–Save This Page as a PDF–

Jesus Questioned About Fasting
Matthew 9:14-17; Mark 2:18-22; Luke 5:33-39

Jesus questioned about fasting DIG: Why did John's disciples and the Pharisees fast? What was implied by Yeshua's apostles not fasting? When will they fast? How do the three mini-parables answer the question? What is the old garment? How does new wine into old worn-out wineskins relate to fasting, the Groom, or the Messianic Kingdom?

REFLECT: Where is the new wine in your life? What are the old wineskins? How has the new wine of Jesus burst some of your old wineskins? From these verses, what do you have to do to qualify as a disciple? Do you see any of the modern-day-Oral-Law where you worship? What can you do to call attention to it?

Throughout **His** ministry, **Yeshua** was constantly confronted with a first-century sect known as **the Pharisees** (Hebrew *P'rushim*). Their name comes from the root *parash* meaning *to separate.* **They** were very meticulous in **their** religious observance, who set themselves apart even from many of **their** fellow Jews, especially the common people known as the *am ha-aretz.* It should be emphasized that there were undoubtedly many *P'rushim* who followed **their** strict observervances out of a sincere love of **God**. Undoubtedly, many of **Christ's** followers even came from the sect, including some rather high-profile rabbis such as Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea. But, the disagreements between **the Messiah** and **the Pharisees** *always* revolved around the Oral Law (**to see link click Ei – The Oral Law**).

Among the pharisaic traditions was frequent **fasting**, twice a week on Mondays and Thursdays (see **Dq – When You Fast, Put Oil on Your Head and Wash Your Face**). Apparently, **John's disciples** were observing a **fast** at that very time. And it was a confusing time for **them** as **Yochanan** languished in Herod Antipas' prison (see **By – Herod Locked John Up in Prison**); **his disciples** seem to have wavered in **their** belief in **John's** message. Was **Yeshua** really **the Meshiach**? There were things about **Him** that seemed strange and inexplicable to **them (John**

3:26). In **their** view, there must have been a terrible contrast between **him** who lay in the dungeon of Machaerus, and **Him** who sat down to eat and drink at a banquet with **tax collectors**.

John's disciples could understand **Jesus'** reception of sinners because **Yochanan himself** had not rejected **them**. But, what **they** could not understand was why **He** had to eat and drink with **them**? Why attend a banquet at the very time that **their** master was locked up, when **fasting** and prayer seemed more appropriate? Indeed, wasn't **fasting** *always* appropriate? And yet, this new **Messiah** had not taught **His talmidim** to either **fast** or *what* to pray! **The Pharisees**, in **their** desire to cause a rift between **Jesus** and **His forerunner** obviously pointed to that contrast again and again.

At any rate, immediately after **Levi's** banquet (see **Cp – The Calling of Matthew**) it was at the prompting of **the Pharisees**, and in company with **them**, that **the disciples of the Baptizer** criticized **Jesus** about **fasting** and prayer. **They** seem to have sided with **the Pharisees** in the Jewish ceremonial and ritualistic observances; **Jesus** and **His apostles** did not follow the Oral Law and the **Pharisees** wanted to know why.[434]

After **Messiah** forgave the sins of the paralyzed man (see **Co –Jesus Forgives and Heals a Paralyzed Man**), the members of the Great Sanhedrin returned to Jerusalem to discuss, debate and then vote on the viability of what **they** had just witnessed (see **Lg – The Great Sanhedrin**). **Their** ultimate decision was to decide if the movement of **Jesus** of Nazareth was a significant or an insignificant Messianic movement. If **they** found the movement significant, then **they** would proceed to **the second stage of interrogation**, during which **they** could ask questions. **They** obviously decided that this was a serious movement that needed further investigation.



The members of the Sanhedrin were then free to ask questions of **Jesus** to determine if **He** was the promised **Messiah**. **Now John's disciples and the Pharisees were fasting. Some Pharisees came and asked Jesus, "How is it that John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast often, but yours go on eating and drinking" (Matthew 9:14; Mark 2:18; Luke 5:33)?** Unfortunately, **fasting** had become a mere formality instead of being an expression of true humiliation **(Luke 18:13)**; and how the very appearance of the person praying in public, unwashed, and with ashes on his head was even made a matter of boasting and religious show **(Matthew 6:16)**.[435] The problem with **their** question, therefore, was **their** assumption. Pharisaic Judaism at the time believed that when **the Messiah** came **He** would follow the Oral Law. **Fasting** was part of the Oral Law! So **their** thinking was this, "If **You** are really **the Messiah**, why don't **You** and **Your talmidim** follow **the traditions of the elders (Mark 7:3)**?

Religious ritual and routine have always been dangers to true godliness. Many ceremonies, such as praying to saints and lighting a candle for a deceased relative are actually heretical. But, even if it is not wrong in itself, when a *form* of praying, worshiping, or serving becomes the focus of attention, it becomes a barrier to true righteousness. It can keep an unbeliever from trusting in **God** and a believer from faithfully obeying **Him**. Even going to messianic synagogue or church, reading the Bible, saying grace at meals, and singing worship songs can become lifeless routines in which the true worship of **ADONAI** is absent.[436] Here, **Jesus** uses three mini-parables to make **His** point.

The first parable is a description of a Jewish wedding. The last recorded testimony of **the Forerunner** had pointed to **Yeshua** as **the Groom** of a typical Jewish wedding **(John 3:29)**. The wedding feast did not start and the invited guests assembled until **the groom** was there to host the feast. When the feast began it was a time of rejoicing for all who were present. **Messiah** said that just as it would be inappropriate to expect the guests at a wedding feast to **fast**, so it was inappropriate for **His apostles** to **fast**.[437]

Jesus answered: How can the guests of the groom mourn and fast while he is with them? They cannot, so long as they have him with them. As long as **Yeshua** was living **they** couldn't **mourn** because **the groom** was physically present. **They** needed to feast, not **fast**. **But the time will come when Jesus, as the Groom, will be taken from them, and on that day they will**

fast (Matthew 9:15; Mark 2:19-20; Luke 5:34-35). As the departure of **the groom** from the wedding feast signaled the end of the feast, so **Christ's** departure would bring **the apostles** to a time when **fasting** and prayer would be appropriate. The reference is to the crucifixion. **Isaiah** said it like this: **For He was cut off from the land of the living; for the transgression of My people He was stricken (Isaiah 53:8).** Therefore, we can see that during the time when **the Suffering Servant** ministered, the Kingdom of **God** was being offered to the nation of Isra'el.

To apply this truth to both **John's disciples** and **the Pharisees** who heard **His** words, **the Prophet of Nazareth** gave two more parables. To make the point, **Messiah** referred to two common elements of everyday life around **Him** – **clothing** and **drink**. In each case **He** insists, by reference to the experience of **His** hearers, that the change, in order to be effective, must be radical.

Then **He told them** a second **parable: No one tears a piece out of a new garment to patch an old one.** The **patch** refers to **the Messiah's** new type of ministry and preaching, grace, as compared to the Oral Law, the old worn-**out garment** ready to be set aside. This was an allusion to the outer **garment** worn by the average Jew of that day. It was vital for protection from the elements, which is why the Torah forbids it to be taken overnight **(Exodus 22:26-27)**. Furthermore, this **garment** would include fringes, or *tziziot*, as mandated in **Numbers 15:37-39**, in order for Israel to remember the calling of the Torah. Orthodox and other Jews continue to observe this command by wearing a small prayer shawl called a *tallit katan* to display the fringes. Many Jewish men (and some women in contemporary branches of Judaism) wear a modern tallit today in synagogue to fulfill this commandment. It is this important **garment** that **Jesus** uses as an illustration. If a worn tallit is patched with **new** material, as the new cloth shrinks it will surely **tear** away the stitches and become useless. **For the new patch will pull away from the old garment, making the tear worse (Matthew 9:16; Mark 2:21 Luke 5:36).** The point of **this parable** was that **He** had not come to help them **patch** up pharisaic Judaism. **He** was not going to help them plug up the holes in the fence of the Oral Law. **He** was presenting something quite different.

The third word-picture illustrates the same truth. **And no one pours new wine into old** worn-out **wineskins.** These were made of the skins of animals, such a goats, and these, for a while, served their purpose well. But there came a day, of course, when **the wineskins** were old and dried and therefore more vulnerable to pressure from within, especially in the forming of cracks. If, in such **old wineskins, new wine** was **poured**, the result would be disastrous. This is because the still

fermenting **new wine** would work and expand and thus bring pressure on the **old**, hard, inflexible containers, beyond that which they could bear. Then it was just a matter of time before **the old wineskins would burst. If they do, the new wine will burst the skins. The wine will run out and both the new wine and the old** rigid **wineskins will be ruined. No, new wine must be poured into new wineskins, and both are preserved. And no one after drinking old wine wants the new, for they say, "The old is better."** The point here is that **He** didn't come to put **His** teaching into **the old wineskins** of pharisaic Judaism. The legalistic, external, self-righteous system of traditional Judaism could neither connect with or contain the ministry of **Christ**. **He** was presenting something that was **new**. **And no one, after drinking old wine wants the new, for they say, "The old is better." The old wine** was **the Torah**, and **the new wine** was the Oral Law. **And no one, after** experiencing **the old wine of ADONAI's Torah (Psalm 1:2)**, will want **the new wine** of the Oral Law, **for the Torah is better (Matthew 9:17; Mark 2:22; Luke 5:37-39).** In each case, the two things did not match: feasting and fasting, an **old garment and a new garment**, **new wine and old wineskins**. **Jesus** was noting that **His** way and the way of the Oral Law simply did not mix.

Believers today are not immune to this. At least the Oral Law was applied all throughout Isra'el. No so from church to church, or from denomination to denomination. Sometimes their rules vary within the same denomination. The things that they are asking you to do are not to be found in the Bible; however, you must conform to their set of rules to be considered "spiritual." My wife and I once were members of a church that sent out a very strong subliminal message; not really even talked about to any degree. But the men were supposed to wear suits and ties, and the women were to wear dresses and heels. My wife (the nonconformist) immediately took to wearing pants suits!

If your employer says, "If you work here we don't want you to (you fill in the blank)," that is a code of conduct and is a reasonable thing to ask. However, if they say, "If you're really a believer you will (you fill in the blank)," then that is merely modern-day Oral Law. Friend, that is legalism. You become a legalist when you expect everyone to live by your rules that are nowhere to be found in the Scriptures. Then you judge their spirituality on the basis of *your* arbitrary rules and regulations. That's what pharisaic Judaism did.

We need to remember that most Jewish tradition is based upon the Scriptures. So we cannot jump to the wrong conclusion and say that **Jesus** was being critical of

anything rabbinic or traditional. The fact that **the Messiah** has come clearly has implications for our perspective of Torah (see **Dg – The Completion of the Torah**), and tradition. One example of tradition is the fact that the third cup of the Passover Seder meal is used by **Yeshua** to illustrate **His** redemptive work. This cup is not mentioned in Torah details pertaining to Passover, **but is actually a rabbinic idea added during the Talmudic period.** It would surprise some that not only are Jewish believers encouraged to remember the lessons of this cup **(Matthew 26:26-29)**, but the Gentile believers of Corinth were to do likewise **(First Corinthians 11:23-26)**.

Jesus came to teach the fullness of the Torah, even to the point of correcting some of the errors in people's understanding of it. In that sense, it gives both Jewish and Gentile believers a way to understand the entire Bible as a consistent revelation from **Genesis** through **Revelation**.[438]