

Reading: Matthew 9:9-17

Theme: Not rituals, but relationship.

No doubt we have all met people for whom nothing is ever right or good enough. They can always find fault with anyone or anything and they are never happier than when they do so! In chapter 9 we can see a number of occasions when people question, disbelieve or criticise Jesus and His disciples (v3, 11, 14, 24b & 34). Yet these criticisms give rise to some glorious truths which we need to learn from and apply to our lives - Jesus has power to forgive sins, Jesus will welcome sinners to Himself and here in v14-17 we have Jesus' care of those He welcomes. From v14-17 there are a number of things to see and apply to ourselves, whether we are Christians, maybe thinking Christian things over or even if we are merely content with being religious or churchgoers. I want us to note 3 things:

1. Bondage and Sadness. (v14)

This account of the disciples of John going to and questioning the Lord Jesus, follows the account of Jesus and His disciple being at a feast with tax collectors and sinners. Mark tells us in 2:18 "*Now John's disciples and the Pharisees were fasting*" and some of John's disciples came and asked Jesus why He and His disciples were not fasting. It seems they were feasting while the others were fasting!

An interesting grouping - John's disciples and the Pharisees! Both were a religious Jewish group, who practiced fasting, lived strict and disciplined lives. To be fair, John's disciples would have been sympathetic towards Jesus, but the Pharisees may have questioned them and prompted, stirred up questions concerning Jesus as a man of God - while they fasted, why did Jesus and His disciples feast! Perhaps the Pharisees wanted to win John's disciples over

to their side and view of Jesus as false and not of God, or maybe even tried to cause a quarrel between Jesus' and John's disciples.

We are to be careful to whom we listen to, as we could listen to those who would oppose the things of God, who could so easily plant the seeds of division and argument and breakup relationships and friendships. The devil would love to spoil the work here in our church and in our lives and he would do so if we give way to petty criticisms, especially caused by those who in their actions, minds and hearts resent God's work and people here.

John's disciples brought these questions to Jesus. Rather than keep silent, they came with an honest request for information to answer the question prompted through discussions with the Pharisees - asking why they fasted, but Jesus' disciples did not. Jesus only deals with the 2nd part of their question, does not criticise them or their practice. He wants to lead them onto the truth, rather than isolate them in defence of their position.

Fasting was commanded by God in OT only on one occasion - the day of atonement (Leviticus 23:27). Other praying and fasting occasions are noted and are taken as right and proper, but only when there were exceptional circumstances. Fasting as a matter of routine or habit or practice is never commanded and was not mentioned as needed in OT. Sadly, over the years, the centuries, fasting became a religious thing to do. If you said you loved God, then you had to fast and pray to please Him. So, by the time of Jesus it was accepted to fast to 3 times a week. If you did not do this, then you could not possibly be serious about God and were not pleasing Him!

The Pharisees and, we assume, John's disciples felt this. So, the veiled criticism from the Pharisees, must have been that Jesus and

His disciples were not really out to please God, but were gluttons and therefore not godly. John's disciples truly wanted to know why Jesus' disciples did not fast.

Both the Pharisees and John's disciples were in bondage and sadness to rites and rituals. They became religious - probably John's disciples with sincerity had imposed such fasts upon themselves. They probably lived strict, disciplined and austere lives, feeling this was the way to please God, but they were in bondage and sadness.

In reaction to our pleasure-loving days, we still find people who feel that they must live harsh, joyless and even sad lives to be a Christian. They even feel that is what being a Christian is - being religious and not doing this or that, not being happy and certainly not smiling!! That is religion - going through dos and don'ts, conforming to rites, rituals and self-imposed rules. Christianity is not that at all; being a Christian is not a matter of external things, for it is something radically different - as Jesus goes on to show.

Let's pause a moment. Does anyone here view Christianity as a hard bondage, a life that must be joyless and harsh? If that's the case, then you are viewing the Christian life as a religion and setting up rites rituals and rules where they should never be. See what Jesus says about such and have a radical rethink!

2. Liberty and Joy. (v15)

Jesus uses an example of a bridegroom and a wedding. The way He phrases the question in the Greek is such that the answer **must** be "*No, they cannot possibly mourn.*" It would be ridiculous for the guests, the friends to mourn and fast at the wedding feast! Such is a time of joy, celebrating and feasting as these ones would rejoice with the bridegroom, his bride and their families.

Jesus explains and justifies the actions of His own disciples and does so in a way that does not condemn the sincere, even if misguided practices of the disciples of John. Interestingly, Jesus builds on a picture that was first said by John the Baptist in John 3:29 in answer to his disciples about Jesus' growing popularity *"The bride belongs to the bridegroom. The friend who attends the bridegroom waits and listens for him, and is full of joy when he hears the bridegroom's voice. That joy is mine, and it is now complete."*

Here we are given an insight into Christianity as something of joy, of enjoyment and of liberty. Jesus' disciples had every reason to eat and be happy for the bridegroom Himself was with them - the most important person in the Middle Eastern wedding was the bridegroom. If these guests, friends had reason to celebrate, how much more so did the bride! She would have many more reasons to celebrate - as she was to be his, and he was to be hers.

Throughout the Bible, both in OT and NT, there is an amazing, unbelievable relationship shown us between Almighty God and all who trust in Him as their God and Saviour - that He is the Bridegroom and they are the Bride! This speaks of a relationship, of love, of joy. We see this love coming first from the Lord and as a young or older person comes to realise, know that love, they love Him in return. We love Him, because He first loved us.

This is the basis of the gospel - in trusting in the Lord Jesus as our Saviour, we do not become religious, having a list of dos and don'ts to get to heaven, but we come into a relationship and are the subjects of God's love, receive that love which affects our lives and attitudes. We begin to love Him and want to do that which pleases Him, to avoid that which does not please Him. We are free

to do and enjoy many, many things and can do so as long as we know they please Him. Yes, we may fast in exceptional circumstances, but we do not have to fast to keep His love or earn merit points get into heaven.

Jesus says here that His disciples would fast. They would know a time when Jesus was seemingly lost to them, gone from them and so they would fast, sorrow and mourn while He was dead. There are occasions when we can and are to fast even as believers and we touched on these things when we looked at Matthew 6:16-17 last year.

Let's just pause a moment and move away from the question of fasting and consider a much more important question. Do we have any personal experience of this loving relationship with the Lord Jesus as our Saviour? I'm not asking if you are or if you will become religious, but am saying what the Bible says – that you need to have a loving and living relationship with the Son of God, the Lord Jesus for yourself. If that is possible, as we as a church feel the Bible says it is, shouldn't you be going all out to know this great God in this incredible way? This is something radical, it is not rehashed or dressed up religion, Jesus speaks further of this in v16-17, so we see:

3. New, Not Old. (v16-17)

For the disciples to fast and do all sorts of religious rites and rituals would not do. Jesus uses 2 illustrations to show that it would be inappropriate for the disciples to fast in a ritualistic way. Here was Jesus and He was working miracles, casting out demons, would raise the dead, heal the blind, would bring the good news to the poor, to “sinners” and tax collectors and He was announcing forgiveness of sins. Here was something new and radical. It was not a reworking of religious man-made ideas or set ordinances

such as set fasts and prayers. Jesus uses two illustrations here to show the gospel way would not fit into man's own ideas of getting to God, for the gospel was new and radical, not something old reworked or imitated.

The first illustration is that of a worn-out cloth or garment e.g. an old shirt. It has been used, it is old, has a hole in it; you would be foolish to put a piece of new unshrunk cloth in it as a patch to repair it. The Greek word indicates *an unshrunk wool patch*. When the patch gets wet, it shrinks and the old shirt or cloth will rip more as it shrinks and you make a greater hole in it and ruin the shirt or the cloth. It is no good to do that. It would be better to get a totally new piece of cloth or shirt altogether, in the same way Christianity was new and different from Judaism, especially from man-imposed ways of trying to get to God that people had added to the OT appointed way to go to God.

The second illustration is that of wineskins. They didn't have bottles in those days, but the skin of goats or a sheep were prepared and dried properly, were sewn up and sealed and then filled with new wine. Because the skin was new and fresh, as the new wine continued to ferment a bit in the skin, so the new skin would expand and stretch and able to remain intact, allow the wine to settle down and mature. If new wine was put into an old skin, which had set, yet was not hard, but had lost its elasticity, then the new wine would burst it.

Jesus is saying that the new wine of the gospel, would not stay contained in old man-made ideas, nor former ordinances and rituals. The gospel was something new, had to be viewed and treated as such. People were not to try and fit it into old religious systems, no matter how seemingly good or appealing.

If you are trying to earn and work your way to heaven, you do not have this new wine, nor this new cloth. You are trying old ways - even if you tag it onto or try to fill up on religious things to help you. You are in a right pickle, as you are doing things your way which is totally different God's way.

God says *"For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith - and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God"* (Ephesians 2:8) I urge anyone who thinks they can do their bit, do good even in church and Christian things and be ok with God, to seriously consider what Jesus is saying here, that the gospel of God's grace and man imposed rites, rituals, fastings etc. do not mix and are not compatible. We cannot get right with God, be able to go to heaven by doing things our way. DIY is not possible with salvation. There's only one way to be able to go to heaven - through the Lord Jesus and all He has accomplished for us.

Yes, there came a time when the disciples did fast - not only when Jesus died, but even after they'd seen Him alive. Paul the apostle says that he fasted often. Many through the years have fasted as they have seen the need and been able to do so. Yet Jesus did not place these fasts on His raw, untrained, unprepared disciples at that time - such is His gentleness and care for those who follow Him.

Those of us who are older Christians need to be wise in our dealing with younger Christians. Just as the Lord has dealt gently with us over many years; teaching us bit by bit as we were able to receive it, so too we must encourage younger Christians. We do not expect a new born baby, or even a little child to tackle a 16-ounce rump steak! Nor would we expect them to climb a mountain or move a piano. Not at all, but they have to grow, develop, mature to even consider such things. Yet how many older Christians treat a newly

converted young person or adult as if they should know and do the harder things in the Christian life. We can try to impose on such ones the things it may have taken us decades to know, understand and apply to our own lives. Sadly, as older, mature Christians, it is all too easy to be severe, when we should be wisely gentle and encouraging; we can be harsh when a soft answer or a patient example would be better.

There is a Christian liberty and we must not apply even a hint of our man-imposed ideas upon a believer and make that a test of true saving faith. We are to realise there are cultural differences also from our situation in the UK to other countries e.g. Spain, Indonesia, Greece, Africa, South America, Far and Middle Eastern countries and so we could go on... Different does not mean it is necessarily wrong! We too need to be aware of an inflexible man-made religious imposition of dos and don'ts according to our ideas and culture. Clearly some things are wrong, sin and are to be avoided, we are also to avoid all appearance of evil, but there is a Christian liberty that must not be curtailed, nor be indulged in if it offends our weaker brothers and sisters.

For us all, we need to make sure we are truly trusting the Lord Jesus as our Saviour and not relying at all on what we do, have or have not done! To rely on what we do or not do can mean we are neglecting God's way of salvation and we will find to our loss that there is a way that seems right to us, but it ends in eternal destruction. Only God's way of grace through the Lord Jesus leads to eternal life, liberty and joy in this life. I pray we would all think on these things.