, inviting everyone to respond to this gift

¹ 178 E.g., Lv. 16:29, 31.

79 Lk. 18:12; Did. 8:1; b. Ta’an. 12a; y. Pes. 4:1. For an allusion to John’s own practice see Mt. 11:18.

180 The focus could be on the problem of sin or on the downtrodden state of God’s people under foreign dominion (or both together).

Nolland, John. 2005. *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text*. New International Greek Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press.

of love, and calling all to answer love with love[2]. This imagery builds on prophetic traditions that understood the communion between God and people as a love story, where the people's infidelity to the covenant was metaphorically described as adultery[3].”²

2. Patchwork Won't Satisfy

“No one puts a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old garment, for the patch tears away from the garment, and a worse tear is made.” **(Matthew 9:16, ESV)**

One of the patterns we see in Matthew is that Jesus gives parables in threes, a standard teaching practice among the rabbis of Jesus' day. So, Jesus moves from the parable of the wedding feast to a parable of patchwork. Jesus doesn't continue with the teachings of His day as a symbol of a new tradition. Jesus has said that He hasn't come to abolish the law but to fulfill it. The point Jesus is making here is that, according to the prophet Jeremiah, it was known that God would eventually divorce Israel, in a sense, meaning that a time would come to end the Mosaic Covenant and its laws. But a new Covenant would take its place, where God's laws would be written on the hearts of the people, and we wouldn't be separate any longer from God. For that glorious covenant to happen, the law must be fulfilled, and a new law takes its place. Jesus is saying that trying to patch in the law with the new covenant won't work because God is making all things new. Paul echoes this in Corinthians that a person is made new in Christ, and the old person is gone away! The coming of Jesus marks a shift for God's people, and as the hymn declares, “there's no going back, no going back.”

² [1] Long, Phillip J. 2013. *Jesus the Bridegroom: The Origin of the Eschatological Feast as a Wedding Banquet in the Synoptic Gospels*. Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications.

[2] John Paul II. 2014. *Audiences of Pope John Paul II (English)*. Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana.

[3] Boland OP, Vivian. 2021. *The Spirit of Catholicism*. New York, NY: Bloomsbury Continuum.

“The strife about fasting suggests the contrast between new and old, between the old systems of the Pharisees and of John and the new system of Christ. But Mt., who connects by $\delta\acute{\epsilon}$, understood v. 16 as the continuation of the foregoing. Christ had justified the abstention of His disciples from fasting in v. 15. He now explains why He did not graft His teaching on to the old and outworn Pharisaic system of religion; why, in other words, He did not reinforce the whole system of religious observances as taught by the orthodox Jews. He does not emphasise the effect which would be produced on His own teaching. That is suggested by the next verse. Here He lays stress on the disastrous effects which His teaching would produce on Judaism. As the new patch makes a worse rent in an outworn coat, so His teaching would weaken rather than heal weak points in the religious system of Judaism. A system to which fasting and the like was essential, was outworn. That is why He introduced a conception of religion in which fasting was perhaps an expedient, but not a vitally essential element.”³

““Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the Lord. For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the Lord. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.” Thus says the Lord, who gives the sun for light by day and the fixed order of the moon and the stars for light by night, who stirs up the sea so that its waves roar— the Lord of hosts is his name.” **(Jeremiah 31:31–35, ESV)**

“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.” **(2 Corinthians 5:17, ESV)**

³ Allen, Willoughby C. 1907. A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to S. Matthew. International Critical Commentary. New York: C. Scribner’s Sons.

3. New Wine, New Wineskins

“Neither is new wine put into old wineskins. If it is, the skins burst and the wine is spilled and the skins are destroyed. But new wine is put into fresh wineskins, and so both are preserved.” **(Matthew 9:17, ESV)**

The third parable Jesus uses is that of not putting new wine into an old wineskin that cannot stretch any farther. Jesus is introducing the Kingdom of God onto the earth. We know it won't be completed until He comes a second time, but He is starting something brand new. Jesus isn't trying to graft Himself and His teachings onto the corrupted religious system of the day that the religious leaders are using as a political weapon. Doing things such as refusing to allow tax collectors into the temple, and allowing people to swindle people who come to Jerusalem by making them buy temple sacrifices for exorbitant prices. Jesus isn't saying that He's ignoring God's promises to Abraham and Moses; we have seen that Jesus cares deeply for the prophets. Yet the modern religious system of His time was only a shell of what it was meant to be. Jesus is casting off the weight of that shell or shill of a system for a celebration that brings eternal life. Jesus sees the religious leaders' oppression of the people and their failure to give them hope, and He wants no part of that. Instead, He has come to bring life to the fullest and invited His followers not to mourn and fast, but to eat and celebrate, because they are not in a dead religious system, but are engaged to be married to the groom!

“Jesus reinforces the point of the parable of the bridegroom with two further illustrations of the incompatibility of the old and new ages. One cannot put an unshrunk patch on an already-shrunk garment; for when it is washed, the patch will shrink, pulling at the garment and tearing it further.⁶⁴ Nor can wine that has not yet fermented—bubbling, expanding, and emitting gas—be put into old, brittle containers, or they will explode. One needs new containers that are more flexible. So too the new age Jesus inaugurates brings new practices appropriate to the changed circumstances, most notably in this context the joy of celebration rather than the sorrow of fasting. “Both” at the end of v. 17 refers to both “wine” and “wineskins” (the two nearest antecedents),⁶⁵ not to the old and the new, despite the popular view that

sees Matthew redacting his sources in a more conservative direction to make Jesus say that the old is preserved by means of the new.”⁴

Application

Christian Perfection: The Grace of Jesus never stops!

Methodists are deeply devoted to God’s grace. We believe that His grace is operative from birth till death, and if we cooperate with God’s grace, the Lord will continue to work in your life. This echoes Jesus’ description of a celebration of new life, not a hopeless set of rules to crush one’s spirit. Jesus wants us to mourn because the groom isn’t here yet, but to look for His coming with celebration because there is an excellent feast at His table.

This week, encourage someone in their walk with Jesus and remind them that if they have accepted Christ, they have a seat at His great banquet and Jesus continues to work in them! Amen!

⁴ 64 On the specific details of the grammar and imagery of this little parable, see esp. M. G. Steinhauser, “The Patch of Unshrunk Cloth (Mt 9:16),” *ExpTim* 87 (1976): 312–13, esp. 313: “No one puts a patch of unshrunk cloth on to an old cloak; because the patch of unshrunk cloth draws the overlapping section of the unshrunk cloth from the cloak and the tear becomes worse.”

⁶⁵ See Carson, “Matthew,” 227–28.

Blomberg, Craig. 1992. *Matthew*. Vol. 22. *The New American Commentary*. Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

“John Wesley viewed Christian Perfection as a profound work of God’s grace whereby Christians are cleansed from internal sin and set free to love God completely and love others as themselves. This involves being delivered from the internal principle of selfishness, set free from outward sin in new birth, and released to serve God with an undivided heart[1]. Wesley understood perfection as a single-minded devotion to God, characterized by absolute purity of intention that expresses itself in love for good and abhorrence of sin. This is not achieved through human effort, but is a gift of God’s grace that requires full cooperation[2]. While Wesley believed believers could attain perfect love and be restored to moral likeness of God, he also acknowledged that human imperfection remains due to our limitations and ignorance[3]. Ultimately, Wesley taught pure intention rather than perfect performance, viewing this as part of God’s broader renewal of creation and humanity’s relationship with God, others, and the world - a holistic understanding that goes beyond merely subjective spiritual experiences[3].”⁵

⁵ [1] Ayars, Matt, Christopher T. Bounds, and Caleb T. Friedeman. 2023. *Holiness: A Biblical, Historical, and Systematic Theology*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic: An Imprint of InterVarsity Press.

[2] Maas, Robin M. Van L., and Gabriel Odonnell. 1990. *Spiritual Traditions for the Contemporary Church*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press.

[3] Arnold, Klaus. 2018. *Full and Present Salvation in Christ: Life and Work of Theodor Jellinghaus*. Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications.