

OUT WITH THE OLD?

Out with the old and in with the new? Or is it, off with the new and hang on to the old? That's the sort of argument directed at Jesus. In Luke 5:33-39, He asks a series of rhetorical questions. Let's continue to explore why His teaching was so hard for so many to take.

1- PRAYING & FASTING? - In verse 33 Jesus' critics said, "*the disciples of John fast often and offer prayers, and so do the disciples of the Pharisees, but yours eat and drink.*" Not only did Jesus' disciples eat and drink with tax-collectors and sinners, they didn't observe traditions.

Self-righteous Pharisees went around tsk-tsking everyone to get them to live their way. They had good intentions. They loved God's Law, and put protective margins around it. Their own rules and traditions were meant to keep them from breaking God's commandments.

So, why fast? Old Testament law required only one fast per year. On the Day of Atonement, the people were to afflict themselves by humbly praying and abstaining from food (Leviticus 16 and 23:26-32). Through Israel's history, fasting became associated with times of repenting and grieving before the Lord, especially during the fall of Jerusalem and exile of God's people.

2- RITUAL OR RELATIONSHIP? - "With appropriate uses came abuses," notes RK Hughes, "like those who supposed their fasting brought self-achieved holiness, a works-righteousness, despite the prophets warning against such thinking" (Isaiah 58:3-5, Jeremiah 14:12).

By Jesus' day, fasting had become religious routine (Luke 18:12). Pharisees practiced regular fasts twice a week, but never on the Sabbath, which was a joyful day. When they fasted, they made sure everyone knew, going about sprinkled with ashes and with unwashed faces.

Instead of fasting as a spiritual discipline, or expression of humility, dependence and devotion to God, notes RC Sproul, it became a very formalistic type of piety. "The supposition was that you could not be spiritual unless you were uncomfortable," adds Hughes. They thought spirituality consisted of doing things you do not want to do and refraining from what you want.

3- A DISCIPLE'S DUTY? - Knowing Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior is not about rituals, but about a new relationship with God. Old traditional man-made ways of doing religious things had to give way to Christ's life-transforming gospel of the kingdom. Jesus brings new spiritual life, as those who received Him are reborn into His kingdom of light. The Promised One has come!

Matthew 9 and Mark 2 indicate both Pharisees and the disciples of John asked Jesus about fasting. John the Baptist was an ascetic in the desert, the final Old Testament prophet preparing the way for the Christ. His disciples practiced fasting as part of their attitude of repentance.

Yet Jesus, who claimed to be the promised Christ, was not fasting, but feasting with sinners and tax collectors. This was legitimately puzzling to everyone. Jesus answers with a question:

4- WHAT ABOUT THE BRIDEGROOM? - In verses 34-35, Jesus replied, "*Can you make wedding guests fast while their bridegroom is with them? The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast.*" Fascinating response!

Jesus alludes to what John the Baptist said in John 3:28-30, *I am not the Christ, I am the friend of the bridegroom. He must increase, I must decrease.* Jesus refers to Himself as the bridegroom. In His day a wedding feast was in honor of the bride and groom, and didn't start until the groom arrived. It lasted for days, and all other religious feasts were canceled for the parties.

Pharisees would also have thought of an Old Testament picture of God the Father as bridegroom. In Isaiah 62:3-5 and Hosea 2:19-23, the Lord rejoices over His people as His chosen bride. Jesus reminds them that as the Christ, He is fulfilling the Old Testament promises.

5- WHAT ABOUT US TODAY? - Jesus is the divine bridegroom who came for His bride. In His presence was not the time for fasting but for feasting. The celebration Matthew gave for Jesus was a fitting response, even as all God's people should rejoice in the repentance of sinners.

Jesus' words also form a 'penetrating prophecy' about Himself. The bridegroom being taken away in verse 35 refers to His impending crucifixion (Isaiah 53:8). Today we may issue public calls for fasting and praying, but fasting is private (Matthew 6), as a personal spiritual discipline. As the obedient church trusts and obeys, Christ lives through us as the living reigning Lord! ☐