

Lessons in Religious Liberty

Section 1 - Fasting

Matt. 9:14-17; Mark 2:16-22; Luke 5:33-39

We learned in the last chapter how Jesus taught His disciples to pray. In this chapter we will learn how He taught them to live.

Christ's *ratio vivendi* (reason for living) was characteristically simple. It had two main features: 1) a disregard for insignificant mechanical rules, and 2) a habit of falling back on the great principles of morality and piety in all things.

Carrying out these principles of life in a practical way led people away from the prevailing customs of the day. According to the Gospel records, our Lord and His disciples were actually charged with the offense of nonconformity to current practices in three categories. They departed from existing practice in the matters of: 1) fasting, 2) ceremonial purifications as prescribed by the elders, and 3) Sabbath-keeping. For the most part, they neglected fasting. The second issue they totally neglected. They did not neglect the third, but their way of observing the weekly rest was significantly different from that which was currently in vogue.

These departures from established custom are historically interesting. They are the small beginnings of a great moral and religious revolution. For in teaching His disciples these new habits, Jesus was inaugurating a process of spiritual emancipation. This would result in the complete deliverance of the Apostles, and through them the Christian church, from the bondage of the Mosaic ordinances. It would also deliver them from the aggravating bondage of an empty way of life that had been passed down as traditions from the Jewish fathers.

These departures in religious practice create a great deal of biographical interest as it pertains to the religious experiences of the Twelve. A serious crisis occurs in anyone's life when he first departs from the religious opinions and practices of his generation - even the smallest principle. The first steps in the process of change are generally the most difficult, the most dangerous, and the most decisive. In this respect, learning spiritual freedom is like learning to swim. Every expert in swimming remembers the difficulties he experienced when he first began to swim. He found it hard to stroke with his arms and legs. He floundered and tried his best. But he feared

that he would get in over his head and sink to the bottom of the pool. Now he smiles as he looks back on his fears. But those fears were not altogether unjustified. For the beginner does run some risk of drowning even though he is only swimming in a shallow pool.

It is helpful for young swimmers and for apprentices in religious freedom to be in the presence of experienced friends when they are making their first attempt. Then they can be rescued if they are in danger. The Twelve had this friend in Christ. His presence was not only a safeguard against all the spiritual risks they faced from within themselves, but a shield from all the assaults which might come to them from the outside world. These assaults were to be expected. Non-conformity generally gives offense to many. And, at the least, the offending party is questioned. Sometimes they are exposed to more serious consequences. Custom is a god to the multitudes. No one can withhold worship from that idol without consequences. Consequently, the Twelve incurred the usual penalties that were connected with their single-minded devotion to Christ. Their conduct was called into question and censured every time they departed from the religious customs of the day. If they had been on their own, they would not have been able to defend themselves for their actions. They just did not understand the principles on which this new practice was based. They simply did as they were told. But in Jesus they had a friend who understood those principles. And He was always ready to give good reasons for everything He did and for everything He taught His followers to do. The reasons He used in defending the Twelve against the prevailing customs were especially good and instructive. Taken together, they constitute a defense for nonconformity that is no less remarkable than the one He made for graciously receiving publicans and sinners. It consists of three lines of defense which corresponds to the charges that had to be addressed. We will consider this defense under three headings. The first heading takes up the subject of fasting.

Fasting

From Matthew's Gospel, we learn that the conduct of Christ's disciples in neglecting fasting was noticed by the disciples of John the Baptist. "Then the disciples of John came to Him" (that is, those who happened to be in the neighborhood) "saying, 'Why do we and the Pharisees fast, but Your disciples do not fast?'" (Matt. 9:14). From this question we learn incidentally that in the matter of fasting, the school of the Baptist and the sect of the Pharisees were in agreement in their general practice. Jesus told the Pharisees at a later date that "John came to you in the way of (legal) righteousness" (Matt. 21:32). But it was a situation where two extremes met. For no two religious parties could be more different in some respects than these. But the difference was to be found in the motives rather than in their religious behavior. Both did the same things. They fasted, practiced ceremonial purification, and offered many prayers. But they did them from different motives. John and his disciples performed their religious duties in simplicity, godly sincerity, and moral earnestness. The Pharisees, as a whole, did all their works pretentiously, hypocritically, and routinely.

From the same question, we further learn that John's disciples, as well as the Pharisees, were very zealous in the practice of fasting. They fasted often. We know that this statement is strictly true of the Pharisees who made great pretensions of being godly. Besides the annual fast on the great day of atonement as prescribed by Moses and the four fasts that had become customary in the time of the Prophet Zechariah (in the 4th, 5th, 7th, and 10th months of the Jewish year), the stricter Jews fasted twice every week (on Mondays and Thursdays). This bi-weekly fast is alluded to in the parable of the Pharisee and the Publican (Luke 18:12). Of course, it should not be assumed that the Baptist's disciples practiced fasting in the same way that the strictest sect of the Pharisees did. Their system of fasting may have been organized according to an independent plan which involved different arrangements as to times and occasions. But this fact is known, and it is substantiated by their own testimony: the Pharisees and John's disciples fasted often. They could have even fasted on the same days and for the same reasons.

It is not clear what feelings prompted the question asked by John's disciples to Jesus. It is not impossible that the party spirit was working. Rivalry and jealousy had been detected, even in the community of the Baptist (John 3:26). If this was the case, then the reference to the pharisaic practice could be explained by a desire to overwhelm Jesus' disciples with sheer numbers and put them in the position of being in the minority on the question. However, it is more likely that the primary feeling in the minds of those bringing the question was that of surprise. In the matter of fasting, they seemed more like the Pharisees who were stigmatized by their own master as a "brood of vipers," than the followers of the One who was cherished and worshiped by John. If this is the case, the purpose for the question was to obtain information and instruction. It fits with this view that the question was addressed to Jesus. If they had only wanted an argument, the questioners would have addressed it to the disciples only.

If John's followers came to Jesus seeking instruction, they were not disappointed. Jesus answered their question. His answer was remarkable for its originality, point, and pathos. He used parables to present the great principles by which the conduct of His disciples could be vindicated, and by which He desired the behavior of all who bore His name to be regulated. Now, His reply. First, it was purely defensive in nature. Jesus did not blame John's disciples for fasting. But He did express His own contentment by defending His disciples for abstaining from fasting. He did not feel called to belittle one party in order to justify the other. But He took up this position: "To fast may be right for you, the followers of John; not to fast is equally right for my followers." They must have been so grateful for Christ's attitude here. He was tolerant on a question in which the name of John was involved! Jesus had a deep respect for the forerunner and his work and always spoke of him with the deepest appreciation. At one time, He called him a burning and shining lamp (John 5:35); at another time, He declared that he was not only a prophet, but something more (Matt. 11:7-15). We may remark in passing, that John had the same kind of

feelings toward Jesus and did not sympathize with his own disciples who were jealous. Both of these two great men were censured by their degenerate contemporaries (but for different reasons), and both spoke about the other to their disciples and to the public with loving respect. The lesser light confessed that he was inferior; the Greater magnified the worth of His humble fellow-servant. What a refreshing contrast that was presented instead of the base passions of envy, prejudice, and detraction that were seen so much in other places. Under the Pharisees' ungodly influence, their followers spoke of John as a madman and of Jesus as immoral and profane! (Matt. 11:16,19).

We now leave the *manner* of His reply and address the *matter* of the reply. In order to vindicate His disciples, Jesus used a metaphor that was suggested by an unforgettable statement said about Him at an earlier time by the master (John) of those who now examined Him. Certain disciples had complained that men were leaving John and going to Jesus. John had said in effect, "Jesus is the Bridegroom; I am only the Bridegroom's friend. Therefore, it is right that men should leave me and join Jesus" (John 3:29). Jesus then took the Baptist's words and used them for His own advantage to defend the way of life that was being pursued by His disciples. His reply, paraphrased, went something like this: "I am the Bridegroom, as your master said; it is right that the children of the bride-chamber come to me; and it is also right that, when they have come, they should adapt their way of life to their changed circumstances. Therefore, they are doing well if they do not fast, for fasting is an expression of sadness, and why should they be sad when they are with Me? People might as well be sad at a marriage ceremony. The days will come when the children of the bride-chamber will be sad, for the Bridegroom will not always be with them; and at the dark hour of His departure, it will be natural and timely for them to fast, for then they will be in a fasting mood - weeping, lamenting, sorrowful, and heartbroken."

The Principle Behind Fasting

Here is the principle which underlies this graphic representation: fasting should not be a fixed, mechanical rule. Fasting has to do with the state of mind a person is in. To be more specific, people ought to fast when they are sad or in a state of mind which resembles sadness - absorbed in thought, preoccupied. It could be done when there is some great, solemn crisis in a person's life or a community, like that of Peter when he was troubled by the great question of admitting the Gentiles into the church. Or, it could be done in a situation similar to the one in the Christian community at Antioch, when they were about to ordain the first missionaries to go to the lost people in the world. Christ's teaching is clear and distinct here. Fasting in any other circumstances is forced, unnatural, unreal. People can be made to do it out of duty, but they will not do it with their heart and soul. "You cannot make the attendants of the bridegroom fast while the bridegroom is with them, can you?" (Luke 5:34). He asked the question, basically asserting that it was impossible.

By this rule, the disciples of our Lord were justified. Yet John's were not condemned. He admitted that it was natural for them to fast, because they were mourning, sad, and dissatisfied. They had not found Him who was the Desire of all nations, the Hope of the future, the Bridegroom of the soul. They only knew that everything was wrong. And in their questioning, despairing mood, they enjoyed fasting, wearing rugged clothes, and going to lonely, desolate regions, living as hermits - a practical protest against the ungodly age they were living in. The message that the kingdom was at hand had also been preached to them. But the way John proclaimed it, the announcement was *awful* news, not good news. It made them anxious and discouraged, not glad. People in this sort of mood could not do anything else but fast. Whether it was beneficial for them to *continue* in that mood after the Bridegroom had come, and had been told by John that He was such, is another matter. Their grief was by their own choice. It was useless and without cause. For Jesus had appeared to take away the sin of the world.

Jesus still had more to say in reply to the questions which were addressed to Him. Things that are new and unusual need many explanations. Therefore, to the beautiful story about the children of the bride-chamber, He added two other equally suggestive parables about: 1) the new patch on the old garment, and 2) the new wine in old skins. The purpose of these parables is much the same as that of the first part of His reply: to enforce the law of congruity in relation to fasting and similar matters. That is, He wanted to show that in all *voluntary* religious service where we are free to regulate our own conduct, the outward acts should be made to correspond with the inner motives of the heart. No attempt should be made to force particular behavior or habits on people without considering the relationship between the inner heart and the outer behavior. This is what Jesus meant: "We observe this law of congruity in nature. No one puts a piece of unshrunk cloth (Matt. 9:16) on an old garment. Neither do people put new wine into old skins, not just because it is improper, but to avoid bad consequences. For if the rule of congruity is neglected, the patched garment will be torn by the shrinking of the new cloth. And the old skin bottles will burst when the new liquor ferments, and the wine will be spilled and lost."

The old cloth and the old bottles in these metaphors represent old ascetic ways in religion. The new cloth and the new wine represent the new joyful life in Christ. Those who tenaciously hold to the old ways do not possess this life. The parables were applied primarily to Christ's own generation, but they have application to all ages in transition. Surely, they find new illustration in almost every generation.

Jesus used these ordinary parables as arguments to justify His departure from the current religious customs. There are only two ways to escape the power of these parables. First, some people deny that they are even relevant. That is, they would deny that religious beliefs, by their

very nature, demand to find new ways to express themselves outwardly. They also deny that if these ways are not found, there will be negative consequences. This position is usually assumed by those who advocate rituals and customs. For the most part, conservative minds have a very inadequate conception of the powerful force of belief. Their own belief - their entire spiritual life - is often a fragile thing. So they imagine that the faith of other people must be tame and compliant. Nothing but some horrible experience will convince them that they are wrong. When the proof comes in the form of some kind of revolutionary outburst that cannot be suppressed, they are dumbfounded. These kinds of people learn nothing from the history of previous generations. They continue to think that their own situation will be an exception. Hence the *vis inertiae* (the power of inertia; dead resistance to force applied) of established custom continually insists on holding on to what is old until the new wine proves its power by producing an explosion that is unnecessarily wasteful. Then, the wine and bottles often perish together. Energies which might have quietly worked out a beneficial reformation are distorted into blind powers that cause indiscriminate destruction.

In the second place, even if the metaphors are accepted as relevant, other people may deny that a new wine has come into existence. Essentially, this was the attitude that the Pharisees assumed toward Christ. In effect, they asked Him, "What have you taught your disciples that they cannot live as others do? Why do they need to invent new religious habits for themselves? This new life about which you boast is either an empty claim, or an unlawful, counterfeit thing. It cannot be tolerated. No one would regret it if it were thrown away." The opponents of the Reformation had a similar attitude toward Martin Luther. In effect they said to him, "If this new revelation of yours, that sinners are justified by faith alone, were true, we admit that it would involve a very serious modification in religious opinion. Many alterations would occur in religious practice. But we deny the truth of your doctrine. We think the peace and comfort you find in it is only a hallucination. Therefore, we insist that you return to the time-honored faith. Then you will have no difficulty in giving consent to our long-established customs." The same thing happens to a greater or lesser degree in every generation. For new wine is always in the process of being produced by the eternal vine of truth. In some of the particular areas of belief and practice, it demands new bottles in order for it to be preserved. But instead, the answer comes back in the form of an order, "Be content with the old bottles."

They do not seek to denounce or attempt to suppress the new. But those who stand by the old often oppose the new by the milder method of belittling. They eulogize the honorable past and contrast it with the present. This is a disadvantage for the present. They say, "The old wine is vastly superior to the new; how mellow, mild, fragrant, wholesome is the one! How harsh and excitable is the other!" Those who say these things are often not the worst people; they are often the best - people of taste and feeling, the gentle, the reverent, and the good. They themselves are

excellent examples of the old vintage. Their opposition forms by far the most difficult obstacle to the public recognition and toleration of what is new in religious life. For when the saintly people disapprove of it, a strong prejudice is naturally created against this, or any cause.

Observe, then how Christ answers the honest admirers of the old wine. He concedes the point. He admits that their preference is natural. In the conclusion of His reply to John's disciples, Luke represents Him as saying, "And no one, after drinking old wine wishes for new; for he says, 'The old is good enough'" (Luke 5:39). This striking viewpoint shows His rare frankness in stating the case of opponents, and no less rare modesty and tact in stating the case of friends. It is as if Jesus had said, "I am not amazed that you love the old wine of Jewish piety. It is the fruit of a very ancient vineyard. I don't even mind that you dote upon the very bottles which contain it, though they have been covered with the dust and cobwebs of centuries. But how are we to think about this? Do people object to the existence of new wine, or refuse to have it in their possession, because the old is superior in flavor? No. They drink the old, but they carefully preserve the new, knowing that the old will run out one day. The new, however, will get better with age and may ultimately be superior even in flavor to that which is presently being used. You should behave in the same way toward the new wine of my kingdom. You may not immediately want it, because it is strange and novel. But surely you could deal more wisely with it than simply to shun it, or spill and destroy it!"

The lovers of the old ways have seldom understood Christ's wisdom. But the church could surely benefit from it. On the other hand, those who love the new ways have seldom sympathized with His graciousness. Niebuhr, a celebrated theologian, has remarked, "It must make a man wretched, if, when on the threshold of old age, he looks on the rising generation with uneasiness, and does not rather rejoice in beholding it; and yet this is very common with old men. Fabius would rather have seen Hannibal unconquered than see his own fame obscured by Scipio." There are always too many Fabii in the world, who are annoyed because things will not remain stationary, and because new ways and new people are always rising up to take the place of the old. On the other hand, it is not less rare to see Christ's graciousness among those who advocate progress. Those who love freedom despise the stricter sort as fanatics and extremists, and they push their changes without regard for their misgivings. They do not seem to have any appreciation for the excellent qualities of the "old wine." When will young people and old people, liberals and conservatives, broad Christians and narrow, learn to bear with one another? When will they learn to affirm each other - that they are both necessary to complement the other in their own one-sidedness?