

What a Difference Jesus Makes!

Matthew 9:14-17

When I was a kid I was conflicted about the concept of partying. Of course, we celebrated birthdays and graduations and special events in my family, and I always enjoyed it. But when I was in Jr. High and High School I associated the word “party” with the wild kids on campus who did things they weren’t supposed to do behind their parents’ backs. I associated the word “party” with juvenile delinquency and deviant, defiant behavior, and therefore I avoided the party crowd like the plague. As a young Christian whose faith was more about dos and don’ts than about Jesus, I was convinced that Jesus would avoid these people too.

So when I discovered that Jesus was accused of being a partyer because He hung out with the party crowd, I was more than a little surprised. I was like the Pharisees and disciples of John the Baptist when they discovered the same thing. They were bewildered...and upset. We talked about the Pharisees last time, who accused Jesus of being a friend of tax collectors and sinners—the low life of first century Palestine. This morning we’re going to look at John’s disciples, beginning in **Matthew 9:14**. ¹⁴ *Then the disciples of John came to [Jesus], saying, “Why do we and the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?”*

This encounter between Jesus and John’s disciples came on the heels of Jesus attending a lavish party in the home of Matthew, the tax collector, whom Jesus had just invited to follow Him. Matthew was so excited about his new assignment with Jesus that he threw a big party and invited all his friends, with Jesus as the guest of honor. But some of those who saw Jesus fraternizing with sinners—eating and drinking and having a good time—criticized Him for what they perceived as *inappropriate* behavior.

For them, Jesus’ behavior didn’t correspond to godliness and spiritual maturity. In fact, it was quite the opposite. Their concept of appropriate behavior for Jesus and His disciples was self-denial and self-discipline, which is why John’s disciples asked Jesus why His disciples did not fast like them and the Pharisees.

The practice of fasting occupied a large place in the religious observances of first century Judaism. It was considered a sign of piety, because it was assumed that God was especially impressed with and attentive to people who fasted. So Pharisees typically fasted twice a week, on Monday and Thursday. John’s disciples may have fasted even more than that. Mark’s version of this event seems to suggest that both John’s disciples and the Pharisees were fasting on the very day that Jesus’ disciples were feasting at Matthew’s house (2:18).

The question John’s disciples posed to Jesus about fasting seems to suggest that they were siding with the Pharisees, who had just criticized Jesus for partying with tax collectors and sinners. But I think the question was born out of sincere confusion. Remember, John was preparing the way for Messiah, and that preparation required repentance and a certain austerity (Blomberg), an austerity that was reflected in John’s message and ministry style. John *never* feasted. Instead, he ate locusts and wild honey. John *never* dressed up to go out on the town. Instead, he wore a coarse, itchy camel hair cloak. His message was, “Hey everybody, it’s time to get serious about God, because He’s about to show up. So stop messing around. Stop wasting your time with frivolous things. Stop sinning and get your act

together.”

And for John’s disciples, perhaps even John himself, doing those things had a certain look, a certain posture, a certain set of behaviors. It looked *serious*, and therefore did not include laughter and fun and loud music and dancing. It looked like self-denial and self-discipline, and therefore did not include buffet lines and refills on glasses of wine.

So when John’s disciples saw Jesus’ disciples laughing and feasting and dancing and celebrating they were like, “Hey, what are you guys doing? You’re not supposed to behave like that! It doesn’t correspond to the kingdom of God that is supposed to be coming. It doesn’t align with our concept of what Messiah is supposed to be like! He’s supposed to be single minded and laser focused on getting that kingdom up and running, not being distracted by dinner parties with the local riff raff.”

Verse 15a. *¹⁵ And Jesus said to them, “Can the wedding guests mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them?”*

Jesus responds to the question about fasting with a question of His own—a question designed to force John’s disciples to consider the purpose of fasting, and why fasting doesn’t make any sense for Him and His disciples at the present time. And, not surprisingly, Jesus poses His question by using a metaphor. He compares Himself to a Bridegroom, and His disciples to groomsmen who are His companions at a wedding celebration.

The Old Testament sometimes used the metaphor of a wedding to describe Yahweh’s relationship with Israel. In that metaphor the Bridegroom was Yahweh (Isa. 62:5; Hos. 2:19-20), and it depicted His unconditional, unfailing love for His bride, Israel. John’s disciples were well aware of this. And so they would have concluded that Jesus was declaring that He was the very One about whom those Scriptures were written. *He was Israel’s Bridegroom.*

But notice again what He says: *“Can the wedding guests mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them?”*

The word translated “wedding guests” is literally “sons of the bridal hall” or “companions,” and it is clearly a reference to Jesus’ disciples. The word refers particularly to “...the wedding guests who stood closest to the groom and played an essential part in the wedding ceremony” (BAGD). We call them groomsmen in our culture. They are the closest friends of the groom, and their job at a wedding is to attend the groom and make sure He has everything He needs and that nothing will distract or hinder the celebration.

What Jesus is describing in verse 15 came into much clearer focus for me when we lived overseas in another culture. In the Punjabi community weddings are extravagant affairs that last for several days. For the Punjabi community of Nairobi, the nights leading up to the formal ceremony are comprised of a series of lavish festivities in an ornate hall, hosted by the bride and groom’s parents and administered by the groomsmen. There are games, speeches, dancing, singing, feasting, and reveling until the wee hours of the morning. This goes on for several consecutive nights until the actual day of the wedding, which is the climax of the weeklong celebration and, thus, the most extravagant event of all.

If you are a *groomsman* in the Punjabi community, your job is not just to get this party started, but to keep it going, full steam, without a lull, for the entire week. Your job is not only to be attentive to the groom—making sure he is happy and all his needs are met; your job is to be attentive to all his *guests*, making sure all of *them* are happy and all *their* needs are met. Your job is to mitigate all the distractions and mishaps that might sabotage the festive mood, to fuel the celebratory energy so that it keeps running at its peak, and to maintain the

joyous atmosphere until the last guest goes home. In short, your job is to make sure everyone has the time of their lives.

That description of a Punjabi wedding is not unlike weddings in Jewish culture at the time of Christ. And it was this image of an extravagant, joyous wedding celebration that Jesus is using in verse 15 to describe the behavior of Jesus and His disciples.

The long anticipated Bridegroom, Jesus, has finally arrived, which is cause for the grandest, most lavish celebration ever. And His groomsmen are the disciples, whose job it is to keep the party going. Thus, fasting is inappropriate. Fasting is associated with mourning; fasting is associated with desperation and deprivation. And since Jesus is now here, we're no longer desperate, we're no longer deprived, we're no longer sad. As David said in Psalm 16, *"In his presence there is fullness of joy; at his right hand there are pleasures forevermore"* (Psalm 16:11).

What are those pleasures as it relates to being in Jesus' presence? His disciples got to see Jesus heal people of their illnesses, deliver them from demons, forgive them of their sins, and raise them from the dead! They got to see Him calm hurricane force winds with a simple command! These are things to be excited about! This is cause for celebration! And so forget fasting and mourning! It's time to feast and rejoice and revel in Jesus' presence!

That's the response Jesus gives to John's disciples' question about why His own disciples do not fast. But mind you, Jesus is not against fasting, and He's not saying that fasting will never be appropriate for His disciples. He goes on in the last part of verse 15 to say, *"The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast."* Jesus is making a reference to a time in the future when fasting will be a feature of discipleship because He will no longer be with them. And when Jesus says, "The bridegroom is taken away from them," the language suggests a violent removal, which is likely a reference to Isaiah 53:8, a foreshadowing of Jesus' crucifixion.

Jesus is stating that there will be a time in the future when fasting *will* be appropriate for His disciples, because without the Lord in their presence they will experience challenging circumstances that will require an intense time of discerning God's will or seeking God's face. But even then, it will be different, simply because the Bridegroom has already come, His kingdom has been inaugurated, and things are different from now on because of that. And that includes how we relate to God and express ourselves to Him. Look what Jesus says in **verse 16**. ***16 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.***

Jesus uses a different metaphor to reinforce why the traditional methods of expressing ourselves to God are not compatible with what God is now doing. He says if you have an old garment with a tear and you want to mend it, it would be counterproductive to sew on a patch made of new cloth—cloth that has not previously been shrunk. That's because that new patch will inevitably shrink when the garment is washed, and it would pull at the old garment, tearing it further and creating a bigger hole.

Here's the point: Jesus has not come just to patch up the worn out religious traditions of Judaism. He's come to establish a whole new way of relating to God that surpass the old ways. And that is no small matter. Jesus has come to change the way we worship—the forms, the expressions, the activities, the attitudes, the behavior! What is acceptable and appropriate worship is going to be different now that Jesus and His kingdom have come.

And the implications of this in terms of what it means for His followers—who are the true worshipers of God—are so consequential that Jesus repeats Himself by using yet

another metaphor in **verse 17**. *17 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.*"

In the ancient world, when grapes were pressed into juice, the juice was stored in animal skins. Of course, when wine sits in a container it ferments, and the process of fermentation puts a lot of pressure on those wineskin containers, causing them to stretch and become thinner and less elastic.

People learned not to put new wine into old wineskins, because if they did the process of fermentation would cause those skins to burst, and it would destroy both the container and the wine. Instead, they put new wine into fresh wineskins, so that both could be preserved.

Again, Jesus is illustrating that God is doing something new in the world that's going to change the way people relate to Him, and that new thing is not compatible with old systems and structures. I believe He is specifically talking about the ways His people express their devotion to God in the forms and structures of worship.

Remember, these comments are in the context of the question John's disciples asked Jesus about fasting, a practice that serious Jews believed endeared them to God and secured His blessing. But Jesus, in verses 16 and 17, is telling them that things have now changed. The forms, expressions, and activities of worship are different now that Jesus and His kingdom have come.

I believe Jesus is referring to many other worship rites and customs that would either become obsolete, or take on an entirely new meaning in the new order of things. This would include things like animal sacrifices, which became obsolete with the death of Christ on the cross; circumcision, which would no longer be the sign of the covenant; and many other things in the ceremonial law that were fulfilled in the life and death and resurrection of Christ. This would include the rite of baptism, which took on an entirely new meaning after Pentecost than it had in Judaism or even in the ministry of John the Baptist. This would include what we now call the Lord's Supper, which Jesus instituted during the Passover meal, and which now trumps Passover in terms of its significance.

Of course He didn't explain any of these things to John's disciples. He would let them, and even His own disciples, figure it out in due time. But Jesus wanted them to know that He was not merely introducing a revised and updated version of Judaism. His coming is a game-changer. Getting back to the illustration of a wineskin, the changes that He was going to make cannot be contained or confined within the old religious system. They are incompatible. We would say it this way: It's like trying to put a square peg into a round hole. It won't work because it doesn't fit.

This did not mean that Jesus was rejecting the Old Testament. We already learned in the Sermon on the Mount that He didn't come to abolish the Law and Prophets, but to fulfill them (5:17). As one New Testament scholar wrote, "What He repudiated was not Scripture, but the current religious practices allegedly based on Scripture. He did not even repudiate those practices all at once and call on His followers to forsake Judaism. But He did repudiate the suggestion that they should remain confined within the accepted understanding of the old system. His new approach could not be fitted into those old forms. His followers must find new forms or there would be religious disaster" (Leon Morris, *The Pillar New Testament Commentary*).

A few years after Jesus ascended into heaven the Apostles averted a near disaster when they were dealing with Judaizers in the church who were insisting that Gentile converts

had to be circumcised in order to be saved. Paul had to rebuke the Galatian church for the same reasons. They were trying to put new wine into old wineskins, and had they succeeded, it would have destroyed the church in those communities.

You might be thinking, after reading this passage and hearing me try to explain it, “Why didn’t Jesus just tell John’s disciples in plain, straightforward language why His own disciples did not fast? Why does He answer their question by talking about a wedding, a patch on an old garment, and wine and wineskins? Why doesn’t He sit them down and spend a couple of hours explaining why the old ways of worship were going to be replaced with new ways of worship?”

We will discover why in Matthew 12. But suffice it to say that Jesus spoke and taught the way He did because He knew, at any given time, what His audience was ready to hear, and when they were ready to hear it. We see a progression in the Gospels with His own disciples—that Jesus progressively gave them more information about what God was doing in the world and how the kingdom would advance and what needed to happen in order for God’s will to be done. But ultimately, they didn’t really “get it” until after He died on the cross and rose from the dead and ascended into heaven, and then gave them the Holy Spirit, who enabled them to understand it.

The point is, Jesus knows what He’s doing, and what He does and what He says and how He says it is always best. Aren’t you glad we have His words preserved in the Scriptures so that we can marvel at His goodness and His grace?

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Main Idea: Since Jesus and his kingdom have come religious forms and customs have undergone a radical change

A Question about Fasting (14)
John’s disciples

John’s message and ministry style

Jesus’ disciples’ apparent neglect

A Question about Appropriate Behavior (15-17)
Metaphor of a wedding (15)
Jesus is the anticipated Bridegroom

Jesus’ disciples are groomsmen at his wedding
Celebration is appropriate for a wedding

Mourning is incompatible with a wedding

Jesus’ disciples will fast when Jesus is taken away

Illustration of unshrunk cloth (16)
New cloth and old cloth are incompatible

Patching an old garment with new cloth makes matters worse

Illustration of wine and wineskins (17)
New wine and old wineskins are incompatible

New wine must have a new wineskin for both to be preserved