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Pursuing the Kingdom: The Joy of the King's Presence

Matthew 9:14-17

Vernon Advent Christian Church

As we continue our journey through the Gospel of Matthew, we find ourselves reaching another significant turning point in Jesus' earthly ministry. Up to this point, Matthew has carefully revealed both the authority of Jesus and the growing opposition to His kingdom by the religious leaders.

In chs. 3-4, the inauguration of the Kingdom was announced as "at hand" by both John the Baptist and Jesus Himself. In chs. 5-7, in the "Sermon on the Mount," Jesus proclaimed what life in His kingdom looks like. Then, beginning in ch. 8, Matthew shifts from the teaching of Jesus to His miracles. And one miracle after another has demonstrated that Jesus possesses authority unlike anyone who has ever lived.

He has authority over every disease, over every demonic power and even over nature itself. And then, as we saw last week in ch. 9, He demonstrated the greatest authority of all by forgiving the sins of the paralytic man before healing him, proving that He is not simply a miracle worker, but the very Son of God with authority to forgive sins.

He, then, called Matthew, a despised tax collector, to leave everything behind and become one of His disciples, after which He joyfully shared a meal at Matthew's house, along with other tax collectors and sinners, while declaring, "I came not to call the righteous, but sinners."

And its immediately after that banquet that Matthew places the passage that we are going to read today. The setting is important because this conversation does not happen in isolation by itself. Jesus is reclining at the table with people the religious leaders considered beyond hope. The Pharisees are beside themselves that a man claiming to be a rabbi, or a teacher, would not only associate with such people, but would actually make one of them His disciple.

And into that atmosphere comes another question, and not from the Pharisees this time, but from the disciples of John the Baptist. Matthew tells us, "...the disciples of John came to him, saying, 'Why do we and the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?'" (Matt. 9:14)

Now, this is a question about fasting on the surface, but beneath it lies a much deeper issue. The real question is this, "What happens when the long-awaited Messiah finally arrives?" Can people simply add Jesus to the religious system they already have, or does His coming change everything?

And that is what is at the heart of our passage today. Jesus is about to reveal that the kingdom of God is not simply an improvement on the old way of doing religion. He did not come to patch up an exhausted system or to fit neatly into the expectations of the religious establishment. He came to bring something entirely new, the fulfillment of everything the Law, the Prophets of the Old Covenant and even John the Baptist had been anticipating. And so, let's read on to see what Jesus has to say. If you are able, please stand with me in honor of God's word as I read from the Gospel of Matthew 9:14-17. [Read Passage]

We begin with the disciples of John asking a question concerning fasting. Now, a basic definition of fasting that I found online is “the voluntary practice of abstaining from food for a set period of time to draw closer to God.” Now, primarily paired with prayer, fasting was done to seek God’s guidance, to express repentance and to demonstrate reliance on God rather than on our physical needs.

Evidently, the fact that Jesus’ disciples were not fasting was something the disciples of John had observed and it concerned them. And so they ask the question. But Jesus answers in a way that no one expected. Instead of giving a detailed explanation about fasting, He shifts everyone’s attention away from the practice itself and directs it toward His own identity. He says in vs. 15, [Read].

Now, at first glance, His answer may seem unrelated to the question, like a good politician, but in reality, it goes straight to the heart of the issue. The disciples of John, and the Pharisees too, for that matter, were focused on external observance while Jesus was focused on the reality that stood right in front of them. The question was never simply, “Should your disciples fast?” The greater question was, “Do you recognize who is standing in front of you?”

And Jesus identifies Himself in these verses as the Bridegroom. And that image would have immediately caught the attention of His Jewish audience because throughout the Old Testament, God frequently described His covenant relationship with Israel as that of a husband and his bride. Isaiah declared, “Your Maker is your husband.” Hosea portrayed God’s faithful love toward an unfaithful people through his own marriage. And Jeremiah described Israel’s early devotion to the Lord as the devotion of a bride.

By calling Himself the Bridegroom, Jesus was doing far more than using a beautiful illustration. He was making a remarkable claim about His identity. The Bridegroom had arrived because God Himself had come to dwell among His people. And that changed everything.

Imagine attending a wedding reception. No one walks into the reception expecting it to feel and look like a funeral. The guests are not dressed in black and sitting silently with tears of grief. No. Instead, there is music, laughter, celebration and joy. Why? The reason is simple. Weddings celebrate the arrival of a long-awaited day. Friends and family rejoice because, after waiting for the expected day, the bride and groom are finally together, which is a cause for celebration.

Jesus says that is exactly what this moment is like when He says, again, in vs. 15, “How can the wedding guests mourn while the bridegroom is with them?” His disciples are not neglecting God by failing to fast. They are rejoicing because the One whom every fast had anticipated is finally here.

That is an important truth for us to understand. Throughout the Old Testament, fasting was not only about going without food for a set time but it was often connected with longing. People were expressing their dependence upon God and their desire for Him to act. John the Baptist’s disciples also fasted because they were preparing for the coming of the Messiah and their ministry was marked by that expectation.

But Jesus says, in effect, “The waiting is over.” The King has come. The Messiah has arrived. The Bridegroom is standing among His people. It would make little sense to

continue mourning when the very One they had been longing for was now present with them.

And then, for the first time in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus hints at His coming death. The phrase "taken away" here is significant. It points us to the cross, where the Bridegroom would be "taken from His disciples." There would indeed be days of sorrow after His death. There would be seasons when fasting would again become appropriate as God's people longed for His return after His resurrection and ascension back to the Father, but for now, Jesus was in their midst.

And this helps us understand the place of fasting in our lives today under the new covenant. We do not fast because we are trying to earn God's favor or prove our spirituality. We fast because we long for a deeper fellowship with Christ. We fast because we hunger for God's presence more than earthly comforts. We fast because we await the day when our Bridegroom returns and we enjoy His presence at the marriage supper of the Lamb is finally celebrated which was promised in the passage we heard read this morning from Rev. 19.

Now, having explained that His presence is like a wedding celebration, Jesus immediately follows with another illustration. And, again, the illustration doesn't seem to have anything to do with the original question. He says in vs. 16, [Read].

To us, that may sound like some good sewing advice, but to His audience it was a familiar picture from everyday life. In the first century, clothing was valuable. People did not throw away worn garments simply because they developed a tear. They repaired them. Some of you may have grown up that way as well.

Yet everyone knew you would never sew a patch of new, unshrunk cloth onto an old, worn-out garment. Why? Because once the garment was washed, the new cloth would shrink while the old cloth had already finished shrinking. Instead of solving the problem, the patch would pull away from the old fabric and leave an even larger tear than before.

Now, Jesus is not giving a lesson in tailoring here. He is making another powerful statement about the nature of His kingdom. The disciples of John and the Pharisees assumed that Jesus had simply come to fit within the religious system they already knew. They viewed Him as another teacher who would perhaps make a few adjustments or offer a few reforms, but in their minds, His teaching could simply be sewn onto the traditions they had already developed.

But Jesus is saying that is not what He had come to do. For you see, the kingdom of God is not a patch for a worn-out system. The coming of Christ introduces something far greater. And this is one of the central themes running throughout the Gospel of Matthew.

Jesus repeatedly declares that He did not come to abolish the Law and the Prophets but to fulfill them. Everything in the Old Testament pointed toward Him. The sacrifices anticipated His perfect sacrifice. The priesthood anticipated His eternal priesthood. The temple anticipated His presence among His people. The festivals anticipated the joy of redemption that He would accomplish. Everything pointed toward Jesus Himself.

You see, the problem was never with God's Law. The Law was holy, righteous and good. The problem was what sinful people had done with it. Over the centuries, the religious leaders had surrounded God's commands with countless traditions, regulations and man-made interpretations. Instead of leading people to know God, religion had

become increasingly focused on performance, what a person could do for God. And people began to measure their spirituality by outward appearance while neglecting the condition of their hearts. Jesus did not come to repair that system. He came to fulfill God's redemptive plan and establish the new covenant.

You see, the Pharisees wanted Jesus to fit comfortably into their “spiritual box” and that same temptation exists today. Our human nature constantly drifts toward external religion because outward rules are often easier to measure than inward transformation. We like our “spiritual checklists” because they give us the illusion of control. If I attend church, read my Bible, pray every day, avoid certain sins and perform enough religious activities, then perhaps I can convince myself that I am a “good” person and everything is well between me and God.

Now, all of those things are valuable and good and we should do practice them, but they can never replace a transformed heart. The gospel is not about “being good” or simply adding Jesus to our way of life. It is about receiving an entirely new life through Christ.

Now, Jesus concludes His answer to the question with one final illustration, one that builds upon the previous examples but drives His point even deeper. He says in vs. 17, [Read] And, just as everyone in Jesus' day understood the illustration about patching old garments, they also understood this one.

Wine was commonly stored in animal skins that had been carefully prepared to hold it. When the skins were new, they were soft, flexible and able to stretch as the fresh wine fermented and released its gases. Over time, however, those wineskins became dry and brittle. And if someone were to pour new, fermenting wine into an old wineskin, the pressure would eventually cause the hardened, brittle skin to crack and burst and the wine would be lost. The problem was not the new wine. The problem was that the old wineskin could no longer hold what was new.

Again, Jesus is not giving practical advice about storing wine. He is revealing something essential about the kingdom of God. The life that He brings cannot simply be poured into hearts that remain unchanged. Again, the gospel is not simply new information to be added to our existing way of thinking. It is the transforming power of God that creates something entirely new.

The Apostle Paul would later express this beautifully in one of my favorite passages of scripture when he wrote in 2 Cor. 5:17, "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come." You see, the gospel is not behavior modification. It is about becoming a whole new person because God, by the working of the Holy Spirit, has given us new life in Jesus.

This is why pursuing the kingdom of God begins with surrender rather than self-improvement. Before Jesus changes what we do, He changes who we are. The gospel is not ultimately about what we do for Christ. It is about what Christ has done for us. He lived the life we could never live, died the death we deserved to die and rose again, so that, all who trust in Him will receive newness of life.

That is the invitation Jesus extends in this passage. He is not inviting people to adopt a new religious system. He is inviting them into a new covenant, a new relationship and, ultimately, a new life. The new wine of the kingdom can only be received by hearts that God has made new through faith in Jesus.

Brothers and sisters, may we never settle for simply adding “religious duty” to an unchanged heart. Instead, may we continually yield ourselves to the transforming work of the Holy Spirit, allowing Jesus to shape every part of who we are. For the greatest miracle of the kingdom is not that sinners become more religious, it is that, through God’s grace, sinners become new creations in Christ.

So what does this mean for us? Well, as we come to the end of this passage, it is worth remembering the question which began this conversation. The disciples of John wanted to know why Jesus’ followers did not practice the same religious customs they did. The Pharisees wanted to know why Jesus refused to conform to the traditions they had carefully preserved. But Jesus responded by showing them that His arrival changed everything.

The Bridegroom had come, the kingdom of God had broken into history and the long-awaited Messiah was standing before them. They were asking about religious practices while failing to recognize the One to whom all those practices had always pointed.

And that same danger still exists today. It is entirely possible to know the language of Christianity without knowing Christ Himself. It is possible to attend church faithfully, read the Scriptures regularly, pray often, serve diligently and even defend biblical truth, yet slowly allow our relationship with Jesus to become a “religious routine.” The Christian life was never intended to be simply a collection of habits or traditions. At its heart, Christianity is a day-in, day-out relationship with the living God.

And so, Jesus did not come to make bad people better. He came to make dead people alive. He did not come simply to repair an old religious system or to add another set of rules to our lives. He came to establish a new covenant through His death and resurrection. He came to give new hearts to sinful people, to forgive their sins, to place His Spirit within them and to invite them into a joyful relationship with Himself.

One day, our fasting will cease forever. Our longing will be satisfied. Our faith will become sight. The Bridegroom will return, and all who belong to Him will gather at the marriage supper of the Lamb. And on that day there will be no more sorrow, no more tears, no more death and no more waiting. There will only be perfect joy in the presence of our King.

But until that glorious day, may we pursue His kingdom with hearts made new by His grace, lives transformed by His Spirit and eyes fixed on Jesus, the Bridegroom of His Church, who alone is worthy of our worship. Let’s pray.

Heavenly Father, thank You for sending Your Son, Jesus, our Bridegroom and King. Thank You that through His life, death and resurrection You have not called us to empty religion but to a living relationship with You.

Lord, guard us from simply going through the motions. Give us hearts that delight in Your presence more than in religious routine. Continue to make us new by the power of Your Spirit, shaping us into the likeness of Jesus each day.

Help us to pursue Your kingdom with joy, surrender and wholehearted devotion as we await the blessed hope, the return of our Savior. May our lives reflect the transforming

power of the gospel so that others may see Jesus in us and be drawn to Him. And we ask all of this in the name of Jesus, Amen.

Benediction: May you go with hearts made new by the grace of Christ. May you find your greatest joy in the presence of the Bridegroom, delight in His transforming work and pursue His kingdom not through empty ritual, but through a living relationship with Him. And may the peace, joy and power of Christ strengthen you until the day He returns in glory. Amen.