

The Gospel Of Luke

16 When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read,¹⁷ and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

¹⁸'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free,¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.'²⁰

And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. ²¹Then he began to say to them, 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.' (Luke 4:16-21. NRSV)

Message 8

Then They Will Fast

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Luke 5:33-39

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Introduction:

Open your Bibles to Luke 5:33-39. Do you remember church, that Jesus would often say after his teaching: 'let he who has an ear to hear, hear'? Do you remember that? He would give a teaching with a plain and easily applied meaning but he would also hint that there was more to this if anyone had ears to hear or eyes to see. I believe we are dealing with such a passage this morning, so 'Lord give us ears to hear and eyes to see. Father God, send your Holy Spirit to be our teacher this morning and to open the eyes of our heart that we might see and be changed'.

And all God's people said: Amen. Let's read the word together:

33 Then they said to him, 'John's disciples, like the disciples of the Pharisees, frequently fast and pray, but your disciples eat and drink.'³⁴ Jesus said to them, 'You cannot make wedding-guests fast while the bridegroom is with them, can you? ³⁵The days will come when the bridegroom will be taken away from them, and then they will fast in those days.'³⁶ He also told them a parable: 'No one tears a piece from a new garment and sews it on an old garment; otherwise the new will be torn, and the piece from the new will not match the old. ³⁷And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise the new wine will burst the skins and will be spilled, and the skins will be destroyed. ³⁸But new wine must be put into fresh wineskins. ³⁹And no one after drinking old wine desires new wine, but says, "The old is good.'" (Luke 5:33-39. NRSV)

In the early church there was a sense that this passage had two meanings. There was an obvious and plain meaning that in and of itself has great value to the church. Then there was an ultimate meaning, a far future meaning that would have particular significance for a certain generation of the church. Which meaning you were talking about hinged on your understanding of the phrase:

³⁵The days will come when the bridegroom will be taken away from them, and then they will fast in those days.' (NRSV)

The plain interpretation of those words was spelled out by the Church Father Cyril of Alexandria. He said:

"For all things are good in their season, but what is the meaning of the Bridegroom being taken away from them? It is his being taken up into heaven." (Commentary of Luke, Homilies 21-22)

So the plain meaning of the teaching related to the appropriate behaviour of the church AFTER Jesus ascended up into heaven following his death and resurrection. That would mark a very obvious and dramatic shift and new behaviours and practices would be necessary. Excellent! We'll teach on that today. But there was also the sense in the church that something more was going on in this story. Ambrose of Milan, another church Father and the mentor to the more famous St. Augustine wrote:

"'But the days will come when the Bridegroom shall be taken from them.' Which are these days in which Christ is taken from us, especially when he himself has said: 'I shall be with you, even to the end of the world', when he has said, 'I will not leave you orphans'? For it is certain that if he were to leave us, we could not be saved. None can take Christ from you, unless you take yourself away. ... Neither Caiaphas nor Pilate took Christ from us." (Exposition of the Gospel of Luke)

So Ambrose, without disagreeing with the plain level of meaning indicated by Cyril's understanding, hinted that there was more to this than first met the eye. A greater 'leaving of Christ' was being spoken of than that effected by Caiaphas and Pilate who crucified the Lord Jesus. A greater departure was coming, one of OUR MAKING rather than of an outside agent. Let's deal with both of these meanings, moving from the obvious and plain to the spiritually discerned and ultimate.

The Plain And Obvious Meaning:

In terms of the plain and obvious meaning it can be said with confidence that:

1. Fasting is a future imperative.

It is clear from the context of this story that Jesus' disciples were not fasting during his earthly ministry. If they had been this story would have gone like this: 'The Pharisees said to Jesus: 'How come your disciples don't fast?' And Jesus said: 'They do. Zip it.' But that's not how it goes. Jesus admits that his disciples weren't fasting, but he says that in the future **THEY WILL**. Now right away, this leads us to reflect back on the primary teaching that Jesus has on fasting in Matthew 6. There he says:

"Moreover, **when you fast**, do not be like the hypocrites, with a sad countenance. For they disfigure their faces that they may appear to men to be fasting. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward. But you, **when you fast**, anoint your head and wash your face, so that you do not appear to men to be fasting, but to your Father who *is* in the secret *place*; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly. (Matthew 6:16-18. NKJV)

It's easy to see than, that while the disciples of Jesus were not fasting during his earthly ministry, they had already been told that it would be part of their **FUTURE MANDATE**. Indeed, the Bible goes on to record that after the ascension of Jesus into heaven, the early church was often found fasting:

Now in the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen a member of the court of Herod the ruler, and Saul. ²**While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting**, the Holy Spirit said, 'Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.' ³Then **after fasting and praying** they laid their hands on them and sent them off. (Acts 13:1-3. NRSV)

So, beyond a shadow of a doubt, the early church understood that fasting was indeed a commandment of the Lord but that it was to be in their future, not during the time when Jesus was with them bodily. We need to learn two things from that:

- i. Fasting should be part of our worship practice
- ii. Timing is critical to obedience

Do you see that? Sometimes Christians will say that fasting is optional and that Jesus never **EXPLICITLY** taught it. That's simply not true. He says in Matthew 6: 'When you fast', he doesn't say: 'If you chose to fast'. The only qualifier on the command is a timing one. Not yet, but soon. Fasting needs to be a regular part of our worship routine. In the early church it was

woven in with prayer and worship and so ought it be now. But we also need to understand that there is a TIMING element to obedience. That's why the Bible says:

⁵⁶You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but **why do you not know how to interpret the present time?** (Luke 12:56. NRSV)

One of the things that God's people are supposed to be adept at doing is understanding the time and calling for TIME appropriate actions. Jesus said that if we knew the time we would act correctly:

⁴²Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. ⁴³But understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. ⁴⁴Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour. (Matthew 24:42-44. NRSV)

There are certain actions in the future span of history that are called for in specific future seasons. If we do not know the time, we will not have the opportunity to respond with obedience. That's why until the Lord returns, we will fast and pray and watch for his appearing. Amen? Amen.

2. Christianity was not a 'patch' on Judaism, it was a whole new thing.

Jesus understood that with his earthly ministry, the people of God were between seasons, the old covenant was being surpassed by the new. The new covenant was not an upgrade on the old, like Windows 7 is an upgrade on XP and Vista, no, it was a totally new thing. Was it birthed out of the old thing? Yes. Like an oak tree is birthed out of an acorn. Was it the opposite of the old thing? No, Jesus came not to abolish the law but to fulfil it. It was not, the opposite, but it was not strictly CONTINUOUS either. It was like a whole new wineskin, a whole new vessel to contain new and fresher wine.

Jesus taught this sort of thing all the time, but here he says it in response to a question about fasting, so let's look at this answer in that specific light. In Judaism there was actually only one mandated fast, the one on the Day of Atonement. One of the things we say today in the Biblically illiterate church that is just completely untrue is that fasting is an old covenant thing, mercy and righteousness are new covenant things. And we quote pious sounding verses like: 'I desire mercy not sacrifice' as though that wipes out the whole 'take up your cross and follow me' thing. In the Old Testament AND in the New Testament worship was supposed to result in

righteous living and if it didn't, God would rather we all just shut up. That actually doesn't change from Old to New, if anything it gets stronger. The point is, fasting actually was far less common in Judaism than it became in Christianity. The Pharisees and John's disciples were actually cutting edge on this. They were instituting voluntary fasts. They were going beyond the once a year mandate of Judaism and they were scheduling REGULAR and FREQUENT fasts and they wondered why Jesus wasn't joining in. In response to that he tells a story about new wineskins the plain meaning of which is that Christianity is not just going to be Judaism on steroids, it is going to be a thing of the Spirit, a thing of new wine. We're not going to mandate weekly fasts, we're going to respond to the Spirit and when the Spirit tells us to fast, we'll fast.

The Pharisees were trying to make Judaism more rigorous, Jesus said that our righteousness would exceed theirs, but that it would be lead of the Holy Spirit. That's DIFFERENT, that's new, not just Judaism gone extreme.

3. People who enjoy the old ways are the least likely to embrace the new.

Look at how Jesus ends this teaching:

³⁹And no one after drinking old wine desires new wine, but says, "**The old is good.**" (Luke 5:39. NRSV)

The old is GOOD. Not better, they aren't even interested in a comparison, because the old is FINE. Do you know what the hardest church to change is? A good church. I have a friend who pastors in a church that is a complete re-do. The original church completely imploded. I was actually the youth pastor there at one point, it was my first job in ministry. The church went through a terrible split over, of all things, worship style. The older folks with the money said: 'Not on our dime' and the younger folks said: 'Fine, we'll all leave and plant a new work'. They did. All the young families left and started their own church and the old Baptist church started to die. You can't kick all the young people off the island and hope to have a future, its mathematically impossible. Unless all the seniors are going to start reproducing again in the manner of Abraham and Sarah, when you kick everyone under 35 out of your church you are done – it's over. You should just have a funeral and close the place and sell the building. Of course most don't, they just play out the clock and survive for another 20 years on endowments and meagre givings. This town is full of those churches as most towns are. But the young people

were no better, they should have been more patient and loving. Anyway, both groups died. The original Baptist church imploded, couldn't afford the building and had the wisdom to know **THEY BLEW IT!** So they actually signed the deed of their church over to a church planter from another denomination and said: 'We're done. You make the decisions, we'll just sit here with our mouths closed and clap.' And so they did. That church, Harvest Oakville, is now almost 1000 people strong. Not bad eh? It's easy to change a church that has **COMPLETELY** blown it. They know their wrong and they need no convincing. The hardest church to change is the church that thinks everything is fine. I've worked in one of those churches too. The budget was pretty stable, no major splits and no major departures. Sure attendance was declining by 2-3% per year but no one even noticed. They were like the proverbial frog in the kettle. They were dying too slowly to be alarmed.

Jesus isn't being prophetic here, he is just being an astute observer of human nature. Woe to the church that thinks everything is fine. You are about to be left behind.

The Ultimate And Spiritually Discerned Meaning:

Let's turn our attention now to the ultimate and spiritually discerned meaning of this teaching. Here we need to walk carefully, with less confidence and with more prayerfulness. It may also be that this passage teaches that:

1. There will be a future withdrawing of the Presence of the Lord from God's people.

Remember Ambrose's closing words:

None can take Christ from you, unless you take yourself away. ... Neither Caiaphas nor Pilate took Christ from us." (Exposition of the Gospel of Luke)

Does the Bible say anything about a future falling away that will cause the removal of God's Presence from the church? Actually it does, in several places. Let's work from the Old to the New Testament. Open your Bibles to Hosea. Just open them and hold them open because I want to fast walk you through a few things and then leave you with a verse you should highlight.

Notice first Hosea 4. The Lord opens a lawsuit, a covenant lawsuit against Israel, the people of

God because THEY have abandoned the covenant of their salvation. Now, is God rejecting them or is he stating the obvious that they HAVE LEFT HIM? Well let's see:

Hear the word of the Lord, O people of Israel;
for the Lord has an indictment against the inhabitants of the land.
There is no faithfulness or loyalty,
and no knowledge of God in the land.
²Swearing, lying, and murder,
and stealing and adultery break out;
bloodshed follows bloodshed.
³Therefore the land mourns,
and all who live in it languish (Hosea 4:1-3. NRSV)

They've broken all the commandments, they are taking the Lord's Name in vain, they're lying, stealing, committing adultery, it's a mess in the house of God. Therefore the Lord begins to judge and he sends them all into anguish. Specifically he is singling out the priesthood, the clergy that was supposed to be teaching the people the Word of God. Listen to what he says to those guys:

⁶My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge;
because you have rejected knowledge,
I reject you from being a priest to me.
And since you have forgotten the law of your God,
I also will forget your children. (Hosea 4:6. NRSV)

Did you know that God can and indeed has in the past refused to hear the prayers of people who were converted under false ministers? That's terrifying. The people of God can be destroyed when the clergy forgets the Word of the Law. How many churches are there out there where the WORD OF GOD IS NEVER EVEN OPENED in the house of the Lord? When the Pastor provides CHICKEN SOUP FOR THE CHRISTIAN SOUL instead of MEAT from the Word of God? God is not even obligated to HEAR THE PRAYERS of the people in those churches. The prophet goes on to say:

Wine and new wine
take away the understanding.
¹²My people consult a piece of wood,
and their divining-rod gives them oracles.
For a spirit of whoredom has led them astray,
and they have played the whore, forsaking their God.
¹³They sacrifice on the tops of the mountains,
and make offerings upon the hills,

under oak, poplar, and terebinth,
because their shade is good.

Therefore your daughters play the whore,
and your daughters-in-law commit adultery.
¹⁴I will not punish your daughters when they play the whore,
nor your daughters-in-law when they commit adultery;
for the men themselves go aside with whores,
and sacrifice with temple prostitutes;
thus a people without understanding comes to ruin. (NRSV)

The people of God are so ignorant of the Word that they find themselves worshipping in the spirit alright, but it's not the Holy Spirit of God it's a demon spirit of whoredom that enters the church to lead God's people astray. You know it's happened when your children are all adulterers, fornicators and whores because FALSE WORSHIP PRODUCES POOR BEHAVIOUR in the people. How many of our children have fallen away from the faith in the last 35 years church? When did that start becoming normal? You ask most people on the street today and they will tell you that their Great Grandparents were believers and so were their grandparents and so were their parents BUT NOT THEM – THEY HAVE TURNED AWAY UNTO ADULTERY AND RUIN! What does that mean church? It means that a demon spirit of whoredom commands our worship now. It means that or the Word of God is a lie.

Now listen to this:

³I know Ephraim,
and Israel is not hidden from me;
for now, O Ephraim, you have played the whore;
Israel is defiled.

⁴**Their deeds do not permit them
to return to their God.**

For the spirit of whoredom is within them,
and **they do not know the Lord.** (Hosea 5:3-4. NRSV)

God knows us church, God SEES US and that ought to terrify you as much as it terrifies me. Of this version of the house of God in Scripture God says that they are so deep now into this spirit of whoredom that they cannot turn back. They no longer know the Lord. The covenant is in ruins. The conclusion is inevitable now and the prophet spares no feelings in giving it:

⁶With their flocks and herds they shall go
to seek the Lord,
but they will not find him;
he has withdrawn from them.

⁷They have dealt faithlessly with the Lord;
for they have borne illegitimate children.
Now the new moon shall devour them along with their fields. (Hosea 5:6-7. NRSV)

They'll still come to worship like clockwork every Lord's day but they will not find me there, says the Lord, I WILL WITHDRAW FROM THEM and from their illegitimate children. And in one month, one new moon I will destroy them all.

That's a heavy message. Thank God it's in the Old Testament eh church? It's in the New as well. Speaking about the last days Jesus said:

¹⁰Then many will fall away, and they will betray one another and hate one another. ¹¹And many false prophets will arise and lead many astray. ¹²And because of the increase of lawlessness, the love of many will grow cold. ¹³But anyone who endures to the end will be saved. (Matthew 24:10-13. NRSV)

The last days begin, according to Jesus with a great APOSTASY, a great falling away. Now pagans can't fall away can they? No pagans were never in so they can't fall out or fall away. Only a believer can fall away. Only one who has known the love of God can have his love grow cold. There will be a great APOSTASY church that opens the last days and it will be accompanied by a great increase in LAWLESSNESS, no doubt masquerading in the church under the guise of GRACE as lawlessness has always done. And the love of many will grow cold.

The Apostle Paul spoke of this as well:

Now, brethren, concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together to Him, we ask you, not to be soon shaken in mind or troubled, either by spirit or by word or by letter, as if from us, as though the day of Christ had come. Let no one deceive you by any means; for **that Day will not come unless the falling away comes first**, and the man of sin is revealed, the son of perdition, who opposes and exalts himself above all that is called God or that is worshiped, so that he sits as God in the temple of God, showing himself that he is God. Do you not remember that when I was still with you I told you these things? And now you know what is restraining, that he may be revealed in his own time. For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work; only He who now restrains *will do so* until **He is taken out of the way**. And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord will consume with the breath of His mouth and destroy with the brightness of His coming. The coming of the *lawless one* is according to the working of Satan, with all power, signs, and lying wonders, and with all unrighteous deception among those who perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth, that they might be saved. And for this reason God will send them strong delusion, that they should believe the lie, that they all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness. (2 Thessalonians 2:1-12. NKJV)

The coming of the Lord will be preceded by a GREAT FALLING AWAY, a great turning of the church away from the Word of God and a great permission unto LAWLESSNESS. The demon

spirit of whoredom is already at work deceiving many and a time will come when HE WHO RESTRAINS THAT SPIRIT, the Spirit of Truth, the Spirit of Jesus will be TAKEN AWAY. The lawless one deceives many with counterfeit power, signs and lying wonders. And all who reject TRUTH and who pleasure in UNRIGHTEOUSNESS will perish. Nothing changes as we move from Old to New, if anything the warning is more stark and the consequences more dire.

Now let me anticipate an intelligent question that God's people have asked before. How can a God who calls himself faithful, how can a God who said: 'I will never leave you nor forsake you' withdraw from the church? They asked that question in the OT. When prophets like Jeremiah and Ezekiel prophesied the removal of God's presence from the temple and the consequent destruction of the God's people, they were branded as heretics because that appeared to go against the teaching that God is faithful. The answer is found in Hosea 5:14-15. Let me read that to you:

For I *will be* like a lion to Ephraim, And like a young lion to the house of Judah. I, *even I*, will tear *them* and go away; I will take *them* away, and no one shall rescue. **I will return again to My place Till they acknowledge their offense. Then they will seek My face; In their affliction they will earnestly seek Me.**"

Come, and let us return to the Lord; For He has torn, but He will heal us; He has stricken, but He will bind us up. After two days He will revive us; On the third day He will raise us up, That we may live in His sight. Let us know, Let us pursue the knowledge of the Lord. His going forth is established as the morning; He will come to us like the rain, Like the latter *and* former rain to the earth. (Hosea 5:14-6:3. NKJV)

Did you catch that? God punishes his people by partially withdrawing from them, leaving them vulnerable to enemy attack. They are punished with military invasion AND natural disaster and in their TRIBULATION they cry out to God and the covenant relationship is firmly restored. God does not ABANDON or FORSAKE. But he does withdraw because as the old saying goes: 'absence makes the heart grow fonder.'

The Bible does indeed say that there will be a time, as there has been in the past with God's people when the presence of God will be REMOVED from the House and from the CHURCH because the priesthood and the people have rejected and forsaken the instruction of the Lord.

2. On that day, we will indeed call a fast.

We won't need to be reminded, we won't need to be cajoled or forced, on that day WE WILL RISE UP AS ONE AND CALL A FAST. The Bible says that very thing in the book of Joel. The Book of Joel is one of the most mysterious books in the Bible. It describes events that to the best of our knowledge relate to NO FIXED TIME in the history of Israel. Most of the Old Testament prophets spoke into a very specific time and circumstance and their words were kept as Holy Scripture for future generations because we believe that the way God acted in the past will serve as a guide for how he will act in the future. Indeed that is why some commentators say that the Book of Revelation, the New Testament book of prophesy is little other than reorganised prophesy from the Old Testament. There is a sense in which that is true. But Joel is interesting. We have no idea what original circumstance it addresses, leaving some scholars to suppose that it is has ONLY an ultimate meaning. Rather than most which have an immediate AND ultimate meaning, perhaps Joel has ONLY an ultimate interpretation. I don't know the answer to that, but I do know that Joel says:

¹⁴**Sanctify a fast,**
call a solemn assembly.
Gather the elders
and all the inhabitants of the land
to the house of the Lord your God,
and cry out to the Lord.

¹⁵Alas for the day!
For the day of the Lord is near,
and as destruction from the Almighty it comes. (Joel 1:14-15. NRSV)

Joel predicts that when God's people see the Day of the Lord as being at hand, they will call a fast. If the Spirit remains in a church, it will know when is the time to blow the trumpet. If it isn't, then she, like the rest will be caught in the storm.

Application: Let Us Watch And Know The Times

So what do we do with a message like that? Obviously we need to watch and know the times. There is a timing element to obedience we learned this morning. If this is still regular time, if the

priests of God have not yet abandoned and forgotten the Word of God, if their children are not yet illegitimate and adulterous and immoral beyond reckoning and if the church is not yet being lead in her worship by the Demon Spirit of Whoredom than all we need deal with is the plain and obvious meaning of the text. We should fast, for the Lord is no longer bodily with us. We should watch and pray and ever understand that Christianity is not a patch it is a whole new thing. We should be very wary of feeling comfortable and satisfied for that will make us fearful of the new things of God. If this is still regular time than that is all that is required of you.

But if this is that time, if this is indeed the day when priests forget the Word of God, when churches and denominations are LEAD TO RUIN because there is no knowledge and no understanding. If this is the day when so called believers, the illegitimate children of these false houses and fallen denominations commit adultery and fornication because their VERY PRIESTS commit lewd acts of sexual immorality in the secret hidden places, if this is that day, then we need to seek the Lord so that we can hear the summons to sanctify a fast. Whether we hear it or not, I suppose, will tell us which side of this story we are sitting on. Even so, come Lord Jesus.