

*Years ago, I decided I was going to teach myself to play guitar. And so I bought one. It wasn't an 'el-cheapo' – it was a basic, but OK guitar. And I reckoned that “If I keep it up, I'll end up getting myself a good one.”*

*Well, it wasn't long until I realised I needed a pick-up, so I could plug into a sound system, and so I upgraded sooner than I thought I would. And that was OK, because Ben started learning guitar, he got me old one...*

*Anyway, you've heard us both play in church – **I'm** still very basic, Ben's pretty jolly good, and now Ben has a really, really good guitar... And the worst thing I did, was I had a go of it, and realised how nice it sounds, and how much easier it is to play, ... And so now I'm jealous...*

*Anyway, Ben's packing up his room, because he's about to get married, and he said, “Dad, what do you want me to do with this **old** guitar?”...*

*And there lies a dilemma??? The old guitar still works... Ben doesn't want it anymore, because,,, why would he go back to that one, when he's got a really, really good guitar????? And, why would **I** go back to it?, because the one that I use, is a bit better – not a lot, but it is a bit better.... And one day, I still hope to have a guitar, maybe as good as Ben's...*

*What do we do with the old one??? Do we keep it in case one of the grand kids commit to learning guitar? Maybe...*

Today's message, is all about “discarding ‘the old’, because ‘the new’ is better”...

Sometimes the old and new – they’re just not compatible:

- I can only play 1 guitar at a time. I can’t play them both at once. I can’t add the new guitar to the old one...;
- Probably a better example, might be “computers”  
Sometimes an operating system gets upgraded on a computer, and old pieces of software stop working...  
I’ve got pieces of software, that **used** to be really useful... But now they won’t work on newer operating systems. But that’s not really a problem, because there’s new software that performs so much better.

So out with the old, and in with the new...

The trouble is, sometimes we find it a bit hard to discard the old... We **know** the new is better, but maybe I might be able to use that old thing... Or maybe we’re a bit nostalgic about the old thing...

*I’ve still got my old handpieces and combs and cutters, from when I used to do a bit of shearing... And **some** of it’s narrow gear... I still have a narrow handpiece, and narrow combs and cutters, to go with it... **Why!!!???** Somebody might want them one day... I don’t think **anybody** uses them anymore – why would they, when the wide gear is so much better.... but I just can’t bring myself to throw them away.*

Am I striking any chords here??? Do we have any hoarders here??? You’ve gotten the new one, because it’s so much better, but you haven’t discarded the old one yet???

Today's message is about "Discarding the old, because the new is better"...

Only, I'm not going to be talking about "things" – I'm not going to be giving space-saving advice, or methods to reduce clutter around the home... We're going to be talking about "Discarding our old ways – About discarding our old sinful ways, and even about discarding our old religious ways... – Discarding our old ways, and embracing the way of Jesus... Discarding the old, because the new is so much better..."

Righto:

In today's reading, the presenting issue, was "fasting". John the Baptist's disciples fasted regularly. The Pharisees' disciples, fasted regularly. But evidently, Jesus' disciples did not... And so Jesus was asked, "How come?"... How come those other religious people fast, but you lot don't??? And Jesus answered them, on 2 levels:

1.

Firstly, He asks them a question, "**Can the wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them? As long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast.** <sup>20</sup> **The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast....**"

Alright, there's a time for fasting, and there's a time for "not fasting" – There's actually a time for feasting and celebration... *Robyn and I, are in the middle of a pre-wedding diet – I've got a sports coat I've got to fit into (for Ben & Frances' wedding)...* *But when we get to the wedding,*

*that's not a day for fasting – that's a day for feasting and celebration...*

There is a time to fast, and there is a time to feast and celebrate...

But, let's take a step back:

What is this religious practice of fasting all about?

Well, as we read our bibles, we see there's a number of circumstances, and a number of reasons, that people stop eating meals (for a period), while they pray.

- Some people abstain from eating certain foods for a certain time;
- Some people stop eating **all** food for a time;
- Sometimes a fast might be for just 1 or 2 meals in the day;
- Sometimes people will fast for up to 40 days, where they eat nothing for a whole 40 days...

At various times (in my life), I've fasted:

- Sometimes I've fasted from **all** food, regularly – 1 day a week;
- Sometimes I've not eaten during the day-time, 1 day a week;
- Sometimes, when we've had big issues to pray about, I've had a whole week of prayer and fasting, where I haven't eaten anything for 7 days...

The point is, there is no fixed rule for what a fast is – but essentially, it's giving up food, for the purposes of prayer...

So, in what sorts of circumstances, would a person choose to fast? Well, in the Scriptures, we see a number of circumstances (and these are just a few examples):

- One of the most common reasons for a fast, is at a time of repentance... In Samuel 7, Samuel called the house of Israel, to turn away from their foreign gods, and to turn back to YHWH... And they did. They repented of their sins, and I can't see that they were ordered to do this, – it was their natural response, that in their sorrow for their sins, they fasted for the day. And so, fasting is a way of humbling oneself, and of showing sorrow or contrition for one's actions....
- Another example of this, is when David committed adultery and murder, Nathan the prophet came to David, and told him his son was going to die. And David's son got sick, and for 7 days, David fasted, as he lay on the ground, as he prayed to God on behalf of the child.
- Alright, so that one, wasn't just contrition – he was also praying, for the recovery from sickness...
- Sometimes, in times of sorrow, people fast... And if you've ever known true sorrow, you probably know what this is like – when you are so sad, that you don't want to eat. When King Saul died, the mighty men (that's like the SAS of Israel), took his body, and buried him, and fasted for 7 days. But it wasn't only Saul who died – it was Jonathon (his son – David's best mate), and the people of God – the house of Israel, who died (in the

same battle), and David, and those who were with him, mourned, and wept, and fasted until evening. .... And so, in times of deep sorrow, and grief, people fast...

- Following a disaster, people spontaneously come before God, and fast and pray for help. In the book of Esther, the evil Haman, tricks his king into making a law, which will bring about the genocide of the Jewish people, and when the Jews heard of it, **there was great mourning among them, with fasting and weeping and lamenting, and many of them lay in sackcloth and ashes.**
- But that story doesn't end there – it's not only about sorrow... Esther then asked the people to fast, as she went to plead on their behalf... She was wanting them to pray, and to humble themselves before God, in a fast.
- David tells us, in Ps69, what fasting meant to him. He said, he humbled his soul with fasting;
- Jesus fasted. Remember that? 40 days, He fasted out in the wilderness. And although His body was weakened from that very long fast, His Spirit was strong, and He resisted the temptations of the Devil...
- In Luke 2, we hear about the 84 year old prophetess, Anna. **And she did not depart from the temple, worshipping with fasting and prayer, night and day...** Alright, fasting and prayer, is a way of

## worshipping God.

- In the New Testament, in the early church, when they were seeking guidance from God, they prayed, and they fasted...
- And fasting is also a tool, to be used in Spiritual warfare. When Jesus' disciples couldn't drive a demon out of someone, He says "You can only get this kind of demon out with prayer and fasting"...

Alright, so, as far as I can see, the main purposes of fasting:

- is to humble ourselves before God;
- Sometimes, it's a natural reaction to grief;
- Sometimes it's a natural expression of remorse, as we confess our sins;
- It is to deny what our body craves, in order to give ourselves (more fully) over to God;
- And so, when we pray; and worship; and seek God, fasting can (and should be [at times]), part of our prayer life...
- When fasting comes from the heart, I don't think it so-much makes our prayers stronger (although it may do that) – but it certainly helps us to focus on God, and to pray for the right thing...

And this is important: **Most** of the examples of fasting, I can find in the Bible, are a personal response to God...

Now, having said that, for the nation of Israel, they were a **few** fasts, that they **were** commanded to observe: e.g. on the Day of Atonement – that was the big ceremony, where people’s sins were atoned for – paid for, and their sins were forgiven... And the day of Atonement was to be a day of fasting. And then in Zechariah 8, another 4 additional fasts are mentioned.

**So, it seems like fasting, is a **good** thing...** There’s a time for fasting, and there’s a time “not to fast”... There’s a time for fasting, and there’s a time for celebrating... So, there was a time for fasting, in the story of Esther... And God (in His mercy) answered their prayer. And the King listened to Esther, and those who were trying to destroy the Jews, were themselves destroyed, and the Jews were honoured.

And in 8:16, we read:

Esther 8:16 The Jews had light and gladness and joy and honour. <sup>17</sup> And in every province and in every city, wherever the king's command and his edict reached, there was gladness and joy among the Jews, a feast and a holiday.....

Wow! There **was** a time for fasting, but then when God intervened, there was a time for feasting and celebration...

So, fasting is a good thing. Why didn’t Jesus' disciples fast? Well, the first reason is, “It wasn’t the right time.” Jesus is the answer to the prayers and fastings of millennia... and so, while Jesus was with His disciples, it wasn’t a time for fasting – it was a time for feasting and celebration, because God had answered the prayer, and sent the Messiah (to save the world)...



But remember, Jesus answered this question on 2 levels...

2.

The second level, was “Out with the old, and in with the new, because the new is better.”

And not only is the new better, but the new and the old, are incompatible... And He gives two analogies to explain:

***21 No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old garment. If he does, the patch tears away from it, the new from the old, and a worse tear is made.***

Now, clothes and fabric, have obviously come a long way, since the 1<sup>st</sup> century... Fabric does not shrink, near as much as what it used to... But sometimes it does still shrink...

*When Robyn and I were newly married, I thought I'd do a good deed, and I did the washing... I didn't only wash my clothes – I also washed Robyn's... Anyway, it was the middle of summer, and we had a solar hot water system, so we had plenty of hot water, and it was scalding hot, and my work clothes were pretty greasy, so I gave them a hot wash... and then I washed Robyn's clothes on the same setting, and when Robyn next went to put on her long pants, they'd turned into knickerbockers... Instead of going to the ankles, they stopped just below the knees... So, I learned that some things do still shrink...*

*I gained out of that experience (BTW), because I've been forbidden, from ever washing any of Robyn's clothes, ever again... It still hurts, that I still can't get in on the washing...*

But **most** fabric these days, is pre-shrunk, and a fair bit of technology goes into preventing fabric from shrinking... But back in the first century, if you tried to patch an old garment with new fabric, the new fabric would shrink so much, it would tear away from the old fabric, that had been shrunk over the years, and the garment would be ruined...

And His second analogy:

**22 ... no one puts new wine into old wineskins. If he does, the wine will burst the skins — and the wine is destroyed, and so are the skins. But new wine is for fresh wineskins."**

Are there any wine connoisseurs here??? I'm not a connoisseur, but I know some people would never ever lower themselves to drink wine from box — only bottled wine is good enough... But imagine what wine would be like, drinking it from a goat skin...

Apparently the process was, they would crush the grapes, and let them ferment for a while in a vat, but the final part of the fermentation process, was in the wine-skin... BTW, some people will try and tell you that the wine wasn't alcoholic... It was. The sugar in the grapes would ferment, until the sugar content was lowered, and the alcohol became the preservative...

Anyway, apparently the process was, they would crush the grapes, let them ferment for a while, and then, for the final bit of the fermentation, it would go into the wine-skin, and be sealed until it was ready to be consumed...

And because there was still a bit of fermentation to take place, it was important that it was put into a new, pliable, skin... A new skin, was able to stretch a bit, because when grapes ferment, the yeast is actually consuming the sugar and converting it to alcohol and carbon-dioxide... And the carbon dioxide gas, stretches the skin. But you couldn't use an old skin, because it had already done all the stretching it could, and it would burst, and you'd lose the wine...

So, what's Jesus saying here, about fasting? Is He saying that now Jesus has come, under the New Covenant, Disciples of Jesus shouldn't fast??? No, He's not saying that at all... In fact, He says that there will come a time for Disciples of Jesus to fast, and we see the example of Disciples of Jesus, in the early church, fasting...

So, what **is** He saying?

....

To humble ourselves, and for a time, to fast and pray, is a good thing... But the sort of fasting that the Pharisees had become accustomed to, is not...

They had taken something that **should** be, a personal response to God, from the heart, and they'd turned it into a religious act of self-righteousness...

Instead of being moved by the Spirit of God, to humble themselves and fast for a time, they made it into a status symbol, of their religious elitism... Many of them had a practice of fasting 2 days, every week. And they let everybody know about it.

groan “Oh, I’m fasting... Do it twice a week, every week, you know...”

“Oh, you must be very spiritual...”

Do you remember the Pharisee in Luke 18, skiting about himself?:

Luke 18:11 **The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. <sup>12</sup> I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.'**

That’s a pretty good picture of what fasting had become... Not at all what God intended, but a badge of religious superiority...

No, Jesus didn’t come to end fasting – He came to do away with the old religion of doing religious acts, and presenting an **image** of spiritual superiority, while they were actually, rotten to the core...

Jesus came to save sinners. The new wine, is being saved through the grace and mercy of God, found in Jesus Christ.

Whenever any of us come to Jesus, to give ourselves, to Jesus as Lord, we have to realise that “the old is incompatible with the new”... There **will** be things in my old life, that I have to put aside, to be a true disciple of Jesus...

Some of these are obvious:

- theft; lust; immorality; greed;
- gossip; slander;
- hatred; bitterness

Our old way of life, is put to death, and we are born again, to a **new** way of life in Jesus Christ.

But here, Jesus is teaching us, that even our old religion – where we **once** strived to be acceptable to God, by fulfilling all religious righteousness..., is something that has to go. Why? Because it’s an act of legality, rather than a response of the heart. And God never intended it, to be that way...

When we give ourselves to Jesus Christ, because He is Lord, there is no place for the legalities of ceremonial religion... When God fills us with His Holy Spirit, institutional, legal religion, cannot contain Him...

The prophet Isaiah, compares an empty, religious fast, to the true fast:

In Isaiah 58, he describes how outwardly, it appears as if these people are seeking God – they’re calling upon God every day, and they’re fasting... They **claim**, that they want to see God’s justice and righteousness in their land, as if they were

righteous themselves... But it seems that God doesn't hear them or answer their prayers. Why?

They cry out:

<sup>3</sup> 'Why have we fasted, and you see it not?  
Why have we humbled ourselves, and you take no  
knowledge of it?'

Behold, in the day of your fast you seek your own  
pleasure,  
and **oppress** all your workers.

<sup>4</sup> Behold, you fast only to quarrel and to fight  
and to hit with a wicked fist.

Fasting like yours this day  
will not make your voice to be heard on high.

<sup>5</sup> Is such the fast that I choose,  
a day for a person to humble himself?  
Is it to bow down his head like a reed,  
and to spread sackcloth and ashes under him?  
Will you call **this** a fast,  
and a day acceptable to the LORD?

<sup>6</sup> "Is not **this** the fast that I choose:  
to loose the bonds of wickedness,  
to undo the straps of the yoke,  
to let the oppressed go free,  
and to break every yoke?

<sup>7</sup> Is it not to share your bread with the hungry  
and bring the homeless poor into your house;

when you see the naked, to cover him,  
and not to hide yourself from your own flesh?

- <sup>8</sup> Then shall your light break forth like the dawn,  
and your healing shall spring up speedily;  
your righteousness shall go before you;  
the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard.
- <sup>9</sup> Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer;  
you shall cry, and he will say, 'Here I am.'  
If you take away the yoke from your midst,  
the pointing of the finger, and speaking  
wickedness,

The old wineskin, was religious fasting, as a legal requirement, but done with a vile and filthy heart... The **new** wine, and the new wineskin, is a life transformed by the Spirit of God...

If you've never fasted, for the purpose of prayer, I want to encourage you to do it sometimes – to humble yourself before God, to fast and pray... But never do it as a religious rule – Fasting won't make you more spiritual...

But we also need to remember this: Some people who claim to be Christians, are all very sombre, and legalistic; and there's not a lot of joy about them.... In Jesus Christ, we have reason for celebration... Yes, there will be times for fasting, but not as a sombre, legalistic requirement, to 'be spiritual' ...

Because we have the Spirit of God, there is much of the old that we put aside, and so when we fast, it is a heart-response to God... And as we saw in Isaiah 58, more important than fasting, is to have a heart of righteousness, and a just, and righteous expression of our faith, as we interact with others in the world.

What do we discard, because 'the new' is better? Our old self. Our old worldly self, And the old religious self.

Questions???