

## CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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<b>Series:</b>	<b>Mark</b>		Pastor/Teacher
<b>Text</b>	<b>Mark 2:18-22</b>		Mason Depew
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### WHETHER TO FAST OR FEAST

Introduction: Fasting is a religious practice that most evangelicals today have either forgotten about entirely or at least find very confusing. This passage in Mark chapter 2, although very brief, is a tremendous guide for us to think through this issue and consider where fasting fits into the pattern of the Christian life.

1. There are several kinds of false fasts that really have little in common with the biblical idea of fasting. In particular I want to address a couple of the most well-known “fasts” that last for a month or more: Lent and Ramadan.
  - a. In the first three centuries of church history, Lent was not widely practiced. It became much more common around and after the Council of Nicaea, and the basic idea of practicing special self-control for 40 days is not a terrible one. The problems we Reformed have with Lent have more to do with its imposition on all Christians without biblical warrant, and its placement in the church calendar, making it seem that Christians have to deny themselves *in order* to prepare for Christ’s atonement on Good Friday.
    - i. Lent tends to lead Christians into the false view of fasting that we find in the Pharisees here in Mark 2:18. People begin to assume fasting is *inherently* good and necessary, as a kind of preparation for salvation, as if it makes us more worthy of God’s grace. This is the very reason the Pharisees cannot understand Jesus’s teaching: if fasting is pious, surely more fasting must make you more pious?
    - ii. One reason that Reformed Christians seem more interested in Lent lately may be that we have let our traditional spiritual disciplines slide. That is, if we better understood the appropriate reasons and times in our lives for religious fasting, our people would see less reason to covet forms of self-denial from other traditions, such as Lent. One of my seminary professors wrote an excellent article making this argument, ironically for *First Things*.<sup>1</sup>
  - b. Even further from the truth, however, is the Muslim fast of Ramadan. Like with Lent, when you first hear that Muslims have a whole month where they fast, that sounds like

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<sup>1</sup> “The traditional Reformed vision of the Christian life was even more demanding than Lent and renders a normative Lenten season irrelevant. In the older Reformed literature, there was much discussion on the value of prayer and fasting. In the modern period those aspects of piety have largely been neglected. Karin Maag observes in her book *Worshiping with the Reformers* that though the Reformed are known for doing away with special days from the church calendar, they actually expanded “the range of communal worship offerings,” including days of prayer and fasting. Christians were called to attend these days during times of special distress (for example, plague, flood, drought, wars). ... Reformed Christians have at their disposal great resources to recover a richer and deeper piety of self-denial. In his exposition of the Sermon on the Mount, the English Reformed writer William Perkins devoted fifteen pages to discussing Matthew 5:16, “when you fast,” by defining what a “religious fast” is, when it should be done, how it should be done, the distinction between private and public fasting, the joy of fasting, sincere fasting, and the use of private fasting in preparation for regular Sabbath-day worship. That today’s Reformed Christians are turning to Lent suggests that they have lost track of the Reformed practice of fasting and self-denial and feel a need for something objective and external to ratify outwardly the promises and consequent obligations of the Christian faith.” - R. Scott Clark, “Reformed Christians and Lent,” in *First Things*, March 31, 2023.

extremely impressive self-control. The reality, however, is that they only fast from sun-up to sun-down during Ramadan, and commonly **feast** just outside of those hours. In this way it is actually more like having two Thanksgiving dinners in a single day with a long break in between.

- i. I am sure there are some pious Muslims who have more self-control, but there is strong evidence that Islamic culture as a whole treats Ramadan more like a feast than a fast. This is a big part of why so many businesses, even in the western world, are starting to advertise aggressively during Ramadan: consumption *dramatically increases!*<sup>2</sup> They consume as much as twice the food they normally would throughout this “holy” month.
  - ii. You can also find articles in various medical journals and institutions like the National Library of Medicine about just how *unhealthy* Ramadan is for Muslims.<sup>3</sup> Particularly in the Gulf countries that are known for their wealth, obesity and diabetes rates regularly see a sharp rise during Ramadan. This makes a mockery of the very idea of religious fasting.
  - c. In our text this morning, Christ makes it clear that fasting is not for all places or all times. It is not something that inherently or always makes you a better person. Otherwise, he would have had his disciples do it, just like he taught them to pray.
2. If these are false fasts, then what is a true fast? We cannot say all fasting is inappropriate, because Jesus says his disciples will fast “when the bridegroom is taken away from them,” that is, after he is arrested. So Christ did not suspend fasting for all time; he expected his followers to resume it, for certain purposes and occasions, after his time on earth was finished.
    - a. Fasting is *not* appropriate for celebrating God’s gracious gifts to us, and this is the chief reason Christ did not have his disciples fast while he was on earth. As he says in Mark 2:19, as long as his disciples have “the bridegroom,” who is Christ himself, with them, they are not to fast. Parallel to this, simply reflect on the fact that when Christ tells us to remember his atonement for us, he commands us to *eat bread* in the Lord’s Supper! That is when we are “with the bridegroom,” so to speak. We ought never to grieve when Christ welcomes us to his sacred table.
    - b. Fasting is appropriate for occasions associated with grief, for times when you are particularly confronted with the sin and misery of this fallen world. The only time Luke mentions the apostles fasting is in Acts 13:1-3, right after they have experienced the most severe persecution yet<sup>4</sup> and right before they have to send off Paul and Barnabas.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> “‘Ironically, Ramadan is all about food,’ says Aya Yousef, an HLB Egypt Makary Consulting senior analyst. While more than two billion Muslims endure a month of fasting, the international food consumption rate exceeds the typical consumption pattern. ‘Food retailers stock products at least a month ahead in preparation for excess demand,’ Yousef added. ‘Supermarkets and hypermarkets extend hours to midnight and tend to have Ramadan-specific promotions and offers.’

A survey published by HLB found that Muslim households see their food bills increase by 50 to 100 per cent during the holy month of Ramadan, which accounts for roughly 15 per cent of their annual expenditure on food in a single month.

Out of any product seller, date dealers see their profits increase dramatically during the Ramadan season. During the holy month of fasting, according to the research database Statista, around 1.7 million metric tons of dates were produced for last year’s Ramadan in Egypt alone.” - ‘Ramadan Is All About Food’, *International Business Times UK*, published on 12 April 2024.

<sup>3</sup> For example, “Food Expenditure and Food Consumption before and during Ramadan in Moroccan Households.” In the *Journal of Nutrition and Metabolism*, March 18, 2022.

<sup>4</sup> James the brother of John was put to death and Peter was imprisoned in the previous chapter, then freed, but he was still being hunted. Clearly these were very difficult times for the church.

<sup>5</sup> “Now there were in the church at Antioch prophets and teachers, Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen a lifelong friend of Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, ‘Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.’ Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off.” - Acts 13:1-3

- c. Martin Luther had a ton of experience with fasting in both the false and true ways of doing it. He likely did severe damage to his digestive system through excessive fasting when he was a monk. That was because he was trying to earn his way out of Purgatory with his own righteousness, which he of course repudiated later. Even after the Reformation began, however, Luther still maintained that fasting was an important spiritual discipline for Christians. He emphasized that, in light of the Gospel, we must fast with a view to controlling our flesh, *not* in order to earn anything from God.<sup>6</sup> So the **purpose** with which you fast makes a huge difference in **how** you do it.
  - d. Many Reformed churches and denominations actually call on their people to fast as they pray on particular occasions, either in the lives of their church bodies or the nation as a whole. For example, Presbyterian churches in this country called for several fast days during the COVID pandemic, at first for the sick and later for churches to be allowed to open up. More recently, I have heard of many of the same churches calling their people to grieve and fast as they pray God’s mercy on our churches in light of sexual sins and scandals. They think it is an appropriate response to many of the ministers in our tradition who have been exposed as wolves preying on the sheep. Personally, I have joined some of these fasts and also fasted when close friends of mine have gone through some particularly harrowing trial such as a severe car accident or drug addiction.
  - e. As a result of these more focused purposes, Biblical fasts are typically for short, specific periods for time. They are not designed to sound hugely impressive, like a month for Ramadan or 40 days for Lent. It is a good practice to simply fast one day at a time. Personally, I follow the Jewish pattern of starting at sundown on one day, continuing until sundown on the following day, and then eating a light meal after sundown on the second day so I can sleep easier. It is nothing to boast about, but it does not need to be. It is an effective reminder to my soul that the things of this world, even essentials like food, are less important than my need of grace from God for sustenance and protection.
  - f. Most importantly, however, biblical fasting is *voluntary*, not mandatory. This means that you should never feel strictly obligated to fast on particular days or for particular reasons. Reformed churches may seek to *persuade* Christians to fast together as we seek the Lord’s will on a particularly pressing issue, but we have no authority to *command* you to fast at any particular time.
3. There will come a day when fasting ceases for all time. When Christ returns, every one of our reasons for fasting will be no more! The bridegroom will be with us once more, this time never to leave again as his bride becomes his wife.
- a. Jesus’s illustration of the old vs. the new garments and wineskins in Mark 2:21-22 was designed to make this point. His mission will ultimately bring about the renewal and recreation of all things! Fasting is one of those things that belongs to the “old” world, that is the original creation that is still cursed with sin and decay. The glorious joy we ought to feel in gratitude for the Gospel is a foretaste of this “new wine” that simply cannot “fit” with fasting. You cannot make them make sense together. So when Christ returns, his recreation will have to be extremely thorough: everything tainted with the sin and decay of the old world will not fit his new creation. His ministry on earth with the disciples was an appetizer for this final feast. It was a foretaste of what living in the new creation will be like, where Christ is dwelling bodily amongst us as the center of our lives. We will have no reason to grieve or fast because we will have our deepest need fulfilled: to be reconciled with God Almighty and never separated again. The Pharisees, by teaching people to fast

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<sup>6</sup> “Of fasting I say this: it is right to fast frequently in order to subdue and control the body. For when the stomach is full, the body does not serve for preaching, for praying, for studying, or for doing anything else that is good. Under such circumstances God’s Word cannot remain. But one should not fast with a view to meriting something by it as by a good work.” - Martin Luther, *What Luther Says*, compiled by Ewald M. Plass, 3 vols., 1:506.

for fasting's sake, show that they are actually not looking forward in faith to the fulfillment of these promises.

- b. Revelation 19:6-9 gives us an exquisite picture of this great final feast we are looking forward to, known as the marriage supper of the Lamb.

“Then I heard what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude, like the roar of many waters and like the sound of mighty peals of thunder, crying out,

‘Hallelujah!

For the Lord our God

the Almighty reigns.

Let us rejoice and exult

and give him the glory,

for the marriage of the Lamb has come,

and his Bride has made herself ready;

it was granted her to clothe herself

with fine linen, bright and pure’— for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints.

And the angel said to me, ‘Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb.’ And he said to me, “These are the true words of God.”

- c. This scene from Revelation will be the end of all fasting forevermore. So even as we fast from time to time in this life it is absolutely essential to remember this is not forever. Our great Savior, Jesus Christ, has washed his bride's garments white with his blood, so that she is worthy to be married to him.<sup>7</sup> The days of all grief and temptation and hunger are numbered, and they are counting down to the end. We are not there yet, but that day is promised to us, and he who has promised it is faithful and true. Amen.

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<sup>7</sup> Throughout revelation, there are many references to the saints of God wearing “white robes” and Revelation 7:14 explains why their robes are so clean: “They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.” This, I believe, also explains the “fine linen” which was granted for the bride to wear in 19:8. The “righteous deeds” of the bride of Christ are only righteous because they have been washed in the groom's blood.