

Can you be too cheerful?

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Date: 05 August 2018

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[0 : 00] Good morning. Thank you, Robert, for that. Do please have those verses that we read from Luke's Gospel open in front of you. We'll be focusing this morning on verses 33 down to 39.

We looked at the previous part last week. I wonder, as you think about yourself, as you consider your character and how you're inclined to behave, would you say that you are an emotional person? Can people tell how you're feeling when they look at you? Do you find it easy to express emotions or would you rather keep them kind of bottled up inside, whether that's happiness, sadness, surprise, anger, etc., etc., the whole range of emotions.

Can people tell what you're thinking? Do you even admit to yourself how you're feeling, perhaps? It's interesting, isn't it, watching different people opening presents.

Young children, of course, it's very easy to tell whether they're excited about what they've been given or, in many cases, whether they're excited about the box they've been given it in. But people vary quite a lot, don't they, in how they react, how much you can tell what they're thinking.

[1 : 09] It's great giving Jo presents because she's always so incredibly excited about whatever she finds inside. But giving presents to my siblings, well, actually, that can be quite a difference, sometimes a somewhat frustrating experience because with many of them, what you get is a kind of a blank look and they put it down and move on to the next present.

And if you're lucky, you get kind of a muttered thanks. I don't think they're necessarily unimpressed, just not particularly inclined to show it, perhaps. We vary, don't we, in how much we show our emotions, how much you can tell what people are thinking.

And sometimes we don't like what we think other people are thinking. We're unimpressed by their reaction. And that's where we find Jesus in this passage here.

The Pharisees are unimpressed by what they are seeing of Jesus' emotions, or at least that's their understanding of it. See, last week they accused Jesus of eating with sinners, and we saw his response that his call is a call to sinners, so of course he's there with them.

It's a call to repentance, verse 32. But they should be unsurprised to see him keeping company with people who no one else wants to help. And now as the Pharisees move on to another accusation, as they accuse him of failing to pray and fast as they do, their disciples do, and indeed John the Baptist's disciples, as they move on to this next accusation, what we see is that this call to sinners is a call to repentance, but it's also a call to celebration.

[2 : 47] Now to appreciate what's going on here as they come with this accusation, it's worth taking a moment to think about what is the point of fasting. Why do people do it?

Fasting, so abstaining from food and drink either entirely for a certain period or kind of subsisting on the most basic foodstuffs for a longer period.

Both kinds of fasting were quite commonplace in the ancient world, with reasons that kind of ranged from trying to prevent demonic possession by fasting, because a lot of them believed that demons could gain possession over them through them eating.

From that through to fasting to prepare to receive ecstatic or miraculous powers from a deity. And in some ways the ideas in Judaism, in Old Testament belief, weren't all that different, because in the Old Testament we find, for instance, we find Moses fasting in preparation to receive the Ten Commandments.

We find Daniel fasting prior to receiving his visions, and so on and so forth. And lots and lots of fasting as part of mourning for those who have died.

[4 : 01] So for instance, David and his men, they fast to mourn the deaths of Saul and Jonathan in 2 Samuel chapter 1. We also find in the Old Testament, we find people fasting by way of intercession.

Fasting as part of prayer, and particularly prayer in repentance. So for instance, David, when he's sinned with Bathsheba, and when he's been told that his son is going to die for his sin, well we find David then fasting, and spending his nights lying in sackcloth on the ground, by way of repentance, by way of crying out to God for the life of this child.

And this last sense, this sense of repentance and intercession, seems to have become kind of the dominant idea for the Pharisees by the time we get to the New Testament here in Luke.

So the Pharisees have developed their practices to the point that they are fasting regularly, twice a week from morning to evening. Mondays and Thursdays, every week you fast for those two days. And that is by way of kind of intercession for the nation as a whole. The Pharisees are crying out to God for a Messiah, calling out for deliverance from oppression.

[5 : 19] Or at least that's the theory of it. And similarly, that idea of fasting as a mark of repentance is quite strong. And perhaps that's why John's disciples are fasting.

Remember, John came to preach a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And for the people then, the natural response of repentance is, you fast for a while.

So perhaps that's what John's disciples are up to. In response to God's goodness, the people fast in gratitude, in repentance, and so on.

And I think maybe it's this dimension of fasting, of repentance, that's perhaps what prompts the question here. Because Jesus said in verse 32, I have come to call sinners to repentance.

And this response from the Pharisees, we could kind of see it as them saying, well, it doesn't look very much like repentance to me. You say people should repent, but the people following along after you aren't doing the repenting that we're expecting to find.

[6 : 27] In fact, this tax collector doesn't look very sorry for what he's done. Far from visible repentance, he's not lying in sackcloth and ashes, is he? No, he's throwing a party. And there you are with him.

And encouraging his friends to have a party as well. So what kind of piety do you call this? What kind of godliness is this? This is not what we're expecting at all.

That's a fair point, isn't it? I mean, is Levi sorry for his sins or not? How are we supposed to believe this is genuine repentance if none of the marks of it are there?

But Jesus is having none of this accusation. He rejects that requirement for fasting as part of repentance. One of the other things about fasting as you go through the Old Testament is that quite often the prophets condemn people for fasting.

So for instance, in Isaiah 58, why have we fasted, the people say, and you, God, have not seen it? Why have we humbled ourselves and you have not noticed?

[7 : 33] And God answers, yet on the day of your fasting, you do as you please and exploit all your workers. Your fasting ends in quarreling and strife and in striking each other with wicked fists.

You cannot fast as you do today and expect your voice to be heard on high. Is this the kind of fast I have chosen? Only a day for people to humble themselves. Is it only for bowing one's head like a reed and for lying in sackcloth and ashes?

Is that what you call a fast? A day acceptable to the Lord? See, for Isaiah and for many of the other prophets, as with so many things, what the people have done is they've turned what ought to be an outward expression of what's already inside, an expression of the existing inward devotion, an expression of humility.

They've turned that into an empty ritual. They've turned it into a mere performance. See, the people there in Isaiah 58 are outraged. We're fasting and you don't even care, God.

But God sees the heart behind the fasting. God sees the hollowness of the gesture. God sees that the rest of their actions don't match up. Now, that's not to say that fasting can't be part of legitimate repentance, of true piety.

[8 : 48] Indeed, at other times, the prophets do call for fasting as part of true repentance. Say, for instance, in Joel chapter 2. But that fasting cannot stand alone.

It has to sit alongside the appropriate attitude to the heart. If we go back to that idea of people opening presents, this kind of outward sham fasting that Isaiah condemns is like that person who opens a present and says, oh, thank you, it's lovely, in that kind of over-enthusiastic, fake way that everybody can see straight through.

That's a pointless gesture, isn't it? Maybe we could deceive one another. However, some people can manufacture the appearance of emotion quite effectively. But none of us is going to pull the

wool over God's eyes.

So maybe this is the attitude that Jesus is accusing the Pharisees of. I mean, there are other times where they get accused of this kind of empty gesture, a form of religion with nothing behind it, an outward show of piety.

And maybe there is some truth to that accusation here. Maybe there is an emptiness to it. It would fit with what we know. But that is not the problem that Jesus raises here, is it?

[10:02] Jesus doesn't have a problem with fasting in general. Jesus doesn't even say that the Pharisees shouldn't be fasting. Jesus himself fasted in the wilderness as he was being tempted. In Matthew 6, he gives instructions for how to behave when one is fasting.

So fasting is a possible thing for believers to do. No, the response that Jesus gives is simply, this is not the right time. Have a look again at verse 34.

Jesus answered, Can you make the friends of the bridegroom fast while he is with them? But the time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them. In those days, they will fast.

So Jesus doesn't say that there is no place for fasting. What he says is that this is not that time.

Why? Because this is a time of celebration, not a time of mourning.

The two are simply incompatible. You cannot have celebration and fasting at the same time. If fasting is what you do when you're mourning, it has no place at a wedding feast, does it?

[11:08] If fasting is for bemoaning the fact that the kingdom of God has not yet arrived and interceding before God and asking him to relent and to send the promised deliverer, if that's what fasting is for, then it has no place now in Jesus' day because that time has come.

The kingdom has arrived. So why cry out for the kingdom to come? The kingdom has arrived. And so the life of Jesus' disciples should be rightly marked by feasting and by celebration, not by fasting because they have the bridegroom with them.

Now there is a somber note in those verses too, isn't there? Because Jesus warns that a day will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them. Jesus already knows he's not going to be around forever.

Jesus is predicting the fact that he will be taken away from his followers. He will go to die and fasting will then be an appropriate response. So we're now in that point after Jesus has died and so perhaps then fasting is an appropriate response for us today.

Should we be fasting much more regularly than we do? Are we supposed to be in mourning because the bridegroom has been taken away? Well, I suspect probably not because that's not the full picture, is it?

[12:34] As is so often the case, we find ourselves in the time of the inaugurated kingdom. So the kingdom of God has been proclaimed on this earth. The kingdom of God is being proclaimed on this earth.

The good news is announced. The good news is present today. And whilst the king isn't here with us manifest on the earth, we do have amongst us the other comforter who he promised he would send.

We have the Holy Spirit dwelling within us. We are not left alone without God. So we live in this time of partial fulfillment. We live in a time when, yes, there are sadnesses.

A time when there are difficulties. A time when, as we thought about a few weeks back, there is a place for lament in our individual lives and our corporate lives. There is a dimension of future hope of the kingdom that is not yet realized.

We live in a time of partial, incomplete fulfillment of the kingdom. But there is also that very real sense in which the kingdom is here.

[13:41] So we have the Holy Spirit here with us. The good news has been announced. Our sins are washed away by the blood of Jesus. And so I suggest that whilst there is a place for fasting, for mourning, for lament from time to time, I suggest that our day-to-day, our default setting, if you like, ought rather to be one of joy and of celebration.

Westminster Shorter Catechism. What is the chief end of man? Man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever. The whole reason we are here is to give God glory and to enjoy him.

We are supposed to be enjoying God here, now, and forever. I don't know if any of you have heard the phrase, the frozen chosen.

Maybe some of you have even had it leveled at you. A somewhat dismissive name given to some Christians, particularly to Calvinists, to those who believe that God has chosen for himself a people

by his own sovereign decree, as we do here at Covenant Church.

A name, in fact, given particularly to Presbyterians, so to denominations like the Free Church of Scotland that we're part of. In fact, a name given particularly to Scottish Presbyterians.

[15:00] And it presents that caricature of the Stoic Scot who wouldn't break into a smile unwrapping a nice present, and most especially who would never, ever show any sign of emotion in church.

The frozen chosen. That church building, of course, is going to be very austere. The building will be quite cold, probably, full of pews, and so on.

The preaching, well, the preaching will be faithful, will be solidly biblical, but really rather long and, frankly, quite dull. The singing, slow, monotonous, restricted in content.

The prayers, long. And in that sing-song voice that just gently lulls you to sleep, because heaven forbid that we show any kind of passion about anything at all, any emotion with respect to what we're talking about.

Now, some of you have probably been to churches that come worryingly close to that caricature. Maybe some of you think this church is rather closer than you would like to that caricature.

[16:07] Well, maybe some of you have grown up with something actually not too dissimilar to that. And for some of you, maybe that's just what church is, and any departure from that is disturbing. Now, we've spent some time, haven't we, over the past few months thinking about worship, thinking about what it looks like to praise and glorify God, the true nature of worship.

And we've reflected, amongst other things, on the seriousness of what we do when we worship God, particularly when we gather to worship Him together on the Lord's day.

There is rightly a place for reverence, a place for solemnity to a gathering. A church service shouldn't be frivolous. It shouldn't be lighthearted and inconsequential, inconsequential, because we do an awesome thing when we come into the presence of the Almighty and we humbly bow before Him.

But there is certainly also a place for joy and for celebration. There is a place for upbeat songs.

There is a place for excitement. There is a time to laugh as well as a time to weep.

And I think this passage seems to suggest that actually joy and celebration should be the norm, not the exception. Why is that?

[17:27] Well, because we should keep being amazed at finding ourselves here. We gather with the Lord's people on the Lord's day and we are overjoyed that He has spared us for another week.

We're excited to be together. We are enthusiastic about hearing from God's Word. But more than that, more than that we should continue to be bowled over day by day and week by week by the sheer enormity of the fact that He has loved us.

Each day, the fact that we have been forgiven for our sins should cause us to dance and shout and praise God. So repentance certainly includes a dimension of sorrow for our sins.

But when we come in confession, when we come recognizing how we have fallen short, we should always be reaching the place where we recognize that those sins have been washed away.

We've got to be able to reach that point of rejoicing because if you look at yourself, if you contemplate your sins and your failings, and the end result of doing that is that you feel kind of depressed.

[18:38] You feel unloved and unlovely. If that's the end result of the process, then you've only done half the process because you're forgetting that those sins that so grieve you have been taken away, have been nailed to the cross, and we bear them no more.

Praise the Lord. Praise the Lord, O my soul. That is what the Pharisees just don't understand. The Pharisees think that repentance is characterized only by fasting because they have no assurance that their sins are actually washed away.

Levi, on the other hand, Levi, this sinful tax collector, Levi has heard Jesus speak. Levi has heard Jesus say that he is welcome.

Levi has heard the call to follow, and so Levi is rejoicing because he is with the bridegroom. And so then Jesus explains that the time of his life on earth should not be characterized by fasting because the kingdom has arrived.

The new thing has come, and the new thing doesn't fit into the existing categories, and that brings us to these two very brief parables that he tells in the closing verses of this section.

[20 : 02] Jesus explains here to these Pharisees who are accusing him that what he's come to proclaim is more different than they think it is. He explains to them that they can't just treat the gospel as some kind of patch, as a small modification of what has gone before in order to deal with a minor defect.

No, they can't try and contain the gospel within their existing paradigms. It simply will not work. The gospel is a newer thing than they think.

And so, verse 36, he told them this parable. No one tears a piece out of a new garment to patch an old one. Otherwise, they will have torn the new garment, and the patch from the new will not match the old.

Jesus makes his point here with an obvious truism, doesn't he? Of course nobody cuts a piece out of a new garment to patch an old one. Obviously, that's stupid.

Not only is it not going to make the old thing any better, because it's not going to match, but even more ridiculously, you've taken this nice new thing, and you have torn it.

[21 : 10] You've ruined it. So what Jesus is saying is, he's saying that the new message that he brings is not just a patch. It is not a minor improvement.

It's not a small modification to Judaism. Jesus is not just another rabbi with a different interpretation of the law. No, this is a new covenant.

For the Jews, especially, the high value given to old things, well, that could lead them to go to great lengths to try to preserve it. But Jesus is clear that that will not work.

You cannot take part of his teaching and just stick it on to the old. To attempt to do so will spoil it. And he gives another illustration.

When you store wine in cleaned animal skins, well, the new ones, the new skins have a fair bit of elasticity, and they can generally cope when the new wine keeps fermenting once it's in there and gradually expands.

[22 : 10] But when the skins have already done their stretching, when they've dried out, and then you try and put new wine in, well, then when the wine expands, it just splits the skin and the wine is lost.

The new way of life that is associated with the gospel, the new paradigm that Jesus brings, cannot be contained within the constraints of the old ways.

And there's a final warning in the very last phrase, which like those two key words to repentance in verse 32 that we thought about last week, like those, this is only recorded by Luke here in verse 39. No one after drinking old wine wants the new, for they say the old is better. It's a solemn warning, isn't it? Don't expect that the people who have given their lives to old movements will be happy about switching their allegiance.

People are likely to want to stay with what they know works. They've got used to their old wine and they're frightened they aren't going to like the new thing. And as Luke presents it, they're not even willing to try the new wine.

[23 : 22] They're happy to just stick with what they have. Now that is always a problem for anybody wanting to change, well, pretty much anything in life, isn't it? It's a problem for reformers throughout situations, that tendency of people to want to stay put, that inertia.

And sometimes people come to this passage and they use this verse to try and cajole people into trying something new. They use this to mock old traditions.

But that isn't really the point here, is it? Because what Jesus is talking about isn't just some new idea. This isn't just any old thing.

This isn't Jesus just coming with a new interpretation that just happens to be a bit of a shift. It isn't just a new idea in any area of life.

No, this is something different, isn't it? Jesus isn't still doing new things today. This is a decisive change. You can't just stick with the old, but that new thing doesn't keep on changing.

[24 : 32] This isn't a mandate to always keep saying the new thing is better. The new thing might be better or it might not. This verse doesn't tell you using a computer projector is better than an OHP.

We have to make that decision some other way. The point of these parables is that the new things, the new gospel, has to be allowed to have its own integrity.

You can't chop bits out of it. You can't try and fit it within the constraints of the old thing. It's a decisive change and a once-for-all change.

