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Conducted by  
Frank Worgan

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- (Continued from last month) -

### ***The Lord's View of Fasting***

What he thought about this practice is also revealed in Mark 2:18-22, where we find him being criticized for failing to instruct his disciples to fast.

After all, they were apparently neglecting to do what all really devout Jews were expected to do, whether Pharisees and their disciples, or disciples of John the Baptizer!

Notice especially, that a marginal note tells us that the Lord's critic asked, "*Why do we and the Pharisees fast frequently . . . ?*" So, this questioner tells us two things:

First, that there certainly was a section of Jewish society that fasted 'often'.

Second, that Jesus clearly did not regard fasting as a religious duty, because he had not taught his own disciples to fast. In fact, the disciples of Jesus might be called the 'Non-conformists' of their time, because they did not follow the practice of the majority.

Now listen to the Lord's response, in verses 19-22 of Mark chapter 2.

He might have brushed aside the criticism by saying something like, "*The fasting about which you speak is unessential, because it is not commanded by the Law of God*". Instead, he gave an answer which is most significant because it revealed that not only fasting, but also *the entire ceremonial law* was soon to have no meaning. He said, in effect,

*"Whilst the Bridegroom is present with his friends there is no need to fast. And when he is absent, it will not be necessary to tell them to fast, because the sorrow they feel at his absence will guide them as to how they should behave, without having a law imposed upon them"*.

Then, he went on to illustrate this teaching by using the two examples of the wineskins and the cloth. He said that new wine is not put into old wineskins, because the old cannot contain the vitality and freshness of the new.

Similarly, you do not sew a piece of strong, new cloth on an old garment, because if you try to do so, you will find that the threads of the old garment are weak and you merely make a larger rent.

In other words, fasting, says the Lord, is one of the practices which belong to the old system, and the vital spirit of the new faith - the coming Christian dispensation - cannot be put into the old forms of Judaism.

### ***The Practical Meaning of this Teaching***

How does this fit in with what the Lord says in Matt? 6:16, in the 'Sermon on the

Mount'?

Well, I repeat, he was expressing neither approval nor disapproval of a practice which the Jews had imposed upon themselves. He was saying that their fasting might be either a good thing, or a bad thing.

If they engaged in it sincerely, as a genuine sign of humility and repentance, and fasted in order to concentrate their minds in order to be able to give proper attention to spiritual matters, it would be a good thing.

But, if they engaged in it simply in order to impress people with their piety and to show how 'religious' they were, it was a bad thing.

There were, the Lord, said, certain people who deliberately put on a doleful face and who even disfigured their faces. They *whitened* their faces, to emphasize how pale their self-denial had made them! And it is not without significance that the Pharisees choose to fast on two days of the week - Monday and Thursdays - which just happened to be market days! You can readily imagine how crowded Jerusalem would be on market days!

The Lord does not mince his words. He says, bluntly that they do it '*to be seen by men*'. They want to be praised for their piety. This, they will certainly receive. But that is the *only* praise they will receive, for they will not receive the praise of God. Therefore, his advice to his fellow-Jews amounted to this:

*"If you decide to fast, do it the right way. Keep it to yourself. Do not make a show of your devotion. So far as our outward appearance is concerned, when you fast look normal! There is no need for others to know that you are fasting. Let it be a matter between God and you."*

***Back to the original Question!***

"Should Christians fast today?" Couched in this form the answer to the question must be "No!" That word 'should' implies compulsion. It speaks of compliance with a requirement - something which *ought* to be done - and, as we have seen, there is no law of Christ that imposes the obligation to fast.

If the question is *uncouched*, "May Christians fast?", the answer is surely, "Yes".

But it remains something about which an individual must decide for himself.

We can all appreciate, I am sure, that whilst there is nothing in the teaching of the New Testament requiring Christians to fast as an act of devotion or worship, fasting may well be something from which, in these days of stress and excess, modern men and women of the Western world at any rate, might benefit.

Can you think of any advantages that might be derived from the occasional fast?

So then, when do you propose to begin?

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## GETTING WHAT WE DESERVE

Recently I ran across the following statement in some clippings I have accumulated: "Though we can't have everything we want, we should be thankful we don't get what we deserve." All of us tend to dwell on what we do not have more than upon what we do possess. We become envious of the possessions of others. Man's avarice is really a problem. As one man observed, we would all like to have "just a little more money than we could ever spend." We observe others and feel we deserve more simply because they have more, rather than being thankful for what we do have.

Actually, we should probably be thankful we do not get what we deserve, either