

How Does Jesus Transform Religion? Mark 2:18-28

¹⁸ Now John's disciples and the Pharisees were fasting. And people came and said to him, "Why do John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?" ¹⁹ And Jesus said to them, "Can the wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them? As long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast. ²⁰ The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast in that day. ²¹ No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old garment. If he does, the patch tears away from it, the new from the old, and a worse tear is made. ²² And no one puts new wine into old wineskins. If he does, the wine will burst the skins—and the wine is destroyed, and so are the skins. But new wine is for fresh wineskins."

²³ One Sabbath he was going through the grainfields, and as they made their way, his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. ²⁴ And the Pharisees were saying to him, "Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?" ²⁵ And he said to them, "Have you never read what David did, when he was in need and was hungry, he and those who were with him: ²⁶ how he entered the house of God, in the time of Abiathar the high priest, and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and also gave it to those who were with him?" ²⁷ And he said to them, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. ²⁸ So the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath."

- Mark 2:18-28, ESV

Should Christians fast and keep the Sabbath? If so, how should our fasting and Sabbath-keeping be different from the way non-Christians - like Jewish and Muslim people - fast and keep the Sabbath? In other words, does the coming of Jesus completely do away with such religious practices or does He transform them in any way?

When Jesus was asked why His disciples did not fast, He explained that His presence with His disciples was cause for such joy that fasting was improper. He also indicated that His disciples would indeed fast, once He was no longer with them. But then He gave this unusual teaching about garments and wineskins.

As if to further illustrate what Jesus means by His teaching about the unshrunk cloth and the new wine, Mark immediately follows this saying with an account of the disciples picking heads of grain in a field on the Sabbath and Jesus' explanation that "*The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath.*" (vv. 27-28)

So, what does all of this mean? Well, the coming of Jesus and the kingdom salvation that He brings into reality in the lives of His disciples is like the unshrunk cloth and the new wine. It is new, in that God's people are no longer striving after righteousness and waiting for salvation. Jesus has come. He has purchased our forgiveness and given us His perfect righteousness. The whole nature and shape of religion has changed, from a striving to a resting, from trying to earn favor from God to giving thanks for His favor freely given in Christ.

So, what do fasting and Sabbath-keeping look like in this new era of salvation? We don't fast to earn God's favor or prove our own righteousness. That's as impossible as it is unnecessary! But we do fast. We fast to sharpen our hunger for Jesus and to express our greater desire for Him than for the pleasures of food. And our Sabbath-keeping, likewise, is not about showing God how religious and disciplined we are. It's about resting in Christ and enjoying Him more fully on the Lord's Day.

Jesus does not come to do away with religion, but to turn it on its head. We're not earning salvation. We're not showing how righteous we can be. We're not trying to impress God, as if that were ever possible. No, we're enjoying Him, resting in Him, trusting Him and training our hearts and even our bodies to long for Him more!