



Matthew 9:14–17

14 Then John’s disciples came and asked him, “How is it that we and the Pharisees fast often, but your disciples do not fast?” 15 Jesus answered, “How can the guests of the bridegroom mourn while he is with them? The time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them; then they will fast. 16 “No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment, for the patch will pull away

from the garment, making the tear worse. 17 Neither do people pour new wine into old wineskins. If they do, the skins will burst; the wine will run out and the wineskins will be ruined. No, they pour new wine into new wineskins, and both are preserved.”

Reflection

On this side of history, it's easy to be critical of the Jewish religious leaders of Jesus' day. They had been worshipping God for hundreds of years in a very particular way. Often for all the right reasons, they'd got it wrong, they'd added things to Scripture, they'd strayed from God's word, and formalised their errors by making them oral law and religious traditions. What's

more their culture and national identity has become caught up in these practices and they're holding on for dear life – they have no country of their own, they're oppressed by the Romans, and intermingling in the seductive culture of the Gentiles. No wonder the zealous amongst them are so defensive, and so protective of their religious beliefs and practices – they're all that's left, if they lose them all is lost.

Into this context comes Jesus and turns everything on its head. Over hundreds of years God's people have drifted away from the truth and he's fixing it in three. It's radical, painful, and hugely controversial. Imagine someone coming into your church, speaking profoundly with great wisdom and authority and with a presence and peace about them. Very quickly they

develop a cult following, you feel the pull of it yourself, but some people become completely caught up in it. Next, this person begins to challenge almost every aspect of the way you worship God ... what would you do?

We feel some of this in today's passage. Imagine the scene. Word has just got out about Jesus' controversial new disciple – that tax collector Matthew. What's more Jesus has been seen feasting at his house with many tax collectors and sinners. How can you preach like this man does, such a profound understanding of God's word, and there's reports of miracles and healings not seen since the days of the prophets of old; and yet here he's so flagrantly breaking with the traditions of God's people. How can he possibly explain sharing

table fellowship with tax collectors, gentiles and sinners, and setting the example for his followers to do also?

Yesterday it was the Pharisees who confronted Jesus about this; today it's John the Baptist's disciples. Now you'll remember that John the Baptist lived a very devout life. He lived in the wilderness, dressed in very basic clothing made of animal's hair and ate locusts and wild honey. It was almost like he embodied his message of urgent repentance in the way he lived and ate. No doubt his disciples lived in a similar manner; basic clothing and food, not at all caught up in the things of this world.

And here's Jesus lounging at a feast in a rich tax collector's house filled with sinners.

“How is it that we and the Pharisees fast often, but your disciples do not fast?”

They’re fasting; Jesus and his disciples are feasting. They’re fasting, like John told them to, following a Jewish tradition that has spanned many centuries and become one of the pillars of Jewish religious practice, and yet Jesus and his disciple feast with pagans.

Jesus answers their question with a question, it’s a habit of his:

“How can the guests of the bridegroom mourn while he is with them? The time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them; then

they will fast.”

In the Old Testament God is referred to as the bridegroom of the nation of Israel, his people (Isa 62:5; Hos 2:19– 20). ‘Who fasts at a wedding?!’ says Jesus. ‘The day you’ve been waiting for in eager anticipation for centuries is here. The Messiah, God’s anointed king, the son of God himself, God himself in the person of Jesus has finally arrived not to save you from the Romans but to save you from Satan, sin and death, to set everything right again and lead you through his death and resurrection to eternal life in heaven. This shouldn’t be a time of fasting but a time of celebration.’

But it’s even more than this says Jesus. And he makes his point using a couple of

illustrations from daily life: patching up a coat and filling up a wineskin.

‘I haven’t come to patch up old religious traditions,’ says Jesus. ‘I’m here to do something new. No-one puts a patch of new fabric on a worn out garment, if you do that it only makes the tear worse. I’m here to do something new, it’s time to be clothed in an entirely new garment. Not a garment of the law, but a garment of Spirit. Not the Old Covenant but the New Covenant.’

Or take a wineskin for example, they’re made of leather, as they get old they stretch to their limit, they even begin to dry out and crack. But new wine, still fermenting, expands. The two don’t mix, you need completely new wine skins – you know

that if you put new wine into old wineskins they'll burst. It's the same with me, I'm doing something entirely new, breaking with old traditions. I'm here to fulfil the promises of the Old Testament, not to fulfil your religious traditions. I'm here to bring in new life and a new way of relating to God – the old way of doing things is passing away, something better is here.

Think

Think for yourself back over this passage now. You might think over how hard it would have been for John's disciples and the Pharisees to have all of their religious practices so sharply called in to question. How about our religious practices? Have we got things right or might we have drifted? Are we just following traditions? Is

there anything wrong with tradition when it is perfectly consistent with Scripture? What about when the traditions are good but people just unthinkingly go through the motions? Are you just going through the motions in some areas of your Christian life?

Or you might like to think about what it means that Jesus came to make everything new, and gave us a new and better way of relating to God. We're born again to a new life, to an anticipation of a new heavens and a new earth – what's this like for you?

Pray

Then spend some time praising God, and confessing your sins, and pleading with

him for others, thanking him for his goodness, and asking him to make you increasingly new. And of course praying through anything else that you have been convicted of by in his word this morning.

