

Fasting - Mark 2:18-22

by Travis Dean

May 22, 2010

Our story today refers to the practice of fasting. I remember the first time I attempted fasting. I was a student in academy. There were a couple students who seemed to be very spiritual. I remember them skipping supper as a part of a fast. I was impressed with their devotion and tried following their example. I don't remember the details of this experience, but I do know that my commitment didn't last long. My hunger overpowered my desire to emulate these spiritual students. About ten years after this experience I made another decision to fast. This time I was a pastor at La Vida Mission in New Mexico. I was in the midst of a very depressing time of my life. I was at my wits end, and as a last resort, I decided to go without food and water until I had an answer to my quandary. Remarkably, I experienced no hunger pangs during this time. I read the Bible and other Christian books, and felt that the time was meaningful. A few days later I ended my fast. There had been no fire from heaven but I did experience some degree of fulfillment from this experience. I culminated this time with a little celebration by shaving my beard.

As I prepared this sermon, I learned some things about fasting. And I hope our story today sheds some light on this practice for you as well. Before we begin, I invite you to bow your heads with me.

Here is a summary of our story today: *The disciples of John and of the Pharisees asked Jesus why His disciples were not fasting as they were. Jesus answered their question with three analogies. He said that for His disciples to be fasting would be like fasting at a wedding, like tearing a piece of cloth off of a new garment in order to patch an old one, or like putting new wine into old wineskins.*

Let's now consider what John's disciples experienced in our story today. First, they experienced fasting. How did the Jews practice fasting? I invite you to turn with me to Isaiah 58:4, 5. God finds fault with the Jews' motives for fasting. They fasted "for strife and debate". They fasted in order "to make (their) voice heard on high." In other words, in order to be heard by God. They thought the practice of fasting would give them brownie points with God. Verse 5 gives a description of what they did during their fast. They afflicted their souls, or, in other words, they spent time confessing their sins. They bowed down their heads like a bulrush and put on sackcloth and ashes. This is all an outward show that they believed made God pleased. If you read on, you will discover that God was not pleased with this kind of fast. It is likely that the Jews in Jesus' day practiced fasting in much the same way as we find here in Isaiah. In fact, Jesus will counsel against this type of fasting in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 6:16). According to a 1st century document on fasting, the Jews fasted on Monday and Thursday. Luke 18:12 mentions a Pharisee boasting to God about fasting twice a week. Some believe that the reason for this dates back to Moses' fast on Mount Sinai for forty days and nights mentioned in Deuteronomy 9:9. So, John's disciples experience fasting in our story today.

They also experienced resentment. You may remember that Mark mentioned in chapter 1 verse 14 that John had been put in prison. So his disciples were probably still mourning his imprisonment in our story today. They were fasting in sorrow. The fact that Jesus hadn't rescued John from prison probably irritated them. And now they were given another reason to resent Jesus' actions. He is not instructing His disciples to fast as the Pharisees have taught them to. It is likely that the Pharisees were behind some of the resentment of John's disciples. In our last story, the Pharisees complained about Jesus eating and drinking at Levi's house, and tried to use this to alienate Jesus' disciples from Himself. This time they point out Jesus' failure to instruct His disciples to fast. Once again their motive is to alienate. And this time they target John's disciples instead of Jesus' disciples. As we know from Mark 1:6, John ate a very simple diet of locusts and honey. But Jesus has just attended a banquet at Levi's house, and now on Monday or Thursday, His disciples are not fasting. John's disciples bite the hook the Pharisees dangle in front of them. They are offended. They experience resentment.

Last of all, John's disciples experienced word pictures. They came to Jesus ready for a debate, ready to engage in a conflict. They wanted a direct answer and probably anticipated an argumentative response. But they must have been taken off guard. Jesus didn't respond with either of these. Instead, He related to them

three analogies. First, he used the word picture of a wedding. He described the experience of a bridegroom and his friends. This is a very significant analogy. I invite you to turn with me to John 3:27-29. This passage of Scripture takes us back to when both Jesus and John were preaching and baptizing in Judea. Jesus is beginning to pull more crowds than John. And John's disciples are upset about this. They come to John, complaining. Now let's read how John responds, beginning with verse 27. John assures his disciples that watching the people go after Jesus brings him joy. And notice the analogy he uses: a wedding. He uses the same analogy as Jesus does in our story today. When John's disciples recalled this analogy, it must have drawn in their interest. They recalled the good old days. They were reminded of John's commendation of Jesus. This word picture revealed that they had a lot of common ground with Jesus. They had more in common than they had differences. With this first word picture John's disciples were disarmed. They were probably softened a little.

John's disciples were given a second word picture. It's a picture of someone sewing. In these days all sewing was undoubtedly done by hand. Over time a garment would wear out and become torn. The picture is of someone taking a piece of new cloth from a new garment in order to patch an old one. Such a practice would have undoubtedly seemed ludicrous to John's disciples. The third word picture they were given involved a similarly unlikely scenario. Someone has just made some new wine. It is still in the process of fermenting. Back in those days they stored wine in wineskins. These were leather pouches made from sheep or goat skin. After sitting for a while, they became hard and brittle. Putting new wine into these old wineskins would have seemed unthinkable to John's disciples. As the new wine fermented it gave off carbon dioxide. This would require a flexible wineskin that would allow for the release of this gas. The only result of putting new wine into old wineskins would be a big mess. The old wineskins would burst, and the wine would spill all over the place.

In all three of these word pictures John's disciples were given a picture of actions that would be unthinkable: (1) Fasting at a wedding; (2) Using a new piece of cloth to fix an old garment; and (3) Putting fermenting wine into brittle wineskins. We are not told how John's disciples responded to these word pictures or if they connected the dots from the analogies to the issue at hand, namely, fasting. They may have left with a lot of thinking to do. Or it is possible that they got the point, and realized that it was unthinkable to expect Jesus' disciples to fast at this time.

So, what did Jesus experience in our story today? First of all, He experienced conflict. As we have been going through the book of Mark, Jesus has repeatedly experienced conflict. In Mark 1:13 Jesus experiences conflict from Satan in the wilderness. Satan comes tempting Jesus. In Mark 1:23-24 Jesus is confronted with a demon in the synagogue - another conflict. In Mark 2:6-7 and again in verse 16 Jesus is confronted by the Pharisees - still more conflicts. Today's story pictures Jesus in yet another conflict. This is number five and it's only the second chapter. As I have already mentioned, the Pharisees were likely instigating this conflict between Jesus and John's disciples. The Pharisees seemed to be ready instruments for Satan's use in bringing Jesus into repeated conflicts during His life and ministry.

Second, Jesus experienced disarming hostility. As we have already considered, Jesus' use of the wedding analogy probably recalled good memories in the minds of John's disciples. By using this analogy Jesus revealed to them that they had a lot of common ground to base their relationship on. And He further assured them that His disciples will fast later. In verse 20 Jesus says, "But the days will come when the bridegroom will be taken away from them, and then they will fast." Later on, Jesus will be gone, and then His disciples will have an experience similar to what John's disciples are experiencing now. And they will fast, too. So, with Jesus' use of word pictures, He disarmed hostility.

How does this story reveal Jesus as our example of a healthy and dangerous Christian? First of all, He is our example in that He brought joy. Jesus equates His coming to earth to a wedding. A wedding is a time to celebrate. Everyone gets dressed up. The bride and groom look their very best. Two people who have fallen in love are committing to spending the rest of their lives together. It's a great event. And Jesus says the time He is spending with His disciples is like this. It's like a wedding. The Son of God has come to earth! This has never happened before. And He is here to propose! He has come to "marry" the human race back to God by His life, death, and resurrection. I imagine the joy Jesus brought was similar to when my parents come for a visit.

Elijah and Abigail are always glad when grandpap & grandma come for a visit. Elijah has learned to recognize their car. We say, "Guess, who's here!" And Elijah says excitedly, "Grandpap and grandma!" Their presence brings joy.

So, we learn from our story today that a healthy and dangerous Christian is someone who awakens joy. It's someone who is enjoyable to be around. There are some people who claim to be Christians who carry a cloud around with them. People see them coming and think, "Oh no, here comes so and so...." But a healthy and dangerous Christian awakens joy. People are glad to see them because they anticipate an enjoyable time. They equate their presence with being blessed.

This story also reveals Jesus as our example of a healthy and dangerous Christian in that He disarmed hostility. When Jesus was confronted with hostility, He didn't respond with argumentative words. He didn't choose to be controlled by the same spirit. Turn with me to Proverbs 15:1. These words were written by the wisest man, other than Jesus, who has ever walked this earth. And his perception was that a soft answer turns away wrath. We also learn this from our story today. And we learn that a healthy and dangerous Christian is someone who disarms anger. Anyone can react to anger with anger. That comes quite natural to those with type A temperaments. Anyone can walk away from hostility with their tail between their legs, nursing their wounds. That comes quite natural to those with type B temperaments. But to see them as a brother or sister....to see them as someone who may be our neighbor in heaven...and then to disarm their hostility - this is the experience of a healthy and dangerous Christian. It takes tact. It takes insight. But the same Spirit that lived this out in Jesus' life in our story today, has been given to us, so that we, too, might disarm hostility.

As I have reflected on this story the question has gone through my mind: Where did John's disciples go wrong? How did they get in a position where they were resenting Jesus' actions? Just a few months before they witnessed John rejoicing at Jesus' arrival. There was excitement that Jesus was the Messiah they had all been waiting for - for hundreds of years! Mark doesn't tell us explicitly where John's disciples went wrong, but their experience is a warning to us. It brings to mind the danger of following a person.

It has been a tendency throughout history to follow a person, a religious leader. Some have become followers of Moses, others of Mohammed, and still others Martin Luther. People say, "What they believed is what I believe." Some of you may be familiar with the Apostles' Creed. It's a statement of beliefs that some claim to be straight from the 12 apostles. But to follow even the 12 apostles is to make a big mistake.

There was a group of Christians in the 1800's who resisted the tendency to follow a person. They became a strong movement that is now known as the Seventh-day Adventist Church. The Seventh-day Adventist movement is a group of people who carry on the work of those who have gone before us instead of sitting on it. Ellen White and the other Adventist pioneers built on the truth that the Reformers had taught. And by God's grace the Seventh-day Adventist Church will continue to build upon the truth that the Adventist pioneers taught. They will continue to carry on the work of those who have gone before us.

There has been and always will be only two groups. Those who follow Jesus Christ, and those who follow something or someone else. God is looking today for people who resist the tendency to follow a person. He is looking for those who will resist the tendency to follow a set statement of beliefs. God is looking for people who will follow Jesus Christ. There is no higher position than to be a follower of Jesus Christ. You can't get any higher than that. Jesus is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. All who follow Him will never go wrong.