

“The New Has Come”

Introduction: As we are working our way through Matthew’s presentation of Jesus, it doesn’t take too long to figure out that while Jesus did some amazing and beautiful things, not everyone was thrilled with him. The opposition began to rise with the scribes who weren’t happy with the declaration of forgiveness Jesus laid on the paralyzed man. “Who can forgive sins but God alone?” was their thinking. Then last week we saw how the Pharisees were disturbed by the company Jesus was keeping at the table. “Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?” was their question of his disciples. A truly righteous man wouldn’t be caught dead in such company!

Now this morning, we meet a third group that was disturbed with Jesus. They weren’t happy to see Jesus and his disciples eating at all! And so they asked: “How is it that we and the Pharisees fast often, but your disciples do not?” The “we” in this case were the disciples of John, the one who had come to prepare the way for the Lord. But, if this was really the Lord, then the kingdom movement that he had begun wasn’t looking anything like what they had imagined. Fast forward to chapter 11 and we find John experiencing this personally in prison, tossed there by a local leader who hadn’t liked it when John questioned his moral behavior. With shackles around his ankles, John wondered whether this Jesus was really the one who was to come, or should they all be looking for someone else (11:1-3)?

How does Jesus respond? He affirms that, indeed, with his arrival, the new has come. The challenge is, can we see it? Let’s hear our text and then think about how Jesus helps us to see.

I. The Appropriateness of Fasting

A. As Jesus responds to this question about fasting, there are a couple of things he doesn’t do. The first thing he doesn’t do is focus on how to fast properly. He actually did some of that in his Sermon on the Mount when he spoke about giving to the needy, prayer, and fasting in terms of the motivation one was to have. Fasting was not to be a show, or a time to walk around looking somber, so that others might see how spiritual you were. Fasting was to be between you and God. It was to be an exercise to help make space for God to work in your life, a time to learn in a deeper way that God could be trusted to meet your needs. [6:16-18]

B. The second thing Jesus doesn’t do is say that we should just forget about fasting. “When you fast,” he says in the sermon... (6:16). Various kinds of fasts were commonly practiced by Israel throughout its history. There was a fast on the Day of Atonement (the only fast required by OT law), there were fasts in times of national emergency, and there were fasts when particular guidance was needed. The Pharisees, joined as we just heard by the disciples of John, had made it a practice to fast twice a week (Lk. 18:12). In the NT, we also read about fasting that accompanies worship and prayer (Ac. 13:2;). “Train yourself to be godly” (1 Tim. 4:7-8) Paul writes to Timothy. So, fasting, along with practices such as solitude silence, and frugality, is one of the disciplines of abstinence that one might choose to engage in as part of a spiritual training regimen.

C. So, if Jesus is not focusing on the “how” in his response, or the “if,” what is his focus? His focus is on the “when.” To emphasize this, Jesus takes his listeners to a wedding. Weddings, especially Jewish weddings, were huge, celebratory events. They were times of rejoicing and hospitality, dancing and fun. An open house was maintained for a week. Food and drink were available to all, free of charge, paid for

by the groom's family. Talk about good news! In fact, weddings were often a description of the kingdom of God that Jesus had come to usher in. And on several occasions, God was given the role of bridegroom and his people that of bride. The picture is one of God, the groom, wooing his people, his bride:

"As a young man marries a young woman, so will your Builder marry you; as a bridegroom rejoices over his bride, so will your God rejoice over you" (Isa. 62:5).

"In that day you will call me 'my husband,' . . . "I will betroth you to me forever" (Hos. 2:16, 19).

"I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband" (Rev. 21:2).

D. What Jesus may very well be hinting at with this wedding illustration is that he is now serving the role of bridegroom that had been ascribed to God up to this point. What God's people had been waiting for – God to dwell with them as Messiah, bringing things back into good order in the world – had now come in Jesus. He was beginning to make things new. This should be a time of rejoicing. Fasting was not appropriate at this moment. To fast was to miss the celebration. To fast was to miss Jesus.

II. Seeing the New

A. To further illustrate how significant this time of his coming is, Jesus uses a piece of clothing and a skin of wine. "No one sews a patch of unshrunk (new) cloth on an old garment." The problem was that when the garment was washed, the piece of new cloth would shrink, and the garment would tear. Regarding wineskins, he says: "Neither do people pour new wine into old wineskins." The problem was similar to the garment. When the new wine, as it fermented, continued to expand, it would cause a brittle old wineskin, that had already been stretched to its limit, to burst. The point Jesus was making, I think, was that he was offering an entirely new garment, and an entirely new skin, to those who would follow after him as he fulfilled what Judaism had been pointing to.

Even more, as we circle back to the wedding illustration with which Jesus began, we might see alongside the image of a garment, a set of wedding clothes that Jesus offers us so that we might attend the great wedding banquet he invites us to (Ma. 22:11-13; Rev. 19:7-8). And we might see, alongside the wineskin, Jesus at that wedding in Cana of Galilee, where he turned many gallons of water into wine, saving a marriage and affirming the joy that he had come to bring (John 2).

B. Perhaps the question to ponder is, can we see that the new has come? As Paul puts it in his second letter to the church in Corinth: "If anyone is in Christ there is a new creation, the old has gone the new has come" (2 Cor. 5:17). Admittedly, as we look around us, it's not always easy to see! At least part of seeing clearly has to do with (to add yet another image) the new set of lenses Jesus gives us to put on – call them our "already-not-yet" glasses. The expectation, when wearing old lenses, is that we now live in the age of sin, evil, and death. But when the Messiah, the true king, arrives, the new age will arrive with him, all at once, in all of its fullness.

C. Jesus, however, turned this expectation on its edge as he revealed not one coming but two. He claimed to be the Messiah, and that the reign of God had begun with his arrival, his first coming. In this light, all that we have heard him say and do point to where the kingdom of God is headed, and what it will begin to look like. But it won't be here in its fullness until he comes again. Many of his parables in fact stress the incompleteness or hiddenness of the kingdom, like a tiny seed that grows largely out of

sight, invisible to human eyes, but headed to become the greatest of trees (Ma. 13:31-33). The challenge for us in seeing is that if we stress the "already" aspect of the kingdom to the exclusion of the "not yet," we will expect quick solutions to our problems and be dismayed by all of the suffering and tragedy that still exists. On the other hand, stressing the "not yet" over the "already" leaves us too pessimistic about the possibility of transformation in our lives and in our world.

D. So, wearing these already-not-yet lenses can . . .

- help us know that personal change can take place, and enslaving habits overcome, but to acknowledge that we'll still struggle to live a life that is fully pleasing to God or fully helpful to our neighbor.
- It can help us know that God has spoken his truth, recorded in his word, but that we must be humble in our ability to understand and apply it perfectly, and so be charitable in our dialogue with others.
- It can help us to understand that the church can be a place of great community internally, and pursue societal change externally, but that it will still struggle with living out healthy interpersonal relationships, and that cruelty, terrorism and oppression will continue to be present in the world around us.

[John Stott, in *Hope in Times of Fear*, Timothy Keller, pp. 29-31]

E. What keeps us moving forward, faithful and persistent until Jesus returns, is the resurrection of Jesus, which kicks off the arrival of God's kingdom, the breaking of heaven into earth. In the resurrection, anticipated, in the old way of seeing things, to come to a great flock of the faithful at the end of time, but now having come to one man – Jesus – in the middle of time, we have the presence of the future. The power by which God will finally destroy all suffering, evil, deformity, and death at the end of time has broken into history and is available—partially—now. When we unite with Christ by faith, his power becomes accessible to us, power to free us from guilt and shame, power to free us from the fear of death, power to free us from the idols and false gods that enslave us, and power to fuel us as we seek to bring God's love, justice, and beauty to a world, and to our neighborhoods, desperate for these things.

In Jesus, heaven has begun to break into earth. May God give us grace to see.