

# **First Serve**

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Studies in the Gospel of Mark

Text

Mark 2:13-22

Topic

Troubled by His feasting with sinners, two groups approach Jesus to ask why He does not observe the twice-weekly ritual of fasting

Title

*"The Fast & the Curious"*

Introduction

I have a suggestion for an annual event that would put Lemoore on the map.

It would be called, *La Tomatina en Lemoore*.

It would be modeled after *La Tomatina en Buñol*, held annually in the eastern part of Spain since 1945.

**It's a food-fight using only tomatoes.** The fight lasts for an hour, after which the whole town square is covered with tomato paste. Fire trucks hose down the streets and participants use hoses that locals provide to remove the tomato paste from their bodies.

**It's one of a growing number of annual tomato food-fights in the world.**

- Since 1982, the town of Twin Lakes, Colorado has held a tomato fight called the "Colorado Texas Tomato War," in which Texans and Coloradans square off with tomatoes.
- Since 2004 the Colombian town of Sutamarchán holds a similar event on June 15th when a surplus of tomatoes is harvested.
- In Costa Rica the town of San José de Trojas celebrates a *tomatine* during the local Tomato Fair.
- In the town of Dongguan in southern Guangdong province in China, a tomato fight is held on October 10, during which they use up to 15 tons of tomatoes.

Closer to home, *La Tomatina en Reno*, as it's called, matches five thousand participants with one hundred thousand pounds of tomatoes.

The event takes place the last weekend of August and only overripe, inedible Roma tomatoes are tossed - which is better than simply throwing them in the trash. *La Tomatina* organizer Club Cal Neva charges a \$10 per participant fee, and if you'd like to chuck produce at the mayors of Reno and/or nearby Sparks, you'll have to fork over \$50. All profits from the event go to the American Cancer Society.

With Del Monte and the Olam plant in Lemoore, what are we waiting for? *We could be part of an international circuit for tomato fighters.*

A food-fight of a different kind dominates our text. People are upset that Jesus *feasts*, and that He doesn't seem to *fast*.

Their accusations and questions provide a teachable moment as Jesus explains some things about both feasting and fasting.

I'll organize my thoughts around two points: #1 Jesus Explains Why Feasting Is Something You Should Exemplify, and #2 Jesus Explains Why Fasting Is Something You Should Enjoy.

## #1 Jesus Explains Why Feasting Is Something You Should Exemplify

(v12-17)

One of the local income tax services is advertising for help using yard signs that read, "Help Wanted: No Experience Necessary. Will Train."

How excited are you about having your taxes done by someone who saw a sign, and has no experience, and will receive only about two months training before tax season?

The Roman government, as I understand it, taxed regions, like Israel, by offering a contract to the highest bidder. This contract called for Rome to receive a certain amount of revenue. The person who won the bid made his profit by collecting more than the contract called for.

These contracts mostly went to wealthy Romans who then employed Jews to do the actual collection of the taxes.

Since these tax collectors came in regular contact with Gentiles, and since they were involved in what amounted to legal extortion of their own people, they were not just despised; they were cut-off from all the regular Jewish rites and rituals. Considered traitors, they had no hope of salvation under the Jewish system.

**Mar 2:13** Then He went out again by the sea; and all the multitude came to Him, and He taught them.

Jesus has been described over-and-over again by Mark as having teaching as His priority. This certainly carried over to His first disciples, in the Book of Acts. It ought, therefore, to be our priority today.

Mar 2:14 As He passed by, He saw Levi the son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax office. And He said to him, "Follow Me." So he arose and followed Him.

We know Levi as Matthew, and after this initial story, that is how Mark will refer to him. Matthew is the Greek name, and Levi was the Hebrew name. As a tax collector, Matthew worked for Greek-speaking Romans, but he gathered taxes from Hebrew-speaking Jews

"Sitting at the tax office" meant that he was at what we would call a customs booth, along the road, charging tax on goods both coming in to Capernaum, and going out from it.

He was undoubtedly familiar with Jesus, if for no other reason, on account of the mighty works the Lord had been performing.

This is a profound and moving, very emotional, "follow Me" command. Tax collectors were considered ritually unclean, and outside of Judaism altogether. Yet Jesus called him to follow, requiring seemingly nothing of Matthew in terms of cleansing or preparation.

This "follow Me" is a "come-just-as-you-are" invitation. It's the only way you can come to the Lord. No amount of good works, or religious rituals, can affect the heart of the matter, which is that we are all sinners separated from God.

It is only by believing in Jesus that we can be saved. God declares the believing sinner righteous based on the Cross of Jesus Christ, where He took our place.

We can't emphasize this enough, because the devil has been pretty successful in spreading the lie that we can clean-up our own lives *before* coming to God.

While it is possible for a person to *reform*, we cannot be *transformed* unless we receive the Lord as our Savior.

Matthew had, in a moment of time, gone from being a guy who could not even attend synagogue, to being one of the key disciples of the Person John the Baptist had pointed-out as the Messiah of Israel Who would inaugurate the kingdom of God on the earth.

That's grace in action.

Mar 2:15 Now it happened, as He was dining in Levi's house, that many tax collectors and sinners also sat together with Jesus and His disciples; for there were many, and they followed Him.

Matthew threw a feast, partly in order to introduce his colleagues to Jesus. It's typical of a person who is called by the Lord to want to tell his closest friends and his family about the Lord. It would be odd not to.

"They followed Him," probably means they, too, got saved. If so, I wonder if many of them had a Zacchaeus-like response to their new life?

Zacchaeus was the short of stature tax collector who had to climb a tree to see Jesus passing by. The Lord noted His effort and invited Himself to dine with Zacchaeus. The tax collector got saved and said, "Look, Lord, I give half of my goods to the poor; and if I have taken anything from anyone by false accusation, I restore fourfold" (Luke 19:8).

Jesus' other "disciples," namely the two sets of fishing brothers - Peter and Andrew, James and John - were at the feast at Matthew's house. This is pretty big. We can be certain that these boys had never eaten with a tax collector. In fact, Matthew undoubtedly collected, and extorted, taxes from their fishing business.

For at least that night, they were enjoying the freedom we have in Jesus Christ to share fellowship with all who are called by Him, to follow Him.

Not everyone was happy about the grace of God in Matthew's life.

Mar 2:16 And when the scribes and Pharisees saw Him eating with the tax collectors and sinners, they said to His disciples, "How is it that He eats and drinks with tax collectors and sinners?"

This literally reads, "the scribes of the Pharisees." These were the scholars who spent their time studying the Scriptures, who were of the strict sect of the Pharisees.

In the original language, this is not a question. It is a stunned exclamation. "With tax collectors and sinners He eats!" They could not comprehend how it was possible to share a meal with such people, let alone enjoy it.

Mar 2:17 When Jesus heard it, He said to them, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance."

No word of knowledge was needed; Jesus "heard" their exclamation.

No one who is sick thinks, "I'd better get myself well, then I'll make an appointment to go and see my doctor." No, you recognize something is very wrong, and you go to your doctor so he or she can make you well.

Because of the nature of the problem, Dr. Jesus doesn't wait for the sinner to realize he or she needs help. He goes out and finds them, calling upon them to repent.

The scribes of the Pharisees didn't see themselves as sinners, but as "righteous," because they were attempting to keep God's Law, as they interpreted it. They were, for example, keeping themselves separate from those considered sinners.

But how sad that those with the cure kept it to themselves.

You cannot *achieve* righteousness by keeping the Law; you can only *receive* righteousness, as a gift, by believing in Jesus Christ.

At the very least, the scribes ought to have been embarrassed, because they never once thought about how to help tax collectors and sinners come to know the God of Israel. They were content to judge them, and to turn them over to judgment.

I mean, how could you not want to rejoice, that one minute Levi was a tax collector, and from this point forward in Mark's Gospel he would be known as Matthew, an apostle of the Messiah?

Could the teaching of the scribes affect a heart in so radical a manner?

I think it goes without arguing that Jesus, His disciples, Matthew, and the tax collecting sinners, were all enjoying the feast, celebrating.

Come-just-as-you-are salvation by grace through faith in Jesus is something to celebrate. *Olive Garden* may have the never-ending pasta bowl, and *Red Lobster* its endless shrimp, but Christians have eternal life, and that should be celebrated like a feast at all times.

Words like "joy" and "joyful" occur hundreds of times in the Bible. We are commanded to rejoice always (First Thessalonians 5:16).

To exemplify means *to illustrate* or *to show as an example*. Our lives should illustrate, and be the example to the world, that salvation in Jesus is a spiritual feast - a spiritual smorgasbord of resources needed to live for God.

If you are saved, you should see yourself as a Matthew, called by Jesus and wanting to call others to Him, to a feast that will last forever.

Grumpy Christians ought to be the exception, rather than the rule.



## #2 Jesus Explains Why Fasting Is Something You Should Enjoy

(v18-22)

When Jesus was on the earth, the Jews who considered themselves righteous fasted twice a week, on the second and the fifth days of the week.

It wasn't commanded by God, and you won't find it anywhere in the Scriptures. It was something added that was assumed to make one more spiritual. I mean, doesn't fasting automatically sound more spiritual than feasting?

That's the background for the particular question about fasting asked Jesus in these verses.

Mar 2:18 The disciples of John and of the Pharisees were fasting. Then they came and said to Him, "Why do the disciples of John and of the Pharisees fast, but Your disciples do not fast?"

We learned earlier (1:14) that John the Baptist had been imprisoned. His disciples are an interesting bunch, because they don't really do what he told them to do.

John had pointed-out Jesus as "the Lamb of God Who takes away the sin of the world." He had said of himself that he must decrease while Jesus increases.

In effect, he told his disciples to follow Jesus. But they remained followers of John.

Going into the Book of Acts, quite a ways after Jesus was taken to Heaven and the church was born, Paul encounters some disciples of John the Baptist.

He can tell that there's something not quite right about them. He asks them if they've received the Holy Spirit since they believed. They claim they've never even heard of the Holy Spirit.

That's weird, because John the Baptist spoke of the Messiah baptizing with the Holy Spirit.

Finding common ground with the Pharisees is another odd thing about John's guys. In Matthew's Gospel, John had called the Pharisees who came out to him in the wilderness a "brood of vipers." But here his disciples were, teaming up with them to question the Lord.

It seems all too possible for a disciple to not really hear what is being said. We should take note of this, and ask the Lord to show us the things **we** are not really hearing, and the reasons why.

Back to our text. All the spiritual guys were fasting; and fasting certainly seems spiritual. So why was Jesus still holding that turkey leg, probably on a fast day?

Mar 2:19 And Jesus said to them, "Can the friends of the bridegroom fast while the bridegroom is with them? As long as they have the bridegroom with them they cannot fast.

You don't fast at a wedding feast. It is inappropriate. It is, in fact, disrespectful, because you are excluding yourself from the joy of the occasion. I think the term is buzz-kill.

It's like that stupid custom, at weddings, of asking, "Does anyone here present know of any reason that this couple should not be joined in holy matrimony, speak now or forever hold your peace."

For one brief moment the couple is at the mercy of anyone behind them who feels like ruining their day.

Jesus goes so far as to say "they **cannot** fast." He means that the joy they are experiencing is so overwhelming, fasting should never even enter their minds.

By the way, John the Baptist is quoted in John's Gospel as saying, "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. Therefore this joy of mine is fulfilled" (3:29).

For disciples, these fellows weren't listening very hard. He had already answered this question for them, by himself using the bridegroom illustration.

[Mar 2:20](#) But the days will come when the bridegroom will be taken away from them, and then they will fast in those days.

The word used for "taken away" describes a form of violence.

He wasn't, therefore, talking about His ascension into Heaven, but rather His being crucified, and being in the grave three-days and three-nights.

Jesus knew He was headed to the Cross, and that is the "taken away from them" moment He was referring to.

Jesus' specific answer as to why He and His disciples did not practice the twice-weekly fasting was that it was inappropriate to do so while He was on the earth offering to inaugurate the kingdom.

He will now go on to make a distinction between the kind of fasting practiced by the disciples of John and the Pharisees, and that which is appropriate.

Mar 2:21 No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old garment; or else the new piece pulls away from the old, and the tear is made worse.

No one should attempt to patch an old, worn garment by sewing a piece of unshrunk cloth over a hole in it. The result would be that the unshrunk patch, when it became wet, would shrink and tear away from the old garment at the sewn edges, leaving a greater tear than before. To seek to preserve the old by patching it up with what is new is destructive.

Mar 2:22 And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; or else the new wine bursts the wineskins, the wine is spilled, and the wineskins are ruined. But new wine must be put into new wineskins."

The skins of goats, stripped off as nearly whole as possible and partly tanned, were commonly used in the as containers for liquids. With age, the skins became hard and lost their elasticity. To put new wine (fresh from the wine vat) into them would mean that inevitably the fermenting wine would burst the old skins.

A double loss would result: the wine would be lost, and the skins would be ruined.

The traditions of the day - like twice-weekly fasting - were like a torn garment, and an old wineskin.

The Lord was offering a brand-new garment, not a repair or alteration. And He was promising a filling that their old wineskins could not contain.

- A relationship with Him would involve receiving a brand-new garment - a robe of righteousness, fit for Heaven.
- And it would involve being filled with something new - the Holy Spirit of God.

We often speak of our salvation using the illustration of the robe of righteousness, so let me summarize it quickly. Born a sinner, you stand before God in filthy rags, inappropriate for the holiness of Heaven. Jesus alone has a robe of righteousness. He offers to take off of you the filthy rags, and give you the robe of righteousness that will gain you Heaven and eternal life.

But His righteousness, as we have already said, can never be earned; it must be given to you. And it is, when you repent and believe in Jesus.

Beyond that, Jesus promises you will be indwelt by God the Holy Spirit. Your body becomes His temple as He resides within you.

The whole character of having a relationship with God thus changed with the coming of Jesus. We don't add Him to the old ways. He fulfills the old ways, rendering them obsolete.

So does that mean we need not ever fast?

Pardon the pun, but *"Not so fast."*

This isn't the only thing Jesus said about fasting. A quick look at His teaching on the subject is in order.

In Matthew 6:16 Jesus assumes that His followers will fast periodically. He says, “*When* you fast, “ not “*if* you fast.”

The apostle Paul took this to heart. In Acts chapter thirteen, he and the other leaders at the church in Antioch fasted before he and Barnabas were sent out to do mission work.

In Acts chapter fourteen, those same two men, Paul and Barnabas, are described as fasting before appointing leaders in the newly born churches.

Jesus also mentioned how to fast:

Mat 6:16 "Moreover, when you fast, do not be like the hypocrites, with a sad countenance. For they disfigure their faces that they may appear to men to be fasting. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward.

Mat 6:17 But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face,

Mat 6:18 so that you do not appear to men to be fasting, but to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly.

I've seen sessions where actors are given an emotion, or a situation, and must try to convey it through their facial expressions alone.

I can understand someone looking sad, but how do you disfigure your face in such a way that it communicates fasting?

It seems, then, that we should fast; and, when we do it, we should do it as unto the Lord, in secret. But we're not done surveying fasting yet.

I want to share one more insight - one that I think puts at least some fasting into its new, church age, perspective.

Do you realize that, right now, in Heaven, **Jesus is fasting?** At His last supper with the disciples, Jesus said to them, "Assuredly, I say to you, I will no longer drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God" (Mark 14:25).

The day He was referring to is His Second Coming back to earth, with the church as His bride, to celebrate the marriage supper on the earth as the thousand year kingdom of God is finally inaugurated.

Jesus has elevated fasting to something we'd have to call romantic. He won't drink of the vine again until He can do it with us. His fasting keeps us on His heart, 24/7.

Let me put it another way. We normally only think of fasting as a discipline to draw us closer to God; to humble ourselves; to storm the gates of Heaven.

While I think those are all very real reasons to fast, you certainly cannot say that is why Jesus is fasting. **He is fasting strictly for joy - the anticipated joy of drinking again with us.**

Here's what I get from this quick survey. Fasting is OK as a practice, because the bridegroom is gone.

But, since He is coming back, we ought to enjoy any fasting we do as an anticipation of our reunion with Him, and with all the saints of the church age.

I came across this summary of fasting: Don't eat and allow God to speak to you in the space you create.

Your Christian life is to look like a feast even if you fast in private. Jesus is, after all, your heavenly Bridegroom, and you are his bride.

Whatever other reasons you fast, and whatever other results it achieves - it keeps His coming for us, to take us home, on our hearts, as we, too, long to drink with Him at our feast.