

# As priorities are established

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Date: 18 September 2013

Preacher: Bob Fyall

[ 0 : 00 ] Now, we're in the middle of a short series from Luke's Gospel in Luke chapter 5 and 6, which I've called The Saviour's Kingdom Grows, and we're looking at various ways in which, in the early ministry of Jesus, his kingdom begins to grow.

And today we are looking at chapter 5, verses 27 to 39. We're going to begin by reading that. It's on page 861 of the Bibles.

Page 861. And Jesus has been calling disciples. He's been healing diseases. And now we continue with a slightly different slant, but it's still the idea of Jesus presenting himself to people, challenging them with his kingdom, and that kingdom growing.

Luke chapter 5, verse 27. After this, that's after the healing of the paralyzed man, Jesus went out and saw a tax collector named Levi sitting at the tax booth.

And he said to him, follow me. Leaving everything, Levi rose and followed him. And Levi made him a great feast in his house. There was a large company of tax collectors and others reclining at table with them.

[ 1 : 21 ] And the Pharisees and their scribes grumbled at his disciples, saying, Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners? And Jesus answered them, Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick.

I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance. And they said to him, The disciples of John fast often and offer prayers, and so the disciples of the Pharisees.

But yours eat and drink. 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.

He also told them a parable. No one tears a piece from a new garment and puts it on an old garment. If he does, he will tear the new, and the piece from the new will not match the old.

And no one puts new wine into old wineskins. If he does, the new wine will burst the skins, and it will be spilled, and the skins will be destroyed.

[ 2 : 25 ] But new wine must be put into fresh wineskins. And no one, after drinking old wine, desires new. For he says, The old is good.

That is the word of the Lord. Now let's pray for a moment as we ask the Lord's help. God our Father, how slow we are to listen. How reluctant we are to learn.

We hear these words which transformed lives, which swept through whole communities, which banished sin, which overcame death itself.

And sometimes they seem to us so trite. Open our eyes, Lord, to see the wonder of what happened by the Lake of Galilee. Open our ears to hear the power of those words spoken then, but also spoken for us.

And change our hearts, and make us into the kind of people transformed by grace, ready and willing to follow the Master.

[ 3 : 27 ] And we ask this in his name. Amen. A number of years ago, someone said to me, I didn't realize you were a religious person. And I said, I'm very glad because I'm not.

And that's a genuine point. Religion and gospel are polar opposites. Religion is about keeping rules, doing good works, doing pious things, going to the right places.

In other words, it's something that touches the superficial in our lives. It's something that makes us appear to be good. As you know, the only thing that can transform our lives is grace.

And that is what gospel is about. Gospel, of course, will make us do the right thing. But it will make us do the right thing because it transforms us from the inside.

It's not about a set of roles that we keep and tick off, and most about when we're able to do it. It's about inner transformation. And this is what's happening here as the Savior makes his way around the region, around the Sea of Galilee.

[ 4 : 45 ] Lives are being transformed. Not just people's outward behavior, but their fundamental attitudes. And in this section, Jesus is establishing his priorities.

Jesus is establishing his priorities are grace, transformation, and gospel. He's not about religion. He is about gospel.

That's such an important point to grasp. And it's interesting here, controversy is beginning to develop as the New Age clashes with the old.

And we already saw the beginnings of that with the paralyzed man. And the people said, who is this man that dares to say he can forgive sins? Who is this man who is setting himself up above everything we've understood?

And we noticed how Jesus brought his ministry to two unknown people. Both of them unnamed, one a leper, the ultimate social outcast, and one a paralyzed man whose paralysis and condition had prevented him from really being part of the community.

[ 5 : 53 ] Now this time, he is coming to a social outcast, first of all. He is coming to a tax collector, and that's the first part of the section, verses 27 to 31.

A tax collector, as much of a social outcast as the leper was for different reasons. And then in the next section, the question about fasting, he is reflecting on this, if you like, and establishing priorities.

So let's look at this then in these two sections. First of all, the story of the call of Levi, verses 27 to 32.

Jesus is showing that people matter more than prejudices. People matter more than prejudices. After this general note of time, linking it with the previous stories of the leper and the paralyzed man.

Luke is giving us a series of snapshots, so to speak. He's not telling us everything that happened, but he's saying, essentially, had you been there by the Lake of Galilee, this is what you'd have seen, this is what you'd have heard.

[ 7 : 05 ] These are the kind of things that were happening. And he comes to a social outcast. Now, tax collectors were triply despised, so to speak. They worked for the occupying Roman power.

That's the first thing. They worked for the oppressor. Secondly, they were often ruthless and extorted money.

Many of them, not all of them, but many of them were cheats and exploiters, loan sharks and so on. And thirdly, they had constant contact with non-Jews, which for the stricter people would make them ceremonially unclean.

Now, it would have to be said, and I have to be very careful, some of you may work for the inland revenue. No one slavers with glee and rejoices when an envelope marked inland revenue comes through the door.

Similarly, no one rejoices when you see a traffic warden bearing down on your car. The apologies to anyone here who may happen to be a traffic warden. We all do excellent jobs, but none of us rejoice at that.

[ 8 : 17 ] And when you take that, when you take, if you like, the natural dislike for collecting taxes and add the other things I've mentioned, you can see how far Jesus' ministry is extending.

No one is to be excluded, whoever they are, whatever they've done, whatever their job. No one is to be excluded. And remember, back in 313, John the Baptist had not said to the tax collectors, leave your job.

He had come, many tax collectors had come to him and said, what will we do during when the Baptist's great ministry was happening at the Jordan? John the Baptist had said, stay in your job and do it honestly.

So it wasn't a question that there was anything wrong with the job itself. And here, Levi has the same call as Peter had earlier in the chapter.

Levi, of course, is better known as Matthew, and he's going to be mentioned later on in chapter 6 as one of the apostles. But remember the point I made on the first day.

[ 9 : 21 ] Levi, Matthew, Peter, James, and John, they were disciples before they were apostles. And here, great commitment is expressed with amazing brevity.

He left everything and followed. Now, I talked about that a few weeks ago. We were talking about leave everything and follow.

Once again, that's not the same for everyone. For many people, perhaps for most people, the Lord is saying essentially what the Baptist said to these people, not so much leave your job, stay where you are, but do it for me.

Do it in a different spirit. Do it with lives transformed by grace. For some, it may mean leaving home and toil and kindred. For many people, perhaps for most people, it will mean staying where we are, homes we're in, the families we're in, the jobs we're in, and doing it for the Lord, doing what you're currently doing.

The essential thing is the following. The following has to be translated in each of us in different ways into the lives we live, whether we're shopkeepers or students, postmen or professors, working or retired.

[ 10 : 35 ] Each of us have to translate that following. But the following is essential for all of us. And you see, Jesus, by choosing him, breaks his love of money.

That is the point. You see, years of criticism, years of ostracism, had not changed Levi one bit. He had heard all the religious talk.

And now, something different. Grace enters his life. And he shows this by throwing a party. Verse 29, Levi made a great feast in his house, large company of his presumably associate workmates, reclining at table with them.

You see, presumably he wanted to introduce Jesus to them. See, once again, we noticed in the first talk, one of the marks of a disciple is he wants to introduce other people to the master.

And that's what is happening here. You see, it's necessary to realize our sinfulness. The Pharisees certainly would make him feel sinful. The religious teachers would make him feel guilty.

[ 11 : 45 ] But there's no point in making people feel guilty without offering the chance of transformation. And that's what Jesus does. You see, simply making him feel guilty will either harden people or else lead people to despair.

Jesus essentially saying, look, you haven't got it right. That's like your life's a mess. But follow me. Everything will change. And notice verse 31, those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick, I have come not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.

Now, Jesus is clearly not saying the Pharisees are already justified. What Jesus is saying is the Pharisees cannot be justified until they recognize that they are sinners, until they recognize their need, until, in fact, they have open and humble hearts.

He used to tell a story later on in the Gospel about the tax collector and the Pharisee who went to prayer. The Pharisee was not justified because he paraded his achievements before the Lord, whereas the Pharisee said, Lord, be merciful to me, a sinner.

That's what I mean when I say people are more important than prejudices. Prejudice would have condemned this tax collector. Prejudice would have written him off. Prejudice would have said there's no hope, no future.

[ 13 : 14 ] Jesus transforms him. And that transformation is, there's not a great deal of detail here, but the fact that he makes this great feast, incidentally, that's an interesting detail because it suggests that he still has, you know, he still has plenty of wherewithal and so on.

But the point is people matter more than prejudices. religion can tell you how bad you are. Only the Gospel, only grace can transform.

And that is why it is good news. That's why religion is not good news, but Gospel is. Now, this incident is followed by not so much an incident as a dialogue here.

And verses 33 to 39, which centers around fasting, and I'm going to call this relationships matter more than rules.

People matter more than prejudices. Relationship matters more than rules. And they, now, verse 3, they is quite vague, but it seems to me to suggest probably the Pharisees and the scribes had already been counterattacking, so to speak.

[ 14 : 31 ] They were already been saying, this man, Jesus, dangerous, radical, don't listen to him. They, you know how you, oh, they say. Now, if somebody says, or even works, some of us are saying, that's usually said by people who don't have the courage to express the opinion in their own words.

They say. Well, they were around in Jesus' time as well. And, they say, the disciples of John, fast, yours, eat and drink. Now, the important thing about this is that fasting is not wrong. Indeed, I will come back to that, because fasting is highly regarded on the great day of atonement, Leviticus 16, fasting was a necessary part of the preparations for that day. And elsewhere, Jesus, for example, in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew, Jesus says, when you fast, which is parallel to when you pray. So, Jesus is not attacking fasting as such. Indeed, what Jesus is talking about, and if you read Matthew 6 about the fasting and praying, is that both are to be done in private and for God, not for others.

[ 15 : 51 ] Not as a show. See, what he's talking about here is the kind of fasting, that kind of badge of how pious you are. An ostentatious fast. A fast that, a fast that draws attention to ourselves.

And the kind of praying is, now when Jesus says don't pray in public, he's obviously not talking about prayer meetings. He is talking about the kind of practice of some of the more pious Pharisees.

You can get this in all kinds of religions of ostentatious, lengthy prayers in public places. And similarly, similarly with fasting. Fasting is not an index of piety for others to see and comment on. That is the point. Now, you see, the motive, and the problem here with the they and the Pharisees and so on, their motive is not to help people, not to build up relationships, it's not genuinely to listen to Jesus, it's to cause trouble.

That's their motive. For them, rules matter more than relationships. There are rules laid down, you've not only got to keep them, you've got to be seen to keep them.

[ 17 : 04 ] That is the point. You know, this is still the case. Have you ever met the kind of person who's very pious but might well have been sanctified by vinegar?

You know, the kind of pious, prudish person whose disapproval hangs around them like a miasma and who makes you feel small and dirty. Not the sort of person with shoulder you would cry on. Not the sort of person you would go to with some sorry tale. Not the kind of person you'd go to and say, I've made a mess of it. You see, that is what happens when rules matter more than relationships.

And there is no religiosity about Jesus. He cares about people and their lives. Now, don't misunderstand that either.

That doesn't mean that Jesus says, come to me and you can do anything you want excepting indulgently everything. I mean, you know the chorus, Jesus, take me as I am, I can come no other way.

[ 18 : 11 ] Now, that's absolutely true. But Jesus doesn't call us to him in order that we can cherish our sins in order that we can cherish our bad habits.

Jesus calls us to him so that his grace can transform us. And our old sinful desires, the old sterile way of life, these are only going to be transformed by God's grace.

Not by rules, not by regulations, not by super piety. And you see what Jesus says, he doesn't attack, of course he doesn't attack fasting, he knows it's God appointed, and he knows that there are times and places for it, as he says in the Sermon on the Mount.

Read Matthew 6 later on, and you'll find that. But he raises it to a whole different level. You see, the gospel is on a different level.

Left to ourselves, we will either plunge along the muddy pathways beside the high road, or else we'll try and walk a tight rope.

[ 19 : 23 ] We'll either indulge ourselves, or we'll become super pious. The gospel actually takes us, if you like, above the road as the spirit helps us to live that way of life.

And, you see, the other thing about grace is, grace realizes, not just to begin with, but continually, how much we need cleansing from our sin.

Deep, inward cleansing. The apostle John says, if we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. And that's the problem here. Sin is something external that can be dealt with, can be taken away, and a kind of whitewash.

And what Jesus is talking about here is the new age has dawned. He says, it's inappropriate for my disciples to fast because the bridegroom is here.

That's the rich picture picked up, runs right through the Bible, right from Genesis 2, the first wedding on earth, where the Lord brings Adam and Eve together, pointing forward to the great wedding, in eternity of the lamb and his bride.

[ 20 : 39 ] And Jesus is saying that this is the time of wedding, not the time of fasting. The time of fasting will come when the bridegroom is taken away, but the marriage, marriage is, you see, once again, marriage is the ultimate, excuse me, marriage is the ultimate example on earth of how relationships matter more than roles.

In any good marriage, obviously, husband and wife will have different roles. There will be different ways of different partners who do different things. marriages. But a marriage based entirely on roles would be a monstrosity. What kind of a marriage would it be? You went to the kitchen in the morning and the roles up, this is what he has to do, this is what he has to do, and so on.

I hope you realize that. Yeah. Marriage, in other words, marry a good marriage, not perfectly because we're imperfect, sinful human beings, and when you put together two sinners, we're traveling together to the full likeness of Christ.

There's obviously going to be difficulties, this is realism, but if it's trying to govern that by rules, a rule to cover everything, then the relationship dies, the relationship goes stale and becomes sour.

[ 22 : 16 ] Therefore, Jesus is saying, I'm here at the moment, I'm the bridegroom, I'm here, it would be inappropriate for my disciples to fast. Not that fasting is wrong, not that there isn't a place for it, but it's not what it's about because at the end, in the wedding of the Lamb, it's not going to be a fast, at the end it's going to be a feast.

Remember how often throughout the Gospels and elsewhere the new creation is seen under the title of a party. And that's why he used the metaphor of wine, wine which is the symbol of joy and exuberance.

Remember in John's Gospel his first sign was turning water into wine. And what he's saying essentially is the new age has arrived.

You cannot love the bridegroom. You cannot love people by having a rigid structure which may change the outside. And by the way, I hasten to add that the faith of the Old Testament was never external at all.

Read Hebrews 11, by faith, Moses, by faith, and so on. But what had happened by the time of our Lord's earthly life is that groups, religious groups, had found it much easier to create a whole panoply of rules and regulations rather than follow the simple call love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your might.

[ 23 : 47 ] It was the very heart of Old Testament faith. And this is what Jesus is saying. Jesus is saying it's about rejoicing, it's about party, it's about wine, it's about marriage.

So you see the relationship with the living Lord is what matters, and the appropriate lifestyle will follow. Rigid rules leave the heart unaffected and change nobody, but grace will transform our lives now, and grace will lead us to the Father's house.

Amen. Let's pray. God, our Father, who rejoice in your grace, your grace that transforms us from everything that we are by nature, your grace that is with us every moment of your lives, and your grace that will lead us home.

Help us to rejoice in that grace, to love the bridegroom, and to look forward to his appearing. In his name, Amen. Now, we're in the middle of a short series from Luke's Gospel in Luke chapter 5 and 6, which I've called The Savior's Kingdom Grows, and we're looking at various ways in which, in the early ministry of Jesus, his kingdom begins to grow, and today we're looking at chapter 5, verses 27 to 39.

We're going to begin by reading that. It's on page 861 of the Bible. Page 861. And Jesus has been calling disciples, he's been healing diseases, and now we continue with a slightly different slant, but it's still the idea of Jesus presenting himself to people, challenging them with his kingdom, and that kingdom growing.

[ 25 : 47 ] Luke chapter 5, verse 27. After this, that's after the healing of the paralyzed man, Jesus went out and saw a tax collector named Levi sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, follow me.

Leaving everything, Levi rose and followed him, and Levi made him a great feast in his house. There was a large company of tax collectors and others reclining at table with them, and the Pharisees and their scribes grumbled at his disciples, saying, Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?

And Jesus answered them, Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.

And they said to him, The disciples of John fast often and offer prayers, and so the disciples of the Pharisees, but yours eat and drink. 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. He also told them a parable. No one tears a piece from a new garment and puts it on an old garment.

[ 27 : 06 ] If he does, he will tear the new, and the piece from the new will not match the old. And no one puts new wine into old wine skins. If he does, the new wine will burst the skins, and it will be spilled, and the skins will be destroyed.

But new wine must be put into fresh wine skins, and no one after drinking old wine desires new, for he says, the old is good.

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we hear these words which transformed lives, which swept through whole communities, which banished sin, which overcame death itself, and sometimes they seem to us so trite.

Open our eyes, Lord, to see the wonder of what happened by the Lake of Galilee. Open our ears to hear the power of those words spoken then, but also spoken for us.

[ 28 : 13 ] And change our hearts and make us into the kind of people transformed by grace, ready and willing to follow the Master.

And we ask this in his name. Amen. A number of years ago, someone said to me, I didn't realize you were a religious person. And I said, I'm very glad because I'm not.

And that's a genuine point. Religion and gospel are polar opposites. Religion is about keeping rules, doing good works, doing pious things, going to the right places.

In other words, it's something that touches the superficial in our lives. It's something that makes us appear to be good. As you know, the only thing that can transform our lives is grace.

God's and that is what gospel is about. Gospel, of course, will make us do the right thing, but it will make us do the right thing because it transforms us from the inside.

[ 29 : 24 ] It's not about a set of roles that we keep and take off and boast about when we're able to do it. It's about inner transformation. And this is what's happening here as the Savior makes his way around the region, around the Sea of Galilee.

Lives are being transformed. Not just people's outward behavior, but their fundamental attitudes.

And in this section, Jesus is establishing his priorities.

Jesus is establishing his priorities are grace, transformation, and gospel. He's not about religion. He is about gospel. That's such an important point to grasp.

And it's interesting here, controversy is beginning to develop as the new age clashes with the old.

We already saw the beginnings of that with the paralyzed man.

And the people said, who is this man that dares to say he can forgive sins? Who is this man who is setting himself up above everything we've understood? And we noticed how Jesus brought his ministry to two unknown people, both of them unnamed, one a leper, the ultimate social outcast, and one a paralyzed man whose paralysis and condition had prevented him from really being part of the community.

[ 30 : 50 ] Now this time he is coming to a social outcast. First of all, he is coming to a tax collector, and that's the first part of the section, verses 27 to 31.

a tax collector, as much of a social outcast as the leper was for different reasons. And then in the next section, the question about fasting, he is reflecting on this, if you like, and establishing priorities.

So let's look at this then in these two sections. First of all, the story of the call of Levi, verses 27 to 32.

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After this general note of time, linking it with the previous stories of the leper and the paralyzed man.

Luke is giving us a series of snapshots, so to speak. He's not telling us everything that happened, but he's saying, essentially, had you been there by the lake of Galilee, this is what you would have seen, this is what you would have heard.

[ 32 : 02 ] These are the kind of things that were happening. And he comes to a social outcast. Now, tax collectors were triply despised, so to speak. They worked for the occupying Roman power. That's the first thing. They worked for the oppressor. Secondly, they were often ruthless and extorted money. Many of them, not all of them, but many of them were cheats and exploiters, loan sharks, and so on.

And thirdly, they had constant contact with non-Jews, which for the stricter people would make them ceremonially unclean. Now, it would have to be said, and I have to be very careful, some of you may work for the inland revenue.

No one slavers with glee and rejoices when an envelope marked inland revenue comes through the door. Similarly, no one rejoices when you see a traffic warden bearing down on your car.

Apologies to anyone here who may happen to be a traffic warden. We all do excellent jobs, but none of us rejoice at that. And when you take that, when you take, if you like, the natural dislike for collecting taxes and add the other things I've mentioned, you can see how far Jesus' ministry is extending.

[ 33 : 27 ] No one is to be excluded, whoever they are, whatever they've done, whatever their job, no one is to be excluded. And remember, back in 313, John the Baptist had not said to the tax collectors, leave your job.

Many tax collectors had come to him and said, what will we do during when the Baptist's great ministry was happening at the Jordan? John the Baptist had said, stay in your job and do it honestly.

So it wasn't a question that there was anything wrong with the job itself. And here, Levi has the same call as Peter had earlier in the chapter.

Levi, of course, is better known as Matthew, and he's going to be mentioned later on in chapter 6 as one of the apostles. But remember the point I made on the first day.

Levi, Matthew, Peter, James, and John, they were disciples before they were apostles. And here, great commitment is expressed with amazing brevity.

[ 34 : 31 ] He left everything and followed. Now, I talked about that a few weeks ago. We were talking about leave everything and follow.

Once again, that's not the same for everyone. For many people, perhaps for most people, the Lord is saying essentially what the Baptist said to these people, not so much leave your job, stay where you are, but do it for me.

Do it in a different spirit. Do it with lives transformed by grace. For some, it may mean leaving home and toil and kindred. For many people, perhaps for most people, it will mean staying where we are, homes we're in, the families we're in, the jobs we're in, and doing it for the Lord, doing what you're currently doing.

The essential thing is the following. The following has to be translated in each of us in different ways into the lives we live, whether we are shopkeepers or students, postmen or professors, working or retired.

Each of us have to translate that following, but the following is essential for all of us. And you see, Jesus, by choosing him, breaks his love of money.

[ 35 : 45 ] That is the point. You see, years of criticism, years of ostracism had not changed Levi one bit. He had heard all the religious talk, and now something different, grace, enters his life, and he shows this by throwing a party.

Verse 29, Levi made a great feast in his house, large company of his presumably associate's workmates, reclining at table with them.

You see, presumably he wanted to introduce Jesus to them. See, once again, we noticed in the first talk, one of the marks of a disciple is he wants to introduce other people to the master, and that's what is happening here.

You see, it's necessary to realize our sinfulness. The Pharisees certainly would make him feel sinful, the religious teachers would make him feel guilty, but there's no point in making people feel guilty without offering the chance of transformation, and that's what Jesus does.

You see, simply making feel guilty will either harden people or else lead people to despair. Jesus essentially saying, look, you haven't got it right, that's like your life's a mess, but follow me.

[ 37 : 05 ] Everything will change. And notice verse 31, those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick, I've come not to call the righteous, but sinners, to repent of the

sinner.

Now, Jesus is clearly not saying the Pharisees are already justified. What Jesus is saying is the Pharisees cannot be justified until they recognize that they are sinners, until they recognize their need, until, in fact, they have open and humble hearts.

He used to tell a story later on in the gospel about the tax collector and the Pharisee who went to prayer. The Pharisee was not justified because he paraded his achievements before the Lord, whereas the Pharisee said, Lord, be merciful to me, a sinner.

That's what I mean when I say people are more important than prejudices. Prejudice would have condemned this tax collector. Prejudice would have written him off. Prejudice would have said, there's no hope, no future.

Jesus transforms him. And that transformation is, there's not a great deal of detail here, but the fact that he makes this great feast. Incidentally, that's an interesting detail because it suggests that he still has plenty of wherewithal and so on.

[ 38 : 28 ] But the point is, people matter more than prejudices. Religion can tell you how bad you are. Only the gospel, only grace can transform.

And that is why it is good news. That's why religion is not good news, but gospel is. Now, this incident is followed by not so much an incident as a dialogue here.

And verses 33 to 39, which centers around fasting, and I'm going to call this relationships matter more than rules.

People matter more than prejudices. Relationship matters more than rules. they. Now, in verse 3, they is quite vague, but it seems to me to suggest probably the Pharisees and the scribes had already been counterattacking, so to speak.

They had already been saying, this man, Jesus, dangerous, radical, don't listen to him. They. You know how you say, oh, they say. Now, if somebody says, or even what some of us are saying, that's usually said by people who don't have the courage to express the opinion in their own words, they see.

[ 39 : 49 ] Well, they were around in Jesus' time as well. And they say, the disciples of John, fast, yours, eat and drink. Now, the important thing about this is that fasting is not wrong.

Indeed, I will come to that, because fasting is highly regarded on the great day of atonement. Leviticus 16, fasting was a necessary part of the preparations for that day.

And elsewhere, Jesus, for example, in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew, Jesus says, when you fast, which is parallel to when you pray. So, Jesus is not attacking fasting as such.

Indeed, what Jesus is talking about, and if you read Matthew 6 about the fasting and praying, is that both are to be done in private and for God, not for others, not as a show.

See, what he's talking about here is the kind of fasting, that kind of badge of how pious you are, an ostentatious fast, a fast that draws attention to ourselves, and the kind of praying.

[ 41 : 04 ] Now, when Jesus says, don't pray in public, he's obviously not talking about prayer meetings, he is talking about the kind of practice of some of the more pious Pharisees, you get this in all kinds of religions, of ostentatious, lengthy prayers in public places, and similarly with fasting.

Fasting is not an index of piety for others to see and comment on, that is the point. Now, you see, the motive, and the problem here with the they and the Pharisees and so on, their motive is not to help people, not to build up relationships, it's not genuinely to listen to Jesus, it's to cause trouble. That's their motive. For them, rules matter more than relationships. There are rules laid down, you've not only got to keep them, you've got to be seen to keep them.

That is the point. This is still the case. Have you ever met the kind of person who's very pious, but might well have been sanctified by vinegar?

You know, the kind of pious, prudish person whose disapproval hangs around them like a miasma, and who makes you feel small and dirty. Not the sort of person with shoulder you would cry on, not the sort of person you would go to with some sorry tale, not the kind of person you would go to and say, I've made a mess of it.

[ 42 : 36 ] You see, that is what happens when rules matter more than relationships. And there is no religiosity about Jesus.

He cares about people and their lives. Now, don't misunderstand that either. That doesn't mean that Jesus says, come to me and you can do anything you want, accepting indulgently everything.

How many of you know the chorus, Jesus, take me as I am, I can come no other way. Now, that's absolutely true. But Jesus doesn't call us to him in order that we can cherish our sins, in order that we can cherish our bad habits.

Jesus calls us to him so that his grace can transform us. And our old sinful desires, the old sterile way of life, these are only going to be transformed by God's grace, not by rules, not by regulations, not by super piety.

And you see what Jesus, he doesn't attack, of course he doesn't attack fasting, he knows it's God appointed, and he knows that there are times and places for it, as he says in the Sermon on the Mount.

[ 43 : 53 ] Read Matthew 6 later on, and you'll find that. But he raises it to a whole different level. You see, the gospel is on a different level.

Left to ourselves, we will either plunge along the muddy pathways beside the high road, or else we'll try and walk a tight rope.

We'll either indulge ourselves or we'll become super pious. The gospel actually takes us, if you like, above the road, as the spirit helps us to live that way of life.

And the other thing about grace is, grace realizes, not just to begin with, but continually, how much we need cleansing from our sin.

Deep, inward cleansing. the apostle John says, if we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. That's the problem here. Sin is something external that can be dealt with, can be taken away, and a kind of whitewash.

[ 45 : 06 ] And what Jesus is talking about here is the new age has dawned. He says, it's inappropriate for my disciples to fast because the bridegroom is here.

That's the rich picture picked up, runs right through the Bible, right from Genesis 2, the first wedding on earth, where the Lord brings Adam and Eve together, pointing forward to the great wedding in eternity of the Lamb and his bride.

And Jesus is saying that this is the time of wedding, not the time of fasting. The time of fasting will come when the bridegroom is taken away, but the marriage, marriage is, you see, once again, marriage is the ultimate, excuse me, marriage is the ultimate example on earth of how relationships matter more than roles.

In any good marriage, obviously, husband and wife will have different roles. There will be different ways of different partners who do different things.

But a marriage based entirely on roles would be a monstrosity. What kind of a marriage would it be? You went to the kitchen in the morning and the roles up, this is what she has to do, this is what he has to do, and so on.

[ 46 : 36 ] I hope you realize that. Yeah. Marriage, in other words, marry a good marriage, not perfectly because we're imperfect, sinful human beings, and when you put together two sinners, we're traveling together to the full likeness of Christ.

There's obviously going to be difficulties, this is realism, but if it's trying to govern that by rules, a rule to cover everything, then the relationship dies.

The relationship goes stale and becomes sour. Therefore, Jesus is saying, I'm here at the moment. I'm the bridegroom, I'm here, it would be inappropriate for my disciples to fast.

Not that fasting is wrong, not that there isn't a place for it, but it's not what it's about, because at the end, in the wedding of the Lamb, it's not going to be a fast, at the end it's going to be a feast.

Remember how often throughout the Gospels and elsewhere, the new creation is seen under the title of a party. And that's why he uses the metaphor of wine, wine which is the symbol of joy and exuberance.

[ 47 : 50 ] Remember in John's Gospel his first sign was turning water into wine. And what he's saying essentially is the new age has arrived.

You cannot love the bridegroom, you cannot love people by having a rigid structure which may change the outside. And by the way, I hasten to add that the faith of the Old Testament was never external at all.

Read Hebrews 11, by faith, Moses, by faith, and so on. But what had happened by the time of our Lord's earthly life is that groups, religious groups, had found it much easier to create a whole panoply of rules and regulations rather than follow the simple call love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your might.

It was the very heart of Old Testament faith. And this is what Jesus is saying. Jesus is saying it's about rejoicing, it's about party, it's about wine, it's about marriage.

So you see the relationship with the living Lord is what matters and the appropriate lifestyle will follow. Rigid rules leave the heart unaffected and change nobody.

[ 49 : 12 ] But grace will transform our lives now and grace will lead us to the Father's house. Amen.

Let's pray. God, our Father, who rejoice in your grace, your grace that transforms us from everything that we are by nature, your grace that is with us every moment of your lives and your grace that will lead us home.

Help us to rejoice in that grace, to love the bridegroom and to look forward to his appearing. In his name. Amen.