

# SICK OF RELIGION?

Weekly Devotional

*A ministry of Chapel Hill*

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## WEEK 4

*This guide pairs with Mark 2:18-22 and the sermon preached at Chapel Hill on March 16 and 17.*



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Executive Associate Pastor at Chapel Hill. Theology nerd who also loves big, dumb blockbuster movies, dinosaurs (no kidding, I *love* dinosaurs), and classical music. What do these things have in common? They all point, in their own way, back to a big, beautiful God.

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## **LifeGroup Guide**

### **Head**

Use a Study Bible to discover what was the practice of fasting in Jewish culture at the time of Jesus.

Jesus tells a story about a bridegroom. Look up Isaiah 62:5; Hosea 2:19-20 to see that in the Old Testament this is imagery used of the Lord. If Jesus is the bridegroom, what point is he making about fasting?

How do both the comments about cloth and comments about wineskins illustrate the relationship of Jesus to the Old Testament law? In what way is Jesus bringing in a new era?

### **Heart**

When you consider the difference Jesus has made to your life, would you say that he has been an “addition” to a way of life you already had, or a radical transformation and a “new” way of life?

Let’s define “religion” as behavior and belief designed to get favor from God. Where do you see “religious” tendencies in your life? What would be the “new” way of behavior and belief that counters those tendencies?

The image of wine, wineskins, a bridegroom and a wedding all allude to the fact that close proximity to Christ, in this life and the next, is a cause for celebration! When did you experience a memorable wedding (yours or a friend’s) and how is a wedding an apt picture for the joy of union with Christ?

### **Hands**

Do you see yourself in the grumbling attitude of the people? I know I can! Where are you grumbling about religious traditions or practice instead of rejoicing in people coming to know Christ?

There are many images of the “new” things Christ does in our lives. Isaiah 43:19 “See I am doing a new thing”. Psalm 96:1 “Sing to the Lord a new song”. 2 Corinthians 5:17 “If anyone is in Christ he is a new creation”. What is the new thing, the new wine, that Christ is bringing in this next season in your life?

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**DAY 1 – Monday**  
**Daily devotional**

**Read**

*Mark 2:18; Joel 2:12; Acts 3:1-3*

**Ask**

*Use a Study Bible to discover what was the practice of fasting in Jewish culture at the time of Jesus.*

**Reflect**

If you've ever experienced great loss, you'll know how odd and perfunctory eating seems to be in the midst of that. Eating, however necessary and routine, feels completely out of place while mourning, especially because eating is in and of itself a pleasure. When your soul is rent by grief, eating just doesn't seem appropriate.

If you understand this, then you understand the basic motivation of fasting in the Old Testament. Take a look at most of the passages in the Old Testament regarding fasting, and you'll see that more often than not fasting is accompanied by sorrow and weeping, as in the passage in Joel from today's reading. The only time fasting is religiously required of the Israelite people is on the Day of Atonement, and even then, it is an appropriate response to the level of contrition meant for that day.

With all that in mind, fasting wasn't necessarily a religious ritual, it was just a natural response to grief. In a greater sense then, you could consider fasting to be a way of acknowledging the greater needs of your soul over your body. You can see this sense of fasting in today's passage from Acts, where the early church prays and fasts, presumably because what was more important than food then was knowing God's will. They yearned for it, more than they yearned for their next meal.

Before we continue to explore the rest of the passage this week, it's worth considering this basic principle of fasting: we are spiritual creatures in need of spiritual food. Whether our fasting is driven by grief, or by a desire for the something only God can give (see John 6:35), it seems to me that Scripture is teaching us that the motivation for fasting should come from the soul and not a sense of religious obligation.

And yet, sometimes we lead our soul by the posture of our body. Sometimes we practice what is true and right before our emotions and mind line up with it. With that in mind, consider skipping a meal today, or later this week, and spending the time you would have eaten to dwell on what spiritual food you may be hungry for in Jesus. Perhaps in your physical hunger you will sense what your soul craves.

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**DAY 2 – Tuesday**  
**Daily devotional**

**Read**

*Mark 2:18-20; Isaiah 62:5; Hosea 2:19-20*

**Ask**

*Jesus tells a story about a bridegroom. Look up Isaiah 62:5; Hosea 2:19-20 to see that in the Old Testament this is imagery used of the Lord. If Jesus is the bridegroom, what point is he making about fasting?*

**Reflect**

If there's one thing I've learned in my scant twelve years of marriage, it's that communication is so key to healthy relationship. And one of the most important of things to communicate is expectations, because so often they don't align! I remember when Megan and I first started taking vacations together, she thought they were about seeing and doing lots of things. I thought they were about settling down and reading a good book. Those two aims aren't very compatible. Once we figured out what our expectations were for vacation, we were able to compromise and come to a place where we both enjoyed them.

Which leads me to the Pharisees and the disciples of John. What did they expect from fasting? Ostensibly, their motivation for fasting was sorrow (see yesterday's devotion), especially over their nation's plight. But did they ever expect that God would really comfort them, that he would really visit them? Or did they, over time, come to see fasting as an end in and of itself?

As you've read the passages from the Old Testament referring to God as the bridegroom, I'm sure you noticed that they are permeated with joy. God will *rejoice* over his people Isaiah says. Hosea uses the *very* intimate phrase that the people "will *know* the Lord." This means the end of sorrow, the end of loneliness. Finally, God will be present, and it will be a joyful moment.

What the Pharisees seemed to have expected, if anything, was not joy, but wrath. So until they saw fire from heaven, they expected to stay sorrowful. They expected an apocalypse, but they got a wedding instead. I love this about Jesus' response, because in this sense it doubles as a subtle invitation. Like the father to the elder son in the parable of the Prodigal, Jesus seems to be saying, "Come on in, there's a party happening!"

Today, take some time to examine your own expectations of God. Do you expect anything from your spiritual practices, or are they an end in and of themselves, merely the right thing to do? Do you expect God to be present to you in any way through those practices? If so, would you expect to find joy in his presence? May it be so.

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## **DAY 3 – Wednesday**

### **Daily devotional**

#### **Read**

*Mark 2:18-20; Isaiah 64:6; Ephesians 2:4-10*

#### **Ask**

*Let's define "religion" as behavior and belief designed to get favor from God. Where do you see "religious" tendencies in your life? What would be the "new" way of behavior and belief that counters those tendencies?*

#### **Reflect**

My wife and I have an affectional, playful ritual that we've grown to enjoy. Megan would ask, "Why do you love me?" half-seriously. I would say, "Because I love you. You don't earn my love, I choose to give it to you no matter what." She would then say something like, "Would you love me if I got in a horrible fire and burned my face beyond recognition?" I'd reply, "Yes, of course!" Then I'd turn the tables and ask, "Would you love me if I was just a noxious cloud of sentient green gas?" At which point she'd punch me in the shoulder, which I take to mean, yes.

I say this was half-serious because at root, we all want to know that we are loved no matter what, which is serious business indeed. I know that Megan likes to hear it when I say that I love her because of her sense of humor, her pretty face, or the like (which I do say), but over time those things may change. In fact, any relationship that's built on what I get out of it is one that is subject to change (don't get me on my soapbox about why some marriages fail). True love is love that chooses to love, sacrificially and without condition, not that smarmy, sexually-charged facsimile churned out by mass media nowadays (oops, got on my soapbox).

And that's the fatal error of religious thinking: it assumes relationship based on what is earned. No wonder religious people tend to be miserable; they live in a constant tension of always having to please, one misstep away from losing favor. Many of us can recognize how tragically unhealthy and unhappy it would be to approach relationships with our spouses, friends, and parents as though we have to earn their favor, how much more so with God?

How much of your spiritual practices are motivated by earning God's love? What would it look like to instead have spiritual traditions and practices that are about making room to know and experience the Father's heart?

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**DAY 4 – Thursday**  
**Daily devotional**

**Read**

*Mark 2:18-20; Matthew 6:16-18*

**Ask**

*Do you see yourself in the grumbling attitude of the people? I know I can! Where are you grumbling about religious traditions or practice instead of rejoicing in people coming to know Christ?*

**Reflect**

Many readers don't know that the Pharisees were actually a reform movement in Jesus' time. Their aim was to fastidiously obey the Mosaic covenant that God had delivered to them, and that Israel had tragically and repeatedly broken many times in the past, in order that God would deliver them from the rule of the Romans and restore their nation to them. They thought that if they did it right this time, and led the nation in obeying the law, then God would listen and restore their fortunes. That's exactly what the Old Testament seemed to say, after all. All that to say, their sorrow and mourning was ostensibly sincere. The problem was, you get the sense that they treated God's law as a set of checklists that would appease God, instead of a way of relating to God. They took that mentality and went overboard, adding laws to the laws just to make sure they didn't even get close to breaking them. Being human beings, it wasn't long before making sure God thought they were good and worthy people mutated into making sure other people thought they were good and worthy people.

It's interesting to me that Jesus doesn't slam fasting itself. He's really just talking about the motives of why we fast. This is evident from the when Jesus gives guidelines for fasting in Matthew. There, he points out that fasting is for God's sake, not anybody else's. In other words, the right way to do fasting is to do it as a means to know God.

I remember a distinct phase in my own life when I very diligently woke up early in the morning, prayed, and read my Bible, because it was the right thing to do. I was very diligent... and very judgmental of those who weren't. And, when I was finally honest with myself, I had to admit I was miserable and ultimately no closer to God. In the end, my diligence was really about comparing myself to others and proving my worth to God.

Here's a good litmus test for whether your religious practices are about making space for God or about comparing yourself to others: are you miserable and judgmental? Or do your practices bring you the fruit of God's presence, e.g. love, peace, joy? Take time to evaluate your motives today.

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**DAY 5 – Friday**  
**Daily devotional**

**Read**

*Mark 2:20-22; Matthew 22:34-40; John 13:34*

**Ask**

*How do both the comments about cloth and comments about wineskins illustrate the relationship of Jesus to the Old Testament law? In what way is Jesus bringing in a new era?*

**Reflect**

Have you ever tried to see the picture hidden in a stereogram? A stereogram, if you didn't know, is one of those optical illusions that look like a jumble of colors and patterns until you cross your eyes a certain way and stare past it until, almost like magic, a quasi-hologram appears to materialize into view.

Jesus is like a stereogram for the people of his day. When the Pharisees and their contemporaries looked at the Scriptures, their perspective was limited. Jesus' life, and especially his death and resurrection, brought in bold relief a new picture out of those ancient stories and writings. In Matthew 5:17, Jesus declares that he has come to fulfill the law, not abolish it. Put another way, he's the law in 3D.

When we ask what it is that Jesus brought that is "new" to the law, it's actually Jesus himself. There is some notion of God's love and patience throughout the Old Testament, but until Jesus shows up on the scene we don't fully understand who God is. By coming in the flesh, God shows us fully his true nature and character: love.

Jesus' life, death, and resurrection set a new pattern for our lives now. In point of fact, we only have to read Acts to see that the Church as we know it did "burst" out of the rituals and observances of the faith they were born into. Because of Jesus, and the radical love he evidenced, things like circumcision and sacrifice needed to be rethought. Instead of a people set apart by their observance of God's law, now we are people set apart by our observance of Jesus' life.

Today, take some time to meditate on the first phrase of John 3:16, "For God so loved..." perhaps say it out loud a few times. Allow the radical and revolutionary nature of that phrase sink into your heart.

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**DAY 6 – Saturday**  
**Daily devotional**

**Read**

*Mark 2:20-22; John 3:3*

**Ask**

*When you consider the difference Jesus has made to your life, would you say that he has been an “addition” to a way of life you already had, or a radical transformation and a “new” way of life?*

**Reflect**

It’s fascinating to study how the body works. Every day, my cells recreate themselves. My hair grows, my skin sheds off, making room for new skin, my organs flush and revitalize my blood, my circular system constantly creating new blood cells, and so on. When I was young, these systems of creation and renewal were in overdrive, but as I age they slow down until they will eventually fail. When my body stops renewing itself, I will die. New life, as it turns out, is life itself.

When Jesus talks about new wine, new cloth, it’s tempting to only infer that he’s talking about himself in the context of what his life, death, and resurrection bring to the table in the grand scheme of history. But I believe that there’s more to it than that. When the Spirit of Jesus is at work, he brings life, and life means renewal. It’s why Jesus tells Nicodemus in John 3 that one must be “born again” to see the kingdom of God. We need spiritual rebirth to enter into relationship with God, and from henceforth spiritual renewal day by day to sustain life.

This is why we should expect to see spiritual growth of some kind or another in our lives, slow or fast, big or small. As we look backwards and evaluate our lives, the evidence of Jesus’ Spirit at work is newness. Sometimes it may not be evident at the time, but if you are in relationship with Jesus you are in touch with Life Himself, and newness and growth is inevitable.

Take time to journal a bit today. Before you consider what new thing God is doing now, consider where you were ten years ago, five years ago, one year ago. What has God taught you about himself, about yourself? What is new? What remains the same? Invite God to speak to you about these things.

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**DAY 7 – Sunday**  
**Daily devotional**

**Read**

*Mark 2:20-22; Ephesians 3:14-21*

**Ask**

*There are many images of the “new” things Christ does in our lives. Isaiah 43:19 “See I am doing a new thing”. Psalm 96:1 “Sing to the Lord a new song”. 2 Corinthians 5:17 “If anyone is in Christ he is a new creation”. What is the new thing, the new wine, that Christ is bringing in this next season in your life?*

**Reflect**

Every once in a while, I deal with insomnia. Over the years, I’ve learned of ways to get past it, but first I had to learn when I was dealing with it. One of the ways I know I’m not going to be able to fall asleep without some help is when I have a song get stuck in my head. It’s absolutely bizarre, but I can be lying in bed for 15 minutes or more and the only thing going through my mind is a portion from whatever particular song it may be, over and over and over, stuck in a loop. Maddening!

Sometimes our spiritual life can feel like that kind of loop. Instead of a new song, it’s the same tired problem over and over again. Anger, anxiety, lust, fear... these kinds of things can be maddeningly familiar to us. It’s a far cry from a “new song.”

Which is why I’m grateful for the beautiful passage in Ephesians 3 from today’s reading. When we consider what gets us stuck, our inclination is to “work on it.” But the promise of Jesus is not that we would work harder, do better at being spiritual, but rather that God’s Spirit would enable us to truly, deeply know God’s love. New life, after all, does not come by gritting our teeth and making it happen, it must come from outside of us.

As you consider what new thing God may be doing in your life right now, it may be a recognition of something already in process, praise God. But if you’re feeling stuck, wishing for some new wine, it may help to take the time to read Ephesians 3:14-21 out loud as a prayer. Invite God’s Spirit to root you in his love. As you take your eyes off of what besets you and onto God’s glorious, incomprehensible love, I pray that you find a new song.

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