

“Life with Jesus = Joy”

This week at Vacation Bible School, there were many questions asked. And there are several good reasons why these questions were asked. In some cases, the teachers were asking the questions so that the students who were forced to think about what they were learning, or so the teachers could see if they were learning. The students asked some questions as well. Sometimes they asked because they thought of other aspects or applications for the Bible lessons, and sometimes they asked questions just because kids can be curious and like to ask questions. And at times, if you were with us during the week, you may have heard the kids asking questions of each other as they got to know each other better and were trying to figure out how to best enjoy their time together.

Questions are important for many of us, not just children. Even as adults we use questions as teaching and learning tools, or simply to find out new information.

So it probably shouldn't surprise us that Jesus asked a lot of questions. Jesus probably asked even more questions than the ones we know of from the Gospels. For our summer worship series, we've taken some of these questions to consider. Of course, we realize that Jesus didn't ask us these questions directly. But we can use these questions to learn lessons from Jesus and to consider some important truths of Scripture. That's exactly what we'll do this week and throughout the summer under the theme “Jesus is Asking.”

Today Jesus is asking, **“How can the guests of the bridegroom mourn while he is with them?”** Let's first make sure we understand the question. I'm guessing that outside of the Bible or church we don't hear or use the term “bridegroom” very frequently. We're probably more familiar with simply using the shorter word groom. This is the male who is getting married to his wife, the bride. In his question, Jesus is painting a picture of a wedding celebration or a wedding feast. He's comparing his disciples with the wedding guests or attendants who celebrate with the happy couple on their special day and in all of the celebrations that go along with that day.

It seems that feasting is part of the reason that the people were concerned. Just before our text from Matthew's Gospel, we hear how Jesus called Matthew, who had been a tax collector, to be his disciple. Matthew and his friends celebrated with a feast, a feast that included a number of tax collectors, whom the Israelites tended to call by another term, “sinners.” The Pharisees objected. They wondered out loud how Jesus could suggest that he was a spiritual man and a spiritual teacher and still associate with people who were so obviously sinful.

Some have also suggested that perhaps the Pharisees had encouraged John's disciples to ask Jesus the question they had about fasting. These men who had followed and learned from John the Baptist were accustomed to fasting on a regular basis. At that time, John was in prison, and perhaps that had prompted further fasting on the part of his disciples. In any case, they noticed that Jesus and his disciples were not fasting. That was different. The Pharisees fasted, John's disciples fasted, but Jesus' disciples did not. Their question appears honest and straightforward. Why is this? Help us to understand.

God's law in the Old Testament required that his people fast one day each year. On that special day, the Day of Atonement, the people were reminded of their sins. Their fasting was a sign of repentance and mourning. But by Jesus' time, leaders like the Pharisees had determined for themselves that they would fast not once a year, but twice a week. The disciples of John the Baptist fasted, too. However, they noticed that the disciples of Jesus were different. They didn't fast on a regular, weekly schedule. Were they right, or were the fasters right?

To answer their question, Jesus asked his own **“How can the guests of the bridegroom mourn while he is with them?”** Another translation records Jesus' question in a way that better captures the fact that in Greek the question clearly suggests an answer: **“The attendants of the bridegroom cannot mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them, can they?”** (NASB). In other words, the reason that Jesus'

disciples don't fast and that he doesn't expect them to fast is Jesus. Jesus is with them, and they are overjoyed. Fasting and mourning would not fit with such a joyful circumstance.

But the real question and the real point in the lesson is not whether the disciples should fast. The real lesson for them and for us is a deeper matter of how we view Jesus. They were right to go to Jesus when they had a spiritual question. But their question was misguided. Their question was "What should we do? Should we fast or not?" But they didn't understand that fasting wasn't the issue.

Both the Pharisees and John's disciples in this matter were too focused on an outward action. What really mattered was the attitude of the heart. When fasting demonstrated heartfelt devotion and sincere repentance or sorrow over sin, it was a good thing. When fasting became the measure of spiritual activity, that was the problem.

Jesus went on to explain that these disciples needed to change their mindset. He said, **"No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment, for the patch will pull away from the garment, making the tear worse. Neither do men pour new wine into old wineskins. If they do, the skins will burst, the wine will run out and the wineskins will be ruined. No, they pour new wine into new wineskins, and both are preserved."** We're a bit less familiar with wine and wineskins, or even the dangers of placing new patches on old clothing, but the point is clear. Jesus didn't want people to mix their own ideas about the things they were doing, like fasting, with the new message he was proclaiming to them. That new message was that he is the Savior from sin, and that salvation is a free gift from him.

If we try to do things to make ourselves right with God, we always fail and fall short. The disciples at Jesus' time couldn't fast their way to salvation, because even in something outwardly spiritual, like fasting, they always sinned. But our sinful natures want to believe that salvation depends on us. We like to let people know how good we are when we do things like go to church or give to the poor. We like to think that if we pray enough or if we are good enough, God will be happy with us. But the fact is that we need Jesus.

On Monday at Vacation Bible School, we used an illustration to teach about why we need Jesus. We thought about the Grand Canyon right here in Arizona, and how vast it really is. Standing on one side of the Grand Canyon, we wouldn't even think about trying to jump across to the other side. There's no way we could make it. In the same way, our sins separate us from a perfect and holy God. We can't get to him, and we certainly can't get to his heaven by ourselves. What the Bible tells us is backed up by our consciences, which let us know that we haven't been perfect. They tell us that there are so many sins that we know about but try to hide from everyone else.

But the good news is that Jesus bridged the gap. He took away the sins that separated us from God. He brought us into a good relationship with our heavenly Father, and gives us the assurance of eternal life in heaven with him.

Now think about what a special opportunity the disciples of Jesus had. They had the Savior himself walking among them, teaching them, training them, all as he was doing his work of living a perfect life so that he could die an innocent death for the sins of the world. No wonder that they had reason to be happy and to rejoice. No wonder they didn't feel the need to mourn or fast. They had Jesus, and they had joy.

And the most wonderful thing is that we have similar joy. No, we don't see Jesus and interact with him the way that they did, but he is with us. Through his Word in the Bible and in baptism he calls us to be his very own. Through Holy Communion he strengthens our faith to live in him and to live for him. He gives us the joy that Paul spoke about in our Second Lesson from Philippians (4:4-9). It is a joy that says not that everything is always wonderful, but that even in difficult times we can rejoice because Jesus is with us and heaven is our home. Over the next several weeks as we work through our Summer Worship Series, we will have more opportunities to celebrate that joy and to learn more about it. Jesus is asking us many important questions. As we answer them, let's remember that life with Jesus equals joy. May God grant that joy to us all.

Sermon Text: Matthew 9:14–17 (NIV84)

<sup>14</sup> Then John's disciples came and asked him, "How is it that we and the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?"

<sup>15</sup> Jesus answered, "How can the guests of the bridegroom mourn while he is with them? The time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them; then they will fast.

<sup>16</sup> "No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment, for the patch will pull away from the garment, making the tear worse. <sup>17</sup> Neither do men pour new wine into old wineskins. If they do, the skins will burst, the wine will run out and the wineskins will be ruined. No, they pour new wine into new wineskins, and both are preserved."