



Speaker:
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Sinners Remade and Reclothed

Series: The Gospel of Mark · 8 of 8

6/24/2020 (WED) | Bible: **Mark 2:18-22**

We're continuing today with Mark's gospel and chapter two. We shall focus on verses 18 to 22.

We have then this exchange between Jesus and the religious leaders. I'm not sure when exactly this took place. This may have taken place during the same feast that we looked at last week. In any case, the disciples of John the Baptist and those who follow the ways of the Pharisees were said to fast. And here it's the disciples of John at the very least who approached Jesus directly to ask him a question. Possibly while Jesus was still eating they asked him, "Why do all the followers of John and the Pharisees fast regularly but your disciples don't?"

The followers of John and those who preferred the ways of the Pharisees were slightly different groups. They had some things in common, but differed in others. One thing they had in common was that they fasted regularly. The Law of Moses didn't require people to fast routinely. Sure, we see plenty of examples of fasting in the Old and New Testaments. But God's people were never ordered to fast on a regular basis.

By the time Jesus came to this world, the Jews had added greatly to the Law of Moses. They'd built up a body of teaching by their wise ancestors, and these sayings were referred to more than scripture itself. You may remember that Jesus accused the Jews of nullifying the Law through all these additions that they had made. The habit under examination today was that of fasting twice a week. You might remember that last week I referred to a story Jesus told of a Pharisee in the temple. The Pharisee reminded God in his prayer of how he fasted twice a week. He was essentially outlining his piety to God. And of course we said that he left the temple still in spiritual darkness.

So we had this religious habit developed by Jesus' time. The Jews would fast twice a week, on Mondays and Thursdays. And the Disciples of John, even though they had been renewed in their religion through fresh repentance and a baptism by John, retained this habit of fasting twice a week.

I want to think about fasting itself for a moment. Some believers think fasting always means complete abstention from food. Not only was this not always true, there's a danger that we might miss the point of fasting if we focus too much on the outward act of depriving ourselves. When we express our Christian faith in any way, it must come from the heart. It's always the way of false religion to emphasise external acts. Clothing. Incense. Noise masquerading as worship. If we afflict our souls in any way for the purpose of religious devotion, it must only be as a natural outworking of an inner experience.

Let me read from Isaiah 58 verses 6 to 7. God says, "Is not this the fast that I have chosen? to loose the bands of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, and to let the oppressed go

free, and that ye break every yoke? Is it not to deal thy bread to the hungry, and that thou bring the poor that are cast out to thy house? when thou seest the naked, that thou cover him; and that thou hide not thyself from thine own flesh?" If, as part of some personal or national repentance, we abstain for a while from those things normally enjoyed, God will not be displeased. Insofar as it reflects an inward repentance, he is *delighted* to see it.

Fasting then is usually associated with mourning or repentance. If you take a look at Psalms 69:10, you'll read "When I wept, and chastened my soul with fasting, that was to my reproach." In our passage, the ultra-religious types were fasting, not to accompany inward repentance, but as a mere ritual which they believed would be pleasing in God's sight.

Jesus' answer to the question put to him includes this principle. He employs the picture of a wedding. It's a time of great celebration and happiness. Those people at the wedding who have been assigned the job of looking after the bridegroom, would be expected to be in high spirits. It would be very strange indeed if the groom's attendants were mourning as if someone had died. They would be joyful. The only reason for the attendants to be mournful is if the groom was suddenly taken from them or killed.

Was there a reason that Jesus used the picture of a marriage? Well if you know your Old Testament, you may well be aware that God himself is described as a bridegroom and his people as his bride. Take a look at Isaiah 62. "For as a young man marrieth a virgin, so shall thy sons marry thee: and **as the bridegroom rejoiceth over the bride, so shall thy God rejoice over thee.**" The Lord Jehovah is described as the husband of one wife, and that wife is his elect people. The imagery is even clearer in Jeremiah 31:32. "Not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt; which my covenant they brake, although **I was an husband unto them, saith the LORD**"

In Mark's account, Jesus appears to be ascribing the title of groom or husband to *himself*. And if we dismiss the notion that there are two husbands, **we must conclude that Jesus is here claiming to himself a divine title.** John the Baptist testifies as much, when he says in John 3:29, "He that hath the bride is the bridegroom: but the friend of the bridegroom, which standeth and heareth him, rejoiceth greatly because of the bridegroom's voice: this my joy therefore is fulfilled." And elsewhere, in the Book of Revelation, we read (Revelation 21:9), "And there came unto me one of the seven angels which had the seven vials full of the seven last plagues, and talked with me, saying, 'Come hither, I will shew thee **the bride, the Lamb's wife.**'"

Jesus Christ, being God, is the husband of the church, his bride. And you who are believers can rightly consider yourselves individually "married" to him:

- He chose you in eternity
- He sought you out when you came into this world
- He put away your sinful past so that you would be to him a beautiful, spotless bride
- He clothed you with a wedding garment
- And he put a ring on your finger as a token of the vows he makes to you in the promises of the gospel. Such powerful imagery and such great love!

In the example he gives here, Jesus not only describes himself as the groom but his disciples as his attendants. So he says quite rightly that these attendants, these disciples, are happy

while Jesus is with them. Then, by a glimpse of the end which Jesus would have to face, he tells them that this bridegroom would not be with them much longer. It is then that they would be sad. It is then that they would fast, having had their friend taken from them.

I'd like to inject just a brief word about the role of fasting in the life of today's believers. It's not enough to say that just because people in the Old Testament fasted, that the apostles fasted, or even that Jesus himself fasted, that it is something we should do. However, when we look at the reasons that people did fast in the Bible, we see that it is associated with inward feelings that are definitely still the experience of Christians today. Do we not still mourn over the state of the world around us? Do we not still lament at our addiction to sin? Do we not still afflict our souls in prayer for the salvation of those who we love? If so, then fasting is not only a legitimate expression of Christian experience, but it is to be encouraged. It's not to be done as a weekly, monthly or annual ritual.

But if as an individual you feel especially burdened about some issue, it would be good and proper for you too to afflict your soul before God. And remember that the affliction is chiefly internal. It is an uncommon desperation in prayer. A heart-rending appeal to God that he might have mercy and grant your request. Likewise, there might be a church-wide call for a day of prayer and fasting. And this too is a good practice.

Remember, the fasting does not necessarily mean complete abstinence from food, as I mentioned earlier. It *could* be complete abstinence for a short time. It could be a reduction in intake of food for a longer time. Or it could be a dramatic simplifying of your diet for a time. But it could also be a denial of things other than food. For example, you may be asked to take part in an early morning prayer meeting with the church, meaning that you're deprived of sleep.

The disciples knew something of the truth of that saying: *In God's presence is fullness of joy*. They were really with him. But it was not to last. The bridegroom that they were to attend to for several years would be taken from them and killed. He had promised, in the timeless existence he had before he made the world, to be the one to redeem his people from their sins. He agreed to be the one to step into to the sinner's place and bare the punishment **himself**. We read in Isaiah 53:8 "He was taken from prison and from judgment: and who shall declare his generation? for **he was cut off out of the land of the living: for the transgression of my people was he stricken.**"

We could say that the grief was short-lived. Within just a few days of his death, the resurrected Jesus Christ appeared to his disciples. Truly, their mourning was turned to joy! But he had to leave them a second time. He had to ascend back to his Father's side. By this we mean that he was to reclaim the glory and honour he had in heaven before the world was. And just like the grave, this sinful earth as it were "ejected" him as one who did not belong. It was necessary for him to be made a little lower than the angels. But this was only ever a means to an end, and was to be temporary. The heavenly throne of glory pulled on him like a magnet. He is today where he belongs.

If that were the whole story, we would have cause to spend our days in sorrow. Yet in his departing, he promises to send a different helper: the Holy Spirit of God himself. And it is by the presence of the Holy Spirit that it can truly be said that Christ is *with* us and *in* us. So then, as Christians, we can be said to be both *with* Jesus and *separated from* him. We are at

his right hand now. And the pleasures of being with him that are to last forever have already begun in us. We are **with** Jesus Christ. We are **in** Jesus Christ.

But it gets better. For in the world to come, there is a closeness of fellowship with Jesus Christ that we cannot presently experience. The best is most certainly yet to come!

Getting back to our passage, we see Jesus using two examples of something. You'll be forgiven for reading this and wondering what these two examples have to do with the issue of fasting! Before we think about any of that, we'll examine the real-life details on which his teaching is based.

I think the first example would make more sense to the modern reader than the other one. We all know that clothes shrink when washed. And if I'm right, most of the shrinkage happens when something is washed for the first time. After the clothing has been worn and washed several times, the shrinkage stops. People long ago learnt that, if you had a hole in some item of clothing, you shouldn't use a piece of brand-new material. You'd sew on your nice new patch. But when the whole garment gets washed, the new patch will shrink. And as it shrinks it will pull on the edges of the original garment and cause tearing. You could end up with more damage done to the garment than when you started!

In his second example, Jesus refers to the storing of wine in bottles. I need to remind you that this Authorised Version of ours was once a modern version. In their translation from the Greek, the translators often used words that were more relevant to the modern readers of the 17th and 18th century. In this case, it may have been better to leave the word alone. These wine containers were animal skins. And the example will not make much sense unless you're aware of this. New wineskins were tough and flexible. Wine that was still fermenting would be giving off gas. But new wineskins would expand to cope with the increased pressure. Old wineskins, however, became less elastic and more brittle. The risk with using an old wineskin with new wine was that the build-up of pressure would cause the wineskin to split.

We've looked at the biblical manners and customs, but the question remains. What does this have to do with fasting? It was Jesus intention, in these examples, to make a point. And the point he made must be in response to the question he was asked. In order to get behind Jesus's response to see what form the rebuke was taking, we need to think about the differences between the fasting practiced by these religious folk and that practiced by Christians.

You will remember that the prophet Isaiah, under the inspiration of God, described man's natural righteousness as nothing but filthy rags. If we think of our natural goodness as an item of clothing, that garment would be worn out, full of holes, and filthy. Even in the garden, when the first man made a covering for his nakedness, it was insufficient. And in replacing Adam's homemade covering with one he made himself, God makes it clear that **the only garment, the only righteousness, that is acceptable to God is one that is given by him.**

Every human being in their natural state will invent their own morality. Aside from people with severe mental-health issues, everyone thinks themselves good. They may admit to "making mistakes". They may freely confess that they are "no angel". But they reason that, on balance, they are decent people. And even if they believe there is a judgement to be

faced at the end of time, they reason that by the balances of goodness they must emerge justified.

It's like the Jews. Paul says in his letter to the church at Rome, (Romans 10:3) "For they being ignorant of God's righteousness, and going about to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted themselves unto the righteousness of God." They believed that their righteousness came from obedience to the Law. The trouble is, of course, that no one is able to keep the Law absolutely. And the Law is inflexible. It does not give the benefit of the doubt. It does not allow conformity to the Law in one area to make up for the breaking of it in another area. IT IS MERCILESS. The main character in Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* was being beaten by Moses. When the pilgrim asks for mercy Moses answers, "I KNOW NOT HOW TO SHOW MERCY!" And Moses there represents the Mosaic Law.

So for their whole lives, through reliance on Law-keeping, the Jews were fashioning for themselves a righteousness that had no more use than the fig leaf suit made by Adam. And this filthy garment of righteousness cannot be repaired. If it's patched up with old cloth it will *remain* an old, filthy, and inadequate garment. And if they try to repair it with something new, it will be further damaged. There might be an outburst of repentance. They might go and be baptized by John for the remission of sins. But whatever they adopt, be it ever so new, it cannot be used to mend the rags they wear.

When the gospel comes to a man in Holy Spirit power, **he becomes immediately aware of the utter inadequacy of his own righteousness.** The brightness of the gospel shows the filth on the garments of his supposed goodness. And if a man is to be saved, he must discard his creation. As Adam threw down his fig leaf covering to the ground, so must every other sinner come to God naked. He comes to God with nothing and asks for everything! Remember the words of Toplady that we sing:

*Nothing in my hands I bring,
Simply to Thy cross I cling;
Naked, come to Thee for dress,
Helpless, look to Thee for grace:*

The Great Tailor welcomes helpless ones in and presents to them a robe of righteousness prepared for them from the foundation of the world. And the man or woman so clothed sees how their new garment of righteousness **is an exact copy of the one worn by the Tailor himself, even Jesus Christ.** Listen to this in Isaiah 61:10. "I will greatly rejoice in the LORD, my soul shall be joyful in my God; for he hath clothed me with the garments of salvation, he hath covered me with the robe of righteousness...."

I'd like us to spend just a few more minutes considering Jesus' second example about the wineskins. The natural man is likened to an old wineskin:

- He is inflexible in his commitment to sin
- He is beginning to show no cracks following a life of bitterness
- All that lies ahead is to be discarded
- And for such a man, this means he will be forever trapped in a state of unhappiness and despair.

We can think of this new wine as the gospel. It is a message about a new and better covenant that God makes with man. This new wine cannot be stored in old wineskins. That

is, the gospel is of no benefit to a man if he remains in his natural state. Think about those people who show all the signs of conversion. They claim to embrace the gospel. The person doing this is filling the old wineskins of their souls with new principles that cannot long exist there. Their lives might be temporarily affected. Their conversion will no doubt cause celebration amongst the Lord's people, believing their profession to be genuine. **But the characteristics of the new man are incompatible with the characteristics of the old man.** Like the wineskins of ancient times, these unregenerate individuals will be cast aside by God.

But there is a way for this wine of the new covenant to find vessels suitable to contain it. When we hear the gospel sound, it discloses to us that we are like those old wineskins. We realise that our time will soon be up. And God shows us that we are wholly unsuitable to be vessels acceptable to him. In this scene, we are now drawn to God as the Great Potter. We beg of him that he will make us new. And he does so. Let me read to you from Acts 9:15. "But the Lord said unto him, Go thy way: for he is a chosen vessel unto me, to bear my name before the Gentiles, and kings, and the children of Israel..."

Saul was a chosen vessel of God. And God did the same with us. Created us as vessels of *honour*. And it is into our vessel that he pours his graces.

Is this new wine *the gospel*? Yes, because the faith of the gospel is the faith of Jesus Christ.

Is this new wine *the blood of Jesus Christ*? Yes, because we cannot have eternal life in us unless we drink of his blood, as it were.

Is this new wine *Jesus Christ himself*? Yes, because he lives in us. Christ in us, the hope of glory.

And not only did he make us into new vessels, he promises that we will endure forever. Truly, as we live in this dual nature of the new creature and the remnants of sinfulness in us, it is appointed unto us to die. BUT JESUS PROMISES THAT ALL WHO BELIEVE ON HIM WILL RISE AGAIN. And you, believer, will awaken. There will be a judgement, but one that you will have no reason to fear. The "not guilty" verdict has already been decided! And while other vessels, dishonourable and useless to God, will be smashed to pieces, you will remain as a vessel of his glory forever.

Made the Lord comfort you with these words.

Amen.