

Luke 5:33-35

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The Pharisees confront Jesus about why His disciples do not fast and pray (like they and the disciples of John the Baptizer do). Jesus answers them by parable, explaining that it is not appropriate for the attendants of the Bridegroom to fast when he is with them. That is the time for celebrating. But once he leaves, then will come the days for fasting.

The parallel Gospel accounts for this event are Matthew 9:14-15 and Mark 2:18-20.

In the previous section of scripture *Jesus* responded to *the Pharisees'* challenge to His *disciples*: "Why do you eat and drink with the tax collectors and sinners?" (Luke 5:30) with a short parable (Luke 5:31) and the explanation: "I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance" (Luke 5:32). The conversation continues in this section as *the Pharisees* give their retort.

And they said to Him, "The disciples of John often fast and offer prayers, the disciples of the Pharisees also do the same, but Yours eat and drink" (v 33).

The pronoun: *they*, refers to *the Pharisees* in this verse; *Him* refers to *Jesus*.

Luke tells us that after *Jesus* responded to *the Pharisees'* challenge, *they* confronted *Him* about a lack of certain behaviors amongst His disciples. Their issue involved the spiritual practice of fasting *and* offering prayers. *They said, "the disciples of John [the Baptizer] often fast and offer prayers, the disciples of the Pharisees also do the same, but Yours eat and drink."*

Fasting was seen as a practice that righteous people did. The intent of fasting was to forego a secondary good (like food) to become closer to the greatest Good (God). In the Jewish culture, it was widely assumed that if a person fasted, he was righteous; and if a person was righteous, he would *fast*. The contraries to these assumptions were also accepted. If a person did not *fast*, he was unrighteous; and if a person was unrighteous, he wouldn't *fast*.

The offering of *prayers* follows the pattern of fasting. It was something done as a spiritual practice to relate and commune with God. We are called to take part in this practice today in order to grow our relationship with God (Luke 11:1-4; Philippians 4:6; Ephesians 6:18; 1 Thessalonians 5:17; 1 John 5:14-15). Unfortunately, it seems that *the Pharisees* were known to use this practice to gain attention and praise from men. *Jesus* calls them (and possibly others) out for this hypocrisy in the famous Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 6:5).

Their questions were in some respects similar to the questions *the Pharisees* just asked *Jesus'*s disciples in Levi's (Matthew's) home (Luke 5:30). Both questions challenge the behavior of *Jesus* and His disciples, which do not align with the cultural standards for righteous behavior among the religiously observant in Judea.

The tone in which *the Pharisees* deliver their statement appears to be antagonistic. *The Pharisees* seem to assert their challenge in the same self-righteous tone of condemnation that *they* revealed when confronting *Jesus's* disciples in the previous verses (Luke 5:30).

The Pharisees' remark presumes their superiority. What their presumption seems to really be saying to *Jesus* is: "Why do we [who are perceived as righteous] and *the disciples of John* [who are perceived as righteous] *fast*, but Your disciples [and perhaps by extension—You, Yourself, *Jesus*] do not *fast*?" In other words, "If You are so righteous, why do You not perform the acts of the righteous, as we do?" Their self-presumed superiority is in line with the nature and hostile spirit of their previous interactions with *Jesus's* *disciples*.

And Jesus said to them, "You cannot make the attendants of the bridegroom fast while the bridegroom is with them, can you? But the days will come; and when the bridegroom is taken away from them, then they will fast in those days" (v 34-35).

Jesus spoke to them by another parable and *said*, "*You cannot make the attendants of the bridegroom fast while the bridegroom is with them, can you?*" The answer to this rhetorical question is "No." The friends of *the bridegroom* do not *fast* while he *is with them*. A *bridegroom* is a man full of happiness who is celebrating a joyous occasion. To celebrate, *the bridegroom* surrounds himself with friends who attend him at the wedding feast. These *attendants* honor him by celebrating with *the bridegroom*. It would be improper for the guests of *the bridegroom* to say, "We have chosen this as a time to *fast*" and refuse to participate in the celebration. In this parable, *Jesus* is the *bridegroom*. His *disciples* are the attendants of *the bridegroom*. And they are celebrating together. Therefore, they are joyfully feasting with *Him* instead of fasting and putting on a face of mourning.

In comparing Himself to *the bridegroom*, *Jesus* subtly implies that He is the Messiah.

Isaiah occasionally describes the Messiah or Messianic themes in terms of celebrations. He famously describes the lavish banquet the LORD will serve for His people when the Messiah appears (Isaiah 25:6-9). Isaiah also says:

"And as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride,
So your God will rejoice over you."
(Isaiah 62:5)

The veiled allusion *Jesus* is making is that He is the Messiah, presenting Himself as *the bridegroom* and referencing the time of rejoicing for those in His presence.

In the same vein, *fasting* and *prayers* are offered when God is not physically present. Because *Jesus* is God and *the bridegroom* is physically present with His *attendants*, they are able to converse face-to-face with *Jesus*. Therefore, His *disciples* do not need to *fast* or *offer prayers*.

But the days will come, *Jesus* continues, *when the bridegroom is taken away from them, then they will fast in those days*. There will be a time for *Jesus's* disciples to *fast*, but He says it is not now. That time will come when *Jesus is taken away from them* and no longer with *them*. The

phrase *taken away from them* is either an allusion to His crucifixion and death, or more likely His ascension into heaven. When *Jesus* is no longer physically present with His *disciples*, then will come the days for His followers to *fast*.

It is interesting to note that in Matthew's Gospel, instead of *the Pharisees* retorting with the challenge: *The disciples of John often fast and offer prayers, the disciples of the Pharisees also do the same, but Yours eat and drink*; it is presented in the somewhat softer form of a question raised by *John the Baptizer's disciples*:

"Then the disciples of John came to Him, asking, 'Why do we and the Pharisees fast, but Your disciples do not fast?'"
(Matthew 9:14).

There are at least two explanations for this. The first could be that *the Pharisees* made this observation and challenged *Jesus*, while *the disciples of John* made a similar observation and asked Him separately (*Jesus* gave each group similar answers—Matthew 9:15-17; Luke 5:34-39). Matthew records the encounter with *the disciples of John the Baptizer* (Matthew 9:14). Luke records the encounter with *the Pharisees* (Luke 5:33). A second possibility is that both groups could have been present and made this charge jointly to *Jesus*.

Jesus continues His response to *the Pharisees'* challenge with a memorable parable in the next section of scripture.

Biblical Text

³³ **And they said to Him, "The disciples of John often fast and offer prayers, the disciples of the Pharisees also do the same, but Yours eat and drink."** ³⁴ **And Jesus said to them, "You cannot make the attendants of the bridegroom fast while the bridegroom is with them, can you?"** ³⁵ **But the days will come; and when the bridegroom is taken away from them, then they will fast in those days."**