

**The Question of Fasting**  
**Matthew 9:14-17**  
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Matthew 8-9 provides us with the account of ten miracles that serve to prove the authority of Jesus over all. Matthew has organized these miracles into groups for the purpose of presenting Jesus as the Messiah of Israel.

- Miracles of healing (8:1-17)
- Miracles of power (8:23-9:8)
- Miracles of restoration (9:19-34)

The first group of three miracles all involved physical healing, showing Jesus as having authority of physical ailments. The second set of three miracles involved Jesus' power. Between each of these three sets of miracles, there is an intervening narrative regarding discipleship, including verses 14-17 and the question of the disciples of John to Jesus about fasting.

This question is also recorded in Mark 2:18-22 and Luke 5:33-39. In each synoptic Gospel, the question about fasting follows the story of the healing of the paralytic and the calling of Matthew. Therefore, we can conclude that this interaction between Jesus and the disciples of John was both chronologically and thematically placed in Matthew's Gospel.

**The question for Jesus (9:14)**

The disciples of John referred to those who were followers of John the Baptist. John lived an ascetic lifestyle (Matthew 3:4; 11:18) and obviously had been taught to practice fasting. They were also aware that the Pharisees did likewise and when they learned that Jesus's disciples were not practicing fasting they wanted to know why.

The issue of fasting arose earlier when Jesus taught how not to fast. He explained that one should not make a public show of their sacrifice of food in Matthew.

In order to understand this question, we must first review fasting in the Bible. When we survey fasting in the Bible, we can see that it is the voluntary refraining from eating food for spiritual purposes.

This definition provides three characteristics of fasting.

1. Fasting is voluntary. This means that the reason you are not eating is a conscious choice not to do so, rather than not eating because external circumstances prohibit you from doing so. It is not the result of lack of food or being forced through some external pressure.
2. Fasting involves refraining from eating food. Yet there is no amount stated that defines this abstaining from eating, which leaves room open to abstaining from food for just a meal, or maybe a meal a day, or all meals for a day or two. The point is not the length of fasting but rather that, to some extent, you are abstaining from eating food.
3. Fasting is for spiritual purposes. This means that in fasting we are not abstaining from the eating of food for some other purpose, such as dieting, or a busy schedule, etc. Instead, fasting is to free up time for spiritual purposes, which in most cases in the Bible is prayer.

The one possible prescribed fast in the Old Testament would be on the Day of Atonement. *"It is to be a sabbath of complete rest to you, and you shall humble your souls; on the ninth of the month at evening, from evening until evening you shall keep your sabbath."* (Leviticus 23:32). Most interpreters understand *"you shall humble your souls"* as a reference to fasting.

Yet the disciples of John did not have this type of fasting in mind. The practice of fasting in first century Judaism involved regular times of fasting on Monday and Thursday each week. We see this in Luke 18 with the practice of fasting by the Pharisees.

*"The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get'"* (Luke 18:11-12). This was not only how the Pharisee from Luke 18 practiced fasting, but very likely what these disciples of John were referencing.

The disciples of John were concerned that Jesus' disciples were not observing these regular fasts and asked about this. This question is different from questions that Jesus would field from the religious leaders as this appears to be a legitimate question based upon Jesus' answer and not for the purpose of trying to catch Him in a contradiction.

### **Jesus answer from the analogy of a wedding (9:15)**

Jesus began His answer with the illustration of a wedding. This approach is fitting in light of what John taught about Jesus in John 3:29-30, *“The one who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice. Therefore this joy of mine is now complete. He must increase, but I must decrease.”*

These disciples of John would have likely been familiar with what John had taught about the coming Messiah and when Jesus began with this same analogy, they would have understood that Jesus was identifying Himself as the bridegroom and His disciples as the friends of the bridegroom. This would not only connect Him with John's teaching but communicate who He was to these disciples of John.

John's use of the bridegroom illustration was rooted in the Old Testament. Isaiah 25:6-10 uses this imagery to describe the blessings in the kingdom of God. God is even pictured as the bridegroom (Isaiah 54:5-6; 62:4-5; Hosea 2:16-23), which further shows Jesus is impressing upon these men who He is.

Jesus argues that just as it would be inappropriate for the attendants of the bridegroom to fast when they are with him at a wedding celebration, so it would also be inappropriate for His disciples to fast while they were with Him.

Jesus also uses this analogy to inform them that He will not remain with His disciples permanently. His phrase *“the days will come when the bridegroom will be taken away from them”* communicates more than a simple departure but a removal by others. This is the earliest glimpse of His prediction of death, which would be more fully communicated later in Matthew's Gospel (Matthew 16:21-23; 17:22-23; 20:17-19).

When Jesus is no longer with the disciples because He has been taken away, then His disciples will fast. This does not mean that they will fast in the same way the Pharisees fasted. Rather, it means their fasting would be consistent with what we see in the Scripture, particularly that fasting occurred when people were in distress. Either their lives are threatened, they suffer some despair or anguish, they are burdened with sin and are repenting, they are enduring a trial or temptation, or are at a very significant moment in the history of God's work on earth. In other words, this is not a commonplace occurrence.

We see this in places such as Jesus' temptation by the devil in the wilderness (Matthew 4:2), Paul's dramatic conversion (Acts 9:8-9), or fasting by the disciples of Christ as they embark on a long ministry journey (Acts 13:2-3; 14:21-23). Fasting will not be practiced in the ritualistic type of the Pharisees.

### **Jesus' answer from the analogy of clothing (9:16)**

Jesus' second illustration regarded the practice of mending garments. When mending clothes, Jesus notes that one would never use a new piece of cloth to mend an old garment. If an old garment was mended with a new cloth, the new cloth would shrink when the garment was washed. The result would be a tearing of the old garment when the new cloth would shrink.

This concept would be readily understood by those in Jesus' day. The point is the contrast between new and old. The new cannot be mixed with the old with regard to garments.

This implication for fasting then is that Jesus' new practices also cannot be mixed with the old practices. This, combined with the third analogy of the new wine and old wineskins, communicates that something has profoundly changed between the practices of John's disciples and what Jesus was teaching. The old cannot be mixed with the new.

What do these illustrations of old and new refer to? Matthew 9:16-17 is a central text upon which the teaching of the New Testament is built, namely the change from the practice of Judaism to the practice of Christianity. It forms the basis for what became the Old Testament and the New Testament, or in other words, the old covenant and the new covenant.

### **Jesus' answer from the analogy of wineskins (9:17)**

The last illustration regards new wine and old wineskins. One would never put new wine into old wineskins due to the process of fermentation that occurs with new wine. This fermentation process creates pressure due to expansion as the sugar of the grapes is converted into ethanol, and as a by-product, carbon dioxide. If old wineskins, created from animal skins, were used, the fermentation process would burst these old skins because they do not possess the elasticity to accommodate the expansion of the gas. New wineskins are pliable to allow for this expansion.

This analogy is used to instruct John's disciples of the difference between the practices of Judaism and Christ's teaching with His disciples. Christ's ministry could not be put into the structure of the traditions of the Jews. He brought something new, not a continuation of the old.

The concept of old and new is at the essence of Christ's words in this text. The Greek word that is translated "old" (PALAIOS) in both verse 16 and verse 17 refers to something that has not just been around a long time, but is worn out. This infers that Judaism had run its course and Christianity would become how the Lord reaches the world.

Unlike with the word "old," there are two different words used for "new" in Matthew 9:17. The first word translated "new" (VEOS) denotes that which is recent in time. The last word for "new" (KAINOS), translated as "fresh" in the NASB and ESV, refers to what is new in kind. The ministry of Jesus is both new in time and new in kind. He had just begun His public ministry and the content of what He taught was unlike anyone had ever taught before (cf. Matthew 7:29).

There is debate about the phrase "*both are preserved.*" Those who wish to retain the Old Testament for the church view "both" as referring to the old wineskins and the new wine being preserved. Those who see a dichotomy between the Old Testament and the New Testament understand "both" as referring to the new wine and the new wineskins. As is often the case, theology influences the practice of biblical interpretation.

There are many reasons why what is preserved is the new wineskins. Grammatically, the new wineskins are in the closest context to the word "both." Conceptually, it is the new wineskins that are preserved because they do not burst. Theologically, Jesus is arguing for something new with both the cloth in verse 16 and the wineskins in verse 17.

Matthew 9:16-17 together shows the necessity of what is new. In the analogy of the cloth in verse 16, it is the garment that is damaged by mixing the old with the new. In the analogy of the wineskins, it is not only the old wineskin that bursts with the new wine, but the wine itself is poured out. If new wineskins are used, then the wine is preserved. Thus, the last illustration advances the concept to show that it is impossible to preserve either the old or the new when they are mixed.

This becomes a compelling argument for the teaching of the New Testament to be in the context of the church. The Old Testament was for the nation of Israel.

## Conclusion

Jesus answered the question of fasting far more comprehensively than only the issue that the disciples of John raised. Not only was fasting practiced differently by Jesus' disciples, it was a part of the old system that was being replaced by a new system. Their entire adherence to Judaism as they had practiced it was about to change.

Certainly it is readily observable that the temple sacrifices of the Old Testament are no longer practiced in the church age. We can see that Jesus opposed the traditions of the Pharisees as *"teaching as doctrines the precepts of men"* (Matthew 15:9). Relatively few consider the Old Testament dietary laws relevant to the church, since Jesus *"declared all foods clean"* (Mark 7:19).

However, Jesus came to bring something new to God's people. *"For the Law was given through Moses; grace and truth were realized through Jesus Christ"* (John 1:17). We are no longer under the Old Testament Law since, *"we have been released from the Law, having died to that by which we were bound, so that we serve a newness of the Spirit and not in oldness of the letter"* (Romans 7:6), and *"Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes"* (Romans 10:4).

The Lord brought the new covenant through His death, *"This cup is the new covenant in my blood"* (1 Corinthians 11:25). This covenant is a better covenant, *"But now He has obtained a more excellent ministry, by as much as He is also the mediator of a better covenant, which has been enacted on better promises. For if that first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no occasion sought for a second"* (Hebrews 8:6-7).

Like new wine in fresh wineskins, the new covenant is not an addition to the old covenant but in place of the old covenant. *"When He said, 'A new covenant' He has made the first obsolete"* (Hebrews 8:13). The new covenant the writer of Hebrews referred to in Hebrews 8 was spoken of through the prophet Jeremiah, *'Behold, days are coming,' declares the LORD, 'when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah, not like the covenant which I made with their fathers in the day I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, although I was a husband to them,' declares the LORD. 'But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days,' declares the LORD, 'I will put My law within them and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people'* (Jeremiah 31:31-33).

This new covenant was unlike the old for God's law would be within them. This is why Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 3:6, *"who also made us adequate as servants of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life."* The letter that killed included even the ten commandments, *"But if the ministry of death, in letters engraved on stones, came with glory, so that the sons of Israel could not look intently at the face of Moses because of the glory of his face, fading as it was, how will the ministry of the Spirit fail to be even more with glory?"* (2 Corinthians 3:7-8). What is written on our hearts is the law of Christ, not the Law of Moses (1 Corinthians 9:21), which leads us to fulfill God's will of loving our neighbor as our self in the power of the Holy Spirit (Romans 13:9; Galatians 5:14; James 2:8).

The new covenant was for the Israelites, and extended to the Gentiles who were grafted into God's plan (Romans 11), which is the body of Christ, the church (Ephesians 3:6). The church is instructed by the New Testament, through the ministry of the Holy Spirit in our hearts. We have been released from the Old Testament Law and the New Testament teaches that the application of the Old Testament for us is as an example. *"Now these things happened as examples for us, so that we would not crave evil things as they also craved"* (1 Corinthians 10:6). *"For whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction, so that through perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope"* (Romans 15:4).

When church leaders fail to grasp the change between the dispensation of God's work through the nation of Israel and God's work through the church, they do not serve their followers since they *"direct them to observe the Law of Moses"* just as some of the sect of the Pharisees did in Acts 15:5. Peter's response was, *"Now therefore why do you put God to the test by placing upon the neck of the disciples a yoke which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear?"* (Acts 15:10).

Any type of religious tradition that goes beyond the teaching of the New Testament should be rejected. This is not consistent with the new era brought in by the new covenant, one where God's will is impressed upon our hearts by the power of the Spirit. Holding to such traditions are akin to holding on to old wineskins, which cannot be filled with fresh wine.

*"Therefore no one is to act as your judge in regard to food or drink or in respect to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day— things which are a mere shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ"* (Colossians 2:16-17).