



THE GOSPEL OF
Luke

SESSION OBJECTIVE: LUKE 5:33-39

To understand more about how Jesus redefines our practices.

9 Months

In 1995, director Christopher Columbus (*Home Alone*, *Mrs. Doubtfire*, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*) debuted his romantic comedy called *9 Months*. It had an all-star cast featuring Robin Williams, Hugh Grant, Julianne Moore, Tom Arnold, and Jeff Goldblum, and became an instant classic when it was released despite negative critical review. The movie tells the story of a young couple, not even yet married, who find out they are pregnant. Samuel (Hugh Grant) begins to deal with the fear of commitment and the anxiety of the change this baby will inevitably bring into his life, while his girlfriend Rebecca (Julianne Moore) is excited for this next step. The movie captures well how when you insert a baby into the lives of two individuals, it's the two individuals who are forced to change to accommodate the baby (e.g. Samuel has to sell his sports car to get a larger family style car and purchase a larger space to live in). It's an unreasonable expectation to expect the baby to adapt to the lives of his or her parents; the baby is the new center of their lives.

In Luke 5:33-39, a question of fasting is asked of Jesus, and yet Jesus' answer is not really about fasting at all. Jesus makes the case that fasting (along with many other Jewish traditions) must conform themselves to Him, and not the other way around. Jesus is the new (and final) center of our lives.

Fasting

Verse 33 begins with a group of people asking Jesus about fasting: "And they said to him, 'The disciples of John fast often and offer prayers, and so do the disciples of the Pharisees, but yours eat and drink.'"

The immediate question is: “Who is asking this?” At first, it may seem like the Pharisee. In verse 30, they ask Jesus, “Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?” Jesus responds to them in verses 31 and 32, and that brings the reader here, to verse 33. However, it makes no sense for the Pharisees to be the ones asking since they refer to “the disciples of the Pharisees,” in a distanced manner. It also doesn’t make sense for the disciples to be the ones questioning Jesus because they refer to “your” disciples, which would be themselves! Consider the setting of the previous passage. Jesus was reclining with other tax collectors at Levi’s (Matthew) house. It seems that, while Jesus was reclining them and fending off the criticisms of the Pharisees, they began to ask Him questions regarding religious practices such as fasting. They have made an observation! The disciples of the most religious zealot they are aware of (John) and the religious leaders of their day (the Pharisees) behave differently than the disciples of Jesus, and they want to know why!

The Old Testament only specifies one day of fasting per year, the Day of Atonement or *Yom Kippur* (Lev. 16:29-31). The *Mishnah* (a written collection of rabbinic oral traditions) specifies three fasts. James Edwards writes, “One was fasts that lamented national tragedies, such as the destruction of the temple by Nebuchadnezzar (Zech 7:3–5; 8:19); another, fasts in times of crises, such as war, plague, drought, famine, etc; and a third was self-imposed fasts for any number of personal reasons (2 Sam 12:16; Ps 35:13).”¹ The point is that even by rabbinic tradition, there were only three specified times when a fast would be required outside of the recorded Law in Leviticus 16, and yet the disciples of the Pharisees seemed to fast a lot more than that. With that in mind, Jesus responds to them in verses 34 and 35: “And Jesus said to them, ‘Can you make wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them? The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast in those days.’” To understand Jesus’ reasoning, more information is needed regarding the practices of fasting and wedding feasts in the ancient world.

Wedding feasts were celebratory affairs wherein everyone ate, drank, danced, and had fun both in their house and in the streets for several days (seven days if the bride as a virgin, three days if she was a remarried widow). The guests would come and have no responsibilities other than to enjoy their time with the bride and bridegroom. Jesus’ question regarding making the guests of a wedding fast in light of this seems absurd. No one would ever expect the guest of a wedding to *not* eat. The other strange part of His response is that the “bridegroom is taken away,” and not the guests. This hints at the fact that the bridegroom (Jesus) will be forcibly removed. The point is that the disciples have no need to fast because Jesus (the bridegroom) is with them; they should celebrate! However, there will be a time after His death wherein they *will* fast in His absence. For how long this mourning lasts (and the subsequent practice of fasting), keep reading.

A Parable

At this point, Jesus tells, “a parable,” which is singular in the Greek (παραβολήν) but actually entails two separate analogies within it. Below is a breakdown of each of them.

THE NEW AND OLD GARMENTS

The first analogy imagines an old garment that presumably has a hole in it. The owner takes a new garment and cuts a piece out of it and places it as a patch on the old garment. Jesus’ says that this is bad reasoning for two reasons. One, the new garment is now ruined, and two, the old garment won’t match the new one. It’s a bad exchange that renders both garments less valuable.

¹ James R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Luke*, [Pillar New Testament Commentary](#) (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 172-173.

THE NEW AND OLD WINESKINS

The second analogy involves wineskins. Jesus speaks to the absurdity of putting new wine in an old wineskin because it will cause it to burst. New wine would have not yet fermented, and thus by placing it in the old wineskin, it would expand and destroy the wineskin and spill the wine. This is yet another net zero proposition.

The point of these parables is to demonstrate something about the reality of trying to conform Jesus and the new covenant He comes to establish within the framework of the old. Jesus is not to conform to the traditions of the Pharisees, nor even to the traditions of the old covenant, but on the contrary, the old covenant and traditions are meant to conform to Him. He is the Law-giver, and not the other way around. He can decide when His disciples should fast, and when they shouldn't. He is the divine sovereign.

What About Now?

The biggest, and perhaps most controversial takeaway, is that a strong case can be made that fasting is *no longer a requirement*. The time between Jesus' death and resurrection would have been the timeframe Jesus had in mind for His disciples to fast, because He would have been absent from them. After the resurrection, however, He tells us that He will be "with you always, to the end of the age" (Matt. 28:20). Unless Jesus is speaking metaphorically (He isn't), He is not apart from us but present through His Holy Spirit. If that is the case, again the question might be asked of us: "Why would the wedding guests fast when the bridegroom is with them?" Perhaps the strongest evidence for the lack of fasting requirement is that the New Testament is silent on the matter after the Gospels. Neither Paul, Peter, James, nor John have anything to say about it. Maybe it would make sense if the letters were to mostly Jewish Christians wherein the discipline of fasting would have already been understood and practiced, but this is not so. For example, the letter to Titus is to a Greek Christian being commissioned to the island of Crete. If fasting were still an expectation for the church, the non-Jewish believers would have required instruction. We also might expect the practice to have been abused like most of the other spiritual practices (i.e. the church in Corinth). It's strange to hear someone argue that fasting is *not necessary*, but by all New Testament accounts, it's hard not to come to this conclusion. This isn't to say it's wrong to fast, but simply that it's not a necessary requirement or expectation.

Study Questions**Day One**

1. Read Luke 5:33. Who is asking Jesus this question? How do you know? (Hint: See above notes)

2. Read Luke 5:33. In your own words, what was the point of this question? What were they asking?

Day Two

1. Read Luke 5:34. What is Jesus' response? Why is it absurd to expect a wedding guest to fast at the celebration?

2. Read Luke 5:35. What two things are implied by this verse?

Day Three

1. Read Luke 5:36. In your own words, describe this first analogy in the parable.

2. Read Luke 5:37. In your own words, describe this second analogy in the parable.

Day Four

1. Read Luke 5:38. What does it mean that “new wine must be put into new wineskins?”

2. Read Luke 5:39. What is the point of this parable?

Week 19 Discussion: Fasting

In Luke 5:33-39, a question of fasting is asked of Jesus. While the discussion is not primarily about how to fast (it’s more about the old and new covenants), Jesus does imply there was coming a time (between Good Friday and Resurrection Sunday) that His disciples will fast. While it is no longer required, it isn’t necessarily wrong to fast. Talk as a group about fasting, and the role you think it should play in your life, and how you can become a better practitioner of it.

1. Icebreaker: Have you ever fasted? If so, share a little about it. If not, why not?
2. Do you think fasting is important still? Why or why not?
3. Read Matthew 6:16-18. How does Jesus say we *should* fast? How does He say we *should not* fast? Why do you think He gives these instructions?
4. Do you believe Jesus is away from us or present with us? Why?
5. What are the benefits of fasting?
6. Should the church make a bigger deal about fasting given what you’ve learned in this lesson?

Takeaways:

1. Jesus teaches about when fasting is necessary, and when it isn’t.
2. Jesus is the standard by which all other practices and traditions conform.