

# When the Bridegroom Is Taken Away They Will Fast With New Wineskins

by John Piper

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*Jesus calls us to fast when the bridegroom is taken away, and the new fasting is a response to the new wine of the kingdom.*

**Duration:** 32:11

**Scripture:** Matthew 9:14

**Topics:** "Fasting And Prayer", "Holy Spirit"

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## Description

In this sermon, the speaker discusses the significance of fasting in the context of Jesus' teachings. He explains that fasting was traditionally associated with mourning and sadness in the Old Testament. However, Jesus brings a new perspective by proclaiming that the bridegroom (referring to himself as the Messiah) is present, and therefore fasting is not necessary. The speaker argues that Jesus' claim of being the bridegroom and the arrival of the Holy Spirit signify a new era of salvation, where fasting is no longer required. He emphasizes that the central work of salvation was accomplished through Jesus' death and resurrection, conquering sin, guilt, and death.

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## Transcript

Matthew 9, 14-17 Then the disciples of John came to him, saying, Why do we and the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast? And Jesus said to them, The attendants of the bridegroom cannot mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them, can they? But the days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast. But no one puts a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment, for the patch pulls away from the garment, and a worse tear results. Nor do men put new wine into old wineskins, otherwise the wineskins burst, and the wine pours out, and the wineskins are ruined.

But they put new wine into fresh new wineskins, and they are both preserved. Last week I called you all to a special corporate way of fasting for January. I suggested that we, from supper on Tuesday evening to supper on Wednesday evening, each Wednesday of January, fast.

Skipping breakfast and lunch on Wednesday, and thus devoting those times, if possible, to focused times of meditation on the Word and prayer. Now, fasting is new for some of you, but I want you to realize that it isn't new for the Christian Church. There's a little document called the Didache, which was written at the end of the first century, give or take a decade probably, and in it there's a little section on fasting.

One verse in it goes like this, Let not your fasts be with the hypocrites, for they fast on Mondays and Thursdays, but do you fast on Wednesdays and Fridays? Now that seems strange in a way, a big deal, huh? But I think the point of the early church was, the Jewish custom was to do its Sabbath on Saturday, we're going to do ours on Sunday when he rose from the dead. They do their fasting on those days, and we're going to do our fasting on this day, to try to say yes, yes to something that's there and value, but no to something else, kind of a both-end, ambivalent attitude. We'll take it, but we'll change it.

And we'll come back to that idea. The early church did take it, and they did change it. Epiphanius was a bishop in Italy in the 5th century, and this is what he wrote, Who does not know that the fast of the 4th and 6th days of the week are observed by Christians throughout the whole world? So in the 5th century, Epiphanius at least, was claiming that all Christians fasted everywhere.

John Calvin in the 16th century said, Let us say something about fasting, because many, for want of knowing its usefulness, undervalue its necessity, and some reject it as almost superfluous, while on the other hand, where the use of it is not well understood, it easily degenerates into superstition. Holy and legitimate fasting is directed to three ends, for we practice it either as a restraint upon the flesh to preserve it from licentiousness, or as a preparation for prayers and pious meditations, or as a testimony of our humiliation in the presence of God when we are desirous of confessing our guilt before him. Martin Luther, who is given to overstatement and bawdy sentences, and this is one of the less bawdy ones, said, Of fasting I say this, it is right to fast frequently in order to subdue and control the body.

For when the stomach is full, the body does not serve for preaching, or praying, or studying, or for doing anything else that is good. Under such circumstances, God's word cannot remain. But one should not fast with a view to meriting something by it as by a good work.

And I pointed out more recently how South Korea has exploded in church growth through prayers and fastings. I told that in a first service, and a fellow came up to me who said, I grew up on the mission field in Korea, and I want to tell you a story that is emblazoned on my mind to show the devotion and the dedication of the praying and fasting in Korea. My father, he said, worked with a leper colony, and they had 4 a.m. prayer meetings, the leper colony, and he was asked one morning, and I was a little boy, and he took me with him at about 3.30 a.m. to get there, and sat me in the back, and I could see out the door as these lepers were coming to pray at 4 a.m. And I'll never forget, he said, one man who had no legs, no crutches, and was using his hands and crabbing along the ground, dragging his body to pray at 4 a.m., and he said, I resolved at that time I would never, never complain about having a hard time getting somewhere to pray.

Pretty powerful picture, isn't it? That kind of resolve does break strongholds and release power as it has remarkably in South Korea. My own experience, while not nearly as powerful as I hope it will be, was remarkable this week in seeing breakthroughs through prayer and fasting. I called us as a church to join together corporately in fasting last Wednesday, this Wednesday, and the four Wednesdays of this month in order to pray for awakening and revival in the churches and the advancement of God's kingdom in this city, in our denomination, and around the world to all the unreached peoples.

And I believe if we follow through on that, it will release great, great power. You remember last week I put my fingers like this and said there's a three-legged stool, perhaps, for revival in Acts 13, 1 to 3, and one leg is prayer, and there's been great revival in the prayer movement in our day, and another leg is worship. They were praying and worshiping when God moved, and there's been great reawakening in worship in

our day, and the third leg, they were fasting, and that leg doesn't exist in most churches today.

It's a two-legged stool. And I just raised the possibility, I have no claims on God whatsoever to dictate his timing or to twist his arm, but I raised the possibility that biblically, whether or not there might be a waiting and a watching and a moving on God's part until the church not only prays and not only worships, but fasts, that expresses its longing with fasting this much, oh God, this much, I want you to come and empower your word and awaken your people and spread your gospel. That's what fasting means to me.

To me, fasting is an exclamation point at the end of the sentence, I want your power to be displayed. I am hungry for your power. I am hungry for a revelation of your glory, and then you give an exclamation point this much by skipping two meals and saying that much, Lord, that much, I mean it.

I mean it. It's like, I didn't plan to say this here, but it comes to my mind, it's like Abraham's offering of Isaac. Does it ever boggle your mind that the Lord came to him at the end and says, now I know that you love me above your son.

Well, God knew that, but there was a knowing experientially, there was a seeing knowing, there was a watching knowing, there was a knowing being worked out in the experience of Abraham as he lifted the knife over his son. Now, all you have to do is lift your knife over a meal. This much, I love you.

This much, I need you. This much, our church wants you, and I will pass by, if not my son, breakfast and lunch. And then I got a letter in the mail this week, a very good letter and a reminder, and I want to throw it out lest you opt out for wrong reasons.

A woman said, I'm behind this, I think God's in it, it doesn't work for me on Wednesday. I'm with people over lunch every day. I'm running, in other words, Wednesday doesn't work, breakfast and lunch doesn't work.

Here's what she wrote, so I have a couple of things I believe are from the Spirit that may be more of a fast for some than food. I thought that not watching television for a week or a month or a night of the week when I normally watch it might be more of a fast than food. Instead of watching my favorite program, I might spend the time talking and listening to God.

I wonder if there might be others for whom this would be a fast and would be a focused time of prayer for them. So I say amen to that. And don't consider yourself out of the loop if you immediately say, oh, Wednesdays don't work for me.

That's okay. If your heart is right and you're open to the Lord and you're asking Him, Lord, draw me into the spirit of awakening through fasting, He'll show you. He'll show you when and how.

If your health doesn't work for that, if the doctor says no fasting for you, that's fine. The great physician knows all about that and something else will work. Martin Lloyd-Jones preached a great sermon on fasting when he was doing his series on the Sermon on the Mount and he said, fasting, if we conceive it truly, must not be confined to the question of food and drink.

Fasting should really be made to include abstinence from anything which is legitimate in and of itself for the sake of some special spiritual purpose. There are many bodily functions which are right and normal, perfectly legitimate, but which for special peculiar reasons in certain circumstances should be controlled. That is fasting.

So I just offer to you the spirit of fasting, the call for fasting, and if Wednesday doesn't work, something else will work. Now what I want to do this morning and next Sunday morning is take us to the words of Jesus, the master teacher, the authority of our lives, and ask, what do you have to say to us, Jesus, about fasting? We've heard something from Acts. We're going to be looking at other places, but let's go to Jesus this morning and Jesus next Sunday morning and see what he has to say about fasting.

And we're going to look at Matthew 9, 14 to 17. Richard Foster wrote a book called Celebration of Discipline. It's got a great chapter on fasting.

And in it, he said this verse, verse 15 of Matthew 9, is perhaps the most important statement in the New Testament on whether Christians should fast or not. So if you're asking yourself the question, should I? Is it something God is calling me to do? Is the voice of the living Christ in this call that the pastor is issuing? Listen for it in these verses. Verse 14, the disciples of John the Baptist come.

They come to Jesus and they say, why are you and your disciples not fasting? Because we and John are fasting and the Pharisees fast. In fact, Judaism fasts. Everybody in the Old Testament fasted.

Here, you're not fasting. What's going on? So evidently, during the years of Jesus' ministry, he wasn't fasting. And his disciples weren't fasting.

Why not? He answers with a word picture. Verse 15, the attendants of the bridegroom cannot mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them. Can they? Now, that sentence teaches one simple thing and one absolutely stunning thing.

The simple thing is, Jesus connected the old fasting with mourning, crying, aching, yearning, sadness. It was used mostly in the Old Testament on days when you'd tear your clothes and you'd put ashes on your head and you'd cry out because your sins were so great or you were surrounded by armies or something terrible was happening. And he was saying, that's the way fasting is.

And here's the second thing he was teaching. The bridegroom is here. The bridegroom is here.

What does that mean? This is awesome. I mean, if you have ears to hear, hear right now. Because not many of them heard words like this.

You know, Jesus did not very often come right out and say, I'm God, shape up. He very seldom made those kinds of explicit claims about himself. Things that Jesus said were sort of cloaked at times when he lifted his claim to the highest point.

This is a stunning claim. Who's the bridegroom of Israel in the Old Testament? Isaiah 62, Ezekiel 16, Hosea chapter two. God is the husband and the bridegroom of Israel.

God betrothed Israel to himself with covenant love. He found her sweltering in her blood and he blessed her and he came along and she was naked and full and ready for love and he spread his skirt over her and betrothed her to himself in love and made her cling to him as his bride. That's the bride.

And Jesus says, you don't fast when he comes. Some dusty road, some ordinary afternoon, some out of the way part of Palestine. An ordinary Jewish teacher says, the reason my disciples don't fast is because you don't fast when the bridegroom is here.

Get it? That's the way Jesus thought. There should have been an earthquake. The sky should have split.

The stars should have fallen. The dead should have risen. God was here.

The bridegroom of Israel is here. And his point is, it's too good. It's too good.

It's like a wedding. It's like a party. It's the most stunning thing that's ever happened in the history of the world.

You can't tear your clothes and fast and put ashes on your head. It is too good. That's why my disciples are not fasting.

It's an amazing claim that he's making. Then he says, but the days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them. And here are the key words for us this morning.

Then they will fast. Then they will fast. When is that? One interpretation says he was taken away on Good Friday and hung on the cross and put in a tomb.

And of course you fast when the Son of God is killed and put in a tomb. Of course you fast for those three days. But then he's back at the resurrection and you don't fast anymore because he's here.

You think that's the right interpretation? I don't. The days are coming when the bridegroom is taken away from them. And then, when? Just three days between Good Friday and Easter morning? Then they will fast.

Two reasons. I don't think that's the case. But rather, I think what he means is Jesus was taken away from them, yes, in the cross, but also in the ascension back to heaven.

And he isn't here in a very profound, desired sense now. Two reasons for why I think that's the interpretation and not the other. One is, that's the way the early church understood it, including Paul.

Because they were fasting in Acts 13. They fasted at the beginning of every church plant. Paul fasted over and over again according to 2 Corinthians 6 and 2 Corinthians 11.

And the whole early church after the New Testament fasted. The early church did not understand Jesus that way and I'm very slow to go against the understanding of the apostles and the early church. Second reason.

The next time, and the only other time, the bridegroom is used in the book of Matthew, is chapter 25. You all know this parable. The kingdom of heaven is like a bridegroom who's gone away.

And when he comes, the voices sounded, prepare for the bridegroom's arrival. And then there are ten virgins and five have oil in their lamps and five don't have oil in their lamps. And the five get ready and they come.

And what's it a picture of? It's a picture of the second coming, not Easter. The time of the absence of the bridegroom is from the ascension to the second coming. And therefore when Jesus says the days are coming, when the bridegroom will be taken away from them, then they will fast, he is calling Bethlehem, Baptist church, to fast.

This is the closest you'll get to a command in the New Testament to fast. It isn't a command. It's a prophecy.

And you have to ask yourself in your heart right now, do I want to be a part of the fulfillment of the words of the Lord or do I want not to be a part of them? That's the question. If you're sitting there this morning saying, I don't have to fast. Fasting doesn't have to be part of the Christian experience.

That's fine. But I want you to deal with Jesus, not me. And if Jesus says the days are coming when my people will fast, do you want to say to him, well, not me.

I'll let your prophecy be fulfilled in John Piper and staff or somebody else, but not me. And I just encourage you not to opt out of the fulfillment of that prophecy. Because Jesus says, the sons or the attendants of the bridegroom are going to fast.

Be a part of that group. Please. But he's here, some say.

He's here. I mean, are you minimizing the presence of the Lord by the spirit of Christ in our hearts and in our midst? I hope I'm not. And you'll hear that I'm not before we're done.

But let me direct your attention. You don't need to look this up to second Corinthians five, eight, where Paul says, we prefer to be apart from the body and at home with the Lord. What does that mean? That means when you're in the body, you're away from the Lord.

And when you're away from the body, you're at home with the Lord. Which means that if you're a Christian this morning, there's homesickness in your heart. Is there? If you're a Christian this morning and you're alive, there's homesickness in your heart.

You want Jesus. If you say to me, I have Jesus. I say, well, you don't know the experience of the apostle Paul if you don't know the homesickness for Jesus.

And you have the homesickness precisely because you have Jesus. If you didn't know Jesus, if he weren't there stirring you up, you wouldn't feel any homesickness for Jesus. But you don't have all that Jesus is.

You don't have all his glory, all his power, all his wonder, all the intimacy that you will enjoy someday. That is yet to come. And there's a homesickness in every heart.

And that homesickness is the birthplace of fasting. One of the reasons we don't fast is because we don't feel homesick. In fact, we feel very much at home at work and at the television and on vacation and in our hobbies and goofing around.

We feel very much at home in this world. And of course, why would you fast? There's no great longing. Then come these stunning, jarring words if you read them in context.

Next verse, 16. But no one patches or puts a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment. Now be asking yourself as I read this, what's the old garment? What's the patch? What's the old wineskin? What's the new wine in the context of fasting? For the patch pulls away from the garment and a worse tear results.

Nor do men put new wine into old wineskins. Otherwise, the wineskins burst and the wine pours out and the wineskins are ruined. But they put new wine into fresh wineskins and both are preserved.

In the context, what's the old cloth and the old wineskin? Answer, the old fasting. It's the fasting they're not doing. And what's the new wine? The bridegroom has come.

The bridegroom has come. Emmanuel, God with us. The Lamb is slain.

The sins are cursed and covered. The bridegroom is risen. The Spirit is poured out.

The bridegroom is moving right now in this room and all over these cities and around the world gathering a bride spotless to present to himself in glory and splendor someday at his appearing. That's the new wine. And he's saying, if you try to take all this newness, the arrival of the Messiah, the arrival of the bridegroom, the arrival of the King, the sins forgiven, the coming of the Holy Spirit, if you try to take all that finished work and pour it into the old wineskin of fasting, both of them will be ruined.

The central, most decisive work of salvation in your life happened 2,000 years ago with the death of the Son of God on your behalf and with his resurrection from the dead. Death was conquered. Hell was conquered.

Sin was conquered. Guilt was conquered. A great it is finished was spoken over all of that.

That's done. The new wine is here and it is offered and it is drunk and it is enjoyed wherever the King in his finished work is received. Question now.

As you can see, verse 15 says, then we will fast when the bridegroom is gone. Verse 17 says, the old fasting cannot contain the new wine of the kingdom. So what's the answer? Do we fast or don't we? And my answer is this.

The new wine demands new fasting. The new wine demands a new kind and a new spirit of fasting. In my Greek Testament, years ago, I wrote in the margin, I read it yesterday, again after some years, I wrote in the margin these words beside verse 17.

The new fasting is based on the mystery of the kingdom that the bridegroom has come, not just will come, which was the foundation of the old fasting. The new wine of his presence calls for a new fasting. The old fasting was a yearning, a longing, an aching that was not based on the already finished, wonderful coming of the bridegroom and the finished work of his atonement for sin and the conquering of death and the deliverance from hell and the rising from the dead and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

All that was future for the old fasting. All of it is past for the new fasting. And so every time we fast now, it grows out of a fantastic drinking of the new wine that we have already tasted, that the Spirit is here this morning.

Christ is here this morning. Sins are forgiven this morning. Death is conquered this morning.

Guilt is finished this morning. The doors of heaven are open this morning. Hell is closed to us this morning.

The new wine is precious. If you try to fit it into the old fasting, it will shatter everything. But the new fasting is different because that decisive, saving, hope-giving, future opening work is done and it is past.

So what's new? What's new about it? I suppose the best way to say it is something like this. You can hunger for something because you just smell it and have never tasted it. Or you could hunger for something maybe, not quite truly, if you just hear about it.

Somebody says, have you ever tasted gazornenplatt, which is a word I just made up. And you might say, I don't know whether I'm hungry for it, I've never tasted it. But the kind of hungering that comes in the new

fasting, that the new fasting expresses, is a hunger based on having already tasted the new wine.

The reason we cry out come Holy Spirit is because he's come. And we've tasted him and he's in us. The reason we cry out come Jesus, manifest the fullness of your glory is because in the gospel we've seen his glory.

The reason we cry out come, revive your church is not because we're dead, but because there's just enough life for us to know what real life might be. Does that make sense? That the new fasting is not a desperate, craving, hopeless, almighty help us, but rather is rooted in the absolute, deep confidence and assurance that he is there. Finished at Calvary, risen from the dead, there by the Holy Spirit in my life, and when I cry to him it is a cry for more.

I have tasted the powers of the age to come, and therefore I want more. So I invite you, I urge you, to join us in the new fasting. The new fasting at Bethlehem.

The new fasting around the world. Don't fast in order to earn anything from God. God has so decisively demonstrated his love for the world and his finished taking care of sin at Calvary, and his mighty triumph over death, and his readiness to bring all good things into your life, that all you need to do is take your stand on that, taste it, and drink it, and then, as the desires grow, and it is just remarkable, is it not, that the most mature people in Christ I have ever met are the hungriest for him? You'd think that the people that eat longest would be most non-hungry.

That's not the way it works with an infinite fountain and an infinitely glorious Lord. And so when you take your stand on that finished work and you begin to drink up the river of life and you taste the bread of life and it begins to satisfy your heart, you get hungrier for God. The older you get in Christ, the hungrier you get.

The more homesick you get for heaven, the more you want revival, the more you want fullness in your life, the more you want to be done with sin, the more you want to see churches in the city revived and awakened, the more you want to see the gospel spread to the unreached peoples. If you don't feel strong desires right now, you haven't drunk deeply. And so I beckon you, drink and feed and let the hunger and the thirst come.

And then Wednesday by Wednesday, let's express that hunger to God from our bodies and say, this much, oh God, this much we want you in our families, this much we want you in our souls, our church, our city, our nation and the unreached peoples. Lord, as we close, we want to express our hunger to you. Would you please come now at the end of this service and seal the work you've been doing in people's hearts right now.

I pray for unbelievers whom you've awakened to taste that they would drink deeply now by faith, that they would receive the covenant love of God into their lives and accept him as the bridegroom and king of their lives, never to be the same again. I pray for believers, Lord, who are wrestling with this whole issue of prayer in their lives and where fasting fits that they'd hear the call of Jesus, then they will fast. Oh, Lord, I pray that you would quicken our hunger now to dwell in your presence, that you would shower from heaven a thirst for your reign.

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