

Author: Patrick J Griffiths ©

Date: April 20, 2008

Title: "Why do John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but Your disciples do not fast?"

Text: Mark 2:18-22

Theme: The kingdom message preached by Jesus exceeds the preconceived notions often prevalent in the thinking of people and their thinking must give way.

#### Introduction:

The disciples of John continued to fast in preparation for the coming Messiah. The Pharisees fast to merit favor before man and with God. Although each group differed as to its purpose they both found common cause to ask the question, "Why do your disciples not fast?" It is in this context that we find, "Jesus . . . uttering a great principle, the one on which he acts and is training his disciples to act." (R.C.H. Lenski, Commentary on the New Testament: Mark, 121).

It is important to see the continuity between the two previous paragraphs. First, Jesus is God and forgives sin (2:1-12). Second, we must go where sinners congregate in order to fulfill the purpose of the gospel (2:13-17). Finally, what this has looked like before Jesus and what this looks like after Jesus are two different ideas (2:18-22).

"His free association with sinners seemed to lead to the neglect of devout practices." (D. Edmond Hiebert, Mark: A Portrait of the Servant, 73).

This is the conclusion some might draw. This is always the challenge and the charge we are faced with in our obedience to the grace of Jesus Christ. Regularly I am charged with being soft toward sin and unwilling on my part to tell people what they should not be doing. I gladly accept this charge. It is true; I do preach Christ crucified and it is true that I do preach a guilt-free Christianity. I stand before you guilty as charged. However, I often tell you to stop living in fear and bondage. I often call you to stop living under the burden of doing and start living in the rest of God. The sins we choose are empty cisterns compared to the sufficiency and soul satisfying goodness of God. Regardless as to what conclusions you come to, we will stick with Christ crucified.

#### THE BIG PICTURE:

The Gospel of Jesus Christ in Galilee - Early Galilean Ministry - His authority challenged [Ministry in Conflict]

- "Who can forgive sins but God alone?" - concerning the forgiving of sin (2:1-12)
- "Why is He eating and drinking with tax collectors and sinners?" - concerning the friends He kept (vv. 13-17)
- "Why do John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but Your disciples do not fast?" - concerning the fast and food (vv. 18-22)
- "Why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?" - concerning the forsaking of the Sabbath (2:23-3:6)

Again our Lord uses a story, an event, to answer the question. The issue is not whether we should or should not fast. There is nothing wrong with fasting. The issue is whether or not fasting should be maintained for merit, for personal piety, or imposed as a form of religious exercise. The issue is not the fast per se. The issue is the new message and ministry brought by the Messiah, King Jesus, and the impact this has on the old way.

### **Its Eternal Value:**

How we understand this study will impact how we view the message of preparation and the message of fulfillment. Many people still cling to the old way of works and fail to embrace the new way of faith. In failing to forsake the old they lose the value and joy of the new. Even though each has its place, the two are incapable of mixing without destroying both.

### **The Present Danger:**

Christ and the cross are incapable of mixing with anything else. We cannot add to or take away from Christ and the cross without destroying what He is and what He has done. When Jesus called His people to deny, die, and follow there was by implication a death to the old (Mark 8:34). When Paul says, "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come," there is a passing away of the old and the birthing of the new. The two, old and new, are not the same and for us to synergize the two is to obliterate both and honor neither.

The gospel cannot be changed. These are Paul's thoughts in Galatians 1:6-9.

<sup>6</sup> "I am amazed that you are so quickly deserting Him who called you by the grace of Christ, for a different gospel; <sup>7</sup> which is really not another; only there are some who are disturbing you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. <sup>8</sup> But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to what we have preached to you, he is to be accursed! <sup>9</sup> As we have said before, so I say again now, if any man is preaching to you a gospel contrary to what you received, he is to be accursed!" (Gal. 1:6-9).

In the previous paragraph, we noted how in defense of the gospel's purity we cannot abandon the gospel's purpose. Here we can note how in our desire to reach sinners we must not compromise through contamination the gospel's integrity. The gospel is the bridegroom's presence, the gospel is the unshrunk cloth, and the gospel is the new wine.

### **Questions:**

1. What does this mean for the local church?
2. In what ways can we dilute the gospel's power through wrong associations (I am referring to the message, not physical or tangible alliances)?
3. Have we unknowingly made the new something other than good?

**To Know:** The Holy Spirit desires for us to know the new life that is in Christ Jesus.

**To Choose:** The Holy Spirit desires for us to choose the new life of freedom over the old life of bondage.

**To Feel:** The Holy Spirit desires for us to feel the joy of resting in the goodness of God.

**How will they best hear?**

1. How many times as parents have you said or heard the expression, “We have always done it this way” or “Because I said so.” Well, in Christ Jesus those days are past.
2. If the candidates for our presidential election visited our town or perhaps the president himself showed up at church, in what ways would our behavior and preparation change? King Jesus sits in our midst, what impact does this have on everything around us?
3. All of us have seen the image of a grown child still clinging to a battered and worn piece of cloth that was once their “blanky.” At some point they need to let go. It once served a purpose, but now the new has come and the old must go. In many ways we are reluctant to give up the old because it is familiar and comfortable, but letting go of the old is necessary if the new is to come.

Our passage has two simple parts. First, a question is asked of our Lord. Second, our Lord answers with three word pictures. Let us begin by noting the question.

I. The question (v. 18)

“Why do John’s disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but Your disciples do not fast?”

“It is remarkable that the disciples of John should thus be associated with the Pharisees, but obviously both groups were concerned with the problem raised by the conduct of Jesus and His disciples.” (D. Edmond Hiebert, Mark: A Portrait of the Servant, 73, 74).

The text clearly says, “It was a regular Jewish fast day, which the Pharisees and the disciples of John the Baptist were observing. But Jesus’ disciples were eating. This is what caused the controversy.” (Ralph Earle, Word meanings in the New Testament, 33).

“The main times when Jews of Jesus’ day fasted were days that reminded them of the great disasters of old, like the time when the Temple was destroyed by the Babylonians in 587 BC.” (Tom Wright, Mark for Everyone, 25).

They were a time of remembering trial and suffering.

The answer to the question posed by John’s disciples and the Pharisees is presented inside of three images.

## II. The answer (vv. 19-22)

The intent of our Lord is to use the word picture to teach a larger truth. If we force the details, we will have missed the point. Each picture enhances the central thought: the new has come and the old must go.

“He is talking about the shatteringly new thing that was happening in and through His ministry. He was, after all, announcing the kingdom of God – saying that God was now becoming king in a whole new way, and performing actions to suit the words.” (Tom Wright, Mark for Everyone, 23).

Jesus answers the question with a question. The response is rhetorical. No one would even consider fasting while the wedding celebration is happening.

### A. The example of the wedding (vv. 19, 20)

Jesus was calling His people to leave the past and

“look forward to the great things God was beginning to do, not backwards to the times when Israel had been punished for her failures and infidelities.” (Tom Wright, Mark for Everyone, 25).

Whatever reason the Pharisees might have had for fasting, Jesus is telling them why His disciples do not fast.

“After a Jewish wedding the couple did not go away for a honeymoon; they stayed at home. For a week or so open house was kept and there was continual feasting and rejoicing. In a hard wrought life the wedding week was the happiest week in a man’s life. To that week of happiness were invited the closest friends of the bride and the bridegroom. Jesus likened his little company to men who were children of the bride-chamber, chosen guests at a wedding feast. There was actually a rabbinic ruling which said, ‘All in attendance on the bridegroom are relieved of all religious observances which would lessen their joy.’ The wedding guests were actually exempt from all fasting. This incident tells us that the characteristic Christian attitude to life is joy. The discovery of Christ and the company of Christ is the key to happiness. The life that is lived in Christ cannot be lived other than in joy” (William Barclay, Mark, 59, 60).

“The reason for the fundamentally different position of his disciples is that ‘the bridegroom is with them,’ and in his presence they experience joy. Jesus is both the center and the cause of the joy that his disciples experience.” (William L. Lane, The Gospel of Mark, NICNT, 110).

“It is morally impossible to combine ascetic fasting with a festival of exceptional joyousness.” (Alfred Plummer, The Gospel According to St. Mark, Thornapple Commentaries, 91).

What is interesting is the contrasting picture and the foreshadowing of the cross, “So long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast.” Jesus saw the cross

ahead. We are not, however, to conclude that fasting is now an appropriate expression of the Christian because the bridegroom is absent. This is not the point. Jesus is here and we are to celebrate His person and His work. There is great joy because it is finished.

Whatever spiritual disciplines and religious forms existed before this time the reason for doing them has dramatically changed. The old way showed religious forms as a means of meriting favor and of standing in good stead with others and perhaps God, but the new way abolishes all such thinking. Nothing is necessary for those who believe to merit the good blessings of God or to enjoy God. In our paragraph, whatever motive existed for fasting in the past is done. Fasting is never done for the purpose of meriting favor. If and when we fast it must be done as an act of celebration never of judgment.

#### B. The example of the old garment (v. 21)

“Like the bridal metaphor, the sayings about the new garment and the new wine describe inappropriate actions.” (William L. Lane, The Gospel of Mark, NICNT, 111).

“Notice the deliberate contrast here between the old and the new. That's the point of the parable. Matthew and Mark make explicit the ‘unshrunk cloth’ that is implied by Luke's ‘new garment’ (Matthew 9:16; Mark 2:21). Jesus is saying that to try to attach the new to the old not only results in destruction of the new (‘he will have torn the new garment’), but also the old, which won't look right and will eventually tear again. He makes the same point with a parable about new wine and old.”

[http://www.jesuswalk.com/lessons/5\\_33-39.htm](http://www.jesuswalk.com/lessons/5_33-39.htm)

“Jesus knew quite well that he was coming with a message which was startlingly new; and he also knew that his way of life was shatteringly different from that of the orthodox rabbinic teacher. He also knew how difficult it is for the minds of men to accept and to entertain new truth.” (William Barclay, Mark, 61).

“A brand new piece of cloth won't do to patch a hole in an old coat. This image doesn't work quite the same way as the wine and the skins: by itself it might suggest simply that you need an old piece of cloth for an old cloak, in other words that the old is good and the new bad. But **the basic point Jesus is making is that new and old don't mix.** People shouldn't be surprised when putting them together has unfortunate results.” (Tom Wright, Mark for Everyone, 23).

“A little of the new is worse than useless to preserve the old. Discard the old entirely and accept not merely a bit of the new but all the new in its completeness. Not a new patch but a new robe.” (R.C.H. Lenski, Commentary on the New Testament: Mark, 121).

“There comes a time when the day of patching is over, and re-creating must begin. It may well be that there are times when we try to patch, when what is wanted is the complete abandonment of the old and the acceptance of something new.” (William Barclay, Mark, 61).

### C. The example of the wineskins (v. 22)

“Here's the same contrast of old and new that we saw in the parable of the patched garment. His point is the same: you can't join the new to the old or you'll ruin both the new wine and the old skin. The gas pressure from the fermentation is eventually so great that the inflexible old skin ruptures, and the new wine gushes out onto the ground and is wasted. His hearers all know not to use old skins with new wine. They understand.” [http://www.jesuswalk.com/lessons/5\\_33-39.htm](http://www.jesuswalk.com/lessons/5_33-39.htm)

“Wineskins would stretch with new wine being put in as it continues to ferment, and then they would harden. If new wine was put into a hardened wineskin, the continued fermentation risked bursting the skin. Similarly, new cloth would be expected to shrink considerably, so using it to patch already-shrunken cloth would be asking for problems.” [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New\\_Wine\\_into\\_Old\\_Wineskins](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_Wine_into_Old_Wineskins)

“New wine in old wineskins will result in broken skins and wasted wine. What Jesus is doing can't be fitted in to the existing ways of thinking and living. If people try to do that they'll have the worst of both worlds.” (Tom Wright, Mark for Everyone, 23)

Jesus said, “You cannot pound square pegs into round holes without damaging both.”

## III. The Application

### A. Things have changed.

“The new life in union with Him could not simply be confined to the old forms of Judaism. The teaching of both parables is that the new life of redemption in Christ cannot be confined to the old, legalistic forms of Judaism.” (D. Edmond Hiebert, Mark: A Portrait of the Servant, 75).

B. Thus some things that were appropriate at certain times would be inappropriate to continue now.

C. And you really cannot mingle the two without destroying both.

This idea is always going to be faced and change is inevitable and thus must be embraced, encouraged, and planned for.

New Testament scholar Tom Wright makes the following application from this passage:

“Christians look back to the time of Jesus as the one-off moment when God did the great new thing that had long been promised. Everything is different as a result of what he did. But that doesn't stop us, sadly, from trying to combine the new things the gospel offers with the old things from the world all around us – or, indeed, the old and often unnecessary traditions from the church of former years. When God is doing new things, we should join the party, not grumble because the new wine is threatening to burst our

poor old [skins]. A good deal of day-to-day Christian wisdom consists in sorting out the new from the old." (Tom Wright, Mark for Everyone, 25).

I am in danger of making application where none is to be found, but I find its urgency too direct that it would appear negligent if I did not draw parallels to our current church seen.

You cannot retain the old with the new without doing damage to both. And what Jesus is saying is that the new expression of Kingdom truth will not fit into the old imagery of Kingdom thinking. We do a disservice to the truth when we try and make it fit into a mold that is old. Every church must disciple the next generation and what must be maintained is the gospel's purity, but the context in which it is proclaimed and the manner in which it is proclaimed is going to change with each successive generation.

For example, preaching means "to herald, to proclaim." Historically this looks like a person standing in front of a congregation and "preaching." But the twenty-something and thirty-something generations have ipods, YouTube, search engines, ebooks, phones that take pictures and pick up the internet, and coffee cafes that have wireless internet. Friends, all of these things must be used to proclaim Christ and His redemptive work. We cannot and we must not force the new truth of Christ onto old forms. Jesus is bigger than this.

In light of this, I would like to make an application of this passage to any local church's discipleship ministry. This is a part of wisdom. **First**, in teaching our people we must always reach down to the next generation. It cannot be only to peers. It must reach 20 years down. It must be to our children and grandchildren. **Second**, we must separate the message from the method or manner in which the message is placed. We must contextualize the message. The message cannot change, but what it looks like culturally must be fluid based on the people we are reaching. **Finally**, if we have done this well, then the conflicts over theology and ideology will be minimal because those issues are stable. It is the expression of those truths that must be fluid and it will be the mentoring generation that bends to the next generation if the church is to continue in health.

"But why talk about the contrast between old and new? What is new that would be ruined by being attached to the old? What's he getting at?

Jesus has come with a radical gospel of Good News to the poor, the disenfranchised, the oppressed, the sick, the brokenhearted (4:18-19). He speaks with authority, rather than the casuistry of the scribes of his day. Their man-made rules of who he can eat with and how he should fast would just get in the way.

Jesus, insists, the Gospel of the Kingdom must not be hindered by the man-made rules of the Pharisees' religion. It must be free to work its power unfettered. You can't contain it in old structures. You must find new wineskins for it or none at all.

‘New wine must be poured into new wineskins,’ not accommodated to those comfortable things in our lives with which it is basically incompatible. The message for disciples is to be uncompromising about our faith and the work of the Spirit in our lives. If our honored customs and habits, and the structures of our society must adjust to that, then so be it.”  
[http://www.jesuswalk.com/lessons/5\\_33-39.htm](http://www.jesuswalk.com/lessons/5_33-39.htm)

APPLICATION: (Where do we go from here, what is our NEXT ACTION STEP?)

1. What are the structures of our own age and culture that cannot coexist with the new wine of the Spirit?
2. What have we tried to sew Christianity onto that will cause a greater tear and undermine the faith itself?
3. In Jesus' day, it was the legalistic spirit. What is it in your own life?
4. What is the element that destroys the gospel in your work, your community, your school, or your environment?