

KINGDOM.

LESSON 27

1	PRAYER
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Group leader. Pray for God's guidance through his Spirit, for awareness of his presence and for listening to his voice. Commit your group and this lesson about preaching God's kingdom to the Lord.

2	SHARING (20 minutes) [QUIET TIMES] PSALMS 115, 119:1-88, 119:89-176 and 139
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Take turns and share (or read from your notes) in short what you have learned from one of your quiet times with God out of the assigned Bible passages (Psalm 115, 119:1-88; 119:89-176 and 139). Listen to the person sharing, take him serious and accept him. Do not discuss what he shares. Take notes.

3	MEMORISATION (5 minutes) [GOD'S GREATNESS] (3) EPHESIANS 1:11-12
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Review two by two.

(3) God is sovereign. Ephesians 1:11-12. In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will.

4	TEACHING (85 minutes) [THE PARABLES OF JESUS] THE BRIDEGROOM, THE PATCHED GARMENT and THE WINESKINS
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**“The parables of the bridegroom, the patched garment and the wineskins” in Matthew 9:14-17
are parables about
FASTING IN GOD'S KINGDOM.**

“A parable” is an earthly story with a heavenly meaning. It is a true-to-life story or illustration designed to teach a spiritual truth. Jesus used the commonplace and the events of everyday to illumine the mysteries of the kingdom of God and to confront people with the reality of their situation and their need for renewal. We will study these parables by using the six guidelines for studying parables (See manual 9, supplement 1).

Read Matthew 9:14-17, Mark 2:18-22 and Luke 5:33-39.

In Matthew 9:15-17, Jesus uses three very short parables to teach Christians about fasting:

The parable of the bridegroom: “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.”

The parable of the patched garment: “No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment, for the patch will pull away from the garment, making the tear worse.”

The parable of the wineskins: “Neither do men pour new wine into old wineskins. If they do, the skins will burst, the wine will run out and the wineskins will be ruined. No they pour new wine into new wineskins, and both are preserved.” Luke 5:39 adds, “And no-one after drinking old wine wants the new, for he says, ‘The old is better’.”

By repeating the teaching three times, the teaching about fasting in God's kingdom must be very important!

1. Understand the natural story of the parable.

Introduce. The parable is told in figurative language and the spiritual meaning of the parable is based on that. Therefore we will first study the words and the cultural and historical facts of the background of the story.

Discuss. What are the true-to-life elements of the story?

Notes.

A bridegroom and his guests. First parable (comparison). Bridegrooms and wedding guests who celebrate with joy are a common reality in every society in the world.

A patch of unshrunk cloth. Second parable (comparison). All people who make clothes know that when a patch of unshrunk cloth is put on a hole in an old, badly worn garment, it will shrink and tear the garment.

Wineskins. Third parable (comparison). A wineskin was usually made of the skin of a goat or a sheep. The hide was removed from the animal and then tanned. The hair was cut very short and then the hide was turned inside out. The openings of the four feet and tail were closed with cords and the neck opening became the mouth of the container.

New wine. New wine always ferments! Therefore, if new wine is poured into an old wineskin, the pressure of the fermentation will burst the wineskin, resulting in the loss of both the wineskin and the new wine.

2. Examine the immediate context and determine the elements of the parable.

Introduce. The context of “the story” of the parable may consist of “the setting” and “the explanation or application” of the parable. The setting of the parable may state the *occasion* for telling the parable, or describe *the circumstances* at the time of telling the parable. The setting is usually found *before* the story of the parable and the explanation or application is usually found *after* the story of the parable.

Discover and discuss. What is the setting, the story and the explanation or application of this parable?

Notes.

(1) The setting of these parables is contained in Matthew 9:9-14.

These parables are told immediately after the calling of Matthew (Levi) in all three Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke. If there was a temporal connection between these two incidents, then the contrast between the old and the new is dramatically heightened. At the very time when Jesus and his disciples were feasting with many tax collectors and sinners in Matthew’s home, the disciples of John the Baptist and the disciples of the Pharisees were fasting!

But even if there was no chronological connection between these two incidents, there definitely is a logical connection. The fact is that Jesus and his disciples had fellowship with tax collectors and sinners on more than one occasion (Matthew 11:19; Luke 7:34; 15:1; 19:1-10). But the disciples of John the Baptist and the disciples of the Pharisees abstained from such jovial festivities and even practised a measure of austerity. This contrast was sooner or later bound to lead to the question of fasting!

(2) The stories of these parables is contained in Matthew 9:15-17.

(3) The explanation or application of these parables is not given.

It must be deduced from the stories and the setting.

3. Identify the relevant and irrelevant details of the parable.

Introduce. Jesus did not intend every detail in the story of the parable to have some spiritual significance. Parables are not allegories. The relevant details are those details in the story of the parable that reinforce the central point or main theme or lesson of the parable. Therefore, we should not ascribe independent spiritual significance to every detail of the story of the parable.

Discover and discuss. Which of the details in the story of this parable are really essential or relevant?

Notes.

Jesus does not give any of the details in these parables any particular meaning. The relevance of the details follows from the meaning of these words in other parts of the Bible and from the context.

The bridegroom. The Bible often compares the relationship between God and his people, or that of Christ and the Church, with the bond of love between a bridegroom and a bride (Isaiah 54:1,5; 62:5; Jeremiah 31:32; Matthew 25:1 ff.; John 3:29; 2 Corinthians 11:2; Ephesians 5:32; Revelation 19:7; 21:9). According to 2 Corinthians 11:2 and Ephesians 5:32, “the bridegroom” represents Jesus Christ and “the bride” represents the Christian Church. Jesus compares his own presence on earth with a wedding feast. The question, “How can the guests of the bridegroom mourn while he is with them?” is so phrased that the answer must be “No, they cannot mourn while the bridegroom is with them!” This is a relevant detail.

The guests of the bridegroom. Literally “the sons of the wedding hall” signify the guests of the bridegroom who stood the closest to the groom and played an essential part in the wedding ceremony. They did everything possible to promote the success of the festivities. They represent the Christians. This is a relevant detail.

The old garment. Jesus does not give this detail any specific meaning. But from the context it is clear that the old garment represents the Old Testament religion as passed on by the Pharisees; the old order of things that are ordained by religious leaders, for example, the old system of fasting as well as the other practical applications deduced by the Pharisees from the Old Testament ceremonial law.

The patch of unshrunk cloth. Jesus does not give this detail any specific meaning. But from the context it is clear that “the patch of unshrunk cloth” represents the New Testament religion as revealed by Jesus and the apostles; the new order of things that are ordained by God, especially God’s salvation in Christ. The message is that just as a new piece of cloth cannot be sown onto an old garment, likewise the new order of things cannot be fitted into the old order of things! This is relevant, because it is the main message of the parable.

The old wine and old wineskins. Jesus does not explain these details. But from the context it is clear that “the old wine” represents the legal rules and joyless mourning and fasting of the disciples of John and the Pharisees. “The old wineskins” represent the old forms of expressing the Jewish ceremonial law, namely, with fasting days and fasting practises.

By extension, “the old wine” also represents the content of the Jewish religion, which consisted of hundreds of laws as interpreted by their rabbis and was called “the tradition of the elders”. And “the old wineskins” represent the legalistic and human ordained practices of the Jews that were fitted into an inflexible traditional form or system of religion. The form of the Jewish religion consisted of Sabbath days, fasting days, special religious festivals and pilgrimages to Jerusalem, sacrifices, giving one tenth of everything, circumcision, ritual washings and food rules.

The new wine and the new wineskins. Jesus does not explain these details. But from the context it is clear that “the new wine” represents the salvation in Christ and the blessings of the new life to everyone who is willing to accept them. And the new” wineskins represent the new forms of expressing salvation and the new life in Christ, namely, with gratitude and joy.

They represent the new way in which Christians relate to God and the free and spontaneous way in which they serve and worship God. The content of the Christian religion consists of salvation, deliverance, renewal and complete transformation. The form of their religion is expressed in a community of thankful and joyful Christians, who worship and serve God willingly and eagerly.

It is not correct to say that “the old wine” symbolises salvation by good works of the law and “the new wine” represents salvation by grace. The contrast is rather between the old order of things, which were often purely human institutions of the religious leaders of Israel and the new order of things which consists of the teachings of Jesus Christ. The contrast is between purely human traditions (man-made laws and regulations) and divine teachings (in the Bible)!

The contrast is not between the Old Testament and the New Testament, because there was continuity between the teaching in the Old Testament (Deuteronomy 6:5; Leviticus 19:18) and the teaching of Jesus in the New Testament (Mark 12:30-31). However, the Jewish teachers of the law and the Pharisees had buried the true teaching of the Old Testament beneath a mountain of man-made traditions (laws and regulations). The contrast is between the inflexible traditionalism of the Pharisees and the true teachings of the Bible. The old way of fasting and mourning excluded joy completely, but the new way of relating to God and serving God is the joy of salvation!

After drinking the old wine, no one wants the new wine, because he says, “The old is better” (Luke 5:39). In reality the new order that Jesus Christ introduced is in the best sense of the word “old” (original), because it restored the very essence of the Old Testament teaching. Compare Psalm 23:5-6, “You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. And compare Isaiah 61:7, “Instead of disgrace, they will rejoice in their inheritance; and so they will inherit a double portion in their land, and everlasting joy will be theirs!” You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever!” The only way to genuine joy and perfect glory is what God promises and what God does and not what religious people with their religious rules and religious practices teach!

However, the Pharisees referred to the tradition of the elders as “the old wine”. This word is a commentary on the ultra-conservatism and the ingrained and inflexible traditionalism of the Pharisees and their followers. They held on to their own opinions and decisions, while rejecting God’s Word as taught by the prophets in the Old Testament and by Jesus Christ in the New Testament (Matthew 15:6-9). They did not believe that Jesus Christ *fulfilled the law in every sense* at his first coming (Matthew 5:17; Ephesians 2:15; Colossians 2:14). They chose human laws above God’s grace. They gave priority to human traditions above God’s Word. They preferred human stuffiness to God’s fresh air. They liked outward religion at the expense of inward transformation. It is clear that they needed a radical change of heart. But all change is painful, because it requires self-denial, death to “self” and death to one’s own opinions and religious traditions.

4. Identify the main message of the parable.

Introduce. The main message of the parable is found either in the explanation or application or from the story itself. From the way Jesus Christ himself explained or applied the parables, we know how we should interpret parables. *A parable normally has only one main lesson, one central point to make.* Therefore, we should not try to find a spiritual truth in every detail of the story, but instead look for the one main lesson.

Discuss. What is the main message of this parable?

Notes.

The parables of the bridegroom, the patched garment and the wineskins in Matthew 9:14-17 teach about “fasting in God’s kingdom”.

The main message of these parables is the following. “The new order of things, which Jesus Christ introduced at his first coming, does not fit into the old order of things, which consisted of man-made traditions and institutions, which the Pharisees introduced after the Babylonian exile. The old order of things consists of the tradition of the

elders (the rabbi's), expressed in the form of man-ordained religious practices, like mourning and fasting. The new order of things consists of salvation, healing, restoration, transformation and renewal of people, expressed in the form Jesus Christ ordained, namely, the joy of salvation."

The old order of things was determined by *the tradition of the elders* (see manual 11, lesson 25). The tradition of the elders included very much fasting. Fasting was ostensibly an expression of mourning over one's sins, but in reality it had become a pretence and showing-off of piety (Matthew 6:16). The disciples of John and the disciples of the Pharisees fasted twice every week (Luke 18:12)!

The new order of things is summarised in Matthew 11:4-5 and Luke 4:18-19: The new order of things are things like: the healing of the sick, the restoration of the handicapped, the setting free of the demon-possessed, the raising of the dead, the preaching of the good news to the poor, the proclamation of God's favour (grace) and the salvation from sin. The joy of salvation in all its forms does not go together with the mourning and fasting in all its forms, as if the first coming of Jesus Christ should be viewed as a great calamity, which had descended upon people!

The joy of salvation is one of the basic characteristics of God's kingdom! The genuine people of God's kingdom do not mourn and fast like the disciples of John and the disciples of the Pharisees did, but they rejoice in the presence of Jesus Christ and because of the reality of their salvation. While the old way of fasting excluded joy completely, the joy of salvation introduces the new way of relating to God and serving God! Christians especially express joy in singing and making music (Psalm 33:1-4)!

Of course, this does not mean that there is no room for Christians to grieve about the suffering in the world, to experience distress in their troubles or to mourn over their own sin or loss of a beloved. Jesus is not speaking against genuine sorrow and mourning and fasting, but against the outward show of religious practices as fasting among the people of Israel. The contrast is between purely human institutions and the divine teaching.

5. Compare the parable with parallel and contrasting passages in the Bible.

Introduce. Some parables are similar to one another and can be compared. However, the truth in all the parables has parallel or contrasting truth taught in other passages of the Bible. Try to find the most important cross-references that help us to interpret the parable. Always check the interpretation of a parable with the direct clear teaching of the Bible.

Discover and discuss. How does what each of these Bible passages teach, compare to what the parable teaches?

Teach. Fasting (Hebrew: tsam, Greek: nésteuó) is *the voluntary abstinence from food for spiritual purposes*. Fasting is different than a hunger strike, the purpose of which is to attract attention to a particular cause, usually a political cause. Fasting is also different than dieting, the purpose of which is to loose weight and promote physical health. The normal way of fasting involved the abstinence from food only and not the abstinence from water. The normal way of fasting involved fasting for one day only and not fasting for long periods of time.

(1) The original teaching about fasting in the Law and Prophets (of the Old Testament).

Read Leviticus 16:29-34; 23:26-32 (1446 B.C.); Numbers 29:7 (1407 B.C.) and Isaiah 58:6-12 (740-680 B.C.).

Discover and discuss. What was the original meaning of fasting and the duration of fasting?

There are two Hebrew words that are important to distinguish. The Hebrew word "inna nephesh" means to humble one's soul, to oppress one's soul, to afflict one's soul or to cause privation to one's soul, to deny oneself something). And the Hebrew word "tsom" means fasting or the abstention from eating food.

During the Old Testament period, the Law required of the people of Israel (1446-1407 B.C.) only one day of humbling the soul in the entire year! This was on the Day of Atonement (the tenth day of the seventh month). The day was regarded as a Sabbath, a day of complete rest, that is, everybody had to abstain from any action, which could be interpreted as normal life. On the Day of Atonement, the people of Israel were commanded to humble themselves in order to make them more aware that they had fallen far short of God's requirements! The Day of Atonement was a day of self-examination, of humbling oneself, of confession one's sins and of making atonement for one's sins. It was a day of denying oneself. Although it was expressly prohibited to do any work on that day, there was no expressed prohibition for eating food. The abstinence of food was one way of denying oneself, humbling oneself, but it was certainly not the main way!

The prophet Isaiah (740-680 B.C.) (God's Word) taught that the abstinence of wickedness and unkindness was the way of denying oneself, humbling oneself. The kind of fasting that God chooses is that a man humbles and denies himself by abstaining from doing injustice and instead set the oppressed free, break the yoke of slavery, shelter the wanderer (asylum seeker) and clothe the naked. He must do away with accusation and malicious talk, give food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed (Isaiah 58:6-12).

(2) The description of the historical development of the practice of fasting in the Historical Books of the Bible.

Read Isaiah 58:3,5 and Psalm 35:13 (1000-400 B.C.).

Discover and discuss. How did the meaning and duration of fasting change in the history of Israel, even when it was not required?

The meaning of fasting changed gradually. Gradually, the *inward* humbling or affliction of one's soul became an *outward* abstinence of food (fasting). The humbling of the soul changed into the fasting of the body. In the book of the Psalms and Isaiah, these two terms are closely associated. But more and more the original term "to humble or afflict one's soul" (Hebrew: *inna nephesh*) became a synonym for "fasting" (the body abstaining from food) (Hebrew: *tsum*).

Finally, in the middle period of the kings (740-680 B.C.) these two words are used in parallel (Isaiah 58:3,5). And in Psalm 35:13, "fasting" was even the means by which the soul was afflicted. Thus, while originally "to humble or afflict one's soul" was expressed in a rest-day of inward self-examination, of *inward* humbling oneself before God, of inward confessing one's sins, and of making atonement for one's sins, it now became expressed in a day of *outward* denying oneself the comforts and necessities of life, that is, in a day of fasting! The outward show of abstinence from food became more and more important!

For people in the East, fasting was associated with disasters and death. Therefore, it was customary to fast at every occasion of mourning (1 Samuel 31:13; 2 Samuel 3:35) and during national days of penitence (Judges 20:26; 1 Samuel 7:6; Esther 4:16). The abstinence of food became the means by which the soul was afflicted, more than self-examination, humbling oneself, confessing sins and making atonement for sins.

The multiplying of fasts. In the course of time, fasts began to multiply in Israel.

- In the beginning of the period of the kings (around 931 B.C.) there were fasts for one day from only sunrise to sunset (2 Samuel 1:12) and a fast for seven days (1 Samuel 31:11-13).
- In the end of the period of the kings (before 586 B.C.) there was a supernatural and absolute fast for forty days (1 Kings 19:8).
- In the time of Daniel there was a partial fast for three weeks (Daniel 10:3).
- And at the end of the exile (520 - 518 B.C.) there were fasts during the fifth and seventh month (Zechariah 7:3-5), and soon fasts during the fourth, fifth, seventh and tenth month of every year (Zechariah 8:19)!
- Finally, by the first coming of Jesus Christ, there were two fasts during every week, practised by the Pharisees (Luke 18:12).

Except for the humbling of one's soul (which may include the abstinence of food) ordained by God in Leviticus 16:29-34 for his Old Testament people, all these other fasts were purely human institutions and not ordained by God! These fasts were part of "the tradition of the elders" (cf. Mark 7:1-13)!

(3) The purposes of fasting in the Bible.

Discover and discuss. What purposes did fasting have in the history of the Bible?

While "fasting" in the sense of abstinence of food is *described* in the Bible, it certainly was *not taught as a requirement* for God's people, except possibly on the Day of Atonement. All these "fasts" were purely human institutions and not ordained by God. In the course of time, they became part of Israel's culture, which must not be confused with the culture of the kingdom of God.

The example of fasting of Jesus and the church leaders may be followed, but may never be required of other Christians or of the Church as a whole.

Fasting was a cultural expression of humiliation. *Read* the historical description in Nehemiah 9:1-3 (about 400 B.C.). Fasting was a cultural expression of humiliation, during which a person grieved for his sin and confessed his sin. It was often accompanied by wearing sackcloth and dust or ashes on the head. The Israelites confessed their sins and the wickedness of their forefathers during fasting.

Fasting was a cultural expression of lamentation. *Read* the historical descriptions in 2 Samuel 1:11-12 and 2 Chronicles 20:2-4. Fasting was a cultural expression of lamentation, during which people grieved their losses or feared coming threats. The tearing of their clothes and weeping sometimes accompanied this. King David and his men mourned the death of king Saul and many Israelite soldiers. King Jehoshaphat proclaimed a national fast in order to avert a threat of war.

Fasting was observed to promote concentration. *Read* the historical description in Matthew 4:2; Acts 13:2-3 and Acts 14:23. Fasting was observed to promote concentration on an important religious act or event and to be sensitive to the communications of the Holy Spirit. This was always in connection with prayer or meeting God for a special purpose. Compare the fast of Moses in Exodus 34:2,28 and Deuteronomy 9:9,18 and the fast of Elijah in 1 Kings 19:8.

Luke 4:2 shows that Christ's fast was not partial, but complete. The first purpose of Jesus' fast was to concentrate on his preparation for the work, which God the Father gave him to do. The second purpose of his fast was to be tested by temptation as an apprenticeship before he undertook his difficult but exalted task.

The leaders (elders) of the congregation fasted in connection with the sending of missionaries and in connection with the appointment of elders in the congregation. This could indicate that the Christians were especially sensitive to the communications of the Holy Spirit during fasting.

But note that all these instances are historical descriptions of what Christians did in history. They were not commanded or taught to fast! Matthew 6:16-18 says, "When you fast", not "You must fast"! Christians may therefore fast

voluntarily if they feel that it would help them to meet God in prayer, to seek God's counsel or to prepare themselves for their God-given tasks. But Christians may not teach that fasting is a requirement of God for Christians!

The Bible also records the practice of fasting for the wrong purposes. *Read* the historical descriptions in 1 Kings 21:9; Zechariah 7:3-5 and Isaiah 58:1-12. The Bible also records the practice of fasting for the wrong purposes, either to kill an innocent person or to feign humiliation before God. Zechariah rebuked the Israelites for feasting for themselves instead of fasting for the Lord. Although the Lord did not require fasting, the Israelites fasted, but not for the Lord. In Isaiah, the right kind of fasting, which the Lord required, was not abstinence from food, but abstinence from injustice, oppression and malicious talk!

(4) True biblical fasting is not the abstinence from food, but the abstinence from wickedness.

Read Isaiah 58:3-13; Zechariah 7:4-10.

Discover and discuss. After the people of Israel began to emphasise fasting as the abstinence of food, God demanded Israel to abstain from evil!

Notes. In Isaiah 58:3-12 God taught his people what the right kind of fasting that pleases him is.

The kind of fasting that does not please God (Isaiah 58:3-5). The people of Israel asked, "Why have we fasted (Hebrew verb: *tsam*) and you have not seen it? Why have we humbled ourselves (Hebrew: *inna nephesh*), and you have not noticed?" Then God replied, "On the day of your fasting (Hebrew noun: *tsom*) you do as you please and exploit all your workers. Your fasting ends in quarrelling and strife, and in striking each other with wicked fists. You cannot fast as you do today and expect your voice to be heard on high. Is this the kind of fast (Hebrew: *tsom*) I have chosen, only a day for a man to humble himself (Hebrew: *inna nephesh*)? Is it only for bowing one's head like a reed and for lying on sackcloth and ashes? Is that what you call a fast (Hebrew: *tsom*), a day acceptable to the Lord?" God said that he is not impressed with the traditional practice of fasting of his people Israel!

The kind of fasting that pleases God (Isaiah 58:6-12). God said, "Is not this the kind of fasting (Hebrew: *tsom*) I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter - when you see the naked, to clothe him, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?" Thus, God teaches that true biblical fasting is on the one hand to make a clean break with evil (injustice) and on the other hand to share your food and clothes with the needy in the world!

God promises that when his people "fast" (Hebrew: *tsom*) like this, that is in the sense of denying themselves, abstinence from wickedness and sharing of their food and clothes rather than in the sense of abstaining from food, then he will answer their prayers and bless their lives. He says, "Then your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear; then your righteousness will go before you, and the glory of the Lord will be your rear guard. Then you will call and the Lord will answer; you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I."

Again God repeats what he regards as true biblical fasting: not the abstinence of food, but the stopping of sin in one's own life and the giving of one's possessions and efforts to help the needy and oppressed. He says, "If you do away with the yoke of oppression, with the pointing finger and malicious talk, and if you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed, then your light will rise in the darkness, and your night will become like the noonday."

With regard to true biblical fasting, God's blessings are much greater than the sacrifices a person can bring. God promises, "The Lord will guide you always; he will satisfy your needs in a sun-scorched land and he will strengthen your frame. You will be like a well-watered garden, like a spring whose waters never fail. Your people will rebuild the ancient ruins and will raise up the age-old foundations; you will be called Repairer of Broken Walls, Restorer of Streets with Dwellings."

Conclusion. True biblical fasting does not emphasise the abstinence from food, but the abstinence from sin and injustice and the sharing of yourself and your possessions with the needy and oppressed in this world. According to Isaiah 58 and Zechariah 7 God demanded, not a literal fast, but love towards God and one's neighbour!

(5) Voluntary fasting should be done inconspicuously.

Read Matthew 6:16-18.

Discover and discuss. How should Christians fast, when they fast?

Notes. In the New Testament, in Matthew 6:16-18 Jesus Christ teaches, "When you fast, do not look sombre as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to men that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you." Jesus speaks of the fast as an expression of humiliation. He condemned the act the Pharisees were putting up, when they covered their faces with ashes and wanted all people to notice their piety. Jesus does not command his disciples to fast; neither does he forbid them to fast. If they wanted to fast, they may, but they should do it as inconspicuously as possible.

(6) The joy of salvation does not go together with the mourning and fasting.

Discover and discuss. What does the Bible teach about the absence and presence of “the bridegroom”, Jesus Christ? How does that relate to the question of fasting?

Notes. Jesus says, “How can the guests of the bridegroom fast while he is with them? But the time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them; then they will fast.”

To which time was Jesus referring? Some people say he was referring to the period between his ascension and his second coming (thus, during the whole New Testament period) , while others say he was referring to the period between his death and his coming to them after his resurrection and his coming to them in the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. The second explanation is correct!

Jesus Christ is present all the time. *Read* Matthew 18:20; 25:1; 28:20; Revelation 19:7; 21:9; Ephesians 1:22-23; Ephesians 3:16-17.

Based on Matthew 25:1 and Revelation 19:7 and 21:9, some people teach that the bridegroom, Jesus Christ, is absent right up to his second coming! Therefore, they teach that Christ *requires* Christians to fast throughout the New Testament period right until his second coming.

That is not correct. First, Jesus Christ does not command, teach or require that they must fast, but says, that they *will fast*. Second, Jesus Christ is not absent from the Church throughout the New Testament period, because the Church is his Body. And he is also not absent from the life of every individual Christian during the New Testament period, because he promised to be with them and in them through his Holy Spirit during this period (Matthew 28:20; John 14:17-18; Romans 8:9-10; 2 Corinthians 3:16-17; Galatians 2:20)!

Jesus Christ was absent for a little while. In the period of Daniel there was three weeks of partial fasting (Daniel 10:3). *Read* Isaiah 53:7-9; John 16:16-22; Revelation 21:9-10; Hebrews 12:22-23.

When was Jesus Christ absent from his followers? In Isaiah 53:8 the same words, “he was taken away” were used to predict the violent death of Jesus Christ on the cross. He was “oppressed, led to the slaughter, cut off from the land of the living.”

With the words “the time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them”, Jesus made an early prediction about his coming violent death on the cross. That particular time would be a time of mourning for his disciples. At that time, fasting would be an appropriate expression of their sorrow.

But that mourning and fasting will not be of long duration. In John 16:16-22, Jesus himself said, “*A short while* (that Thursday evening and next Friday morning) and you will no longer see me. And again *a short while* (Friday morning to Sunday morning) and you will see me.” Then he explains to them what he meant. “You will weep and mourn while the world rejoices. You will grieve, but your grief will turn to joy. ... Now is your time of grief, but I will see you again and you will rejoice, and no one will take away your joy.”

On the night before he was crucified, Jesus Christ himself explained to his disciples that his rejection by the evil Jewish and Gentile authorities and their supporters was at hand. He said that he would be condemned to death and would be taken away from them in death for a little while. According to John 16:20 during that time his disciples would weep and mourn and according to Matthew 9:15 during that time they would fast. Thus, Jesus Christ taught that Christians would mourn and fast in the short period (part of three days) that he would be in the grave!

After his resurrection from the dead the disciples had *joy* (Luke 24:41) and after his ascension and enthronement in heaven, they had *great joy* (Luke 24:52). And after the outpouring of the Holy Spirit (that is, the Spirit of Jesus Christ) (Romans 8:9-10) Jesus Christ is really spiritually present with and in his followers everywhere on earth! This fact turned their grief into joy (John 16:20) and no one can or will take away their joy (John 16:22)! The fruit of the Spirit is *joy* (Galatians 5:22).

This is a fulfilment of his words in John 14:16-19, “I will ask the Father and he will give you another Counsellor to be with you forever – the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him, nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you. I (Jesus) will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. Before long the world will not see me anymore, but you will see me.”

With the resurrection, ascension and outpouring of the Holy Spirit, the New Testament Church came into being. The Church is “the Bride” of Jesus Christ (Revelation 21:9-10; Hebrews 12:22-23). And in Matthew 28:20 Jesus promises and the vision in Revelation 1:12-18 symbolises that Jesus Christ is with his Bride every day until the end of the age!

(7) The Old Testament requirement of fasting has been abolished.

Read Colossians 2:14; Ephesians 2:15; Hebrews 7:12.

Teach. The ceremonial law consisted of the circumcision, the sacrifices, the tithes, the ablutions, the rules about clean foods *and fasting*.

Through his death on the cross and resurrection (30 A.D.) Jesus Christ:

- fulfilled the law (Matthew 5:17)

- changed the law (Hebrews 7:12)
- cancelled (annulled, deleted) the regulations of the ceremonial law (Colossians 2:14)
- destroyed the dividing wall of hostility that consisted of the ceremonial law with its commandments and regulations and abolished it forever from the Christian Church (Ephesians 2:15)!

Just as the bringing of animal sacrifices and tithes to the temple, the circumcision of boys, the ablutions and eating of clean food were no longer demanded from Christians, likewise fasting as a humbling of the soul on the Great Day of Atonement was no longer demanded as a religious requirement for Christians! Like circumcision and the sacrifices, fasting may never be re-introduced into the Christian Church as a religious obligation!

(8) Conclusion. The decisive Bible passages concerning fasting are:

Isaiah 58:6-12 emphasises the kind of fasting God has chosen. Fasting is not the abstention from food, but the abstention from injustice, oppression and malicious talk!

Zachariah 8:19 prophesies that the mourning and fasting in the Old Testament period would be replaced by joy in the New Testament period.

Matthew 9:10-17 emphasizes that the joy of genuine salvation and the continual real presence of Jesus Christ does not go together with the mourning of fasting!

Matthew 17:21 (“But this kind does not go out except by prayer and fasting”) like Matthew 6:13b (“For yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.”) and Mark 16:8-20 are additions from much later manuscripts of the New Testament and do not belong to the original Gospels.

Matthew 5:17; Colossians 2:14; Ephesians 2:15 and Hebrews 7:12 teach very clearly that the ceremonial law including fasting has been fulfilled and therefore cancelled and abolished!

Matthew 6:16-18 teaches that Christians may fast if they like, but they may not make fasting a religious obligation for other Christians.

6. A summary of the main teachings or lessons of the parable about fasting in God’s kingdom.

Discuss. What are the main teachings or lessons of the parable about fasting in God’s kingdom?

What did Jesus Christ teach us to *know* or to *believe* and what did he teach us to *be* or to *do*?

Notes.

The main message of this parable is the following. “The new order of things, which Jesus introduced at his first coming, does not fit into the old order of things that consists of man-made traditions and laws which the Pharisees introduced after the Babylonian exile. The old order of things consisted of the traditions of the men of old (the rabbis) which were expressed in the form of religious practices as mourning and fasting. The new order has replaced the old order and consists of salvation, healing, deliverance, restoration, transformation and renewal of people which are expressed in the form of the joy of salvation.

God is not pleased with the man-made tradition of mourning and fasting. The new order begins with the first coming of Christ: Then the following has become a reality: “God with us” (Immanuel, Matthew 1:23), “Christ in you” (Galatians 2:20; Colossians 1:27) and “the Holy Spirit living in you and being with you forever” (John 7:38-39; 14:16-17; Ephesians 2:22). Then Jesus Christ is always present! “Surely I (Christ) am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Matthew 28:20)! This new reality after Pentecost awakens in every Christian genuine joy. God delights in the joy of the Christian’s salvation and in the new way his people worship and serve him, that is, when they share their lives and possessions with the needy.

All legalistic and joyless fasting as well as the other aspects of the inflexible traditionalism of the Pharisees must give way to the salvation that Jesus Christ brings. Christians may privately fast for good reasons, but may not re-introduce fasting (or any of the other inflexible traditions of the men of old) as a requirement for Christians or the Church. The kingdom of God is not characterised by mourning and fasting, but by righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit (Romans 14:17-18).

The new wine (contents) of salvation together with all the blessings of salvation must be poured into the new wineskins (forms) of gratitude, freedom, and spontaneous service to the glory of God!

5	PRAYER (8 minutes)	[REACTIONS] PRAYER IN RESPONSE TO GOD’S WORD
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Take turns in the group to *pray short* to God in response to what you have learned today.

Or divide the group into two’s or three’s and pray to God in response to what you have learned today.

(Group leader. Give the group members this preparation for at home in writing or let them copy it down).

1. Commitment. Be committed to make disciples, build the Church and preach the kingdom.
2. Preach, teach or study “the bridegroom”, “the patched garment” and “the wineskins” together with another person or group of people.
3. Personal time with God. Have a quiet time from half a chapter of **Psalm 141, 143, 145 and 146** each day. Make use of the favourite truth method. Make notes.
4. Memorisation. (4) God is all-knowing. **Hebrews 4:13.** Daily review the last 5 memorised Bible verses.
5. Bible study. Prepare the next Bible study at home. **Romans 7:14-25.** Make use of the five steps method of Bible study. Make notes.
6. Prayer. Pray for someone or something specific this week and see what God is doing (Psalm 5:3).
7. Update your notebook on preaching God’s kingdom. Include your notes on quiet time, your memorisation notes, your teaching notes and this preparation.