



**Part 54: Jesus' Authority Over tradition**  
Matthew 9:14-17

**Big Idea:** We are creatures of habit; it is how God made us. This passage is a call for you and me to reevaluate: are our habits and traditions still keeping us in step with what God is doing?

Are we open to God doing something new, or will we settle for what we are used to?

Verse 14: Then John's disciples came and asked him, "How is it that we and the Pharisees fast often, but your disciples do not fast?"

- **Context and Background:** John the Baptist's disciples come to Jesus to ask him a question regarding fasting. This comes directly after a similar question coming from the Pharisees themselves in verse 11. They go to Jesus's disciples asking "Why does your teacher eat with sinners and tax collectors?". To which Jesus offers a rebuke: "Go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice'" (verse 13, referencing Hosea 6:6). There is a different tone to the questions of John's disciples. First, they come straight to Jesus to ask their questions, showing a level of respect that the Pharisees did not. We can imagine that their's was a question implying a condemnation- Jesus must also be sinful. John's disciples on the other hand seem to offer Jesus a question in good faith. They had been taught by John to fast - and saw the command for fast and repent in the prophets. John had told them that Jesus must increase, and he must Jesus. Why, then, did Jesus's ministry look so different than John? On the other hand, they also identify to some degree with the Pharisees in verse 14. It seems they are at a crossroads in whether they will be open to Jesus's new way, or condemn him like the Pharisees.

- **Why was fasting so integral to the ministry of John the Baptist?** Fasting is only commanded for the people of God on the Day of Atonement. Yet the Pharisees and John the

Baptists disciples fasted regularly. This was because fasting was a way of humbling oneself, repenting, and asking for spiritual renewal. Israel had been disciplined by God - through the exile, but now, they believed, through Roman occupation. The last time the prophets had spoken it was with words of correction - Israel had neglected right worship of God and love of neighbor in justice. Both the Pharisees and John the Baptist believed that their fasting was not just for their own pursuit of holiness but representing their wayward people before God. It was a way of longing for the Messiah to come and bring restoration. This was central to the ministry of John the Baptist as he "made a way" for the Messiah to come. Understandably, John's disciples were confused why Jesus seemed to neglect this central practice. Ironically, we know from Matthew's account that Jesus and his disciples did, in fact, fast. Jesus teaches on fasting in the sermon on the mount, telling his disciples and all who listened how to fast in a way that did not draw attention to your own holiness, but was private between yourself and the Lord. (Matthew 16:6). It seems that the disciples were so effective at fasting only in private, that to John's disciples it looked like they didn't fast at all. However, rather than correcting John's disciples, or feeling the need to prove himself to them, Jesus takes this opportunity to teach them why his ministry has announced a brand-new era. Everything has changed, and it is time to feast!

Verse 15: Jesus answered, "How can the guests of the bridegroom mourn while he is with them? The time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them; then they will fast.

- Jesus uses three metaphors to help explain the way that everything has changed. The first is that of the bridegroom and his guests. Jesus is actually purposefully harkening back here to a metaphor John the Baptist used when speaking of Jesus in John 3:29: "The bride belongs to the bridegroom. The friend who attends the bridegroom waits and listens for him and is full of joy when he hears the bridegroom's voice. That joy is mine, and it is now complete." John the Baptist's ministry was centered on making the way for the Messiah. When the messiah, or "bridegroom" has not yet come, fasting is the appropriate response. But who would fast at a wedding? When the wedding day comes, the only appropriate response is celebration. John's disciples are still operating as if they are waiting on the messiah - and they are so focused on practices they were taught, that they were looking straight past the very thing they most longed for. They couldn't see the forest for the trees. They were missing what God was doing because they were so focused on what they were doing.

Jesus uses two images to further illustrate his point:

- Cloth: Unshrunk patches onto old fabric
  - A used garment and a new, unshrunk garment cannot be sewn together. When the new garment shrinks, the hole will be made worse. The practice of fasting for the messiah is incompatible with the messiah's arrival.
- Wine: New wine into old wineskins
  - Wine was commonly fermented inside animal skins. Wine would expand as it fermented, and the skins could stretch to accommodate the fermentation process. If a wineskin was already stretched out, then filled with new wine, there would be no room for expansion – the wineskin would burst.
  - Jesus emphasizes here that the old wineskin is not bad. It is perfect to house the appropriate wine. The goal is that both the new wine and the old wineskin be preserved as they are used for their intended purposes.

- Both of these images illustrate Jesus’s core point: the “containers” we use (traditions, practices, habits) must be appropriate to their season. If we cling to them past their time, they will become empty, and we will miss what God is doing.

John’s disciples nearly missed the very thing they longed for because it did not look the way they expected. In what ways are we doing the same?

Application:

- How can we as the church embrace “new wineskins”?
- What good “old wineskins” might need to be put aside?



What new habits or practices is Jesus inviting you into personally?

**Small Group Questions:**

1. Read through Matthew 9: 14-17 together. What questions arise for you as you read this passage?
2. Read through the additional context provided in the sermon notes. How does this change the way you read the passage?
3. Put yourself in the shoes of John’s disciples. How would you feel seeing the ministry of Jesus? Do you resonate with their confusion? Why/why not?
4. What ways have you seen the church get stuck in “tradition” and perhaps miss what God was doing?
5. On the other hand, where have you seen the church adapt, and stay in step with something new God brought our way?
6. How can we discern the difference between what needs to be preserved in the church, and what we should hold loosely/allow to change?
7. On a personal level, do you feel that your current habits are serving to connect you with God?
  - a. This could be your current practices and spiritual disciplines, or just the rhythms of your life in general.

8. We can often feel tempted to settle for what is familiar with God, rather than being open to new ways God might want to move in our lives. Where have you seen this in yourself in the past? What about currently?
9. How can we be praying for each other about what we've talked about today?