

# Fast or Feast?

All of Mark chapter 2 and the beginning of chapter 3 deal with confrontations that Jesus had with the religious leaders of His day. The first of these was the controversy over Jesus forgiving sins that happened when He healed the paralyzed man. Then we saw the controversy over Jesus eating with tax collectors and sinners. This third controversy happens over religious traditions, specifically the practice of fasting.

All three of these confrontations and also the two more that we will study in the coming weeks--in all of these, the real issue is the person of work of Jesus Christ. The issue is, who is Jesus really? And what did He come to do? And as we find the answer to those questions, we also find out who we are to be and what we are to do as followers of Jesus.

In the first confrontation we learned that Jesus has the very nature and power of God, with the authority to forgive our sins. In the second we learned that Jesus, **"did not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance,"** (Mark 2:17).

Today we learn that Jesus came to bring gladness, not sadness. He came to bring the new, not just to patch up the old.

Our text today is:

## Mark 2:18-22

**18 The disciples of John and of the Pharisees were fasting. Then they came and said to Him, "Why do the disciples of John and of the Pharisees fast, but Your disciples do not fast?"**

**19 And Jesus said to them, "Can the friends of the bridegroom fast while the bridegroom is with them? As long as they have the bridegroom with them they cannot fast.**

**20 But the days will come when the bridegroom will be taken away from them, and then they will fast in those days.**

**21 No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old garment; or else the new piece pulls away from the old, and the tear is made worse.**

**22 And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; or else the new wine bursts the wineskins, the wine is spilled, and the wineskins are ruined. But new wine must be put into new wineskins."**

## Question: What about Fasting?

John the Baptist's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees, which really means the followers of pharisaical teaching, come and ask Jesus why His disciples weren't fasting. That's their question, verse 18, **"Why do the disciples of John and of the Pharisees fast, but Your disciples do not fast?"**

Now maybe Lord Jesus is still in Levi's, the tax-collector's, house. We saw last time all that that meant, how despised they were. The Pharisees have seen Him there, and now they are witnessing Him with this motley crew feasting on a day when they, possibly, were fasting.

We know that fasting was practiced in the Old Testament at times by individuals and even nations, usually at a time of great distress or repentance. The Law of Moses in the Old Testament does not command any regular fasting. Once a year, on the Day of Atonement the Jews fasted because Leviticus 16:29 commands **"you shall afflict your souls, and do no work at all."**

By the time of Zechariah after the exile, it seems that the Jews observed 4 yearly fasts (8:19). According to Esther 9:31, Purim became a fifth additional fast. But fasting had evolved to the stage where in Jesus' day the stricter Jews fasted twice in a week: Monday and Thursday from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m. So after 6 p.m. they could eat all they wanted. In Luke 18 verse 12, in the parable of the Pharisee and the publican, a tax collector, you remember that the Pharisee declared, self-righteously, 'I fast twice in the week'. So this was a common practice of the Pharisees and of their followers.

Now let me say, the Lord Jesus was not anti-fasting. He believed in fasting, for He fasted Himself, He taught fasting - indeed, in this very portion, He implies that His own disciples one day, when He is taken away from them, will fast.

Jesus taught about fasting in Matthew 6:16-18:

**"Moreover, when you fast, do not be like the hypocrites, with a sad countenance. For they disfigure their faces that they may appear to men to be fasting. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward. 17 But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, 18 so that you do not appear to men to be fasting, but to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly."**

Jesus does not object to fasting, but to the abuse of fasting. The trouble about the Pharisees was that in far too many cases their fasting was for self-display. It was to call the attention of men to their goodness. They actually whitened their faces and went about with disheveled garments on their fast days so that no one could miss the fact that they were fasting and so everyone would see and admire their devotion. It was to call the attention of God to their piety. They felt that this special act of extra piety would bring them to the notice of God. Their fasting was a ritual and a self-displaying ritual at that.

But here in Mark 2, Jesus and His disciples were not fasting, but feasting, and in doing so Jesus was making a point! To enforce this point and hammer it home, the Lord Jesus uses three illustrations to contrast dead legalistic mournful religion with the living liberty of the joy of grace that is found in Him.

Here are the three illustrations: the first is of wedding, in verses 19 and 20; the second is of clothing in verse 21; and the third is of wine in verse 22. Let's look at the first illustration Jesus uses.

### **1. The Bridegroom is Here, Jesus Came to Bring Gladness, not Sadness.**

Effectively what the Lord Jesus is saying here in verses 19 and 20 is: life in Jesus is meant to be like a wedding, not like a funeral. That's what He's saying. It's meant to be like a feast, not a fast.

There was no joy in this fasting of the Pharisees. In chapter 1 verse 15 you will remember Jesus emphasized that the time is fulfilled now, the kingdom of God is at hand now, repent and believe the gospel. The Lord's ministry was coming after John the Baptist, and He was saying that the Messiah you've been waiting for and praying for, the Bridegroom has come, so all your waiting is over, I'm in your midst!

There could be many explanations why John's disciples were fasting. It may be because John was in prison. It may be that they were fasting because they were still waiting for the Messiah, they were still waiting for justice in Israel, for deliverance from God. Jesus is coming and saying: 'Why are you still waiting and fasting for this?'.

Now John the Baptist understood it, even though his disciples did not. John chapter 3 and verse 29 John says this about himself and Jesus, **"He who has the bride is the bridegroom; but the friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly because of the bridegroom's voice. Therefore this joy of mine is fulfilled."**

Jesus was teaching them that a new relationship had come with the Bridegroom, Himself, a relationship which can only be expressed in terms of joy, gladness, and celebration.

So Jesus presses this home: the Christian life, the life with God, the life of grace is meant to be a feast, not a famine! Is your soul feasting on Christ?

## **2. Jesus Came to Bring the New, Not Patch the Old**

Here's the second illustration, of clothing. Verse 21: **No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old garment; or else the new piece pulls away from the old, and the tear is made worse**'. What Jesus is saying here is: 'If I take this new cloth, the preaching of the Kingdom of grace, and try to patch up your old dead religion, it will tear it apart!' Jesus' point is this: 'I have not come to do a patch up job on your old religious traditions. My intention in coming into this world is not to prop up dead religion, but to bring a new relationship. It is the cloth of grace, and it can't patch up the worn out garment of the rules and regulations of the Old Testament. The law was given by Moses, John the gospel writer said, but grace came through Jesus Christ.

Jesus used a parable of an unshrunk patch to illustrate the fact that He came to completely transform the lives of His followers - not merely patch up their old lives. JESUS DOES NOT JUST "PATCH-UP" YOUR OLD LIFE. HE MAKES ALL THINGS NEW!

If you're here this morning and you're an unconverted person, you need to realise that you can't do a patch up job on your soul. You need the new garment of God's salvation - throw out your dirty rags that are filthy in God's sight, even your own righteousness is like that, and accept the garment of salvation that is a gift!

Let's move on to this third illustration which is wine. In verse 22: **And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; or else the new wine bursts the**

**wineskins, the wine is spilled, and the wineskins are ruined. But new wine must be put into new wineskins.**

Jesus referred to an ancient practice in which “the skins of goats were stripped off as nearly whole as possible and partly tanned, so they could be filled with new wine. Their natural elasticity and strength would allow the fermenting new wine to expand. However, if new wine was put into old wineskins, their brittle, inflexible condition would cause them to burst and both wine and wineskins would be lost. The new life that Christ brings is expanding.

Now what is Jesus talking about? The new wine is the joy and the power that Christ brings, and the old wineskins are the form and ritual of dead Judaism. What He is saying is that new wine needs new skins. His point is that there is no use for you disciples of John the Baptist, and for you followers of the Pharisees to put My disciples, Jesus says, under the bondage of sorrowful fasting as it has been practised in the past. It won't work, because the joy and effervescence of the new life in Christ must be allowed to spring forth, must be allowed to express itself!

Christianity has always suffered from man's attempt to mix it with legalism. The Lord taught on this portion of Scripture, categorically and explicitly, that the two don't mix - they don't mix! So stop trying to mix them! Jesus taught that legalism is a cancer that kills new life, and if you don't believe me you need to see the Gospels, and you need to see how serious this legalism was. Because of Christ's non-observance of these fast days, because He broke the pharisaical interpretation of the sabbath that we'll see in our next study in the following verses of this chapter, it was because of these things that verse 6 of chapter 3 says they began to devise a way, take counsel of how they might destroy Him! That's how serious legalism is: it leads you to extinguish the presence of Christ - and if you can't celebrate His presence, that's the only other alternative, you extinguish it, whether you're conscious of it or not.

In Kansas we had a couple of oaks trees in the front yard at home. They provided great shade in the summer months. But those trees do not lose their leaves in the fall. The dead, brown leaves hang on those limbs until spring time comes.

When spring comes, the sap rises in the tree. The new buds being to push out from the end of the branches, and the old leaves are forced to fall away. The new life in the tree expands and causes that which is dead to fall away!

That is exactly what Jesus wants to do in our lives! The old ways of sin and self will hang on for as long as they can. Religion, religious rituals and the traditions of men will not repair your old man; those things merely hold him down for a little while.

When Jesus moves in, He creates a new life within you. The new life He places in you begins to work its way out of you. Before long, what the Lord has done on the inside becomes clear on the outside as He changes the old man into a new creature for the glory of the Lord. The new wine of Jesus on the inside will burst the wineskin of the old man on the outside. This old flesh cannot contain the work of God in the heart!

As Jesus fills the wineskin of our lives, He stretches us to new limits. The inner pressure of His presence displaces unneeded things and fills every area of our lives. This new life is so powerful, so dynamic and so different that the old wineskins of religion and old ways of living must give way to the new life He places within us.

Let me make it clear that Jesus did not come to destroy the Law, He came to fulfill it, Matt. 5:17. Jesus filled full the moral law in that He kept it to the letter. Jesus filled full the ceremonial law in that He was the absolute perfect fulfillment of every type, symbol and sacrifice. Jesus filled full the judicial law in that He was the perfect embodiment of justice. When He comes in, He comes with such fullness that there is no desire for the old garment or the old wineskin.

It's like an acorn. You can take a rock or a hammer and smash an acorn, or you can plant that same acorn and let it germinate into an oak. Either way, the acorn is destroyed. If you smash it, it is gone forever. If it grows into an oak, it has achieved its fullest potential.

Jesus comes into our hearts not to place us under the yoke of the Law, but to enable us to live out God's perfect will through the power of the Holy Ghost. Jesus doesn't smash us under the Law; He places His Law within our hearts and helps us achieve God's best in our lives. He comes in to enable us to live our lives to the glory of God. The Law could never do that!)

Conc: Jesus did not come to blend His new way with old ways of living and believing. Jesus came to redeem sinners and give them new life in Him. That is why salvation is referred to as a "new birth", John 3:3, 7.

What God is saying through the Lord Jesus here is that there is a perpetual wedding joy with Christ for those who will have it: a feast, not a famine; new clothes, not patched up rags; new wine in new wineskins. Do you think it's a coincidence that the early church, in Acts chapter 2, were accused of being drunk? Is that a coincidence? Now they weren't rolling around, and barking, and roaring like a lion - but they were filled with so much joy that the people said: 'Nobody could be full at this time of the morning!', but they were filled with the Spirit of God! It told on their face, in the way they sang, in the way they preached, the way they prayed!

I am inviting you to exit, if you're in it, legalism to the glory of God with a leap and a bound, and sit with the Lord Jesus and join Him in the feast of joy with publicans and sinners. Leave the fast and formalism and dead religion, and know the joy of the Lord which is your strength. Have you got it? There's no joy in keeping rules, because you can't keep them, you'll always fail - but there is joy as a fruit of the Spirit, where you're not drunk with wine wherein is excess, but filled - that word means 'controlled constantly' - by the Spirit. Is it a feast or a famine? Is it the old, or is it the new?