



FASTING OR FEASTING?

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Mark 2:18-22

Eighth Message

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Our text this morning from the second chapter of the gospel of Mark features the third of five stories of controversy recorded by Mark in the opening chapters of his gospel. The issue at hand is fasting, and why the disciples of Jesus did not fast. This text has much to say to believers today. Should Christians fast? And what is it that determines when and why we should fast? Jesus' cryptic answer to the questions is filled with Old Testament allusions to a wedding feast, a bridegroom, new garments, and new wine. Mark 2:18-22:

And John's disciples and the Pharisees were fasting; and they came and said to Him, "Why do John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but Your disciples do not fast?" And Jesus said to them, "While the bridegroom is with them, the attendants of the bridegroom do not fast, do they? So long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast. But the days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast in that day. No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment; otherwise the patch pulls away from it, the new from the old, and a worse tear results. And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise the wine will burst the skins, and the wine is lost, and the skins as well; but one puts new wine into fresh wineskins" (NASB).

I. No Fasting at a Wedding (2:18-20)

A. Fasting as a symbol of exile

In the scene just before this, Jesus created quite a controversy with the Pharisees by eating with sinners at the table of Levi the tax collector, one of his most recent disciples. Jesus' response to the accusation of the Pharisees was that he came to call sinners, not the righteous. Thus was the controversy silenced with but a word. Now the question arises, "Well, given the fact that you claim the right to call sinners and make them disciples, why then don't they behave like disciples?" This is the question the Pharisees put to Jesus, in 2:18:

And John's disciples and the Pharisees were fasting; and they came and said to Him, "Why do John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but Your disciples do not fast?"

A good question, without a doubt. Mark leaves it up in the air as to where the delegation that asked this question hails from, while Matthew records that they were a group of John's disciples (Matt 9:14). Jesus' cryptic answer not only cuts to heart of the reasons behind

fasting, but by capturing an Old Testament metaphor, he makes a revolutionary claim. Verses 19-20:

And Jesus said to them, "While the bridegroom is with them, the attendants of the bridegroom do not fast, do they? So long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast. But the days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast in that day."

Notice carefully that the issue at hand is not if, but why one should fast. Fasting was practiced both in the Old and the New Testaments alike. But it was not an arbitrary spiritual discipline. In the OT, fasting was practiced as an expression of humility under the hand of God's judgment, and in expectation of his restoration.

The book of Joel provides just such a model for fasting. God had visited the nation with a severe judgment by means of an invasion of locusts, which wiped out the harvest and led to a famine. In response, Joel invites the entire nation to humble themselves and repent by fasting. Listen to the words of the prophet,

**Blow a trumpet in Zion,
Consecrate a fast, proclaim a solemn assembly,
Gather the people, sanctify the congregation,
Assemble the elders,
Gather the children and the nursing infants.
Let the bridegroom come out of his room
And the bride out of her bridal chamber.
Let the priests, the Lord's ministers,
Weep between the porch and the altar,
And let them say, "Spare Thy people, O Lord,
And do not make Thine inheritance a reproach,
A byword among the nations.
Why should they among the peoples say,
'Where is their God?'"** (Joel 2:15-17)

In response to the nation's repentance, God promised to visit the land with the early and late rains and bring full restoration to Israel. When that happened, the people were to remove their fasting garments, change their countenance and rejoice. Joel 2:23:

**So rejoice, O sons of Zion,
And be glad in the Lord your God;
For He has given you the early rain for your vindication
And He has poured down for the rain,
The early and latter rain as before.**

It is according to this model that the Jews of the first century fasted. Now, though they were back in the land

following the Babylonian captivity, they felt as if they were still in exile, because they were under the cruel domination of the Romans. They were still longing for full restoration. So while the Mosaic Law required fasting once a year, on the Day of Atonement (Lev 16:1-34), the Pharisees and their disciples fasted weekly, on Mondays and Thursdays, yearning for Israel's restoration. Our Christmas carol well expresses their longings:

*O come, O come, Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel,
That mourns in lonely exile here, until the Son of God
appear.*

Tom Wright comments on this passage from Mark:

The difference had nothing to do with patterns of religion. It was not that the two fasting groups were concerned with outward observances, while Jesus was concerned only with the inner attitude of the heart...Fasting in this period was not, for Jews, simply an ascetic discipline, part of the general practice of piety. It had to do with Israel's present condition: she was still in exile. More specifically, it had to do with commemorating the destruction of the Temple. Zechariah's promise that the fasts would turn into feasts could come true only when YHWH restored the fortunes of his people.¹

This is what Zechariah says:

"Thus says the Lord of hosts, 'The fast of the fourth, the fast of the fifth, the fast of the seventh, and the fast of the tenth months will become joy, gladness, and cheerful feasts for the house of Judah; so love truth and peace'" (Zech 8:19).

How Israel longed for that day! According to Isaiah, that time of complete restoration would bring God infinite joy as well:

**"And as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride,
So your God will rejoice over you"** (Isa 62:5).

B. Rejoicing in the presence of the bridegroom

In his response to the question put to him, Jesus explains that fasting should not be a discipline which believers arbitrarily impose on their bodies in order to cultivate spirituality. Rather, fasting is an inner response to a reality that is much bigger than themselves. Many of you have had the experience of being with a son, a daughter or relative who was near death. I don't know about you, but at times like these I have found it very hard to eat. It is ironic, though, that on such occasions one of the things we are pressed to do is to eat something. But eating at such a time seems almost sacrilegious to the sacred process of grief. The opposite is true of a wedding, however. Then, joy and gladness fill the air with feasting and merriment. That is why Jesus pointedly asks his inquirers, "How is it possible for the wedding guests to fast in the presence of the bridegroom?" His presence makes fasting not only inappropriate, but impossible. (Jesus makes his point doubly emphatic with the double stress of "they are *unable* to do so.")

By his mention of the bridegroom, Jesus implies that they were living in that revolutionary hour, the time of Israel's restoration. The party was going on right now, and the whole nation should be rejoicing. Tom Wright continues,

The party is in full swing, and nobody wants glum faces at a wedding. This is not a piece of "teaching" about "religion" or "morality"; nor is it dissemination of a timeless truth. It is a claim about eschatology [i.e. the study of last things and the age to come]. The time is fulfilled; the exile is over; the bridegroom is at hand. Jesus' acted symbol, feasting rather than fasting, brings into public visibility his controversial claim, that in his work Israel's hope was being realized; more specifically, that in his work the Temple was being rebuilt.²

What a radical, revolutionary claim this is!

C. Fasting in His death

But, Jesus goes on, a time will come when his disciples will fast (i.e. mourn), for the bridegroom will not always be with them: "he will be *taken away*." The word has overtones of being taken away violently. This is a stinging portend of the cross: "By oppression and judgment He was *taken away*" (Isa 53:8). In that hour, his disciples will fast. It was probably for this reason that the disciples of John were fasting, because he had been taken away violently. Thus, for the disciples of Jesus, fasting should be in accordance with what is going on in reality. Thus, in both cases, whether his disciples fast or feast will be determined by what happens to Jesus. His destiny evokes deep responses of joy or grief, because he is the center of their worship. Were he not Messiah, this would be a blasphemous claim.

D. Do you have your wedding invitation?

Your answer to the question, "Are you fasting or feasting?" depends on where the Bridegroom is in your life. Did you know that there is a wedding going on and the Bridegroom is present? Do you see him? Do you possess him? Does he awaken you in the night watches? Joy is the dominant characteristic of Christians in this age of the new covenant, because nothing can separate them from the presence of the Bridegroom. Not suffering, sickness, persecutions, bankruptcy, even death; nothing can separate us from him. Oftentimes such circumstances as these will even enhance the Bridegroom's presence (Acts 16:25). The early church still fasted when they felt it necessary to seek the Bridegroom for guidance, or humility in repentance, but the dominant tenor of the age is that of a wedding feast. Two weeks from now my daughter will be married, and our entire household is caught up in the joy of the wedding plans. Her countenance has softened, her eyes are radiant, her face aglow. How could she fast? As the father of the bride, the one who has to pay for all of this, I suppose I am the only one who should even consider fasting! But there is no fasting, just a lot of feasting going on in our home these days.

Pressing his claims further, Jesus goes on to speak of a tattered garment in need of repair.

II. No Patchwork Garments (2:21)

“No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment; otherwise the patch pulls away from it, the new from the old, and a worse tear results.

A. An old garment

Jesus again stresses what is never done. No one, he says, places a new patch on an old garment to fix a tear; otherwise, when the patch shrinks, the force of the new creates a worse tear in the old. It is interesting to observe that when the Old Testament uses the metaphor of a worn garment, it never describes it as being repaired with patchwork. Worn garments are garments that are simply worn out. The same word is used of the enemies of the Suffering Servant:

**“Behold the Lord God helps Me;
Who is he who condemns Me?
Behold, they will all wear out like a garment”** (Isa 50:9).

The same word is also used of the earth:

**“Lift up your eyes to the sky,
Then look to the earth beneath;
For the sky will vanish like smoke,
And the earth will wear out like a garment...
But My salvation shall be forever”** (Isa 51:6).

Is Jesus saying that Judaism was like a worn-out garment that had served its function well? Is he saying now that the new age has arrived, the old will not be patched up? Is he saying, “No patchwork garments for Israel, its priesthood or temple”? We can’t be certain. However, the word “tear” is the same word used of the temple curtain, which was torn in two from top to bottom at the death of Jesus (see 15:38, although there the verb is used).

B. The new garments for the new age

And Isaiah says that when Messiah comes, he will be clothed with new garments.

**“I will rejoice greatly in the Lord,
My soul will exult in my God;
For He has clothed me with garments of salvation,
He has wrapped me with a robe of righteousness,
As a bridegroom decks himself with a garland”** (Isa 61:10).

If we link the two illustrations together, Jesus is saying that there is a wedding feast in progress, and new garments are to be worn; the old ones will not do. This story had a great impact on the apostles, who used this metaphor of putting on new clothes as the sign that believers belong to Christ:

Rather, *clothe* yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh with regard to its lusts (Rom. 13:14).

Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, *clothe* yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience (Col 3:12).

Christianity is not a patchwork religion, designed to reform people from without. Rather, it is a brand new creation, with new clothes. Just as Adam and Eve needed new clothes to cover their sin and shame, so Christians too are clothed with Christ himself. In the new covenant we are never asked to bring about our own reformation; we are merely invited to put on the person and character of Christ, as a free gift. And as we wear these new clothes we proudly display that the wedding feast with the Messiah is in progress and that we are his guests. And the gift of such garments gives us even more cause to celebrate.

Here Jesus has alluded to a bridegroom, and to the necessity for new garments.

Finally, he speaks of new wine, an image that resonates with joy.

III. New Wineskins for New Wine (2:22)

“And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise the wine will burst the skins, and the wine is lost, and the skins as well; but one puts new wine into fresh wineskins.”

A. Wineskins and new wine

In the ancient world, wine was not fermented in bottles, but rather in animal skins. These soft and pliable skins expanded to allow new wine to ferment for a couple of months before it was stored in earthenware jars. New wine was never placed in old wineskins. They were too rigid and stiff and would burst as the new wine fermented, so that both the wine and skins would be lost. New wine was always put into fresh wineskins. It was too powerful to be contained in old skins.

The image of new wine is a powerful metaphor. It was the key symbol for joy, used by the prophets to describe Israel’s restoration. Several Old Testament texts illustrate the joy of that day.

**Then the Lord will be zealous for his land,
And will have pity on His people.
And the Lord will answer and say to His people,
“Behold, I am going to send you grain, *new wine*,
and oil,
And you will be satisfied in full with them;
And I will never again make you a reproach among
the nations”** (Joel 2:18-19).

**“The days are coming,” declares the Lord ,
“when the plowman will overtake the reaper
and the planter by the one treading grapes.
New wine will drip from the mountains
and flow from all the hills”** (Amos 9:13).

**They will come and shout for joy on the heights of
Zion;**

**they will rejoice in the bounty of the Lord—
the grain, the *new wine* and the oil,
the young of the flocks and herds.
They will be like a well-watered garden,
and they will sorrow no more** (Jer 31:12).

B. New life of the new age

Had that future age of new wine arrived with the coming of Jesus? To that, Jesus gives an emphatic, yes! There was new life at hand, life that the old could not contain. As Ray Stedman said of this passage, “New life needs fresh forms of expression.” This life is so rich and full that all the old forms of Judaism will burst at the seams. Jerusalem could not contain it. Neither could Antioch, Ephesus, Corinth, Rome or Spain. As Amos had prophesied, new life dripped from the very mountains.

At our elders meeting last week, two guests came to share with us. One was a retired pastor, Walt McCuis-tion; the other, a young single woman, Karin Stahl. Walt gave a report on the ministry that he is involved with in Moldova, a tiny country in Eastern Europe, next door to Romania. This retired pastor is not spending his days pursuing leisure. He is bringing presidents of nations to prayer breakfasts. He even has a vision to translate Ray Stedman’s book, *Authentic Christianity*, into Moldovan. Karin Stahl spent two years in Venezuela, working with a compassion ministry, supporting poverty-stricken

children. She then went to Guatemala, and with her gift of faith adopted into her heart the pastor of the local church, the children, and the entire village. Single-handedly she is seeking to raise support for Christian teachers in a school that now has four hundred children. How wonderful it was for us as elders to share the joy of a retired pastor and a young single woman! What is this but new wine, new life that cannot be contained in old wineskins?

Yes, there is a wedding celebration going on. The Bridegroom is present, and he is giving out new garments to all who will come. And there is new wine, flowing as plentiful as water, to all who are invited. That is why we sing at Christmas time,

*Joy to the world! the Lord is come;
Let earth receive her King;
Let every heart prepare Him room,
And heav’n and nature sing.*

The Messianic age and the restoration of Israel is here. The question is, will you accept the invitation to the wedding?

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1. N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996) 433.

2. Wright, 433-434.