

People came to Jesus and complained: “Why do the disciples of John and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?” The implication of the question is that John and the Pharisees are properly exercising the discipline of fasting, but that Jesus and his disciples are not. Jesus is proclaiming the kingdom. It is a time of joy. Fasting with Jesus present would be as inappropriate as going to a wedding banquet or a potlatch and not eating anything (Note to Mt 9:15).

In responding to the question of fasting, Jesus asks: “Can the wedding guests fast?” (Mk 2:19). Jesus is ushering in a “new relationship of love between God and his people in the person and mission of Jesus to his disciples. It is the inauguration of the new and joyful messianic time of fulfillment and the passing of the old. Any attempt at assimilating the Pharisaic practice of fasting, or of extending the preparatory discipline of John’s disciples beyond the arrival of the bridegroom, would be as futile as sewing a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old cloak or pouring new wine into old wineskins with the resulting destruction of both cloth and wine” (Note to Mk 2:19). “Jesus’ teaching is not a patching up of Judaism, nor can the gospel be contained within the limits of Mosaic law” (Note to Mt 9:16-17).

We all tend to work in our comfort zone. We prefer to stay with what we are familiar with and sometimes are hesitant to stretch ourselves and grow. “The scribes and Pharisees were self-righteous; they were not capable of responding to Jesus’ call” to repent and believe in the gospel” (Note to Mark 2:16). So, they held up their own practices which they were comfortable with and criticized Jesus. Jesus ate with sinners and tax collectors and they found fault with him. They could not stretch themselves to reach out to the downtrodden. Jesus rightly challenges this self-righteous attitude: “Go and learn the meaning of the words, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’ I did not come to call the righteous but sinners” (Mt 9:13).

Fasting has a place in helping us to grow closer to God. During the season of Lent, which is only a month away, we fast for 40 days. We can fast by limiting our diet and giving up something that we really enjoy. When I lived on the Zuni Pueblo in the southwest, times of fasting were also accompanied by the strict discipline of spending no money. As we fast in this way, we may experience some hunger, but the hunger is meant to draw us closer to God.

As we recognize our dependence on God, we may open ourselves to hear God especially through the cries of the poor. “For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink” (Mt 25:35). A simple way we do this during Lent is by using Rice Bowls. We set aside that which we saved through fasting in order to provide for the needs of those who have so much less than we do. A little sacrifice each day adds up to a lot over the course of 40 days.

There are other ways of fasting beyond giving up food. Perhaps you spend a lot of time hooked to a cell phone or surfing the internet on a tablet. Fasting can help wean us off the damaging effects of media. But we need to do more than simply give something up, we need to actively search for God in the time that we have freed up. Instead of speaking to someone remotely, we might look around us and communicate more openly and honestly with those around us. And let us not forget the bridegroom. Focusing on our relationship with the Lord and engaging in deeper prayer can help us put new wine into a new wineskin.¹ Thus, fasting can indeed have spiritual benefits as we nurture our relationship with God and grow in our own self-awareness.

¹ catholicnewsagency.com/news/spirituality-year-how-a-break-from-academics-helps-prepare-men-for-priesthood