

Fasting or feasting

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 10 January 2016

Preacher: David MacPherson

[0 : 00] How can you be right with God? How can you know God and love God and please God?

There are no bigger questions. In the passage that we read, there in Mark chapter 2, we find two very different perspectives in answer to those big questions. One perspective, one understanding is revealed by the question that is asked to Jesus by some people. In verse 18, some people came and asked Jesus, and in the question that they ask, they reveal where they're coming from with regards to this big question of how we can be right with God. But then we also have another perspective, another point of view, and that is revealed to us in the answer that Jesus gives to the question that he has posed. That's what we want to do this evening. We want to think about the question, and we want to think about the answer. We'll only think about some of the answer, what Jesus answers with regard to the bridegroom and the wedding feast. He goes on to develop his answer with two little parables concerning the garment and the new wineskins. We won't be thinking about that part of the answer. First of all, though, the question that he has posed, and we'll let's remind ourselves of what the question is. There in verse 18, we read, how is it that John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees are fasting, but yours are not?

That's the question. We read the question, and maybe if we read it fleetingly or superficially, we might say, well, it's an innocent enough question. The people have observed what John's disciples were doing. They were fasting. The Pharisees were fasting, and Jesus' disciples weren't fasting, and so they simply are curious and innocently pose this question. Well, we don't really know what all of the folk involved had in mind. We're told some people posed this question. Maybe among them there were different perspectives, but without the need to speculate in any great measure, we can scratch beneath the surface somewhat of the question to understand where the folks posing the question are coming from. And in order to do that, we need to just have a very little bit of background concerning the matter to hand, which is fasting. Now, for pious Jews at the time of Jesus, there were, or they understood that there were three core religious duties that they needed to perform.

They needed to give to the poor, almsgiving. They needed to pray, and they needed to fast. And that's not the totality of their duties, but these were three core duties. And Jesus picks up on this in his own teaching. You'll remember in the Sermon on the Mount, when there's a section of that sermon where he deals with these three core duties. When you give to the poor, and Jesus explains the manner in which you should do so. When you pray, when you fast. Jesus has no issue with performing these duties, but he is conscious that his audience see these as fundamental, and so he deals with them, as I say, on that occasion. So fasting was a very important thing. It was a big deal for the Jews.

[4 : 01] And folks are observing what is happening with regard to Jesus' disciples. Indeed, for many, the idea was that you could determine a man's piety. Indeed, you could probably try and determine your own piety by these measures.

You're giving to the poor. You're praying. You're fasting. And this is why the man in the street, or the folks described here as some people, notice they're not saying that this is what we're doing. It would appear that they weren't fasting, but they're observing. They're curious as to what the religious folk are doing. And these disciples are, and these disciples are, but Jesus' disciples aren't. And as they observe, they're just a little bit underwhelmed by the disciples of Jesus. And they're thinking, well, these guys don't fast. What kind of Christians are they, to use modern language? They don't fast. What kind of disciples do they think they are, that they're not even fasting? And of course, I think implicit in the question that is a criticism, not only of the disciples, but of their master. The obvious conclusion is that if they're not fasting, presumably it's because Jesus doesn't require them to fast. And so what kind of teacher is he if his disciples are so poorly taught that they're not

involved in such a fundamental religious duty?

[5 : 41] And of course, in the question, there's also another thing going on. These people are doing what so many of us love doing or are prone to do, and that is they're comparing with others.

They're comparing the disciples of Jesus with the disciples of John and the Pharisees. And as they make the comparison, they conclude that the disciples don't match up. In the pleasing God states or the right with God register, the disciples of Jesus are lagging well behind.

Why? Well, they don't fast, or they certainly don't fast enough. And as we understand that background, I think we're able to identify the big problem that is revealed by their question. The questioners believed in salvation by works. Now, they might not have used that expression. They might not have rationalized it in a way that they would declare it, that that's what they believe. But the question reveals that that's where they're coming from. It's all about what you do. You want to please God, it's about what you do. It's all about being good enough. Or in the case of the specific example, it's about fasting. The more you fast, the longer you fast, the closer you can get to God. It's kind of like a stairway to heaven. So God is far away, and we're far from him.

How do we get closer? Well, we can climb up the stairway. And if we give to the poor enough, and if we pray enough, and if we fast enough, well, little by little, we'll get that little bit closer to God.

Now, this flawed understanding of how to get right with God is nothing new. It was nothing new at the time that these folk gave evidence of coming from that perspective. It's in the spiritual DNA of fallen humanity. Every religion, including various distortions of Christianity, is grounded in what we could call works salvation. What the works are, what the religious duties are, will vary from one religion to another. But at core, it's the same form of religion. For our Muslim friends and neighbors, it's the five pillars of Islam. Professing faith, praying five times a day, giving to the poor, fasting at Ramadan, pilgrimage to Mecca, if you do all of these things, and if you do them well, then well, maybe, just maybe, you might be able to please God. For Jehovah's Witnesses, it's knocking on doors. The more doors you knock on, the better your chance of getting into heaven. And so there you go. You knock, and you knock, and you knock, and you knock again. Because as long as you knock, as many times as possible, and maybe, just maybe, you'll be climbing up that stairway to heaven. But then for many of us, many folk who sit in queues, in congregations like our own, in Christian churches, in the free church, there are many who still cling on to this idea that at the end of the day, it's about being a good person, about not being bad to people, about doing your best. And if you're a good person, and if you do your best, then surely, when the time comes, God will receive you. And every manifestation is equally wrong, equally flawed. That's the big problem that I think is revealed in the question that is posed.

[9 : 40] But there's another problem that's really a consequence of the big problem. And namely, it is a distortion of the very works or duties that are performed. Let me explain what I mean by that.

It is good to do good. It's good to do good works. It's good to fast. In the answer that Jesus gives to the question posed, he acknowledges that there is a time for fasting. We've already made reference to the fact that in the Sermon on the Mount, he gives instructions concerning fasting. It's not that it's a bad thing to do. It's a good thing to do. But the problem is that when it becomes a badge of piety, when it becomes a step on the stairway to heaven, or at least that's how people conceive it, then the very duty that in itself is good becomes distorted. Let's just take the case of fasting and the view in which it was held by the Pharisees. What the Pharisees did is they added to the instructions that God had given in the Old Testament. If we look into the Old Testament and look at this matter of fasting, we'll find that for the Jews, there was only one mandatory fast on the Day of Atonement, once a year. That was all. It was the only time that it was required. Now, there were other occasions when the nation fasted at times of crisis or need of one kind or another, but these were not mandatory.

They were a function of the circumstances in which the people might find themselves. But of course, for the Pharisees who see this, who had come to the view that this was their way to please God, they thought once a year, well, that's not going to please them much. Once a year, that's lightweight.

So they fasted twice a week, Mondays and Thursdays. Go try that, Mondays and Thursdays. It's meant to be very good for your health, apparently, every so often. I don't know. But you see, they thought, you see, if we fast twice a week, surely God will be pleased with us. We'll really climb up that stairway, especially if we're doing it more than others. And we can look at others, oh, they're just doing it once a year. Well, we do it twice a week. And so what was in itself a good thing,

something that had a place in God's ordering of the life of his people, becomes distorted because of the wrong place that it has been given, in this case, by the Pharisees.

Of course, the other problem with this is that such religious rigor, in this case, fasting twice a week, inevitably becomes burdensome. It becomes a joyless duty. Now, there will be those who are disciplined and who are vigorous and they'll do it, but there's no joy in it. It's a burden that needs to be performed because, well, if you miss one day, maybe that will mess up all that you've done in the year that had passed. So you do it, but it's a burden. In the days of Jesus, rabbis referred to fasting as an affliction of the soul. And as all good legalists know, if something makes you miserable, then it must be good for you. There is that strain in religion. If it makes you miserable, well, it must be good for you.

[13 : 05] That's not what everybody believes, but there is that danger, and there's something of that in the Pharisees and those who were observing. Though they themselves, the people asking the question, are really just kind of observing what's going on. Nonetheless, they seem to have bought into this, and they think, well, the Pharisees and the disciples of John, they're better. They're more religious because they fast, and they do it often and for longer. The problem of a religious framework that has at its heart works salvation is that it almost invariably distorts the very works it relies on, as we see what's happening with fasting. The question then, this question that is posed to Jesus reveals what man-made religion is all about. It's about fasting. It's about rules. It's about what I can do to please God, what I can do to get to heaven. That's man-made religion. And such religion fails at so many levels. The fundamental fail is that it doesn't work. It won't get you to heaven.

You know, if it worked, then, well, you might say, okay, it's pretty miserable, and do it and all the rest of it, but at least it will achieve the objective. But at that fundamental level, it fails because it won't get you to heaven. You know, even if you could get up one step on the stairway to heaven, which you can't, it'll be one step up and two steps back. You're just not going to make it following this route. It fails at that level, but it also fails at the level that it's really not very attractive to those who are concerned for their soul and concerned to get right with God and are wondering, well, how can I do that? And they think, well, maybe religion. And they observe this kind of religion. They say, well, that's not very attractive. And it's not very attractive. It puts people off, church, and religion. And for those who do give it a go, those who say, well, okay, it's not very attractive, and it's difficult, and it's tough, but I'm going to do it anyway because it's important.

What does it lead to? Well, in some cases, it will lead to religious pride, those who think they're doing pretty well, those who manage to fast on Mondays and Thursdays and whatever else, they think, well, I'm pretty good. And so they fall into pride. Or for those who are a bit more honest and realize that they're not achieving anything, it's just soul-destroying. All these duties, all these rules, all these regulations, all these things to do to please God, and I'm not achieving it. It's soul-destroying.

Well, that's the question. That's what the question reveals. But one way of answering the question or of considering this great matter, how can I be right with God? But let's move on to the answer. In the answer, Jesus, by means of a picture that he paints, reveals God's way of salvation. And the picture that he paints is of a wedding feast. And we're talking about a proper wedding feast, not a half-hour service and then a lunch and then maybe a kelly. No, no, no, no. Some of you are maybe having wedding plans. No, you have to do it proper. This is several days of feasting. This is what people would have immediately pictured in their minds, this serious wedding feast. And he paints this picture for his questioners. And central to everything at this feast in the picture that Jesus paints is the bridegroom. Now, everybody thinks it's all about the bride. Well, they're wrong.

[16 : 46] You see, it's all about the bridegroom. At least in this picture that Jesus paints, it's all about the bridegroom. How can the guests of the bridegroom fast while he is with them? They cannot so long as they have him with them. And then he goes on and we'll come to what he goes on to say. But this is the picture that he paints. And the purpose is to present to his questioners God's way of salvation. And the way we can understand what's being said is by thinking about the bridegroom and different aspects of what is said about the bridegroom. Together, these different aspects reveal God's way of salvation, the good news of God, as Mark has already described it in the first chapter, the good news of God. First of all, and fundamental to the picture, is to establish the identity of the groom. Who is the bridegroom? Well, it's very clear that the bridegroom represents Jesus. Jesus is saying in this picture way, in this somewhat cryptic way, I'm the bridegroom. Okay, but what does that tell us? Who is Jesus, this man who presents himself as the

bridegroom? Does the picture that he paints of a bridegroom give us any clues as to his identity? Is this picture that he uses, is it perhaps a messianic picture that people would have been able to identify? Ah, yes, this is something to do with the Messiah. Well, we might wish that it were, but we might say disappointingly, that's not the case. We could search in the Old Testament and we would not find that the promised Messiah is ever presented by this picture of a bridegroom.

So, we're not going to work out his identity going down that particular route. However, and this is more significant in many ways, and in many ways much more provocative on the part of Jesus, is the fact that what we do find in the Old Testament is that God himself presents himself as the bridegroom of his people. And he does that on numerous occasions in the Old Testament. We can just mention one or two of the many instances in which God presents himself in this way. In the prophet Isaiah, in chapter 54 and verses 5 and 6, we read, We could think of what it said in Hosea chapter 2, verses 19 and 20, God speaking to Israel through the prophet, I will betroth you to me forever. I will betroth you in righteousness and justice and love and compassion. I will betroth you in faithfulness and you will acknowledge the Lord. And then returning, one final reference, returning to Isaiah, we have the beautiful and tender language of God recorded by the prophet.

As a bridegroom rejoices over his bride, so will your God rejoice over you. Now, I think it's only fair to recognize that when Jesus paints this picture to those who are questioning him, I would imagine, you don't know, but I would imagine that many of them wouldn't have made that connection. They wouldn't have immediately thought, oh, what's he doing? You know, comparing himself to God. Maybe some would have seen that there was something of that in what Jesus said. You know, in that regard, it is interesting that in this same chapter, just a few verses before, Mark has recorded the miracle of the healing of the paralytic, where this very issue of Jesus claiming a divine prerogative, that of forgiving sins, created such a stir. And he was accused of blasphemy. So maybe in the light of that, perhaps some of those who were questioning him, would have been shocked by the picture that he paints.

[21 : 02] But whether they understood or not, in some regards, is neither here nor there. The fact is that the picture painted does point to, or at the very least, hint at the identity of Jesus as the eternal Son of God, the bridegroom of his people. You see, God's way of salvation involves God in the person of his Son coming to us. The whole direction of travel in the gospel is different. In man-made religion, we make our way to heaven, or try to, and fail. But in the gospel, God comes down from heaven to us.

It's a completely different direction of travel. And this is what Jesus is speaking about, or revealing in this picture that he paints of the bridegroom. He's the bridegroom. But you've got the identity of the groom, but also in the few words that he says, or that are recorded, you have the guests of the groom. Who are the guests? I think the first thing we need to do is, we need to recognize that they're more than just regular guests. The phrase used here, translated the guests of the bridegroom, literally is the sons of the groom. That doesn't mean that they were literally sons of the groom, but it was an expression that would indicate or identify the inner circle of family and friends. If we think of a wedding today, these aren't the people who would just get an invite to the ceilidh. Now, not that there's anything wrong with just being invited to the ceilidh. No, these are the people who would be at the top table, the sons of the bridegroom. These are the guests that are spoken of here in what Jesus says. And who are they? Who do they represent? Well, of course, they represent the disciples, the disciples who are being questioned because they don't fast. They are the sons of the groom. These men who don't even fast, and yet they're described in this dignified way as the sons of the groom. And of course, that also speaks to us of God's way of salvation. God invites strangers into his family.

He makes friends of his enemies. How can you get close to God? Well, how much closer can you be than by being part of his family? And that is what God does. He invites us to be part of his family. When we're enabled to put our trust in Jesus as Savior, he gives us the right to be called sons of God. That's how close we can get, and it's something that God does for us. What matters is who we are or what we become by God's grace, and not what we do ultimately is what matters. So you have the identity of the groom.

[24 : 12] You have the guests of the groom, but then also, of course, the picture painted is of the feast, of the wedding feast. And what can we say of the feast? Well, really, there's a sense in which this is at the heart of what Jesus is saying in response to those who are questioning him. The whole

point of the picture is that Jesus is making the rather obvious point that a feast is for feasting. God has come into the world in the person of Jesus. Jesus is gathering to himself new family, new friends, and it's a time of celebration. It's a time of feasting. There is a time for fasting, and Jesus makes that point.

But the characteristic and enduring mark of the disciples of Jesus is one of joy and celebration. We are a celebrating people. We are a joyful community. Certainly that is what we ought to be. Is that what we are? Is that what we project to those looking on and looking in? As I was thinking of the words of the chorus or the hymn came to mind, come on and celebrate his gift of love. We will celebrate the Son of God who loved us and gave us life. We'll shout your praise, O King. You give us joy nothing else can bring. We'll give to you our offering in celebration praise. Come on and celebrate.

Celebrate and sing. Celebrate and sing to the King. This is what Jesus is saying. He's saying to be one of my disciples is to be of those who celebrate, of those who feast. But then finally, there's a somber note introduced into the picture that he paints, and it seems almost incongruous in the light of this picture of feasting because the somber note is Jesus speaks of the removal of the groom. Verse 20, but the time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them, and on that day they will fast.

We already know who the bridegroom is. It's Jesus. We already know who the guests are. They're the disciples. And Jesus is saying, one day I will be taken from them, and on that day they will fast. [26 : 29] What is Jesus talking about? Well, the picture that he paints, first of all, we need to try and get just how drastic a picture it is that he's painting. We find it difficult to really visualize the scene that has been painted. In the midst of the wedding celebration, this day of happiness and joy and celebration, in the very midst of it, the groom is forcibly and violently removed. It's a desperate picture that's been painted. The thought that came to mind as I was thinking about this was a few years ago in Afghanistan. There were a number of incidents where suicide bombers went into wedding parties and wreaked carnage. Any kind of terrorist attack of that kind is desperate, but a wedding party, there's something particularly disturbing about that. Now, I'm not saying that the picture that Jesus paints is quite so brutal, but it does envisage the forceful removal of the groom. And of course, we can just imagine the consequent dismay and despair of the guests, of the bride, of all those involved in the party. What is Jesus talking about? What does this represent? Well, it represents his death. You know, again, his questioners, maybe even his disciples at this point would have not have understood this, but there can be little doubt that this is what Jesus has in mind. The groom will be removed. The groom will die. What has this got to do with God's way of salvation? Well, it has everything to do with God's way of salvation. Men and women, you and me, we're estranged from God because of our sin.

And man-made religion looks to close that chasm by good works and fails. God recognizes that the chasm is there, that sin has caused this chasm and that this sin must be dealt with. And God's way is to bridge the gap himself as he takes upon himself the guilt and punishment of our sin. This is what Jesus did at the cross. He died in our place and took our punishment upon himself. So the removal of the groom, as Jesus rightly recognizes, is a time of sadness is a time of sadness. Fasting would be appropriate then. But ultimately, the removal of the groom is the cause of our greatest joy because by his removal, our salvation is secured and access and friendship with God is secured for us. And so we do celebrate the Son of God God who loved us and gave us life by his death. So Jesus answers the question of his questioners and in answering their question, he presents a view that is diametrically opposed to that held by his questioners on how we can be right with God. Two radically different perspectives, man's way and God's way.

The gospel, the gospel, the good news of God at heart is not about fasting. It's about feasting. Not about fasting, though it has its place, but at heart the gospel is about feasting. It's about celebrating what God has done for us. It's not about rules. Though rules have their place, in their place, it's about a relationship with God through Jesus Christ. It's not about what you can do, but about what God has done for you. We need to believe that and we need to proclaim and demonstrate that to others. May God help us so to do. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank you for the gospel. We thank you for the good news of God, your good news. We thank you for your son, Jesus Christ. We thank you for his coming to us, for we acknowledge that we of ourselves have no way of coming to you.

But we thank you that in Jesus you have come to us and you have brought us and invited us into your family. We thank you that in Jesus a way has been secure for sinners such as we all are to be brought close to you and to be right with you and to know friendship with you. And we pray that we would believe this for ourselves and that we would proclaim this joyful good news to others. And we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.