

Should You Fast or Feast

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[0 : 00] Bishop J.C. Ryle, you may have heard of him, he was a very famous preacher in the 19th century. And he spoke on the topic of happiness.

And he said that happiness is something that every person on earth is seeking, without reservation and without exception. That we are all chasing after happiness.

We all want to be happy. But he also said that only Christians can truly have happiness. Now that's a big statement, right?

Because, I mean, surely there are non-Christians who are happy. It's a big statement to make, but that's what he claimed. And if you want to know why he claimed that, then read his book, Happiness.

Which is what the reading group will be looking at this term. So join them. Or if you can't, get that book and read it. It's a good book. It's a small book. And he talks about this idea of happiness.

[1 : 00] But I want us to think this morning of this whole concept of being happy. This whole thing that we are all, whether we know it or not, are chasing after and we want in our lives.

And it's an idea that's actually come up in our growth groups recently. So we've been working through Philippians. And just this last week, we read Paul's instruction that we are, as Christians, to rejoice.

It's a command to rejoice. A command to be happy. Despite the circumstances that life might put us in. And we discussed, at least in our growth group, and I'm sure in yours as well, looking at this verse, just how difficult that sometimes is, isn't it?

To rejoice. Especially when life is not going well. And yet, it's something that marks out Christians. And it's something that not only is it possible to do, but something we're instructed to do.

To rejoice. To be happy. Well, you know, in today's story in Matthew 9, Jesus takes that even further and essentially teaches us, not just that it's possible to rejoice and be happy as a Christian, but that it's inappropriate not to, if you're a Christian.

[2 : 19] It's inappropriate not to be happy. Now, I think that's going to challenge us as we look at this passage, because I think that's what Jesus is saying, and I think it's a big challenge for a lot of us who, if we were honest, are quite comfortable being unhappy in this life.

We're just waiting for eternity, and in the meantime, you know, we're not happy, and that's okay. We're comfortable with that. We almost see it as a mark of Christian piety, often, to be unhappy. When actually, often, it's because being unhappy is just easier. See, being happy, truly happy, takes work.

But it's work that is worth doing. It's work that we should learn how to do properly as Christians, because if you think about it, out of all the people in the world, we have a reason to be happy. And the world needs to know it. We need to know it. And that's the first thing we learn as we look at this story in Matthew 9, is Jesus came, and He's teaching us that because He's come, we have a new reason to celebrate.

[3 : 36] And we need to know that this morning. And so let's have a look from verse 14. It all starts with Jesus' disciples being criticized by the disciples of John the Baptist for, well, being too happy.

That's what's going on here. Let's pick it up from verse 14. Then John's disciples came to Him, Jesus, saying, Why do we and the Pharisees fast often, but your disciples don't?

Jesus said to them, Can the wedding guests be sad while the groom is with them? Okay, so we see here from Jesus' answer that fasting was a sign of sadness.

And it was. In Jewish tradition, fasting was an act, a sign of mourning. And it's something that pious Jews did on a regular basis to show how unhappy they were with how the world was and how much they were longing for God to come and change things.

That's what fasting in the Jewish religion was all about. And it turns out that Jesus' disciples were just not sad enough to do that.

[4 : 52] In fact, they were the very opposite. We see from last week, they were partying it up, right? Jesus and His disciples were having dinner parties with sinners and tax collectors and all the religious establishment were looking on and they were very uncomfortable about this.

And now this is the last straw. They don't even fast. They're not even sad. This can't be. And so they come and they complain to Jesus that His disciples aren't sad enough.

And it's really not appropriate to be so happy, they say. But Jesus replies, Can the wedding guests be sad while the groom is with them?

And it's a good answer. And basically what Jesus is saying is, Yes, they're happy. And it is completely appropriate that they are. It's completely appropriate that they're happy.

They have every reason to celebrate. Don't stop them. And He uses the idea of a wedding. Now I don't know when last you went to a wedding. I've been to a few.

[5 : 55] I've officiated a number. And one of the things in all the weddings that I've been to, that I've noticed, is that no one's ever sad. Well at least I haven't noticed that someone's sad at a wedding.

Everybody's happy. It's a happy occasion, right? A wedding is one of those occasions in life that you just know it's going to be filled with joy and happiness. Why is that? Why is a wedding such an invariably happy occasion?

As opposed to, say, a funeral. You know, a funeral is the opposite. A funeral is sad. You don't come and celebrate too much at a funeral.

It's an occasion of sadness. Why is that? Why is a wedding always happy and a funeral always sad? Well, it's because a funeral is about something ending.

Right? It's about someone's life that's come to an end. It's about your earthly relationship with someone having come to an end. It's an ending. And an ending is always sad. That's why funerals are sad.

[7 : 00] Because it's about something ending. A wedding is the opposite. A wedding is about something starting. A wedding is about something beginning. It's about a new relationship, a new family starting, a new future starting.

And that's why it's always happy. Happiness. You see, human happiness, and it's widely recognized that the happiness a human has is tied to their outlook on the future.

And it's always the case that how happy you are in the moment will depend on how you see the future. I mean, like if you're going on a holiday, and it's a great place you're going to, and it's your favorite place to holiday, you're happy.

Even if you're in a really uncomfortable car on the way there, and it's a really sort of, and it's hot, and you're crammed up against, and there's other people in these bags, and it doesn't matter because you know where you're going, and so you're happy.

Even in a situation that you might otherwise be sad. You see, it's always the same. We're always, our happiness in the moment is dependent on our outlook on the future.

[8 : 08] And so what Jesus is saying here is, because I'm here, because Jesus has come, you can be happy because of what it tells you about the future, what it tells you about the future of this world, and the future of your life.

And just as a groom arriving at a wedding kicks it off, you know, you don't really know the wedding's happening until the groom gets there. I mean, even then, the bride's still got to arrive, but you know, okay, now the wedding is starting.

The wedding is starting. It's not finished yet, but the wedding is at least starting because the groom is here, the wedding party is here, so let's start being happy. Well, just as a groom arriving kicks off the wedding, Jesus, what he's saying here in this answer is that him being here is kicking off something new for this world.

And especially given how the prophets in the Old Testament often describe the plans that God has for this world, because that's what the prophets often spoke about is the age to come, God's ultimate plans for this world, which is not, by the way, how the world is today.

This is not God's ultimate plan for the world, if you were wondering. The Bible is packed with instructions and information about God's plan for this world, but what's interesting is that the prophets so often speak of it as a wedding.

[9 : 37] If you look at how Isaiah, how Hosea, how Jeremiah, how a bunch of prophets speak about God's plan for this world, is that it's described as this beautiful, happy wedding.

We saw it in our reading earlier from Isaiah. I'll just read a few verses again. This is one of the occasions where God's plan for the world is described in wedding language.

So Isaiah 62, 4-5. You will no longer be called deserted, your land will no longer be called desolate, instead you will be called, my delight is in her, and your land married.

For the Lord delights in you, and your land will be married. For as a young man marries a young woman, so your sons will marry, and as a groom rejoices over his bride, so your God will rejoice over you.

It's a beautiful picture of a wedding to happen. By the way, if you go to the end of the Bible, how does it end? It ends with a wedding, a great wedding feast, a great marriage.

[10 : 44] That's how the new creation starts. But this here in Isaiah, and many prophets like it, it's a prophecy about a new beginning. Not just for the land of Israel, by the way, but when we carry on reading, we realize this is a prophecy for the whole world.

God's people, they are the ones with the new name. No longer the Israelites, but the church, God's people, all over, are those who are going to experience this new beginning that God has planned. When His relationship with humans is ultimately restored. Because that is what's happening here. God is marrying His people in this image.

This relationship comes to a new climax. And that is how we're going to be happy one day.

Because the only reason we're not right now, the only reason we have sadness and loss and pain and suffering is because of a severed relationship with our God.

That's what the Bible says. That the reason that there's sadness in this world is because by nature our relationship with God is severed. But God has a plan to fix that.

[11 : 57] That's what the prophets are all about. God has a plan to fix that relationship with humans so that we will be married and we will have this new future. And what Jesus is claiming here in this answer, He's amazing how He does that.

People ask Him a simple question and He answers in a profound way that opens up a whole lot of theological truth. That's what He does. But what He's claiming here in His simple answer, calling Himself the Bridegroom, in light of all that Old Testament prophecy, is that God's plan to fix this world has now started because I have come.

That's what He's claiming here. He has come to initiate that plan. He has come to start the wedding because He is the groom and He has arrived. And we've got to realize that about Jesus coming to earth.

It wasn't just a note in the history of the world. It was the central moment in the history of the universe. Jesus coming to earth was the beginning of the fulfillment of all of the prophecies in the Old Testament.

And Matthew has been at pains to show us that. If you've been with us so far through Matthew's gospel, you'll notice that amongst all the gospel writers, he's the one who most often quotes the Old Testament.

[13 : 20] And again and again and again, you'll find that phrase, this happened to fulfill what Isaiah said or what Jeremiah said or what these prophets said. Matthew wants to show us the coming of Jesus is fulfilling all of these Old Testament prophecies, all the plans for thousands of years that God has been revealing to humanity about what He wants to happen in this world has now started because Jesus came.

That's the significance of Jesus coming to earth. That's what He's saying here. God's plans to restore all things have now started. And to undo all the things that make you and I sad.

Because you know, God doesn't want you to be sad. God doesn't want me to be sad. He didn't make us to be sad. He made us to be happy, but we're not at the moment. But Jesus coming is the sure sign that His plan has now started to undo all the things that make us unhappy.

To restore our relationship with Him. To restore all things. And that's why we need to take Jesus seriously. That's why you need to take Jesus seriously if you haven't yet.

If you're not yet a Christian, if you're not yet a follower of Christ, this is why you need to come close to Him. Because He is the one who has come to fulfill all things that God has planned for this world and for your life.

[14:43] To make us happy again. He is the one and no one else. That's why we can't ignore Him. That's why we've got to come close to Him. And if you have, if you've come close to Jesus, if you're a Christian and you've been following Him, what this means is therefore the appropriate response for you is to celebrate.

It's to be happy. And to show people that you are. But, that doesn't mean that the disciples of Jesus will never be sad again.

That they'll never mourn. That they'll never suffer. In fact, the very next thing He says is that they will. Have a look. From halfway through verse 15.

He says, When He says, When He says taken away, that verb in the original speaks of a forceful removal.

And it's a foreshadow of what is going to happen later in Matthew's Gospel when Jesus is arrested and when He's forcefully taken away from the disciples and He's tried and sentenced to death and crucified on a cross.

[16:09] That will be a time of distress for the disciples such as they've never known. A time of great sadness. And Jesus knows it's coming.

They don't yet, but He does. That's what He's talking about here. But we know and He knows as well. That's not the end of the story. Because what we see is that He comes back to His disciples in a whole new way.

After the resurrection, He does die, but He rises again from the dead and He goes back to His disciples in physical form. And they see Him again. And He never leaves them from that moment. And He has to actually spend a lot of time explaining to them, I'm going to ascend, but I'm not going to leave you. In fact, the very last sentence of the book of Matthew is, I will be with you always. That's how He left. Because of His Holy Spirit, He never actually left at His ascension. But what's interesting is that Jesus knows that for that to happen, for that ultimate end, for good to happen, there needs to be bad first.

[17:27] Even in His answer here, that's what He's saying. Bad has to happen first. It's part of God's plan. It's part of God's plan. Just as He has come to initiate that plan, God's plan to restore all things, He knows that bad has to happen first.

For the ultimate good. Because it turns out that the only way for God to fix the problem of our sin, which has separated us from Him, is not for us to do good deeds, or to try to work our way, or to try to pay for our sin.

We could never do that. And it's always been the truth that the only way for our severed relationship with our Creator because of our sin to be dealt with, to be fixed, is for Him, Himself, to come down and die to pay the price for your sin and mine.

That's the only way it could ever be fixed. No other religious system can fix our sin, much as they try. Only Jesus can. And only this way, through going through this painful process, by dying for our sins on our behalf.

And so, do you notice that even God's perfect plan needed to go through suffering? Even in God's perfect plan, to achieve the end goal of ultimate happiness, there had to be mourning first.

[18:59] There had to be suffering first. There had to be sadness first. Not even God Himself could avoid that path. Not even God Himself could avoid that path of sadness.

God Himself, think about that for a moment, subjected Himself to sadness so that He could bring us through sadness out to the other side to ultimate happiness.

God Himself. Now, we live in an age where we will try to avoid sadness at all costs. Okay? Our comfortable Western lifestyles. The products we buy, the services we make use of, are all actually to try to avoid discomfort and sadness.

Not even God avoided sadness. Not even He could avoid that path. And neither can we, ultimately, no matter how much we buy.

Neither can we avoid sadness. We also have to go through sadness on the way to happiness. Grief is unavoidable in this broken world.

[20:06] Don't fool yourself into thinking that you can avoid it indefinitely. You can't. Grief is unavoidable in this broken world. And yet, what's so interesting about what Jesus says here is that despite the fact that sadness is necessary and grief is unavoidable, Jesus still wants His disciples to celebrate.

You see, that's what's going on here. The disciples of John are saying, this world is sad. We must be sad. And He's saying, no, yeah, sure, it's sad. And sadness, there's still sadness to come. But I want my disciples to celebrate even now. Even now. Because they know what's on the other side of that sadness. And so that's the thing. Despite the unavoidable grief of this world, Jesus still wants His disciples to celebrate because of the future that He's made open for them.

In fact, elsewhere, Jesus describes this idea to His disciples as a woman giving birth. Okay, now if you've ever experienced that, I haven't.

personally. But I have been very close to someone who has experienced it. And man, it looks like a painful process to give birth.

[21 : 29] And yet, in the months leading up to it, the mother is excited. And I go, how can someone be happy about the imminent prospect of another human being forcibly ejected from their abdomen?

That's like, man, that's really, that's painful. And yet, there's joy to a birth, right? Even though it's such a painful process, the thing about, and this is how Jesus described this idea of what's to come as a woman giving birth.

That the pain, such as it is, cannot take away the joy. The joy overwhelms the pain in giving birth.

And that's what Jesus says about a Christian who truly believes the gospel.

that the joy, if it's real for us, if we allow it to be, the joy of what God has planned for us is something that can overwhelm the pain in this world.

If you believe in Christ, if you truly believe in Christ, and truly believe what He's saying, and truly believe these prophecies that are fulfilled through Him, and truly believe the future that God has planned for this world, and that you can be part of it through Christ, if you truly believe that nothing that the world throws that you can take away, your reason to rejoice today, because of what the future holds.

[23 : 00] Jesus has come, and a new era has dawned, and it's because of that, we have a new reason to celebrate, but not only do we have a new reason to celebrate the future, we see next, we also have a new life to live in the present, a new life to live now, because another thing about a wedding, is that if you are the bride or the groom, and you get married, the thing about a wedding, is that your life has now changed, and you can't go back to how it was before, it's a celebration about a new start, but that also means that there must be a fundamental change, life from now on can't be the same, you know, when Jean and I got married, before our marriage, we lived in separate places, when we got married, we moved in to live in the same place together, it would have been really weird if we didn't, right, if we just, if we got married, and oh, it was a lovely day, and then we just carried on going back to our old lives, that would have, that wouldn't have been a marriage, you see, a wedding is the beginning of a complete change, and it's the same with the wedding that

Jesus initiates, it also requires a complete change of how we live, that is incompatible with how we used to live, and that's what he says next, he uses two pictures, which his audience could have easily related to, to describe how incompatible the new life is with the old life, let me read them, from verse 16, have a look in your Bibles, from verse 16, he says, no one patches an old garment with unshrunk cloth, because the patch pulls away from the garment, and it makes the tear worse, and no one puts new wine into old wine skins, otherwise the skins burst, the wine spills out, and the skins are ruined, no, they put new wine into fresh wine skins, and both are preserved, so what is he saying here, what is he using these illustrations for, well he's saying that because of his coming to earth that brings a new beginning, that new beginning also requires, from all who follow him, a new type of life, you can't, he's essentially saying you can't just take Jesus on as an added extra to your life, life, you can't just patch him on to your old life, or incorporate him as an add-on to your current way of living, and sadly many people who call themselves

Christians, that's exactly what they do, I've seen in my time as a pastor, a lot of people think being a Christian is just continuing their old life, continuing to pursue their old pursuits, but just taking Jesus on, going to church every Sunday, listening to some of what he says, and every now and again doing it, taking Jesus on, patching him on to an already existing life, you know what Jesus says that is like, if you do that, if you think Jesus is just an add-on to your life, he's saying that's like putting new wine into old wine skins, now that is something we need to explain to us, because I don't know how many of you use wine skins, but back in those days, they didn't have bottles, so they used to store their wine, they certainly had wine, so to store their wine they used skins, wine skins, but the problem was that wine, new wine, still had time to ferment, and if you put it in an old skin that

couldn't stretch anymore, then the fermentation would expand and break the skin, and so you needed whenever you had new wine, you needed to put in new wine skins that still had stretch in them, that could still expand, that's the illustration

Jesus is using here, and he's saying, and also in the illustration, he says, if you don't do that, if you don't bring new wine skins to accommodate the new wine, you just put it in the old wine skins, it's going to break, and you're going to lose both the skin and the wine itself, what he's saying here, is because of the newness he brings to this world, and to our lives, because of this truth, and the new start that Jesus brings, if we try to fit him in without a fundamental change of our lives, we will end up losing him, it's a warning here, if you think you can just patch Jesus on to your already existing life, if you think that you can ignore the multiple commands in the Bible, to turn around, to repent, to change completely, to follow Jesus, to give up your current life, to follow him, if you think, no, actually, you know what, I don't need to do all that, but I can still be a

Christian, well, Jesus is saying, eventually that will burst, and you will lose both, if you try to fit Jesus in without a fundamental change in your life, you will lose him, because truly following Jesus is incompatible with your old ways of living, if you really follow him, what did that mean for the original disciples, well it meant that they could no longer be Jews, and that was a huge thing for them, it was going to cause a lot of trouble for them, it was going to be a major sacrifice in their culture, they couldn't follow the Jewish religion anymore, if they were going to be Christians, in the first century, and we read in the epistles, that was a huge tension, there were a lot of people saying no we can still be Jews, and we can take Jesus on, we can add him on, they were called Judaizers, and they caused so much trouble in the church, and Paul and the apostles had to spend a lot of their time saying that it's incompatible, the new life that Jesus calls you to live is incompatible with [29 : 19] Judaism, and it still is today, we mustn't think that we can take on Jewish practices, some Christians are really attracted to that, and think that Judaism and Christianity we can hold together, Jesus is using these illustrations to say no, you can't, and the reason is because, the reason that his disciples couldn't follow the Jewish religion anymore, is because they will no longer be living in anticipation of the Messiah, from this moment, that's what Judaism is all about, the whole religion of Judaism is built around anticipating the coming of the Messiah, but they can no longer do that, because now he's come, and so what they're going to do is live a joyful response that he's now come, which is completely different, and it makes Christianity incompatible with Judaism, and that's why you had all the friction in the early church, if you look at the book of Acts, there's massive friction between the Jewish establishment and these new

Christians who were Jews before, and there's a lot of persecution, there's a lot of arrests, there's a lot of killings, they just can't, it's oil and water, but one of the things, if you read those early accounts of the early Christians, that really stands out, you look at the book of Acts, or you read the history of the early Christians, you know, the thing that really stands out is their joy, despite their suffering, their joy, their happiness despite their circumstances, that even their persecutors couldn't take away, and I think, that's also what will make us stand out today, and it's what will make us incompatible with the world around us, in fact, that's what the Bible says, is the thing that marks out Christians, because we recognize that a new age has started while the world is still living in the old age, and therefore we can't be the same, if we really believe the gospel, we won't fit into this world, because we will be living for new things, we will be living with a completely new focus in our lives, we'll be living with new priorities in our workplaces, and with our families, and with our careers, it'll be completely different to the world if we truly follow

Jesus, and this fundamental change has happened, and like the first Christians, we will have a deep joy, if we believe this, that the world will not understand, and that the world can't take away, we will have the ability to rejoice even when life is hard because of Jesus, and that is what makes Christians stand out from the world, that's why Peter later writes in his letter to the churches who were undergoing persecution, he writes to them, you know, guys, you must always be ready to have an answer for anyone who asks you to give a reason for the hope that you have, and in writing that, Peter is assuming that Christian hope will shine out of them, and that people will ask them about it because it will be so evident, but that doesn't mean we'll always be smiling, that doesn't mean Christians are always bouncy, bubbly people, right?

It doesn't mean that we'll never be sad. The days are coming when they will fast, and Christians still fast, it's still a recognized and important practice in Christianity in seasons of our lives, but the difference is we can also feast, feast, we can also feast, we can also celebrate at the same time

because the bridegroom is with us, never to leave us again, the marriage is happening, a new era has started, and that's why we can feast even while we fast.

I want to end with some words from J.C. Ryle from his book on happiness. He writes, the true Christian is the only happy man because he has sources of happiness entirely independent of this world.

[34 : 01] He has something which cannot be affected by sickness and death, by private losses and by public calamities, the peace of God which surpasses all understanding. He has a hope laid up for him in heaven.

He has a treasure which moth and rust cannot corrupt. He has a house which cannot be taken down. His loving wife may die and his heart feel torn into.

His darling children may be taken from him. He may be left alone in this cold world. His earthly plans may be crossed. His health may fail. But all this time he has a portion which nothing can harm.

One friend who never dies. Eternal possessions beyond the grave of which nothing can deprive him. His lower springs may fail but his upper springs are never dry.

This is real happiness. Let's pray. Amen. Father we thank you for your amazing plan to restore all things.

[35 : 17] To restore happiness to this sad world. We thank you Jesus that you initiated those plans and you died for us so that our sins could be paid for.

Our relationship with God restored and happiness again made possible to us. Real happiness. Upper springs that will never dry.

Even when our lower springs fail. Lord we know that there is still sadness in this life but we pray that like a pregnant woman like a woman going through birth that no amount of sadness and no amount of pain will be able to overcome the reasons we have to rejoice and we pray that you would help us to do that.

Help us to remember that. Help us to encourage one another to meet together to spur each other on to remind each other of this hope that we have so that we will do what Paul instructs us to and to rejoice always.

Strengthen us for this and Lord may our rejoicing be a light for those around us to draw them to the hope that we have. For your glory we pray.

[36 : 32] Amen.