

Luke 5:33-39

Sermon: **The teaching of Jesus vs. The teaching of Pharisees #4**

2023.

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FASTING

1. (Luke 5:33) *"And they said to Him: 'John's disciples often fast and pray, and so do the disciples of the Pharisees; but Yours go on eating and drinking.'"*

1.1. "And they said to Him." In Matthew 9:14 we read that it was the disciples of John the Baptist who came to Jesus with this question: *"Why is it that we and the Pharisees fast often, but Your disciples do not fast?"* So who are the "they" that Luke mentions here? Perhaps the Pharisees were the first to raise the question, and then, out of curiosity, John's disciples repeated it as well. That's my personal suggestion, and it seems to me the most logical explanation. Still, I believe we need to pause here and ask: why would John's disciples even ask Jesus this question? If they were free, if they understood His teaching, why would they ask? To answer that, we need to try to step into their shoes. They were just beginning to learn about Jesus' teaching. Their knowledge came from John the Baptist, not from Jesus. Keeping that in mind, I believe their question was perfectly normal and legitimate.

1.2. Why do I think so? Let me explain. John the Baptist's teaching completely aligned with Jesus' teaching. Their shared message to the Jews was this: *"The Kingdom of God is at hand! If you want to enter that Kingdom, you must repent."* That's what both of them preached. John's disciples believed that was true. But being raised in a Jewish culture where Pharisaism was the most dominant religious movement of the time, it was normal for them to think that repentance had to be followed by the religious practices prescribed by the Pharisees. They believed that every Jew, after repenting, had to submit to the Law of Moses in his daily life. And who knew best what and how a person should act? Of course—the Pharisees. They considered themselves the perfect example of what it looked like to live according to the Law of Moses. With that perspective, John's disciples approached Jesus and asked Him: *"Jesus, we know Your teaching is the same as that of our teacher John the Baptist. Then why don't Your disciples observe the Law of Moses and the oral traditions of the elders in their lives? Don't You want them to be as religious as we are? Doesn't the Law of Moses require that from us?"*

1.3. Let's try to answer the question of John's disciples with a counter-question: did the Law of Moses actually command the Jews to fast three times a week, or did the Pharisees, through their rules (the oral tradition), add their own regulations and laws on top of the Law of Moses?

1.4. **(Leviticus 23:26–32)** “Then the LORD said to Moses: ‘The tenth day of this seventh month is the Day of Atonement. Hold a sacred assembly and deny yourselves, and present a food offering to the LORD. Do not do any work on that day, because it is the Day of Atonement, when atonement is made for you before the LORD your God. Those who do not deny themselves on that day must be cut off from their people. I will destroy from among their people anyone who does any work on that day. You shall do no work at all. This is to be a lasting ordinance for the generations to come, wherever you live. It is a day of sabbath rest for you, and you must deny yourselves. From the evening of the ninth day of the month until the following evening, you are to observe your sabbath.’”

1.5. We read here how God gives instructions to Moses, and Moses passes them on to the people. In those instructions, God sets out the religious observances His people were to perform on specific days and months throughout the year. One of those ceremonies was called the “Day of Atonement.” On that day, the priest would offer sacrifices to God on behalf of the people's sins. He would sacrifice a bull and one goat on the altar, and on another goat he would lay his hands and send it into the wilderness. By doing this, he symbolically transferred the sins of the people of Israel onto that goat, which would then carry them away. The whole nation had to participate in this ritual, and anyone who refused was to be excluded from the community, or even cut off by God Himself if he dared to work on that day. Everyone was required to fast—to eat nothing—and by that outward act they showed their repentance and their desire for God's mercy in their lives. This was a commandment prescribed by the Law of Moses.

1.6. Therefore, according to the Law of Moses, the Jews were required to fast on the Day of Atonement, and perhaps once more during the year—no more than that. In contrast, the Pharisees, through their own rules (the oral tradition), demanded that their followers fast two to three times a week. In other words, in Jesus' time there was already a Pharisaic movement that had dominated Israel for centuries as the strongest religious force. They zealously enforced their own laws and obligations. When they fasted, they made sure everyone knew it and saw it. How did the people know they were fasting? They displayed it through their outward behavior and bodily gestures. Moreover, they condemned anyone who didn't follow their example. That this is indeed true we see in this very passage: in the house of the tax collector Matthew sit Jesus' disciples, who do not fast, and the Pharisees criticize them for it, saying: *“Why don't Your disciples fast? They should be doing so if they claim to live according to the Law of Moses!”*

THEY KNOW BEST WHAT THE BIBLE REQUIRES OF US

2. We now return to the disciples of John and to the question they asked Jesus. As I said earlier, the Pharisaic movement had dominated as the leading religion in Israel for centuries. In that environment grew John the Baptist, his disciples, the disciples of Jesus—and Jesus Himself. So when John's disciples heard the preaching of John the Baptist and decided to repent, the logical next step for them was to begin practicing the religious observances required by the Law of Moses and the oral traditions of the elders. Everyone did that, and so John's disciples asked Jesus: *“Why don't your*

disciples do the same as we do? Isn't that the next logical step in the life of a believer who loves Yahweh with all his heart? Doesn't the Law of Moses demand this from us?"

Their question clearly reveals how blindly people in that time trusted that the Pharisees interpreted the Torah correctly and precisely. No one dared to question their interpretation!

2.1. Does this sound familiar to you? Many of us have gone through—or are still going through—something similar. Perhaps for years we sat in the same assurance that our church interprets the Bible rightly and exclusively. Perhaps we still blindly trust our religious leaders. And so, after our repentance, the next logical step becomes carrying out the religious obligations prescribed by our community—our denomination. Whether we are Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant, or Jehovah's Witnesses—from birth or as converts who later changed denominations—most of us follow the instructions of our priests, pastors, and elders. Why?

2.2. Because we've watched them our whole lives. They have been presented to us as mediators between God and people. And so, we want to start looking like them, behaving like them, living like them, and practicing the same religious customs they do. Most of us act that way, believing that they know best what the Bible requires of us.

THE WEDDING METAPHOR

3. Alright, let's continue. (Luke 5:34–35) *"And Jesus said to them: 'You cannot make the attendants of the groom fast while the groom is with them, can you? But the days will come; and when the groom is taken away from them, then they will fast in those days.'"*

3.1. Jesus responds to the Pharisees and to the disciples of John the Baptist. How does He respond? He compares His coming among the people—more specifically, His relationship with His disciples—to the relationship between a bridegroom and his wedding guests. Why use the imagery of a wedding and a groom? I'll try to explain.

3.2. In ancient Israel, a wedding held immense social importance. The ceremony and the celebration lasted for a full seven days. On the first day, the groom and the wedding party would go to the bride's house to bring her—carried on a litter usually reserved for kings, generals, and dignitaries—to the house of the groom. When they arrived, the parents of the bride and groom would negotiate the terms of giving the daughter into her husband's hands. Once they reached an agreement, the groom and bride would consummate the marriage, and then the celebration would continue for another six days. Each day, after finishing their daily work, people would gather at the groom's house, where there was food, wine, dancing, and singing. These were days of joy, celebration, and fellowship.

3.3. Within the entire ceremony there were people who had special roles—responsibilities entrusted to them by the groom. These were close friends of the groom, and their joy was a joy for his sake. They rejoiced at his wedding, wanting those days to be remembered as days of happiness, song, joy, and blessing.

3.4. When Jesus speaks of "the attendants of the groom," He's referring to that group of people and explaining to the Pharisees: *"Can the wedding guests fast while the groom is with them? These are*

days of joy, fellowship, and song! It would be completely illogical and unnatural to ask them to fast during a time of celebration, wouldn't it? No one fasts when it's time to rejoice."

In other words, Jesus is saying: *"So it is with my disciples—they cannot fast while the Messiah, their King, is with them. This is not a time of sorrow and mourning; this is a time of rejoicing! The promised Messiah now stands among His people."*

3.5. Then Jesus continues: *"But the days will come; and when the groom is taken away from them, then they will fast in those days."*

The question is: is there any scenario in which a groom would literally be "taken away" in the middle of his own wedding? I don't know, but I believe Jesus here begins to refer directly to Himself.

3.6. I believe that in this statement Jesus is predicting His crucifixion. He is indirectly telling the Pharisees: *"The days will come when I, the Messiah, will be crucified and will die—and then my disciples will mourn. They will not be able to eat because of the grief they carry in their hearts."*

Here Jesus reveals one of the true meanings of fasting. Fasting is not a religious duty to be performed on specific days according to the commands of religious leaders. In this case, fasting becomes an outward expression of inward sorrow—the sorrow of Jesus' disciples who would mourn the loss of their Teacher.

DOES JESUS BRING A NEW TEACHING?

4. Where does Jesus' understanding of the true meaning of fasting come from? Does He bring a new teaching with Him, or did He, through studying the Torah (the Old Testament), discern what God truly desires when He speaks of fasting?

4.1. **(Isaiah 58:3–8)** *"Why have we fasted and You do not see? Why have we humbled ourselves and You do not notice?" Behold, on the day of your fast you find your desire, and drive hard all your workers. Behold, you fast for contention and strife and to strike with a wicked fist.*

You do not fast like you do today to make your voice heard on high.

Is it a fast like this which I choose, a day for a person to humble himself?

Is it for bowing one's head like a reed and for spreading out sackcloth and ashes as a bed?

Will you call this a fast, even an acceptable day to the Lord?

Is this not the fast which I choose: To release the bonds of wickedness, To undo the ropes of the yoke, And to let the oppressed go free and break every yoke? Is it not to divide your bread with the hungry And bring the homeless poor into the house; When you see the naked, to cover him; And not to hide yourself from your own flesh? Then your light will break out like the dawn, And your recovery will spring up quickly."

4.2. In Isaiah we find exactly such a description—what a person who truly understands God's desire for fasting looks like and does. I believe Jesus was well acquainted with this passage when He spoke with the Pharisees. Therefore, Jesus is not confronting them with some new doctrine that He Himself invented, but with the Torah—with the very Scriptures they claimed to know, study, and live by.

RIGID AND UNYIELDING

5. Alright, let's continue. **(Luke 5:36)** "And He was also telling them a parable: 'No one tears a piece from a new garment and puts it on an old garment; otherwise he will both tear the new, and the piece from the new will not match the old.'"

5.1. Jesus continues to explain to the Pharisees where their true problem lies. He does so through comparisons¹.

5.2. In ancient Israel, the robe you wore was most likely the only one you owned. Through daily wear, washing, and repeated use, the fabric would wear thin and begin to tear in certain places. When that happened, a person would cut a patch from an old piece of cloth to repair the robe—never from a new one. Why?

Theoretically, if someone took a new piece of cloth to patch an old garment, the patch would tear away after washing. The new fabric hadn't yet been washed and hadn't shrunk, so after the first washing it would tighten and rip the old cloth. The tear would become even larger. That's why no one ever used new fabric to patch an old robe.

5.3. Let's move immediately to the second comparison. **(Luke 5:37)** "And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise the new wine will burst the skins and it will be spilled out, and the skins will be ruined."

5.4. When someone poured new wine into wineskins (leather pouches), they always made sure the skin was new. Why? During fermentation, the wine released gases that stretched the pouch, making it, over time, stiff and inflexible. If someone, theoretically, were to pour new wine into an already used wineskin, it would burst because it lacked the elasticity needed to withstand the pressure of the new wine.

5.5. So, what is Jesus trying to explain to the Pharisees here? He continues to confront their theological convictions—the lie they so deeply believe—while at the same time teaching John's disciples to awaken and decide whom they will trust: Him or the Pharisees.

JESUS RETURNS TO THE SOURCE (THE LAW OF MOSES)

6. **(Luke 5:39)** "No one, after drinking old wine, wants new; for he says: 'The old is good enough.'"

6.1. With these words, Jesus is saying to the Pharisees: "To understand and accept My teaching, you must let go of the old."

By old, I believe Jesus refers to their oral tradition, not to the Law of Moses.

By new, He means the restoration of the original interpretation of the Law of Moses — a return to its true intent.

¹ Parables are stories that Jesus drew from nature and from the everyday life of a Jew. Through them, He illustrated the immediate dilemma of His listeners — whether to show them they were mistaken, to open their eyes, or to help them in their confusion.

6.2. Jesus came to show His people what God had truly meant from the very beginning when He gave them the Law. But for anyone to believe Jesus' teaching, that person had to undergo a complete transformation of mind — to break free from the grip of oral tradition. They had to begin using the reasoning God had given them, to question everything, and finally — through studying the Torah itself — to determine who was right: Jesus or the Pharisees.

You couldn't sit on two chairs at once².

6.3. Now let me summarize what Jesus wanted the Pharisees and John's disciples to understand through these parables:

1. *"No one tears a piece from a new garment and puts it on an old garment; otherwise he will both tear the new, and the piece from the new will not match the old."* Jesus is telling them it's impossible to merge His interpretation of the Law of Moses with that of the Pharisees. These two approaches are radically opposed. Whoever decides to follow Jesus must cast out the Pharisaic "leaven" — their doctrine.
2. *"And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise the new wine will burst the skins and it will be spilled, and the skins will be ruined."* This parable carries the same meaning as the first — Jesus repeats the same truth through another image, underscoring how crucial it is that they understand.
3. *"And no one, after drinking old wine, wants new; for he says, 'The old is good enough.'"* Here Jesus confronts the Pharisees with the spiritual reality of their hearts. They were so blindly convinced that their oral tradition was true that they refused even to consider the possibility that Jesus might be right. They would not admit: *"Maybe this rabbi truly speaks from God."* No — they loved the old wine (their tradition) too much to reach for the new wine (God's truth revealed in Jesus). And because of that, they chose to reject Him and His teaching. Not all, but most — yes.

6.4. Unlike the Pharisees, John's disciples had already accepted his call to repentance. Their hearts were open to a new paradigm, yet at that moment they still lived in the old — the Pharisaic — framework. They hadn't yet fully grasped Jesus' message; they were just beginning. But in time, as they listened to Him, if they truly belonged to God, they would leave the old behind — and embrace the new.

² Paul himself underwent precisely such a radical transformation of thought. After his conversion on the road to Damascus (Acts 9), he withdrew — according to his own testimony — for several years to Arabia (Gal 1:17–18), where he studied the Torah and the Scriptures in light of the newly revealed truth about Christ. This period of deep reflection and re-examination of everything he had previously considered unquestionable lasted about three years, resulting in a complete paradigm shift: what he once saw as a threat to the Law, he now recognized as the fulfillment of the Law in the person of Jesus Christ (cf. Rom 10:4).

Like many Jews of his time, Paul had to "step down from two chairs" — to abandon the safety of oral tradition and legal formalism, and to embrace a spiritual understanding of the Torah, one that reveals God's original intention: love, faith, and inner righteousness rather than mere observance of regulations.

THIRSTING FOR GOD'S RIGHTEOUSNESS

7. As we near the conclusion, a question arises: Was Jesus opposing religious practices such as fasting, prayer, and the Sabbath?

I don't believe so. He didn't come to abolish these observances, but to teach His people the true meaning behind them — a meaning the Pharisees had completely lost.

7.1. In short: while the Pharisees believed that merely performing these rituals made them worthy of God's kingdom, Jesus taught the opposite. He showed that the purpose of such acts wasn't in the ritual itself but in the heart's attitude.

Through fasting, prayer, or Sabbath rest, a person should express devotion to God — mourning their own sinfulness yet thirsting for God's righteousness and mercy.

A true child of God eagerly longs for the fulfillment of God's promises and for His kingdom to be established on earth. Such a person loves God because they understand that through the Law of Moses, God gave His people a way to remain in fellowship with Him.

— And who can do this? Only the one to whom God has given a new heart — the chosen of God. —

7.2. Application for us Christians today:

If we belong to a particular denomination, the moment Jesus truly begins to teach us often brings inner conflict. The old — our traditions and inherited theology — will clash with the new — the teaching of Jesus that transforms us from within.

And as we try to reconcile the two, I believe we will eventually have to admit: it's impossible.

The new and the old do not go together. The theology of our church leaders will often conflict with that of our Teacher — Jesus Christ. Therefore, each of us must decide: to whom will we belong — to Jesus or to our religious institution?

7.3. Regarding ceremonial practices prescribed by our church traditions, I see no problem in observing them — under one condition: that we understand what they truly represent.

If these observances reflect a heart that loves God, recognizes its own sinfulness, and hungers for God's righteousness, then such practices are good and acceptable before Him.

7.4. Furthermore, those who choose to live free from religious traditions and rituals — saying: *"I am free from everything the church has prescribed; Christ's teaching alone is enough for me"* — may do so, but under one condition: that they truly live the Gospel of Jesus Christ daily, through every action, thought, and intention. If they do, God will look upon them with favor, and they will remain in His grace.

7.5. Finally — just as Jesus' disciples ate and drank in the house of the tax collector, even though Pharisaic oral law forbade it — so we today may, or may choose not to, observe the rituals of our church traditions.

The choice is ours. Freedom of choice lies in Christ.

As long as we live according to His commandments and walk in the truth of the Gospel, everything else becomes secondary — irrelevant to our salvation.