

Core Beliefs

In the scripture passage that we will study today here in Luke chapter 5, we find controversies taking place within the “church” of that day much in many ways like some of the controversies that we encounter in today’s church, old beliefs and standards colliding with new beliefs and standards. And God wants you and me to know how we should respond to controversies within the church family involving these, and other, biblical doctrines.

Here, Jesus addressed the very serious matter of “Fasting”. A directive from God that had become a standard custom in the church of that day, and especially within the religious system that had developed over time by the Scribes and the Pharisees.

For ourselves, as we carefully study through these words of this passage, I believe that God would have us to consider what seems to be the two most important questions being brought forth in these words. First, God’s real purpose and plan regarding “Fasting”, and then also, the controversies that can develop within the church when one group wants to do things one way, but another group wants to do them differently.

Follow along carefully as I read this passage, beginning in verse 33 of Luke Chapter 5, and ask God to direct your thoughts.

³³Then they said to Jesus, “Why do the disciples of John fast often and make prayers, and likewise those of the Pharisees, but Yours eat and drink?”

³⁴And Jesus said to them, “Can you make the friends of the bridegroom fast while the bridegroom is with them? ³⁵But the days will come when the bridegroom will be taken away from them; then they will fast in those days.”

³⁶Then He spoke a parable to them: “No one puts a piece from a new garment on an old one; otherwise the new makes a tear, and also the piece that was *taken* out of the new does not match the old. ³⁷And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; or else the new wine will burst the wineskins and be spilled, and the wineskins will be ruined. ³⁸But new wine must be put into new wineskins, and both are preserved. ³⁹And no one, having drunk old *wine*, immediately desires new; for he says, ‘The old is better.’” (Luke 5:33-39)

Ideas, philosophies and religions, by their nature, are filled with guiding principles that ideally work together to fulfill a core system of beliefs within each one of them. But unfortunately, as time passes, and as first one person, then another joins into the mix, the basic guiding principles begin to change.

Most all of those people who join in are genuinely sincere, each desiring to do that which is right and in keeping with the core beliefs. But invariably, with each new participant that is added, they bring with them a slightly new and different emphasis, until eventually many of the original core beliefs begin to show real changes.

Religion is especially susceptible to those kinds of influences. Each new voice that comes onto the scene seems to be able to change it to some degree. We see it clearly in many of the pagan religions, but unfortunately, it is also very true within our Christian religion. The core beliefs of Christianity have been so changed and modified over time that Christianity struggles to hold onto the basic infallible truths that are contained within our bible.

As each new denomination has been formed and as new ideas have developed during annual denominational conventions, or as new professors are added to the seminary staffs, the new ideas that they bring with them are passed on and carried out into the mainstream congregations . . . and consequently into the hearts of local church members.

May I repeat what I just said again because this is so very important. The core Christian beliefs that we have held so dear truly are changing. Slowly but surely, many of the basic infallible truths of the scriptures are being transformed into beliefs that are not found in our bible.

And it is not as if the "core beliefs" are vastly different from the old ones. That's not the way it takes place. Dramatic changes always put up "red flags" and cause people to back away from them. But those changes that take place slowly, over a long period of time, seem to be more readily acceptable.

In an earnest effort to try to keep pace with the culture of the world, Christian churches are almost frantic in their efforts to change and devise newer and supposedly better methods of "reaching the lost". But in those earnest efforts, churches and even whole denominations are slowly drifting away from the core beliefs and truths that are contained here within this bible.

How does all of this relate to our scripture text for today? It is this! As Jesus came onto the scene and began to preach His message of repentance and

salvation, He looked very much like one of those people who was set upon changing the established religion that the Jews had come to know and love. And He, in fact, was set upon doing exactly that.

But the real truth was, the changes had already taken place. Core beliefs of their religion had already veered off course.

Very subtly, over the many hundreds of years that had passed between the time of Moses and here, the time of Jesus, church leaders and teachers of the law had been cleverly inserting their own personal ideas and philosophies into the religious mix. And in the process, the religion that God had first given to them had been greatly changed, drained of all of its Spirit and then filled back up with useless, senseless and spiritless activities.

Jesus was simply going back and restoring the original tenets of their religion that had gotten lost along the way. And the religious leaders did not like what He was proposing to do.

That was so here in this simple matter of "Fasting". Over time, the church fathers had so reshaped and remolded the simple sacrificial sacrament of fasting until it was no longer a truly worshipful experience but was now just another required religious ritual, drained of God's Spirit and then filled back up with dead customs and practices.

Unfortunately, those rituals were all that the religious leaders understood, and they felt a desperate need to preserve them. And Jesus and His disciples were ignoring their traditions and ignoring their authority.

They asked Jesus,

³³ . . . "Why do the disciples of John fast often and make prayers, and likewise those of the Pharisees, but Yours eat and drink?" (Luke 5:33)

Note here that in their efforts to emphasize their point, they used John the Baptist and his disciples as examples. Those religious leaders, by no means approved of John the Baptist any more than they approved of Jesus, but they needed what they believed to be a solid arguing point and John the Baptist seemed to fit their purposes. So, they asked,

³³ . . . "Why do the disciples of John fast often and make prayers, and likewise those of the Pharisees, but Yours eat and drink?" (Luke 5:33)

Later on, in His dealings with these religious leaders, Jesus would become very strong in His rebukes, but here He was gentle in His response. He simply explained the basic rule that should always govern fasting, and that being, that “the purpose of fasting is to bring a person closer to and in communion with the person of God.”

Jesus knew very well that He Himself was God and He knew that His disciples did not need to go through the rigors of fasting in order to bring their minds, their hearts, and their bodies into that special communion relationship with Him. They were already enjoying His presence.

It was also another way of declaring to the religious leaders, as He had done just a little while earlier in forgiving the paralytic of His sins, that He, Jesus, was actually the Almighty God.

And to help the religious leaders understand the basic truths regarding this sacrament of fasting, Jesus used a “word picture”. He said,

³⁴ . . . “Can you make the friends of the bridegroom fast while the bridegroom is with them? ³⁵But the days will come when the bridegroom will be taken away from them; then they will fast in those days.” (Luke 5:34-35)

Here, Jesus was emphasizing the utter uselessness of fasting when it is done for the wrong reasons, done simply as a religious ritual.

Let me say again that fasting is a sacrificial suffering that is done for the purpose of bringing a person's mind, spirit and body into a special relational communion with the person of Christ.

And the fasting ritual that had been developed over time by the religious leaders had none of that in it. Fasting had been reduced to not much more than a simple weekly ordeal of denying one's self of food and it was generally devoid of any true worship.

In these words, Jesus explained that it was not necessary for His disciples to fast in order to be drawn closer to Him, they were already with Him.

A question . . . with Jesus there in their midst, was it still necessary for those religious leaders and even the disciples of John the Baptist to continue to fast and pray? Yes, it was. That's because none of them had yet fully accepted that Jesus was Himself the Almighty God in human flesh. And physical nearness

does not necessarily mean Spiritual nearness. So, they still very much needed to fast and pray in order to draw near to Him.

Jesus' disciples knew who He was and were already communing with Him, so, they had no need to fast. Yes, as Jesus said here, later on, after He had been taken from them, then they would need to fast, but not now.

This “word picture” that Jesus used also brought out another important point. It is not a beneficial thing to do to practice or to make others practice “things of the Spirit” without first having the Spirit of God in you. Merely practicing or “mimicking” religious traditions, as the Scribes and the Pharisees did, gains little or nothing for a person’s soul.

That kind of religious practice is what is being spoken about in Proverbs 16 where we are told that,

²⁵ There is a way *that seems* right to a man,
But its end *is* the way of death. (Proverbs 16:25)

And we are also warned in 2 Timothy 3 with the words,

⁵having a form of godliness but denying its power. (2 Timothy 3:5)

Some words, some ideas, some philosophies seem really right, and they have a form of godliness to them, but because they do not have the actual Spiritual presence of God within them, they are not able to be rightly discerned and rightly applied.

When that takes place, innocent and unlearned people can be earnestly involved in all sorts of religious rituals but gain nothing from it, either for themselves or for God. And in the process, they can be hurt and discouraged in their religious pursuits. Listen again to this “word picture” that Jesus gave, beginning in verse 36 of our passage.

³⁶ . . . “No one puts a piece from a new garment on an old one; otherwise the new makes a tear, and also the piece that was taken out of the new does not match the old. ³⁷And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; or else the new wine will burst the wineskins and be spilled, and the wineskins will be ruined. ³⁸But new wine must be put into new wineskins, and both are preserved. ³⁹And no one, having drunk old wine, immediately desires new, for he says, ‘The old is better.’” (Luke 5:36-39)

Simply put, to force improper rituals and doctrines upon unbelievers or new believers can bring them harm.

And to simply add on more and more religious rituals and activities does not accomplish the will of God. Putting a patch on their old Jewish religious practices was not the solution. And to merely practice Christian habits and traditions without the presence of God's Spirit is not the answer either.

To put new wine into old wineskins will burst the old wineskins. Our hearts and souls need to be properly prepared by God's Holy Spirit before we are fit to receive the real things of God.

My thoughts go to the students that we worked with at French Camp. To merely require them to do religious activities accomplished very little. Yes, they might grow up to have a better moral character and behavior, but they will not receive any eternal benefit from their religious practices.

And neither will you or I! New wine, those true things of God must be put into a heart that is properly prepared by God's Holy Spirit, else our old hearts of stone will burst.

As I have considered these controversies that took place in the early church, my thoughts also have gone to two controversies that are currently taking place within several of our church denominations of today. The first is one that I spoke about in an earlier message, that of focusing much of the efforts of the churches on being "inclusive" towards anyone who seeks to join into their congregations. And not only "inclusive", but also, a willingness to change core doctrines and beliefs from those within the scriptures in order to accommodate the newest members.

The second controversy is the intense focus upon the "social issue" of correcting what is considered to be past injustices towards other races of people. Yes, there have been injustices, and probably even worse than most people even know or imagine. And "right changes" need to be made.

The culture has given catchy sounding names to these two "social" and "political" controversies. One of those names is "Woke" and the other is "Critical Race Theory". Both are focused upon changing what their proponents have deemed to be "past wrongs" against specific segments of our society. And the powerful voices within the culture are not only making demands for change within the society at large, but also specifically also within the Christian Church beliefs and practices.

And it seems that some, perhaps many regular church goers have bought into those ideas and philosophies and are convinced that church doctrines and church practices should change to meet those purposes.

And that has produced a problem within many of our major church denominations. It seems to be causing our churches to focus an inordinate amount of their attention on correcting past wrong social philosophies and not keeping their focus on the basic core tenets of scripture, resulting in more and more social philosophy being inserted into the weekly worship service, and less and less gospel being preached, social and political philosophy becoming a substitute for the precious words of this gospel.

May I again quote the scriptures I mentioned a moment ago, first from Proverbs 16 where we are told that,

²⁵ There is a way *that* seems right to a man,
But its end *is* the way of death. (Proverbs 16:25)

And also, the warning in 2 Timothy 3 about ideas and thoughts and behaviors, describing them as

⁵having a form of godliness but denying its power. (2 Timothy 3:5)

Some words, some ideas, some philosophies really do seem to have a form of godliness to them. But because they do not have the actual Spiritual presence of God within them, those ideas and thoughts and philosophies are not able to be rightly discerned and rightly applied.

And when that takes place, innocent and unlearned congregations can earnestly practice all sorts of religious philosophies, but gain nothing from them, either for themselves or for God. And in the process, they can be hurt and discouraged in their religious pursuits.

Folks, God's plan is simple. He wants everyone within a congregation to receive a new heart and a new spirit. Then He wants to put His own Spirit within each person. And then comes our responsibility, that of being faithful to surrender our whole heart to the tenets and beliefs that are found within the gospel. And if we do that, then we will respond rightly, "working out our salvation with fear and trembling", being the Christian people that we are supposed to be within the social and political setting that we find ourselves in.

Let me close with those words from Ezekiel 36,

²⁶I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. ²⁷I will put My

Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do *them*. (Ezekiel 36:26-27)

May we pray.