

It's Party Time

Galilean Ministry Part 11

Mark 2:18-22 (Mt.9:14-17, Lk.5:33-39) 1/27/2018

Summary: Jesus is asked why his disciples don't engage in the expected fasting like John's and the Pharisees. Answer: his presence is the arrival of God as bridegroom bringing salvation to Israel, so fasting would be inappropriate. Furthermore, he began a whole new era that is incompatible with the old and characterized by joy. His disciples will fast, however, when he is forcibly taken away.

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Mark 2:18 Now John's disciples and the Pharisees were fasting. Some people came and asked Jesus, "How is it that John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees are fasting, but yours are not?" 19 Jesus answered, "How can the guests of the bridegroom fast while he is with them? They cannot, so long as they have him with them. 20 But the time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them, and on that day they will fast. 21 "No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment. If he does, the new piece will pull away from the old, making the tear worse. 22 And no one pours new wine into old wineskins. If he does, the wine will burst the skins, and both the wine and the wineskins will be ruined. No, he pours new wine into new wineskins."

Introduction

Happy or Sad?

Have you ever been to a funeral of a believer and felt a little conflicted about whether to be happy or sad? On the one hand you've lost a loved one, and that's sad. But you think about that loved one being in heaven, and that's wonderful. That conflicted feeling is really emblematic of our condition all the time. We look around at this broken world, and see all the horrible heartbreak and suffering and evil, and it calls for brokenhearted grieving. But on the other hand we know the Lord, and we trust in his perfect plan

that he's working out at every moment, and we've read the end of the book and we know where it's all going, and all of that is cause for celebration. So we have that tension – should we laugh or cry? You could say the same thing with regard to our spiritual lives. We see all our sin and it calls for grief. But we also have forgiveness and fellowship with God and that calls for joy.

Ecclesiastes 3:4 [There is] a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance.

We understand that, but is there one mood or the other that should be most dominant? Yes. And Jesus is not only going to show us which it is in this passage, but he's also going to pull back the veil and reveal some spectacular views of his glory that have never been revealed before.

Review

We are in a section of Mark that gives 5 conflict stories where Jesus collides with the Jewish authorities. Last week, in conflict story #2 (out of the 5) we saw that it was right for Jesus to enjoy a party with repentant tax collectors and sinners. It's a good thing, not a bad thing, that Jesus was associating with sinners, because he is a doctor. Now, starting in v.18, we see the third conflict. And we don't know when this event happened – it could have been pretty much any time in Jesus' Galilean ministry, the Bible gives no clue at all about when it took place. However, I think it was probably on the Thursday ... or maybe a Monday. I'll explain that in a minute.

The Question: Why Don't They Fast?

In the last event, conflict was over the issue of who Jesus was eating with. But there is another problem. Aside from the issue of who Jesus was eating with was the fact that Jesus was eating. Why is that a problem?

Mark 2:18 Now John's disciples and the Pharisees¹ were fasting.

It's actually in the present tense – Mark says **they are fasting**. So Jesus is at this meal, Andrew is trying to muscle down the rest of his massive T-bone and Peter is already headed over to the dessert table, and the Pharisees and John's disciples haven't had a bite of food since before sun up that day because it was a fast day.

¹ Of the four major movements in Israel at this time, the Pharisees were the ones closest to Jesus, which is why he has so many run-ins with them. The Pharisee movement was all about calling people to get serious about God, and about being faithful to God's Word. But they ended up adding human tradition to the Scriptures, and from there went into legalism. You don't see a lot of run-ins between Jesus and the Sadducees or Essenes or Zealots, because they just didn't travel in the same circles. But the Pharisees and Jesus butted heads all the time because they were in the same camp – among the same people. That's usually how it is – your most bitter opponents will tend to be the ones from inside your camp, because they care about the same things you care about, so if there is a difference of opinion, it really matters a lot to both of you. People within evangelicalism will get real uptight and go to war about something like infant baptism or eternal security. Liberals who don't accept the Bible as God's Word – they don't care about that kind of stuff.

So the Pharisees were the closest to Jesus. The farthest were the Sadducees. They were the liberals, and they were a lot like liberals today. They didn't believe in resurrection, didn't believe in the supernatural much at all, only accepted the first 5 books of the Bible – rejected the rest, and were mainly political figures. They were wealthy, and they were in tight with Rome, so they had political power. They were also in charge of the Temple, so they had religious power as well.

The opposite of the Sadducees were the Zealots. They were the revolutionaries who wanted to overthrow Rome. And they would try to kill any Jew that sympathized with Rome.

A third group was the Essenes. Their big thing was separation and seclusion. We never see them in the gospels because they are out in their secluded compound, away from society, and the camera of the gospels follows Jesus, who was in the society among the people.

The Pharisees were the most like Jesus – they weren't liberal like the Sadducees, they weren't violent like the Zealots, they weren't hermits like the Essenes, and they were all about obedience to God's Word. And so they were really big on external aspects of religion, like fasting.

The Practice of Fasting

Any Jew at that time who was serious about his faith would regularly do three things: prayer, giving to the poor, and fasting. Those three things were baseline minimum things that every pious believer would do regularly.

In the Old Testament, there is only one time God commands a regular fast – the Day of Atonement. Once a year he wanted the people to fast to reflect contrition over their sins. As time went on, the Jews added to that and established four more yearly fasts. Four times a year they would spend the day fasting for to commemorate various tragedies that had happened in their history – like the fall of Jerusalem, or the death of a great leader. Those fast days fell on the 4th, 5th, 7th, and 10th month of the year.

Beyond those corporate fasts, people would fast individually for the purpose of humbling themselves. Throughout the Old Testament, godly people would fast in times of crisis, mainly for one of two reasons: either they were really sad about something (especially over sin, which is why fasting so often goes with repentance), or they were in desperate prayer for something really big. Scripture teaches that fasting is a way to humble your heart, so you can feel your weakness and neediness and creatureliness and desperation for God.

By the time of Jesus, fasting had become a religious routine. The Pharisees and the people under their influence fasted every Monday and Thursday. That’s why I’m thinking this event likely took place on a Monday or Thursday.

They did that to bring about the end times. The rabbis taught that the great day of salvation, when God would come and finally bring deliverance to Israel through the Messiah – that day of salvation would come when the people of Israel would finally make itself ready through commitment to religious observance. And fasting was one of the three main aspects of religious observance.

John the Baptist’s disciples were also fasting. We don’t know if they also observed the Monday and Thursday thing², but we do know that they are the Pharisees are both fasting and fully expected that Jesus would also be fasting, but he wasn’t.

Jesus had fasted prior to this, with a 40 day fast in the desert. But he didn’t have a practice of fasting like they would have expected, and at this moment he and his disciples were wolfing down food with a bunch of riff-raff at a big party.

18 ...Some people³ came and asked Jesus, “How is it that John’s disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees are fasting, but yours are not?”

It was more than a little troubling that a rabbi would not be participating in such a basic practice of holy living. It would be like today if you went to a conference to hear your favorite preacher – you love his sermons, you’ve read all his books, but then you find out he doesn’t go to church. And none of his followers go to church. He just sleeps in on Sundays. It would be hard for you to take him seriously as a preacher after you find that out, right?

That’s not to say fasting and going to church are equivalent. It’s just to give you an idea how this would have come across to the people at that time. If you’re the Messiah, why would your disciples be less rigorous and committed and serious holy living than the followers of John the Baptist or the Pharisees?

So how does Jesus answer them? Well, Jesus is full of surprises – his answer is nothing like what we would expect. What we expect Jesus to say, “You’re way of doing it is legalistic. Here’s the right way...” That’s what Jesus did in the Sermon on the Mount where he rebuked the hypocrites who fasted for show. But that’s not what he does here, and I don’t think we can assume that John’s disciples were among the hypocrites. John’s fasting was not a bad thing. So how does Jesus answer? Jesus doesn’t want to teach

² John was known for fasting (Mt.11:18), which makes sense, because he was calling the nation to repentance. And John was also concerned about making the people ready for the Messiah.

³ Matthew’s account tells us that the **people** were John’s disciples. Matthew 9:14.

about the topic of fasting right now - he wants to talk about something much, much bigger. He's about to reveal something about himself that has never been revealed before.

Jesus' Claim: I'm the Bridegroom

19 Jesus answered, "How can the guests of the bridegroom fast while he is with them? They cannot, so long as they have him with them.

Don't Fast at a Party

You don't fast at a wedding. When you get a wedding invitation, it always says, "Please come and celebrate with us..." It doesn't say, "Come and join us in a time of contrition and lowliness and grief as we bring a new son-in-law into the family..." No. The bride and groom are trying to maximize their joy, and they spend a lot of money on food so that all their friends will contribute to that joy by enjoying themselves in a great celebration. If you show up with sadness and gloom, you ruin it. That's not the time or place for sadness and contrition.

It was such a big deal in that culture that they even had laws forbidding fasting at a wedding. Notice in v.19 that Jesus doesn't say that people *do not* fast at a wedding; he says they *cannot*. The rabbis said you weren't allowed to fast or do any other religious observance that would detract from the joy of the celebration.

Evidently, self-righteous religionists were showing up at weddings and saying, "I'm sorry, I can't eat anything. I'm fasting." And they were ruining so many weddings that they had to make a law saying you're not allowed to be a party pooper. If it's a party, then you have to party.

The Day of Salvation

So they say, "Why aren't your disciples fasting Jesus?" And he says, "You know how people are exempted from fasting during a wedding? Well, I'm the bridegroom, and so their job is to celebrate, not fast."⁴

Bridegroom? Did Jesus get engaged last week and didn't tell anyone? No, he's not a bridegroom; he's *the* bridegroom. What does that mean? If you're thinking Messiah – remember, the Old Testament never refers to the Messiah as a bridegroom. Who is Israel's bridegroom? Once again, Mark is referring to the book of Isaiah. Isaiah 62 is about that great day of salvation that God promised – the glorious day that the Pharisees and John were fasting to bring about.

Isaiah 62:1 ... for Jerusalem's sake I will not remain quiet, till her righteousness shines out like the dawn, her salvation like a blazing torch. 2 The nations will see your righteousness, and all kings your glory ... 3 You will be a crown of splendor in the LORD's hand, a royal diadem in the hand of your God. 4 No longer will they call you Deserted, or name your land Desolate. ... for the LORD will take delight in you ...5 as a bridegroom rejoices over his bride, so will your God rejoice over you.⁵

Who is the bridegroom? It is Yahweh God. And the wedding is the great day of salvation the Jews had longed for for thousands of years. And the rabbis had taught that that day would be like the ultimate wedding celebration.

So Jesus is saying, "You want to know why my disciples aren't fasting? You are fasting to bring about the great day of salvation, when almighty God will come as Israel's bridegroom? Well, here I am!

⁴ Jesus talked about this in Matthew 11:32-34. When John came fasting, the people ridiculed him. They were like children who wanted to play wedding at a funeral. Now Jesus comes and now they want him to play funeral at a wedding.

⁵ God is often depicted as Israel's husband, but that is a little different metaphor than a bridegroom at a wedding. Isa.61:10 draws an analogy about how a bridegroom and a bride adorn themselves, but this is the only passage I know of that uses the term "bridegroom" (in the LXX) to refer to God.

That is a staggering claim. Jesus is saying that he is God, that his arrival equals the arrival of salvation for the world, and that his presence is the determining factor on whether people should be sad or happy. If he is here, sadness is totally out of place.

God has come to save his people, and what better illustration is there than Matthew's dinner? The order of these last several events is very deliberate – it's all about forgiveness of sins. The leper, the paralytic, call of Matthew, and Matthew's dinner.⁶ The question about fasting is the climax of all those teachings about forgiveness. With the leper Jesus showed his *willingness* to forgive. (...if you are willing ... I am willing – be clean). Then with the paralytic he proved he had the *authority* to forgive sins. Then in calling Matthew he showed the *extent* of forgiveness – it goes all the way to the bottom. Then at Matthew's party with all the sinners he showed the *requirement* for receiving forgiveness – it only goes to the sickos – no one else. The self-righteous are excluded.

Willingness to forgive, authority to forgive, extent of forgiveness, the requirement for forgiveness, and now the climax: the result of forgiveness: celebration! Matthew had it right – throw a party!

You want to see God's glorious kingdom? At this point it's not about conquering kingdoms; it's about forgiving sinners. If you don't fast at a wedding, then you really don't fast at an even greater celebration, like when a lost sinner comes to repentance and receives forgiveness of sins. We talked last week about how people do that today. Someone commits some really egregious sin, and they repent. And people in the church are all solemn: "This is a very serious matter," when they should be shouting for joy. They are like the older brother in the prodigal son story, who was grumbling when his brother came back, and the father was celebrating and throwing a party. It's party time, because the bridegroom is here.

New Era

This is the greatest claim any human being has ever made. There should have been an earthquake or something when Jesus said this. The people are thinking, "Whoa, what did he just ... tell me he didn't just say that!" But Jesus isn't done. He goes on in v.21 to say that his arrival begins a whole new era of redemptive history.

21 "No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment. If he does, the new piece will pull away from the old, making the tear worse. 22 And no one pours new wine into old wineskins. If he does, the wine will burst the skins, and both the wine and the wineskins will be ruined. No, he pours new wine into new wineskins."

Two everyday illustrations to make the point that the old can't handle the new. They cannot be combined; they cannot be mixed. In both illustrations, there is nothing necessarily wrong with the old other than the fact that it's time has passed. The old wineskins and the old garments were fine in their day. He's not saying, "You're doing it wrong – let me correct it" as if Jesus were a reformer.⁷ He says, "The whole era of fasting, waiting for the kingdom of God – now that I'm here, that whole segment of history just ended." My arrival introduces a completely new age that changes everything. So as of right now, the old ways are out. I am the pivot point of redemptive history."

And this isn't the first time Jesus has said something like that. It's been clear in his teaching from the very beginning. Remember when Jesus first went into Capernaum and preached in ch.1? What did the people say?

⁶ The gospels very often report events in different order because they had a theological purpose not a chronological one. So they would group things according to the point they were making. But all three gospels that report these events put them all in this same order (with the exception of the cleansing of the leper).

⁷ We typically think of the Pharisees as always doing everything wrong, but that doesn't seem to be the point here. Remember, John's disciples were also fasting. Jesus does correct their wrong way of fasting elsewhere (Mt.6:18), but that isn't the point here.

Mark 1:27 The people were all so amazed that they asked each other, "What is this? A new teaching...?"⁸

Jesus' presence meant the arrival of the long-awaited kingdom of God, the arrival of salvation, the wedding day for God's people, the end of the old, the beginning of the new, and the fulfillment of Zechariah 8:19.

Zechariah 8:19 This is what the LORD Almighty says: "The fasts of the fourth, fifth, seventh and tenth months will become joyful and glad occasions and happy festivals for Judah."

Someday God is going to do something so great that it will make the people forget about the fall of Jerusalem or any other past tragedy, and they will want to celebrate on those days instead of fasting. And Jesus is saying, "Now that I'm here, that day has come."

No Mixture

And there can be no mixture of old with new. That's the point of the cloth and the wineskins. You can't use Jesus as a patch to shore up some weaknesses in the old system. And the old system cannot contain Jesus' new era. Jesus did not abolish the law by any means, but he did fulfill it in ways that put an end to the old covenant and replaced it with something far better. If you want details on which parts carry over and which parts went away, that's spelled out in detail in the book of Hebrews and the Sermon on the Mount. I'm not going to get into the weeds on that, because Jesus doesn't get into details here. He just makes the staggering claim that the old is done, and the new is better, and the new is him.

And if that's true of the old covenant from Scripture – if Jesus can't even be mixed with that, then it's really true of any human religion. When a person comes to Christ, whatever his old beliefs were, they have to go – the whole system. Jesus cannot be integrated into another system. You can't be a Wiccan and try to integrate Jesus into your beliefs. You can't hang on to your old Buddhism or secularism or evolutionism or whatever philosophy you used to buy into, and just try to patch the holes with Jesus. No religious system in the world can contain Jesus' new wine.

The Joy of Christ's Presence

So back to our original question – life has ups and downs, happy and sad times, but what should be the dominant mood for the Christian? Joy. Overall, our emotions should reflect the fact that the bridegroom has come and is near us. These are good times, and we should celebrate that. I thought about titling this message, "Celebrate Good Times," but I was afraid you'd end up getting that song from the 70's stuck in your head, so I won't mention it. But that song title basically sums up what Jesus was teaching his disciples. I'm here, which means these are good times, so celebrate.

When Jesus was born into this world, the angels didn't appear in the sky in sackcloth and ashes, weeping and fasting. It was a celebration of the entire heavenly host. And not only was his arrival worth celebrating, so was his ongoing presence.

19 Jesus answered, "How can the guests of the bridegroom fast while he is with them? They cannot, so long as they have him with them."

You can't be sad in Jesus' presence. Whatever thing it is that you think is worth grieving over is *nothing* compared to the presence of Christ.

That's quite the load to drop on the people, in a couple sentences, isn't it? You can imagine the disciples sitting there taking notes. "Ok, let me make sure I have this. We don't fast like everyone else because your arrival has begun the new age of the glorious Messianic kingdom. Furthermore, when the

⁸ This is the same word for "new" that is used 4 times in 2:21-22. Those are the only occurrences of the word in the book of Mark.

Bible talks about the bridegroom, almighty, Yahweh God – that’s you. And so right now begins a new epoch in history that replaces the Judaism that has never changed for thousands of years. And we have now entered that new era characterized by joy and rejoicing because you are here to defeat evil and bring in the blessedness of the age to come. Does that about cover it?” “Yep, you got it. That’s all right on – oh, and one more thing...”

An Ominous Note

The Bridegroom Will Be Taken

20 But the time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them

Matthew crumples his paper and throws it away. Jesus meant that to be jarring. It doesn’t fit the analogy of a typical wedding very well. Weddings back then did not end like they do for us. The couple didn’t leave the festivities and go off on a honeymoon. They stayed and celebrated for 7 days with their friends. They would party it up that whole seven days, and at the end, all the guests would leave, not the groom.

And the word **taken** is a very strong word – it points to a violent removal by force. So it’s like Jesus is saying, “Hey, you know how when you go to a wedding, and half way through the celebration the groom gets kidnapped, it’s always such a bummer for everyone at the wedding? Well, that’s what it’s going to be like when I’m taken.”

So Matthew adds a new bullet point on his paper. “After bringing in the new age of the glorious kingdom that ended our fasting, we go back to fasting when the bridegroom, God, gets kidnapped?” Is that a bizarre thing to say? It wouldn’t be if they read Isaiah 53.

Isaiah 53:7 ... he was led like a lamb to the slaughter ... 8 By oppression and judgment he was taken away (same word). ... For he was cut off from the land of the living

It sounds unthinkable, but the Messiah was to be taken – not just kidnapped, but taken to be executed.

So this sounds an ominous note in the story of Jesus. This is the first glimmer we see of the cross in Mark. Remember Mark’s 3-legged gospel? Leg 1 is that Jesus is the powerful, authoritative Son of God. Leg 3 is that we must follow in his steps. But what are his steps? He will suffer and die – that’s leg #2.

That part is absolutely essential, which is one of the main reasons why Jesus kept telling people at the beginning not to go around spreading the news about him. He didn’t want them going out and trying to preach the gospel until they understood about leg #2. And this is the first time that part of the message is introduced in the book.

In this passage, Jesus not only introduces the idea that he will be rejected and suffer and die, but he sets the process in motion by provoking these conflicts with the Jewish authorities. His comments about the old garment and old wineskins being incompatible with the new age he was inaugurating – that’s the kind of thing that showed the Pharisees and Jewish authorities that Jesus really was a destructive force, not just a harmless enthusiast with some new ideas. They saw Jesus as a threat to Judaism itself. And they were right – Jesus did indeed come to destroy the religion of Judaism as it existed in corrupted form in the world of the Pharisees. And even beyond that, he was introducing a new era that would even supersede aspects of true Judaism.

The “Day” of Fasting

So, when the bridegroom is violently taken, his disciples will fast will fast. How long does that last? Some people say it refers to the entire church age – from the crucifixion all the way to the Second Coming. So before Jesus came it was a time for fasting. When he arrived on earth, there was cause for

celebration – but just briefly. Sure, he rose from the dead, but then when he went back to heaven, so we're right back to sadness and fasting.

I don't think that's what Jesus meant. He's talking here about kicking off a whole new era – the new wine. The new era wasn't just during Jesus' earthly life; it's a whole new age.⁹ In fact, Jesus taught that the period after his resurrection would be better than the years he walked the earth.

John 16:5 "Now I am going to him who sent me ... 6 Because I have said these things, you are filled with grief. 7 But I tell you the truth: It is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Counsellor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you.

Was it appropriate to be sad after the crucifixion? Absolutely. If you were there that day, and you saw your Lord mocked and humiliated and beaten and brutally murdered, and afterward someone invited you to go eat, I think you would say, "No, I don't want any food right now." That makes perfect sense, and that's what Jesus is saying. His purpose is not to describe the whole church age. He's giving an indication of that second leg of the gospel – that he will suffer and die. And when that happens, his disciples will go from feasting to fasting because it will change from a wedding to a funeral. But after the resurrection, then joy returns, and no one can take that joy away (Jn.16:16-22).

Now, is there a longing during the church age for Jesus to return? Of course.

2 Corinthians 5:6 ...as long as we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord. ... 8 We ... would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord.

2 Corinthians 5:2 Meanwhile we groan, longing to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling

So there is a sense in which we groan while we wait for Jesus to return. But even so, our situation now is still more joyous and worthy of celebration than the time when Jesus walked the earth and said fasting was inappropriate. In Romans 14:17 Paul said the kingdom of God is not a matter of which foods you eat or abstain from – it's a matter of righteousness, peace, and joy!

When to Fast

So is there any place for fasting in our time? Yes. In Matthew 6:18 Jesus promised a reward for those who fast the right way. You only offer rewards for things you desire. So God the Father definitely desires that we fast. Jesus fasted, Paul fasted, and the church in the book of Acts fasted.

We don't have regular, routine, scheduled fasts like they did before Jesus came.¹⁰ However, there are specific individual times when fasting is appropriate. Because even though it's an age of joy, there are still plenty of moments within this age where there is great sorrow. So the practice of individual fasts in times of sorrow, repentance, or intensive prayer – that's still appropriate. If you would like a fuller discussion of the topic of fasting and where it should fit in your spiritual life, and how it can help you, I did two sermons on that when I taught through Matthew 6:16-17. Just pull up the series titled "Fasting" on FoodForYourSoul.net. I'm not going to re-teach all of that now.

Conclusion

⁹ Some argue that the parable of the virgins supports this view, since in that parable the coming of the bridegroom represents the Second Coming. However, that parable presents a different metaphor. In both cases Jesus is seen as a bridegroom, but in the parable of the virgins, the wedding has not taken place yet, whereas the picture here is of a wedding celebration from which the bridegroom is taken.

¹⁰ In the Didache, we read that the early church fasted on Wednesdays and Fridays, rather than Mondays and Thursdays. This reflected the tendency of the early church toward legalism soon after the Apostles died. Another indication of that tendency is the fact that scribes inserted fasting into multiple passages of the NT when copying them (i.e. Matt. 17:21; Mark 9:29; Acts 10:30; 1 Cor. 7:5). This is one reason why one should be careful about putting too much weight on doctrines that have weak support in Scripture, but that were encouraged by the early church.

Sync Hands and Heart

But I will draw your attention to one principle about fasting that Jesus teaches in this passage. Things like fasting and feasting should correspond to sorrow or joy in your heart. What you do physically should match what's going on spiritually.

That's why later on Jesus rebuked the hypocrites when they fasted for show. The purpose of fasting is to humble yourself. So when they fasted for show, what they were doing on the outside was the opposite of what was going on in their hearts. In their hearts there was self-righteousness and self-exaltation, and so fasting was hypocritical – it was an act. And Jesus repeatedly rebuked them for doing physical actions that didn't match what was on the inside.

Physical actions on the outside and spiritual realities on the inside should coincide. So when your heart gets it right, work to sync up your body with your heart. When your body gets it right but your heart is out of line, sync your heart with your body.

When Your Heart is Bad

Suppose you find yourself in a situation like the Pharisees, where it's the right time to fast, but your heart isn't into it. Maybe you have committed some great sin, or you have fallen into the same sin so many times, and you know you should be broken and crushed and weeping, but your eyes are dry. What should you do? Or everyone at church is singing praises to God, but you're not feeling it. Or it's time to pray, but you don't feel like talking to God. It's time to read Scripture, but there's no hunger in your heart. Or your spouse wants romance, but you're not in the mood. What should you do?

Answer: use the part of you that is on track to pull the part of you that has derailed back up on the track. If your heart is the part of you that derailed, then use the actions of your body to pull your heart along. Your heart doesn't feel like praising God? Use your body – open your mouth and start singing. But don't be content to just sing empty words with a dead heart – that's hypocrisy. Start singing, but do it as an intentional effort to get your heart to sync up with what your body is doing. You're not in the mood for romance? Do everything you can with your words and actions to express romance, and do it with an attitude that is pulling your heart to sync up.

God has made an amazing connection between our hearts and bodies. You can use one to bring the other one along. It won't happen automatically. Just because you force yourself to pray, or read the Bible, or fast, or whatever – that, by itself, may not have any good influence on your heart. But if you combine it with the right kind of attitude, it's amazing what it can do. So when you are out of sync, if your heart is the problem, use your body to get your heart going.

When Your Heart is Good

What about if it's the other way? What about when your heart is good? When you have the right feelings, desires, loves, and so on in your heart, that's great, but don't stop there. Get your body in sync with your good heart. Never think that it's sufficient to just have a good heart, without your body being synced up with it.

James 5:3 Is any one of you in trouble? He should pray. Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise.

It's not enough to just have the right thing in your heart. When it's in your heart, use your body to put it into action. Why? Because God designed a synergy between body and spirit.

Do you know what synergy is? That's when two things combine to produce an effect greater than the sum of the parts. When you have good, godly feelings and desires, acting in accordance with that will amplify those godly feelings. Or in the other direction, if you are doing the right actions, when your heart gets on board those actions will be much greater.

That's why Scripture speaks so often of physical actions in worship – standing, kneeling, bowing, clapping, dancing, shouting, singing, lifting hands, raising arms, falling on your face, etc. Those actions sync your body with your heart so you are loving God with all your being – not just heart, soul, and mind, but also strength, and the result is greater than what was initially in your heart.

So you have a tiny, weak, barely discernable little feeling of “Wow, God is awesome.” If you just leave that feeling alone, it will fade out and be gone inside of 10 seconds. But if you use your body to fan that little spark into flame – you drop down on your knees and read Isa.40 or Ps.19 or 104, or sing How Great Thou Art, or listen to Phil Webb sing it on YouTube – do things with your body to sync your body up with your heart, and that will intensify what is in your heart and get some real flames going where there was only smoke.

That is one of the chief reasons why God gave us fasting. When you go without food, the feelings of weakness and desperation and neediness and emptiness – those physical feelings can take your weak, inadequate repentance and make it real, deep, contrition over sin. It can take your passionless prayers and send them through an amplifier so that it becomes a cry of your heart that is the kind of fervent, intensive prayer that takes hold of heaven and moves the heart of God.

Seek Joy in Christ's Presence

One final point. If you get anything from this passage, get this: Jesus taught that the determining factor for joy or sadness is his presence. Joy is a function of the presence of Christ. Sorrow is a function of the absence of Christ. Learn to diagnose the sadness in your life in those terms. We all run low on joy and have to run to something to get back to being happy. When that happens to you, what feels like the solution? Does lack of happiness drive you to do whatever it takes to draw nearer to Christ? Or does it drive you to the TV – the refrigerator – friends – sin – money – grumbling – self-pity - fill in the blank. Where do you run when you run low on joy?

Jesus promised he would be with us always, even to the end of the age.¹¹ So at one level he is always with us. But we can drift away from closeness with him, and we can do things that restore closeness. Those things that restore closeness – do you see those things mainly as just Christian duties? Or is your soul fully convinced that those things are your only way to real joy?

¹¹ Matthew 28:20.