

Matthew 9C

- Welcome to the weekend of Thanksgiving
 - I bet your turkey wasn't the only thing that got stuffed over this holiday
 - Thanksgiving is the one day of the year when it's socially acceptable to eat far more than you should
 - I know many of us are still chowing down on leftovers
 - And I'm sure at least a few of us are feeling a pants fitting a little tighter already
 - It's OK...that's what New Year's resolutions are for
 - But if you're lamenting your growing waistline tonight, the Lord has heard your cries, and has responded by scheduling the perfect topic for my Thanksgiving weekend preaching
 - That's right...the topic waiting for us tonight in chapter 9 of Matthew is *fasting*
 - Today we will study the second half of a moment that took place between Jesus and His disciples in chapter 9
 - This scene separates the second and third groups of miracles Matthew presents in chapters 8 and 9
 - In this scene Matthew is showing us Jesus' authority over those in covenant with the Lord
 - In particular, the focus is on Jesus' authority over those in the Old Covenant, that is the unbelieving Pharisees
 - They were a part of the Old Covenant, just like all Israel
 - But the Pharisees had hijacked that Covenant and its Law to make it into something it wasn't
 - They added many, many new rules to the religious life of Israel
 - They called these new rules the oral law, in contrast to the written law that God gave Moses
 - Eventually they declared their oral law of manmade rules was equal to Scripture

- They defended that conclusion by claiming that God gave Moses the oral law too, but it wasn't written down until centuries later
- So in this brief scene between Jesus and the Pharisees, Jesus denies and invalidates the Pharisaic additions to the law of God
 - Last week Jesus denied the Pharisee's expectations for the Messiah's ministry
 - He reminded the Pharisees that the chief purpose of the Messiah wasn't to reward those who had made sacrifices under the Law
 - Rather, Messiah would bring mercy to those who failed at the Law
 - So Jesus ate with sinners like tax collectors and prostitutes just as a doctor goes to the sick
 - Jesus' behavior confused the Pharisees, because they believed God's Law and the oral law were the means to pleasing God
 - Those who kept the Law were going to be rewarded, those who didn't wouldn't
 - So they stood in judgment over those who couldn't measure up, and they disapproved of Jesus showing mercy to such people
 - That's self-righteousness, and self-righteousness naturally produces an attitude of judgment toward others
 - Therefore, Jesus told those men to go learn what it means when the Lord said I desire compassion not sacrifice
 - The Lord desires we know Him so we may receive His compassion rather than making ourselves acceptable by sacrifice
- Now moving to the second half of this exchange tonight, the scene continues with a question put to Jesus by the disciples of John the Baptist

Matt. 9:14 Then the disciples of John came to him, saying, "Why do we and the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?"

- John's disciples throw a question about fasting at Jesus
 - And it seems to come out of no where

- But that's an indication to us that we need to do some homework
- We need to work to understand how this question relates to the prior moment
- To do that, we need to pay careful attention to the context, both the context of Matthew and the context of Luke 5
- In both Gospels we're told this question comes to Jesus during His meal at Levi's (Matthew's) house with the sinners and tax collectors
 - In Matthew, the disciples of John ask the question, but in Luke's Gospel, we're told that the question comes from the Pharisees

Luke 5:33 And they said to Him, "The disciples of John often fast and offer prayers, the disciples of the Pharisees also do the same, but Yours eat and drink."

- Notice that each mentions the other group in their question
- Which tells us that these two groups were asking Jesus the same question more or less in unison
- Whatever reason they had for asking about fasting, it must be commonly understood, because it's caught the attention of both groups
 - So why are the Pharisees and John's disciples so preoccupied with fasting at this very moment?
 - Well if we look at the larger context of Luke's Gospel we find a possible answer
 - In Luke's Gospel is generally presented in chronological order
 - That's not the case in Matthew's account, because Matthew commonly moved events around to emphasize certain elements
 - So looking at Luke's account, we learn that this dinner at Matthew's home happened a day or so before a weekly Sabbath
 - Which means this meal likely took place on a Thursday night
 - Which in turn explains why these men were so preoccupied with Jesus's disciples eating instead of fasting
 - By that day rabbis taught their disciples that they must fast every week on Mondays and Thursdays

- They observed this pattern in Spring between Passover and Pentecost and again in Fall between Tabernacles and Dedication
- Why Mondays and Thursday? Because they said Moses went up to Mt. Sinai on a Thursday and came down on a Monday
- Of course, there was no biblical requirement to fast weekly, much less on these specific days
 - This is another example of the oral law imposing additional, unnecessary burdens on the people
 - The average Jew didn't observe this requirement, but the Pharisees and their disciples saw it as a command from God
 - For men dedicated to finding God through self-righteousness, rules like this gave them what they needed: a sacrifice
- So when Jesus and His disciples went into Matthew's home to eat with a bunch of outcasts, naturally the Pharisees and John's disciples were confused
 - First, the judgmental Pharisees couldn't understand Jesus' willingness to show compassion to such people
 - And now we learn that they were equally upset at Jesus' disciples abandoning the rules of the oral law
 - They were concerned that Jesus and His disciples were eating on a Thursday night instead of fasting as was the tradition
 - It's easy enough to understand why the Pharisees objected, but we should ask why are John's disciples concerned?
 - And for that matter, why are John's here and not following John?
 - For that matter, why are they still called John's disciples? Why haven't they left John to follow Jesus?
 - First, remember that John was a forerunner to Jesus
 - He was a prophet the Lord said before the Messiah to prepare the hearts of Israel for His arrival
 - But once the Messiah appeared, John the Baptist told his disciples to follow Jesus instead of following him
 - He said he must decrease so Jesus could increase

- Many of John's disciples left John to follow Jesus, just as John instructed them
 - But some of John's disciples, like these men, refused to leave John to follow Jesus
 - They continued calling themselves disciples of John
 - Why? The only possible answer is that not all of John's disciples were willing to recognize Jesus as the Messiah
- You probably assumed that every follower of John readily embraced Jesus at His appearing
 - But the reality was some people came into John's ministry for reasons other than a true repentant heart that sought the Messiah
 - Some of those who followed John the Baptist were stamped in the mold of the Pharisees
 - What attracted them was John's ascetic lifestyle and rigorous self-denial...in a word it was the *sacrifice* that appealed to them
- So we can see why such men would align themselves so easily with the Pharisees in this moment...they were just like them
 - For these men, fasting twice a week was the perfect recipe for self-righteousness
 - But if they liked John's ministry so much, why are they here with Jesus?
 - Well, by this time John the Baptist had been beheaded, so these men were disciples without a rabbi
 - They must have remembered that John held Jesus in high regard, so they likely came to see if Jesus could be their rabbi
 - But as they come to find Jesus eating with the worst of Jewish society, and doing it on a Thursday no less...this wasn't what they expected
 - So along with the Pharisees these men wonder why Jesus didn't make His disciples fast according to the tradition of rabbis
 - We have two different but related groups asking the same question

- Which explains why Jesus gives two different but related answers
- The first answer is directed to John's disciples

Matt. 9:15 And Jesus said to them, "Can the wedding guests mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them? The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast.

- Jesus uses a wedding metaphor to describe His coming to Israel
 - And this metaphor would have been very familiar to Jews
 - In several places in the Old Testament including Psalms and Isaiah you will find a wedding used to describe Messiah's arrival
 - As well, Jewish tradition used the metaphor of a wedding feast to picture the banquet that opens the Messianic Kingdom
- And John the Baptist used the same metaphor when speaking to his own disciples about the Messiah's arrival

John 3:27 John answered and said, "A man can receive nothing unless it has been given him from heaven.

John 3:28 "You yourselves are my witnesses that I said, 'I am not the Christ,' but, 'I have been sent ahead of Him.'

John 3:29 "He who has the bride is the bridegroom; but the friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly because of the bridegroom's voice. So this joy of mine has been made full.

John 3:30 "He must increase, but I must decrease.

- The fact that Jesus chose this same metaphor to answer John's disciples tells us He was speaking specifically to them
- Jesus was connecting the dots for these men, explaining to them He is the Messiah, the bridegroom John told them to watch for
- But then Jesus extends the metaphor to address their concerns about fasting
 - He says that when the bridegroom does arrive, it's no time for mourning...it's a time of celebration
 - Weddings were particularly unique and festive occasions
 - They were moments of celebration unequalled in Jewish life

- And the Bible chooses that moment to picture how God's people will feel when their Messiah comes for them
- It should be an unequalled moment of incredible joy and celebration
- It was for Jesus' disciples in that day and it will be for us in our day to come
- On the other hand, the deprivation of fasting stands in stark contrast to the joy of a wedding celebration
 - Fasting denies the body joy for a time, and that's part of its spiritual benefit
 - But for that reason, it's impossible to experience the spiritual benefits of fasting while also engaged in a wedding celebration
 - Those two observances are mutually exclusive...
 - In fact, in Israel religious fasting was suspended during a wedding celebration so the wedding party could celebrate
- So Jesus is saying to John's disciples, "I'm the Messiah come for Israel, the One your rabbi told you to expect"
 - Therefore, Jesus presence should be cause for great celebration, on a par with a wedding feast
 - And such a celebration means fasting would be suspended for a time, so as long as Jesus is with them (a reference to Jesus' death and departure)
 - So asking Jesus' disciples to fast now was like expecting wedding guests to skip the meal because the wedding fell on a Monday
- But these disciples of John's couldn't see Jesus as Messiah, because they couldn't reconcile a Messiah who wasn't willing to respect Pharisaic traditions
 - Remember, weekly fasting was a self-imposed requirement...it was part of the oral tradition of the Pharisees
 - The Lord never required fasting in this way
 - So Jesus's disciples had no obligation to fast weekly regardless of the situation

- But that was lost on these men because they saw their traditions as God's instructions
 - And the great irony was they were obeying those traditions in preparation for the Messiah's arrival
 - Yet when He arrived, they overlooked Jesus because He didn't care about their manmade rules
 - They carried themselves with a self-righteous mindset that caused them to reject the Messiah they said they awaited
- And the best proof we have is that these men still call themselves disciples of John
 - They were trusting in their self-righteousness and personal sacrifice, clinging to John's austere lifestyle as an end in itself
 - They were so committed to that life that they stuck to John even after Jesus appeared and long after John the Baptist died
 - In fact, there are still groups operating in the world today that call themselves disciples of John the Baptist!
- So John's disciples preferred the sacrifices of the Pharisee's manmade rules over a personal relationship with God Himself
 - Which leads us to Jesus' second answer spoken to the Pharisees

Matt. 9:16 No one puts a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old garment, for the patch tears away from the garment, and a worse tear is made.

Matt. 9:17 Neither is new wine put into old wineskins. If it is, the skins burst and the wine is spilled and the skins are destroyed. But new wine is put into fresh wineskins, and so both are preserved.”

- Jesus gave John's disciples a metaphor, and He answers the Pharisees with a parable
 - The wedding metaphor was easy to understand, but this parable probably left the Pharisees scratching their heads a bit
 - Parables are simple stories using well-understood principles to teach deeper spiritual truths
 - And there are two parables here that work together to teach complimentary ideas

- First, Jesus describes mending torn clothing
 - That if you take a piece of new, unshrunk cloth and use it to patch an old garment, you'll make a mess of things
 - Because the first time you wash that patched item, the new patch will shrink, pulling at the old cloth in all directions
 - That causes the patch to tear away, and in the process ruins the garment
- Luke's version adds an additional detail

Luke 5:36 And He was also telling them a parable: “No one tears a piece of cloth from a new garment and puts it on an old garment; otherwise he will both tear the new, and the piece from the new will not match the old.

- Luke adds that the new patch will also be ruined and the two pieces won't match
- So putting the two together, the parable says mixing old and new things that don't match ruins both
- Looking at the second parable, Jesus says we likewise can't put new wine in old wineskins
 - This parable requires some knowledge of the culture of Jesus' day
 - A wineskin was a leather pouch used to hold and ferment wine
 - As the fermenting process progressed, it produced gasses that pushed against the wine skin stretching it
 - As the fermentation completed, the wine skin would still be intact and could hold the wine for a time
 - (By the way, this is further proof that the wine mentioned in Jesus' day was true, fermented, alcoholic wine)
 - But after a wineskin was used to ferment wine, it couldn't be used again
 - If new wine were placed in that old skin, the fermentation pressure would again press against the skin
 - But because the skin had no more ability to stretch, it would simply tear, bursting open and wasting the wine

- The principle of the second parable is closely connected to the first
 - The first parable taught that you can combine old and new things that aren't compatible
 - While the second parable teaches that once something has fulfilled its purpose, it can't be pushed into new service again
 - Taking it beyond it's useful purpose only brings ruin
- So now the question is what spiritual truths was Jesus talking about? And as always, our answer comes from the context of the passage
 - Jesus and the Pharisees are disputing over Jesus' obligations to keep the oral law
 - The Pharisees believe Jesus should not eat with these sinners and He and His disciples should be fasting
 - Why? Because the oral law of the Pharisees required these things, and they expected all rabbis to abide by these rules
 - More importantly, they believed these rules came from God, so any man claiming to be Messiah would certainly keep them
 - In response, Jesus uses these parables to expose the Pharisees' flawed logic
 - First, they were trying to patch old clothing with something new
 - The Pharisees had invented many rules in their Mishnah to "patch" holes they believed existed in God's law
 - Pharisees believed God gave His law to Israel to bring Israel to righteousness
 - But the Law could be vague at times or leave room for accidental disobedience
 - So the scribes added new rules to the Law to patch any "holes" they discovered and thereby prevent accidental sin
 - By Jesus' day, these rules had come to be seen as equal to God's law, in the way a patch becomes one with an old garment
 - Except as Jesus points out, the two do not match

- Their manmade rules couldn't equal the authority and validity of God's law
- In fact, adding anything to the word of God only diminishes it, in the way that a patch ruins both itself and the original garment
- But in this case, it was even worse
 - Because over time the Pharisees added so many patches to God's law that eventually the only thing Israel could see were the patches
 - The Pharisees' oral law completely overshadowed and obscured the true Law of God
 - And as a result, the oral law prevented Israel from recognizing Jesus as their Messiah when He came to them
 - The Law itself gave Israel picture after picture of Jesus
 - But Israel missed Him because they were looking for a Messiah that resembled the patches, who looked like a Pharisee
 - So both the Law and the patches were ruined for that generation of Israel
 - Neither did the Law lead Israel to Jesus nor did their patches make them righteous before God
 - Combining them just made a mess of everything
- Secondly, Jesus says these men were trying to pour new wine in old wineskins
 - That is, they were trying to repurpose the Old Covenant of Law by making it serve as a means to righteousness
 - The Old Covenant was intended to preserve Israel as a nation until the day Messiah arrived as God promised
 - Once the Messiah arrived, then the purpose of the Law regarding righteousness was fulfilled
 - As Paul says

Gal. 3:19 Why the Law then? It was added because of transgressions, having been ordained through angels by the agency of a mediator, until the seed would come to whom the promise had been made.

Gal. 3:23 But before faith came, we were kept in custody under the law, being shut up to the faith which was later to be revealed.

Gal. 3:24 Therefore the Law has become our tutor to lead us to Christ, so that we may be justified by faith.

Gal. 3:25 But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor.

- When Jesus died on that cross, He brought the purpose of the Law to conclusion for all who place their faith in Him
 - Jesus was literally the wine in that old wineskin of the Old Covenant, being poured out for our sake
 - And now that Jesus has emptied the wineskin of the Old Covenant, He says we can't pour new things back into it
 - We can't repurpose the sacrifices and rules Old Covenant into a means for salvation, something it was never intended to be
- But the Pharisees preferred the old system over any new order that might do away with their system of rules and self-righteousness
 - And from what they could see, Jesus was proposing a new order
 - An order that cared nothing for their sacrifices or their rules
- In Luke's account we hear Jesus saying this to these men

Luke 5:39 "And no one, after drinking old wine wishes for new; for he says, 'The old is good enough.'"

- Jesus says that once a man has a taste for the old wine, he will not be interested in the new wine
 - Wine generally tastes better after it has aged for a while
 - So once you've tried the old wine, the new wine will not please you
 - And Jesus was saying that once a person has become accustomed to seeking self-righteousness, it's hard to desire any other way
- I told you last week that self-righteousness is a seductive suitor
 - There's something about the trying to make yourself righteous that makes us feel good about ourselves

- There's something about making sacrifices that satisfies us
- And you know what that something is? It's called pride
 - The Pharisees loved that prideful feeling of accomplishment they got every time they completed a fast
 - Ever time they jumped through one of those countless hoops in their oral law, their pride checked another box in their heart
 - They found another reason to feel good about themselves, and they assumed God felt the same way too
- I think this explains why we have pious people who invest years in the sacrifices of a Christian life yet never come to saving faith in Jesus
 - It's because along the way they became content with the old wine of self-righteousness
 - They learned to love sacrificing...
 - Going to church, giving money, serving in various ways, doing penance, whatever was required to make themselves acceptable to God
 - So that even when someone explained the New Covenant to them...
 - That faith alone in Christ's sacrifice was the only way to receive forgiveness from God...
 - Still they prefer to hold onto the old ways
 - To that person, Jesus says that's not how we become righteous or please God or receive His forgiveness
 - He says at the end v.17 we have to put new wine into fresh wineskins to preserve both
 - New wine is the New Covenant, the covenant God established in His Son, the one that offers salvation to all by faith in Jesus
 - And that new wineskin is a new heart of faith
 - It's a heart that does not trust in its own righteousness, for it knows that we have no righteousness before God
 - Even the best among us is still far from the standard of perfection required to enter Heaven

- And knowing that, a new heart is ready to accept God's righteousness credited to us by our faith in Jesus Christ
- Those who have a new heart filled by the love of Christ in the new covenant are being preserved, Jesus says
 - That is, you have eternal life
 - You will receive a new body, you will live for eternity with Jesus in the Kingdom, you are forgiveness and saved
 - But as we walk with Christ engaging in activities like witnessing or praying or fasting, we need to check our heart each time
 - Ask yourself, why are you doing these things? What are you hoping to gain by them?
 - Be careful that you do not slip back into seeking to justify yourself before God
 - Don't think you're patching up your salvation by adding your own good works on top of Christ's work...as if it's insurance
 - And don't try to put the old wine of legalism into the New Covenant wineskin to make yourself look better to God
 - We need to always be on the watch for the pride that leads to self-righteousness
 - Self-righteous Christians aren't more saved than the rest of us
 - But they sure can be a lot less compassionate toward those in need of forgiveness