

AM Isaiah 58 & Mark 2:18-22 A Question about Fasting

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[0 : 00] So, Isaiah 58. This morning's sermon will be about, if you've seen on your notice sheet, a question about fasting. When Jesus is asked a question about fasting, well, here we have in the Old Testament the Lord rebuking his people for their fasts and how they don't observe fasts well.

And we'll see as we come into our text in the New Testament that it was still going on in Christ's day. So, if we could read Isaiah 58 and we'll read the whole of the chapter together.

Cry aloud, do not hold back. Lift up your voice like a trumpet. Declare to my people their transgression, to the house of Jacob their sins.

Yet they seek me daily and delight to know my ways, as if they were a nation that did righteousness and did not forsake the judgment of their God.

They ask of me righteous judgments. They delight to draw near to God. Why have we fasted and you see it not? Why have we humbled ourselves and you take no knowledge of it?

[1 : 18] Behold, in the day of your fast you seek your own pleasure and oppress all your workers. Behold, you fast only to quarrel and to fight, and you hit with a wicked fist.

Fasting like yours this day will not make your voice to be heard on high. Is such a fast that I choose a day for a person to humble himself?

Is it to bow down his head like a reed and to spread sackcloth and ashes under him? Will you call this a fast and a day acceptable to the Lord?

Is not this the fast that I choose, to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the straps of the yoke, and to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?

Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house? When you see the naked to cover him and not to hide yourself from your own flesh, then shall your light break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up speedily.

[2 : 36] Your righteousness shall go before you. The glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard. Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer. And you shall cry, and he will say, Here I am.

If you take away the yoke from your midst, the pointing of the finger, and speaking wickedness, if you pour yourself out for the hungry, and satisfy the desire of the afflicted, then shall your light rise in the darkness, and your gloom be as the noonday.

And the Lord will guide you continually, and satisfy your desire in scorched places, and make your bones strong.

And you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters do not fail. And your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt.

You shall raise up the foundations of many generations. You shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to dwell in.

[3 : 51] If you turn back your foot from the Sabbath, from doing my pleasure on my holy day, and call the Sabbath a delight, and the holy day of the Lord honourable, if you honour it, not going your own ways, or seeking your own pleasure, or talking idly, then you shall take delight in the Lord.

And I will make you ride on the heights of the earth. I will feed you with the heritage of Jacob your father, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.

Amen. Well, our text this morning is Mark chapter 2, verses 18 to 22.

And that's found on page 1010 of the Church Bibles. Mark chapter 2, reading from verse 18 down to 22, these five verses.

Now John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees were fasting. And people came and said to him, Why do John's disciples fast and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?

[5 : 22] And Jesus said to them, Can the wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them? As long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast. The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and they will fast in that day.

No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old garment. If he does, the patch tears away from it. The new from the old and a worse tear is made.

And no one puts new wine into old wineskins. If he does, the wine will burst the skins, and the wine is destroyed. And so are the skins.

But new wine is for fresh wineskins. So this passage we have before us all centers around a question.

Jesus was no stranger to questions. He was asked questions all throughout his ministry. It was usually because he was doing something that was different to the Pharisees and the other teachers and the leaders around him.

[6 : 34] And he was being constantly scrutinized. Sometimes by the Pharisees themselves, but sometimes by other people. And we only have to go back just a few verses from our text this morning when we see a question.

Why does he eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners? And then we only need to zoom forward a little bit to find why are they doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath?

Now sometimes these were genuine questions, but quite often they were a judgmental scolding by the Pharisees. And here we have another question. Why do John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?

Now, Jesus, as we know, never misses an opportunity to teach. And as he often does so, he answers with parables. And interestingly, we've got three parables here all crammed into five verses.

Now, parables, as I'm sure we know, are great truths, but they're packaged in a picture form to help people understand pictures from everyday life.

[7 : 40] So we have parables about planting crops. We have parables about baking bread. We have fishing and we have building. We have losing things and finding things, things that we're all used to.

Jesus used all sorts of pictures in his parables. So these three short parables this morning, we have a bridegroom, we have a patch, and we have a wineskin.

He takes us to familiar places, places like an exciting wedding day, or even just a mundane job like mending some clothes, or even the correct storage of wine.

Our Lord would use anything to teach the people. So we'll look at this text in three parts. Firstly, we have the question in verse 18. Secondly, we'll look at the picture of the bridegroom in verses 19 and 20, which that will actually answer the question directly.

And then thirdly, the pictures of the patch and the wineskins, which deal with the more broader issue. He really goes to the root of the question in answering that.

[8 : 46] It's really the difference between the old life and the new life, of false religion and true saving religion, of being dead in sins or alive in Christ. So verse 18, the question, our first point.

The first thing we read is that John the Baptist and his disciples are fasting. And Jesus' disciples were not. And the reason we know this is because you only need to look up at the previous passage and the call of Levi.

And they were feasting. They were in Levi's house celebrating with him that he was a converted tax collector. So this prompts the question, while his disciples are all sat around eating away, why do your disciples not fast?

These men couldn't work out that if Jesus was a great teacher, like the Pharisees, or even like John the Baptist's men, then if he was so devout and serious about God that he should be following the practices and the customs of the time.

But he was not. Now, fasting, I'm sure we all know, means to go without food or water for a time. We see fasting quite a bit in the Old Testament.

[9 : 55] It's usually done during a time of mourning, particularly if a king dies or someone close to you dies. It happens during a time of national sin or even personal sin.

And as we sang of the psalmist earlier, during a time of struggle and a time of sorrow that the psalmist was going through, it was a time to draw near to the Lord. It was a solemn time, a time of deprivation, of humility, but most importantly, it was a time of prayer where a serious confession was made and seeking of the Lord was made.

And it went along with the outward wearing of sackcloth, which is a material made out of rough goat's hair. And it would have been very uncomfortable to wear.

The closest thing I could think of was imagine wearing a coarse woolly jumper with no t-shirt on. It would be quite uncomfortable. But another part of it, you would put ashes upon your head or we even see in the book of Job that he even sat in ashes.

And the point was that in all these things, all these things that look like outward things, is that what you felt physically inside was mirrored on the outside.

[11 : 16] So fasting would be painful. And so when you felt those hunger pains of fasting because you hadn't eaten for a while, it would be a reminder to you of the sorrow of your soul, the pain that was going on inside.

And the rough clothes on the outside would remind you that you were rough on the inside and how you felt. And then that filthiness of the ash would represent the filthiness of sin, knowing that you are but a sinner born in sin.

But ultimately it was made to make you realise your utter dependence upon the Lord. We see this happening in places like 1 Kings 21 when King Ahab was confronted over his sin.

And in Jonah, even the heathen people of Nineveh, when they turned to the Lord, they followed this pattern of fasting, sackcloth and ashes. And then if we go to the book of Esther, there's some really good detail given in Esther.

When the Israelites learn of Haman's plot to destroy the Jews, we read there in Esther chapter 4, when Mordecai learned all that had been done, Mordecai tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and ashes, and went into the midst of the city.

[12 : 31] He cried out with a loud and bitter cry. He went up to the entrance of the king's gate, for no one was allowed to enter the king's gate clothed in sackcloth.

And in every province, wherever the king's command and his decree reached, there was great mourning among the Jews, with fasting and weeping and lamenting, and many of them lay in sackcloth and ashes.

Now as we move forward, out of the Old Testament and into the New, we see Jesus fasting for 40 days, while he was being tempted by Satan.

And then, as we read in our text, the disciples would then fast later on, after Jesus' death and burial. And then in the book of Acts, the early church fasted, before they sent off Paul and Barnabas to Cyprus, because they wanted to commit this special time to the Lord.

And of course, fasting is appropriate today. It's a time to draw near to the Lord. And so, it still applies this very day. But it's interesting, that under the Old Covenant, there was only one day of the year, where the Lord commanded that you should fast.

[13 : 43] And that was the Day of Atonement. We see that in Leviticus 16, which was a national day of cleansing Israel. Now the rest of the time, the people could fast whenever they wanted.

They were under no compulsion to fast. But by the time we get to the first century, the Pharisees and the scribes had added all sorts of laws around God's law, so that the average man on the street, he didn't know what was the Pharisees' law and what was God's law.

And so, you could hardly tell them apart. And it had got to the point, where if you wanted to be holy, if you wanted to show how dedicated to the Lord you were, you were expected to fast twice a week, on a Monday and a Thursday.

So, it would appear that our text was either happening on one of those two days. Now we know this from different historical documents from around the time, but funnily enough, our Lord actually references this practice.

Think of Luke 18, and the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector. What does the self-righteous Pharisee say when he prays to himself?

[14 : 58] He goes, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week.

And so on. And what made it worse is, we learn from Matthew chapter 6, that they made a show of it. They would go around looking gloomy, they would disfigure their faces, so that everybody knew what they were doing.

And Jesus condemns them for this. For them, fasting had just become a miserable, empty ritual. And there is a lesson for us in this today.

The question is, are you a Pharisee? Do you make a show of Christianity, just for others to see? Do you think it's important to come to church, to dress smart, read your back?

But all these things are all just empty rituals. You think, well, as long as everybody saw me out, and as long as I was well dressed, and as long as I sang along with the Psalms, and I bowed my head to pray, well then, that's all that matters.

[16 : 06] But nothing was really going on. Our hearts, and our minds were cold, and we were checked out. It was just a show, an empty ritual. It is a very easy sin to fall into, and to slip into, to be a formalist, and to be a hypocrite.

The Lord says this in Isaiah 29, verse 13. This people draw near to me with their mouth, but they honor me with their lips, while their heart is far from me.

Now if that is you this morning, there is hope. If you confess it, turn from it, repent of it, the Lord will forgive you, of all your sins, and he will gladly and willingly, forgive you.

So that accounts for the Pharisees, but we read here also, that John the Baptist's disciples, were fasting. They were fasting too. And if we were to look at this account, in the book of Matthew, we would find the question actually came, from John's disciples.

Why do you not fast? Now we know that John's disciples, were quite different from the Pharisees. They were not hostile to Christ. John's ministry was a true ministry.

[17 : 19] Jesus and John had overlapping ministries, and it would have most likely, have been a genuine question. For John's disciples, fasting wouldn't be as much a proud thing, but it would be more to do with John's ministry, of emphasizing repentance, and self-denial, and mourning over sin, that sort of thing.

But either way, they still fasted quite often, while Jesus' disciples, were eating around the dinner table. So they needed instructions too.

Because the disciples of John, they were separating, as a separate group, from Jesus' disciples. So these men needed teaching. We know that John's message, all the time, was pointing his hearers, and his disciples, towards Christ.

Telling them that he must decrease, and Christ must increase. And his role was only just to prepare the way for Christ. I heard it put this way, I think it was Joel Behey, who said, that John the Baptist, was like a bridge.

He was linking the old covenant, and the new covenant. But a lot of men, they got onto the bridge, and they almost got stuck on the bridge, and they didn't move. They didn't go back, they didn't go forward, they were just stuck on the bridge.

[18 : 34] And so, at this point, John should have had no disciples left. They all should have been Christ's disciples. After all, John says himself, that the one who has the bride, is the bridegroom.

The friend of the bridegroom, which was John, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly, at the bridegroom's voice. Therefore, this joy of mine, is now complete.

Now that leads us perfectly, on to our second point, Jesus' response, in the first picture. The bridegroom, and the wedding feast. Now we read, in verse 19, he says, can the wedding guests fast, while the bridegroom is with them?

As long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast. So this is something, they actually cannot do. Jesus puts his hearers, into a familiar place, a wedding celebration.

He himself, is pictured as the bridegroom, and his followers, his disciples, are his guests. Now this language, of bridegroom and bride, should have been, very familiar to anybody, who was, just a little acquainted, with the Old Testament.

[19 : 46] They were always a picture, of how God pictured himself, with his people Israel. We read that in places, like Isaiah 54, and 62, and most famously, in the book of Hosea.

And it's an interesting, side note, that in this, Jesus is clearly, expressing himself, as God. He's expressing his divinity, God the Son, the second person, of the Trinity.

Because he uses this picture, of him being the bridegroom, and his people being the bride, over and over again. We see, in the Gospels, the parables, of the ten virgins. We read, in the book of Ephesians, that, husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church, and gave himself up for her.

And then, in Revelation, on the last day, he saw the holy city, that is John, the new Jerusalem, coming down, out of heaven, from God, prepared, as a bride, adorned for her husband.

Now, in our country, wedding days, they tend to last, only for one day. You have a ceremony, and you have a reception, and I think, that's probably enough.

[20 : 55] But in the New Testament, they could last, for up to a week, a week of celebration, where people would gather, the families would all gather, in the home, for this couple, being brought together, in union.

Now, children, I know some of you, have been to a wedding, quite recently. Now, what do you see, at a wedding? Well, you see lots of food, don't you? You see, perhaps a three course meal, laid out in front of you, and even if you're lucky, you might get a buffet, in the evening.

And it's fancy food too, isn't it? It's not just beans on toast, you get the best food. We might call it a feast. And are all the guests, when they're there, are they all looking sad, and gloomy?

Well, no, they're all happy, because somebody, who they love, and care about, is getting married. And then we think about, what people wear. Do people come to a wedding, dressed in a dark black suit, with a black tie, and everyone's in black dresses, with veils on?

Well, no, it's a nice suit, and the men all have a carnation, in the top pocket, and the ladies all have colourful dresses, and they have the nice hats, because what they wear, actually speaks of the occasion.

[22 : 07] It's a joyful time, and so it's appropriate, to wear these things. And this is what Jesus is saying, about his time on earth. It's a joyful time, a season where, the incarnate son of God, was on the earth, preaching the gospel, seeing sinners being saved, the sick being healed.

It was not a time, for mourning and fasting, but a time of rejoicing, as Jesus is doing, right there in the house of Levi. And he's saying to these men, who are asking these questions, well you should join us, come with us.

It's not a time for gloominess, but a time for rejoicing. It is the season. As Ecclesiastes 3 says, there is a season, for everything, for every time, and every matter under heaven.

A time to weep, and a time to laugh, a time to mourn, and a time to dance. But then he tells them, in verse 20, that there will indeed come a day, when his disciples will fast, and it will be appropriate to do so, when there will be in mourning.

This is the first time, he talks about his death, in the gospels. And notice that phrase, in the middle of verse 20, when he says, he will be taken away. The Greek word for that, it's quite a violent word.

[23 : 25] It's more like the word snatched. It's the same word, that's actually, well, translated, that's used, of the suffering servant, in the book of Isaiah.

That great Old Testament chapter, from 700 years beforehand, which spoke about, the violent death of Christ. Where it says, by oppression, and judgment, he was taken away. He was snatched away.

So here we have, this picture of the bridegroom. Well, what are we to take, from this picture? Well, I couldn't find any better words, than the words of, William Hendrickson. So, I'll just read this short paragraph.

The important truth, which Jesus here reveals, and which, makes the passage, so practical, and filled with comfort, especially also, for us today, is that, for those who acknowledge, Christ, as their Lord and Saviour, the proper attitude, of heart and mind, is not that of sadness, but that of gladness.

If it be true, that God with us, spells joy for believers, should not God within us, awaken every child, of God, to joy unspeakable, and full of glory?

[24 : 36] It was in order, to bring such abounding joy, that Jesus came to the earth, and that he, through his sacrificial death, brought salvation, full and free.

And we see that, don't we, in the Gospels, from the very first announcement, to the angels, to the shepherds, great news, of great joy. And then what Jesus, told his disciples, when he said, these things I have spoken to you, that my joy, may be in you, and that your joy, may be full.

Now, practically, this doesn't mean, that we're bouncing, off the walls, all the time, but it does show, that we have, an inward joy, at the bare minimum.

We all show joy, differently, we all have, a different disposition, some of us are, a dull Yorkshireman, some of us are, more excited Scotsman, or Iranians, but we all show, our joy, in different ways, but to have that joy, in the inner heart, to have that peace, that comes through Christ, who set us free, from the penalty, and power of sin.

So finally, let us come to verses 21, and 22, with these pictures, from daily life, of the patch, of unshrunk cloth, and the wine skins.

[25 : 53] Two parables, essentially have the same meaning. They answer the question, like I said at the beginning, in a much broader sense. He's letting, everybody there know, that there is a much bigger issue, here at heart, than just fasting.

The gospel requires, a great change, a monumental change. The old ways, the man-made rules, the legalistic religion, of the Pharisees, basically what Judaism, had become, and this twice fast, weekly fast, that they had to do, does not fit, with the life of Christ.

There is to be, a new order of things, and we see there, in the first picture, it's about, attempting, to fix an old piece, of worn clothing, with a new patch.

Now I'm sure, we've all experienced, and particularly, the mothers, amongst us, have experienced, the sad fact, that clothes, shrink in the wash. And particularly, those, that are made, from natural fibers, like wool, it's inevitable.

Over time, as you shrink, as you wash them, they'll shrink down. But if you have, a piece of old, wooden clothing, and it has a tear in it, you would need, to put on it, a piece of pre-shrunk, cloth, to fix it.

[27 : 06] If you were to, sew on a new piece, of cloth, it would just, tear off, the first, wash you put it through, because it would, shrink down, the stitches would tear out, and it would be, worse than ever.

The stitching, would be torn, and the bare patch, would be there as well. You would either, need to put a, pre-shrunk, piece of cloth, on there, or better yet, buy a new garment.

The old, and the new, cannot be put together. Now the second picture, about the storage of wine, has the same meaning. Wine in the first century, wasn't stored in, in glass bottles, like we have it today.

Oddly enough, it was stored in, wine skins, it was, animal skins, usually a goat skin. And then, it's quite hard to picture, a goat skin bottle, but, what I gather they did, was they would skin a goat, and then you would have, like the section, where the skin of the neck was, and where the four feet were, the, down to the legs, and you would bring those sides, all up to the top, and you would tie it off, around at the top, and then you would have, like a container of sorts.

And you would pour in, the grape juice, and leave it to ferment. And as the, chemical process, of fermentation, took place, and the, the gases inside, the bottle would expand, it would stretch, the wine skin, and eventually, it would dry out.

[28 : 23] So if you try to repeat, the process, with the same wine skin, over and over again, it wouldn't be long, before that dry, brittle wine skin, cracked open, and the wine skin, was ruined, and so was the wine.

And the same meaning, is here. The new must go, into the new. You cannot mix, the old, and the new. And it's the same, for his hearers, as it is for us. You cannot, fit Christ, into an old, man-centered religion.

You cannot mix Christ, with legalism. You cannot mix Christ, with Judaism, or any other type, of religion. The old religion, of the Pharisees, cannot save you.

A religion of works, and an outward show, of holiness. All these things, including the Pharisees, fasting habits, were empty, and useless. A patch, must be put on, a new garment, and a new heart, for the new covenant.

Like the new wine, of the gospel, must be poured, into a new heart. You must, be born again. You must recognize, that all you have ever done, your whole lives, is sin against the Lord.

[29 : 31] Even your good works, we could see them, as like, filthy rags, or like, that old wineskin, not fit to hold, the good news, of the gospel. Those old, cracked wineskins, you need, a brand new heart.

God alone, can do this. He is the only one, who can, work in you, that salvation, by the work of the son, dying upon the cross, for sinners like you, and me, and then raising him, from the dead.

He calls us simply, to repent of our sins, and trust in him. And after all, he says in Ezekiel, 36, 26, I will give you, a new heart.

And then, very clearly, we have in, 2nd Corinthians 5, 16 to 21, and we'll close with this, a very clear, picture of, the necessary, necessity of a new heart, and becoming a new creation.

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away, behold, the old has come. All this is from God, who through Christ, reconciled us to himself, and gave us the ministry, of reconciliation.

[30 : 41] That is, in Christ, God was reconciling, the world to himself, not counting, their trespasses, against them, and entrusting, and entrusting, the message, of reconciliation.

Therefore, we are ambassadors, for Christ. God making his appeal, through us, we implore you, on behalf of Christ, be reconciled, to God. For our sake, he made him, to be sin, who knew no sin, so that in him, we might become, the righteousness of God.

Amen.