

Sermon: Sunday, 25-Sep-2011 -- Bethel Christian Fellowship, Fair Lawn, NJ

Matthew 9:14-17: The Bridegroom and his guests

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." [NIV 2011]

[prayer for inspiration of the Holy Spirit both to speaker and hearers]

It is a great joy for Joy and me to worship with you again this morning. I can't come before you without thinking that today, this weekend, is a time of celebration for all of us. For even while we are thinking about a wedding banquet in our passage this morning, Pastor Ron and his family are celebrating the marriage of Susanna and Jon. We are glad that God has brought such joy into the life of their family, and we pray that this marriage will a great blessing to them all of their days.

Four years ago, in the last message I preached to you before Joy and I moved to Vermont, the sermon text was Matt. 9:9-13. As you can see, I am picking up today where I left off then.

I am sure all of you remember that sermon perfectly. Nevertheless, I'll give you a quick review. Matt. 9:9-13 describes the call of Matthew himself. Matthew was a tax collector, and all tax collectors were by definition considered sinners. Nevertheless, Jesus called Matthew to follow him, and Matthew responded to that call. He invited Jesus and his disciples to a dinner at his house, and they went and ate with him and his friends. It was at this point that the Pharisees came to the disciples and asked a harshly critical question: "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and 'sinners'?" (Matt. 9:11).

They ask the disciples, but it was not the disciples who answered the question. Instead it was Jesus himself who replied to the Pharisees. He told them that "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick" and concluded with this: "I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners" (9:13).

What does this mean? It means that if I am smug and self-satisfied and confident that I am so good and have such a healthy spiritual life that God will be compelled to look on me with favor -- well, if that is my attitude, then I am not the person who Jesus is calling. No, Jesus tells us, I must come as a sinner, as one who brings nothing. It is only if I know that I bring nothing of my own righteousness that I can be the one who he is calling. The path to Jesus lies directly through acknowledging that I -- yes, I -- am a sinner. Only in Jesus can I find righteousness.

Now in today's passage we hear another question. In verse 11 the Pharisees approached the disciples of Jesus with a question which was implicitly critical of Jesus' own conduct. Similarly, here in v. 14, accusers approach Jesus with a question which is implicitly critical of his disciples'

conduct.

“Then John’s disciples came and asked him, ‘How is it that we and the Pharisees fast often, but your disciples do not fast?’” (9:14).

Clearly the implication is that more fasting is better -- and the disciples aren’t fasting at all! So the *first* thing I wish to discuss today is the question which Jesus is asked.

Jesus replies to this question by describing the disciples as being guests of the bridegroom at a wedding feast. Now this image of Jesus being a bridegroom appears in the Bible repeatedly, and has important implications for our understanding of who Jesus is and our relationship with him. So the *second* thing I wish to discuss is the image of the bridegroom and the wedding feast.

Finally, Jesus concludes this passage with two short sayings, one about what would happen if you tried to patch an old, torn garment with a piece of new, unshrunk cloth, and a second about what would happen if you tried to pour new, fermenting wine into old, stiff, brittle leather wineskins. So the *third* thing I wish to discuss is what these mean. What is the relationship we, the guests at this feast, the guests of this bridegroom, have with our bridegroom, Jesus?

1. A question about fasting

So first, then, we turn to the question which Jesus was asked. **14** Then John’s disciples approached him with the question, “Why is it that we and the Pharisees observe the fasts, but your disciples do nothing of the kind?” [Phillips]

It appears that the disciples of John were influenced by their leader’s asceticism. In Matt. 11:18 Jesus himself described the Baptist in this way: “For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, ‘he has a demon.’” “He has a demon”! They thought the Baptist was so extreme in his fasting that he must be possessed! Certainly the question John’s disciples asked Jesus here shows that they considered fasting to be a good and righteous practice.

Their question mentions that not only they but also the Pharisees were fasting. Now there is an interesting fact about Pharisees and fasting which we can glean from the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector found in Luke chapter 18. That is the parable which begins like this:

9 Then Jesus told this story to some who had great confidence in their own righteousness and scorned everyone else: **10** “Two men went to the Temple to pray. One was a Pharisee, and the other was a despised tax collector. **11** The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed this prayer: ‘I thank you, God, that I am not a sinner like everyone else. For I don’t cheat, I don’t sin, and I don’t commit adultery. I’m certainly not like that tax collector! **12** I fast twice a week, and I give you a tenth of my income.’” [NLT]

Certainly the Pharisee in this parable was confident in his own righteousness. Did you hear him say, “I fast twice a week”? We learn from other sources that fasting twice a week was common in those days. And the fact that the Pharisee did this was one of his reasons for his smug self-satisfaction.

It is ironic that this “requirement” to fast often is not found in the Old Testament.

The only fast explicitly required fast was on the Day of Atonement. We learn about this fast in Lev. 16:29-34 (page ... in the pew Bible):

29 "This is to be a lasting ordinance for you: On the tenth day of the seventh month you must deny yourselves [**i.e., fast**] and not do any work—whether native-born or a foreigner residing among you—**30** because on this day atonement will be made for you, to cleanse you. Then, before the LORD, you will be clean from all your sins. **31** It is a day of sabbath rest, and you must deny yourselves [**fast**]; it is a lasting ordinance. [NIV]

So fasting once a year on the Day of Atonement was mandatory. It was part of your acknowledgment that you are a sinner and that your sins need atonement. But in the OT, except for this one requirement, any other fasting was voluntary, on some occasion which required intense prayer and focused attention for a spiritual purpose.

But by the days Jesus, this had been transformed into a set of religious rituals. And this had occurred despite the fact that the OT had warned explicitly against turning fasting into empty ritual.

One example of such a warning may be found in the book of the prophet Isaiah, 58:3-5 (page ... in the pew Bible). This is what the prophet says:

3 'We have fasted before you!' they say.
 'Why aren't you impressed?
 We have been very hard on ourselves,
 and you don't even notice it!'

"I will tell you why!" I [God] respond.
 "It's because you are fasting to please yourselves.
 Even while you fast,
 you keep oppressing your workers.

4 What good is fasting
 when you keep on fighting and quarreling?
 This kind of fasting
 will never get you anywhere with me.

5 You humble yourselves
 by going through the motions of penance,
 bowing your heads
 like reeds bending in the wind.

You dress in burlap
 and cover yourselves with ashes.

Is this what you call fasting?

Do you really think this will please the Lord? [NLT]

And in vv. 6-9 the prophet goes on to say that the true fasting that God approves incorporates real penitence, godliness, and performing good deeds. In contrast, phony fasting involve going through the motions of penance. The actions of Israel showed that although they went through the motions, their hearts were elsewhere. And such fasting does not please the Lord at all.

When we turn to the New Testament, we find that Jesus himself approached the practice of fasting in the same spirit. His key statement on fasting is found in Matt. 6:16-18, in the midst of the sermon on the mount. This is what he says:

16 "And when you fast, don't make it obvious, as the hypocrites do, for they try to look miserable and disheveled so people will admire them for their fasting. I tell you the truth, that is the only reward they will ever get. **17** But when you fast, comb your hair and wash your face. **18** Then no one will notice that you are fasting, except your Father, who knows what you do in private. And your Father, who sees everything, will reward you." [NLT]

Jesus does not condemn fasting. But away with hypocrisy and public show! There is no merit whatsoever in the public display of the Pharisee in the temple who fasted two days a week!

So when we come back to the question put by the disciples of John -- why don't your disciples fast? -- we already know what Jesus thinks. Fasting is not for public show and consumption, in the way that the Pharisees, and, apparently, the disciples of John performed it. Those disciples thought that Jesus' disciples did not take their religious commitment seriously. The feasting by Jesus and his disciples at Matthew's house only deepened their suspicions. Yet in fact the question they asked showed that it was they, the disciples of John, who had misunderstood the teaching of the Old Testament.

2. The Bridegroom

But the way in which Jesus answers their question tells us more than just something about fasting. Rather, it tells us about himself. For -- and this is the second topic I want to discuss today -- he answers their question in terms of him being the bridegroom at a wedding feast.

This is how he replied to those who questioned him: "Do wedding guests mourn while celebrating with the groom? Of course not. But someday the groom will be taken away from them, and then they will fast." [9:15 NLT]

Alfred Edersheim, an authority on Jewish customs during the lifetime of Jesus, tells us that "by universal consent, and according to Rabbinic law, the wedding festival was to be a time of unmixed festivity. Even on the Day of Atonement a bride was allowed to relax one of the ordinances of that strictest fast. During the marriage-week all mourning was to be suspended -- even the obligation of the prescribed daily prayers ceased. It was regarded as a religious duty to gladden the bride and bridegroom" (The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah, p. 456).

This joyous wedding feast is the picture Jesus uses in his response to the disciples of John. And when he asks "How can the guests of the bridegroom mourn while he is with them?" he is describing the "messianic banquet," derived from such OT passages as Isaiah 25:6-9 (page ... in the pew Bible). This is the great banquet that all folk will enjoy when the Messiah appears. Here is how that banquet is described in Isaiah 25:6-9:

6 In Jerusalem, the Lord of Heaven's Armies
will spread a wonderful feast
for all the people of the world.
It will be a delicious banquet
with clear, well-aged wine and choice meat.

- 7 There he will remove the cloud of gloom,
the shadow of death that hangs over the earth.
- 8 He will swallow up death forever!
The Sovereign Lord will wipe away all tears.
He will remove forever all insults and mockery
against his land and people.
The Lord has spoken! [NLT]

Everyone gathers in a festival to celebrate the abolition of death! Everyone is invited! What a great feast this is indeed -- and the Lord has spoken, so it is sure. This, then, is the great feast to which all the disciples of Jesus are invited.

Further, Jesus clearly identifies himself as the bridegroom at this feast. We should ask ourselves, What did he expect the disciples of John and the Pharisees to understand by that reference? For let us not forget: Jesus, as well as Paul and Peter and the author of the book of Hebrews and all the other New Testament authors, expected all his hearers to have thoughtfully considered everything they found in the Scriptures. You and I, then, also are expected in the same way to read and explore the entire Bible, doing our best to understand its whole scope. And of course the whole scope and goal of the Bible is to bring us to believe and trust only in Jesus.

Such belief and trust is what happens when we consider what Jesus would have expected his hearers to recall from the Old Testament. For in the Old Testament the bridegroom metaphor was repeatedly applied to God.

One example may be found in Hosea 2:16-20 (page ... in the pew Bible). Using an example from Hosea is particularly appropriate because the book tells the story of how God told Hosea to take as a wife Gomer, who, God told Hosea before their marriage, would be unfaithful and adulterous. In the book, the marriage of Hosea to Gomer is used as an image or type of God being the covenant husband of unfaithful Israel. And yet, as the book affirms, God will always be faithful to his covenant: there will be judgment, but there also will be love and reconciliation. It is this love and redemption which is expressed in Hosea 2:16-20:

<p>16 "In that day," declares the LORD, "you will call me 'my husband'; you will no longer call me 'my master.' 17 I will remove the names of the Baals from her lips; no longer will their names be invoked. 18 In that day I will make a covenant for them with the beasts of the field, the birds in the sky and the creatures that move along the ground. Bow and sword and battle I will abolish from the land, so that all may lie down in safety. 19 I will betroth you to me forever; I will betroth you in righteousness and</p>	<p>16 When that day comes," says the Lord, "you will call me 'my husband' instead of 'my master.' 17 O Israel, I will wipe the many names of Baal from your lips, and you will never mention them again. 18 On that day I will make a covenant with all the wild animals and the birds of the sky and the animals that scurry along the ground so they will not harm you. I will remove all weapons of war from the land, all swords and bows, so you can live unafraid</p>
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<p>justice, in love and compassion. 20 I will betroth you in faithfulness, and you will acknowledge the LORD. [NIV]</p>	<p>in peace and safety. 19 I will make you my wife forever, showing you righteousness and justice, unfailing love and compassion. 20 I will be faithful to you and make you mine, and you will finally know me as the Lord. [NLT]</p>
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The Lord himself enters into a marriage covenant with his people. He protects them from beasts and bow and sword and battle, so that all may lie down in safety. He betroths them in righteousness and justice and love and compassion and faithfulness. I dearly love my wife, but with sadness I confess that I too often fail to display these attitudes towards her! But God cannot and does not and will not fail. He will be faithful to them in this way *forever*.

So what we find in such passages in the Old Testament is that it is God who is the husband. It is God's own initiative enter into covenant with his people to take them as his bride. It is because of God's faithfulness to his covenant that they are redeemed from shame and guilt and brought to lie down in safety.

This, then, is what Jesus would have expected the disciples of John to hear when he identified *himself* as the bridegroom. *I am the bridegroom. I am the faithful, righteous one who enters into covenant with my people, my disciples. I display love and compassion towards them. And when they are with me, they are at the great wedding feast.*

And it was not only the testimony of the Old Testament which spoke of Jesus as the bridegroom of his people. The disciples of John also would have heard the testimony of the Baptist to his own relationship to Jesus. For the Baptist himself identified Jesus as the bridegroom.

This testimony by John the Baptist is found in the gospel of John, chapter 3, verses 27-30:

<p>27 To this John replied, "A person can receive only what is given them from heaven. 28 You yourselves can testify that I said, 'I am not the Messiah but am sent ahead of him.' 29 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. 30 He must become greater; I must become less." [NIV]</p>	<p>27 John replied, "No one can receive anything unless God gives it from heaven. 28 You yourselves know how plainly I told you, 'I am not the Messiah. I am only here to prepare the way for him.' 29 It is the bridegroom who marries the bride, and the best man is simply glad to stand with him and hear his vows. Therefore, I am filled with joy at his success. 30 He must become greater and greater, and I must become less and less." [NLT]</p>
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John the Baptist himself identified Jesus as the bridegroom at the wedding feast! Jesus is taking a bride to himself, and the Baptist is the best man, full of joy when he hears the voice of Jesus. In great humility he acknowledges "He must become greater; I must become less."

So there can be no question about what Jesus is saying. He is saying -- *I am this bridegroom!* And in saying that, he is affirming that he is God, and that as such he is our husband in the covenant he establishes with his disciples.

It is to this relationship with his disciples that I wish to turn as my final topic this morning.

3. The guests at the wedding feast

The New Testament makes it clear that those who are in covenant with Jesus in his church are the wedding guests invited to the wedding feast.

In chapter 5 of the letter to the Ephesians, Paul discusses the love and care husbands have for their wives. He emphasizes that the union of a husband and wife, first mentioned as early as the 2nd chapter of Genesis, is a metaphor for Christ and his church. Here is what he says in Ephesians 5:28-32:

28 In the same way, husbands ought to love their wives as they love their own bodies. For a man who loves his wife actually shows love for himself. **29** No one hates his own body but feeds and cares for it, just as Christ cares for the church.

30 And we are members of his body.

31 As the Scriptures say, "A man leaves his father and mother and is joined to his wife, and the two are united into one." **32** This is a great mystery, but it is an illustration of the way Christ and the church are one. [NLT]

Those of us who are married know that there is a union, an identification, between husband and wife that indeed is mysterious yet very real. Christ is united to his church in the same way. The bond is that close. Notice, by the way, that this union is found *in the church*. You do not find your relationship with Christ by yourself, sitting all alone in your study. No, you find it in the worship and prayer and love and ministry of the church, even the church with all its human faults. It is only within the church that we are able to share in the bread and wine, the feast of the new covenant.

Jesus himself uses the image of the wedding feast in the parable of the wedding banquet, which is found in Matthew chapter 22. There Jesus says: "The Kingdom of Heaven can be illustrated by the story of a king who prepared a great wedding feast for his son. When the banquet was ready, he sent his servants to notify those who were invited. But they all refused to come" (NLT, 22:2-3).

The King said to his servants: "The wedding feast is ready, and the guests I invited aren't worthy of the honor. Now go out to the street corners and invite everyone you see.' So the servants brought in everyone they could find, good and bad alike, and the banquet hall was filled with guests" (NLT, 22:8-9).

All are invited to this wedding feast. You and I are invited, regardless of whether we are good, or, as we probably acknowledge when we are honest with ourselves, bad. And what happens to us when we come to this wedding feast with the King's son? We find that we have entered the Kingdom of Heaven!

At such a wedding feast it would be absurd to be fasting or mourning.

When you think about it, we would be shocked if a guest at Susanna and Jon's wedding celebration refused a piece of the cake. Suppose someone said, "oh no I can't have any cake, I'm fasting today." That would be to say, I don't rejoice for you. Your marriage is unimportant to me.

In the same way, Jesus says, "How can the guests of the bridegroom mourn when he is with them?" (Matt. 9:15). The disciples of Jesus were rejoicing to be in the presence of their Messiah.

However, he goes on to say, "The time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them; then they will fast." Here he is referring to his crucifixion and resurrection.

Jesus tells us about a time of mourning by his disciples in the gospel of John. In chapter 16, after the last supper, Jesus is reassuring his disciples, who are devastated that he will be taken from them. This is what he tells them: "It is good for you that I am going away, for unless I go away, the Counselor will not come to you, but if I go, I will send him to you. --- Now is your time of grief, but I will see you again, and you will rejoice, and no one will take away your joy" (John 16:7, 22, NIV).

True, after Jesus' and resurrection, the disciples would mourn, but they also would rejoice, for they would have the Comforter, the Holy Spirit. We know from three references in the book of Acts (Acts 13:3; 14:23; 27:9) that they sometimes fasted after the ascension and the coming of the Holy Spirit. When we think again about what Jesus said in the sermon on the mount -- how he instructed his disciples, when they fasted, to do so in private -- it seems that fasting continues to have a proper place in the normal life of his followers, even today.

In our text today Jesus concludes with two one sentence illustrations of the new life we have in the new covenant wedding feast with our bridegroom.

The first illustration he uses is sewing new, unshrunk cloth on an old garment. No one does this, Jesus says, because when the garment with this new patch is washed, the patch will shrink and rip again the area which it was supposed to have patched.

The second illustration is pouring new wine into old wineskins. Leather skins were sewn into containers to hold wine. New wine ferments and expands. So when you have new wine, you pour it into a new, pliable wineskin. Because the wineskin is new and pliable, it can expand as the wine ferments, and you end up both with the wine and the wineskin. If, however, you were to pour that new, fermenting, expanding wine into an old, brittle wineskin, then the wine would expand and burst the container, destroying both the wine and the wineskin.

The illustrations are simple, but Jesus does not explicitly explain their meaning. So to understand them we consider the context in which they were spoken. And the context, of course, is the question of John's disciples concerning the religious practices of Jesus' disciples. Jesus' disciples were not performing the rituals prescribed by the Jewish customs of the time. And Jesus answers their question by saying, I am not patching an old garment, I am not refilling an old wineskin. I bring a new garment and I bring new wine.

Jesus told his disciples about new wine at the last supper. Here is how this is described by Luke: “In the same way, after the supper he took the cup, saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you’” (Luke 22:20, NIV). The new covenant in Jesus is our new wine.

And what is this new covenant? This is how it is described by the prophet Jeremiah in chapter 31, starting in verse 31 (page ... in the pew Bible):

31 “The days are coming,” declares the LORD,
“when I will make a new covenant
with the people of Israel
and with the people of Judah.
32 It will not be like the covenant
I made with their ancestors
when I took them by the hand
to lead them out of Egypt,
because they broke my covenant,
though I was a husband to them,”
declares the LORD.
33 “This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel
after that time,” declares the LORD.
“I will put my law in their minds
and write it on their hearts.
I will be their God,
and they will be my people.
34 No longer will they teach their neighbor,
or say to one another, ‘Know the LORD,’
because they will all know me,
from the least of them to the greatest,”
declares the LORD.
“For I will forgive their wickedness
and will remember their sins no more.” [NIV]

Jesus Christ, truly God as well as truly man, is our husband and our God. We are his people. We have his law written in our hearts, and our wickedness and sin is completely forgiven.

This completely tears the garment from all systems which attempt to base our righteousness on anything other than faith in Jesus Christ. It may be a system like the self-righteousness of the Pharisee in the temple, glad that he is not like the tax collector. But the same is true of any system in which we attempt to put something, anything, in place of trust in Jesus himself. In this passage today, Jesus calls us once again to look to him as our bridegroom, our redeemer, our mediator, our savior, and to enter Kingdom life through him and through him alone.

So when we fast today, let us always do this in the context of the new covenant life we have at this wedding feast. When we fast, let us do that, as we do everything we do, in order to give glory and honor to our only Savior and Mediator, Jesus Christ.

Amen.