

MEDITATION 20

Mark 2: 18-20

¹⁸ Now John's disciples and the Pharisees were fasting, and people came and said to Jesus, "Why do John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?" ¹⁹ Jesus said to them, "The wedding attendants cannot fast while the bridegroom is with them, can they? As long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast. ²⁰ The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast on that day.

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Some religions include fasting as an essential spiritual practice as do some forms of Christianity. As Protestants, we take a more flexible view toward fasting. If it helps, it's a good thing. But there are other spiritual practices that can help, too.

So, what is fasting? Physically speaking, fasting is refraining from eating or drinking either specific things (like alcohol or certain kinds of foods) or altogether for a period of time. Why fast? Religiously speaking, fasting is intended to: 1) focus you in a particular way toward discernment and attention to your relationship with God, receiving some enlightenment, courage and direction through a personal situation in your life, or listening for God's word to you through a particular season or period of time (such as the 40 days of Lent); 2) repenting or grieving some sin in search of forgiveness and renewal before God.

In Jesus' day, it was 2) in particular that was a required practice for good Jews. If more and more Jews practiced fasting, God would listen to their prayers as a nation toward liberation from foreign domination. Israel was in a time of grieving their situation of bondage. Fasting was a way of praying to God to listen and act on their behalf. Such fasting was also rooted in a belief that God had not listened to the nation up to now because the people had not been faithful to God. Hence, fasting was a kind of suffering one took on as self-induced punishment which was also repentance in search of healing and redemption for self and nation.

So what about you and me now? Personally, I don't practice fasting. But I do take focussed time to sit before God, pray, meditate, read in order to meditate, listen to music or spend time in nature to meditate, seeking to listen for God and make space for the flow of the Spirit in and through me...

What is God speaking to me?... Am I grieving something?... Should I be?... Is there something I should be repenting of? Am I being as I should be in my relationships? Am I called to love in a way I often fail to love?... Am I being called to choose something, commit to something more intentionally, find strength to keep doing something or say no to something or someone?...

What are the questions you need to think about and answer for yourself?... Will you block out slots of time for this practice of thinking, listening and praying or... fasting?...

Prayer: Listen to my heart, O God, as I try to listen to your voice and your word to me... What do you hear that is in me?... Do I hear it?... What do I hear you saying to me?... Am I open to hearing it?... Help me focus my listening better, O God... Do I need repentance?... Do I need to grieve something I haven't properly grieved?... Do I need to let go my grief in order to be open to some newness rather than remain stuck?... Do I need new strength to endure or commit to something or someone? Do I need the courage to say "enough" and take steps accordingly? Speak to me at this time... Amen.

¹⁹ "Jesus said to them, "The wedding attendants cannot fast while the bridegroom is with them, can they? As long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast."

Why are Jesus' disciples not fasting? Why does Jesus encourage his disciples not to fast?... Jesus is the bridegroom. Jesus is hosting a party for his wedding. Who is Jesus marrying? Is it his people? When it's time to celebrate and rejoice it is not a time to grieve or repent...

How much is joy, rejoicing and celebration a part of your spirituality and life as much as grieving and repenting may be?... We need both in our spirituality... Joy and celebration without grieving and repentance is superficial and will not satisfy the soul. Grieving and repentance without joy and celebration is being stuck in Good Friday without acknowledging Easter Sunday.

There are seasons when one side is appropriate and fitting. We need to be free and mature to grieve well and take responsibility for our choices, actions and the consequences of such actions... We cannot grow if we don't. There is loss and sadness in our lives and sometimes complicated feelings involved in that too. There is no benefit avoiding such realities in our lives, and much harm and loss that will come if we do avoid. But we also need to be free and mature to celebrate with genuine joy and feel good about so doing without guilt or residue.

Of course it takes time to move from grief to joy. It needs to take its time. But we also need to savour the moments of joy and celebration knowing that seasons of grief and repentance will also come...

The key is: Is God with me through those times?... What words and new words does God speak to me in such times?... Who do I become and grow to become through such times?...

²⁰ "The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast on that day."

As we already noted above... the days will come... Celebration is not a static reality in our lives, neither is joy or rejoicing... "For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven" (Ecclesiastes 3:1)...

Jesus is telling his religious critics that there is a time for everything, and right now, it is a time to rejoice and celebrate with the bridegroom... It's a time to build up our reservoir of strength in togetherness and assurance of God's caring and providing hand... This will help us when the time of fasting (grieving, repenting) will come...

Isn't it wonderful that this rhythm is also built into the seasons of the church year? There are the 40 days of Lent which begin with Ash Wednesday culminating in Palm Sunday. Then Holy Week brings us from the high of Palm Sunday to the devastating low of Good Friday. And then through the time of the silence of God on Holy Saturday we have the glorious rising up of new life on Easter Sunday and the season of Easter. How will you live through your Lent / Holy Week / Easter Sunday / Easter season this year?...

PRAYER: Come to me, O God, and take me by the hand as I journey through this time of Epiphany... Shine your light and guide me as you guided the Magi... Send your Spirit upon me as you did to Jesus at his baptism, and confirm that I am beloved by you... Confirm your call to me as your disciple as you did to Andrew, Peter, James, John and Levi... Assure me that you will provide a way for me through whatever comes my way... through whatever I am struggling with now... through whatever I still have not come to peace or resolution about in my past...

Give me the freedom to celebrate and rejoice in gratitude for life and the simple things that are mine every day... Give me the freedom to grieve and weep for the sad things in my life and the losses... Help me find meaning in being present and available to others, and give me the courage to share myself so that others may be present for me...

In Jesus' name I pray this way... Amen.