

THE OLD & THE NEW

Mark 2:18-22

October 8, 2006 – Grace Covenant Baptist Church

We look this morning at the third of five successive “conflict” narratives that Mark gives in chapters 2 and 3. It did not take the self-righteous religious leaders very long to begin to question Jesus’ actions. He began His ministry teaching new things (1:27). This alone was a challenge to their neat little system that had given them such authority among the people. But it was not just Jesus’ teaching that was a threat, but He actually backed His words by His actions. His words carried authority, and His works verified His authority. In other words, the conflict that is set up in these narratives is a question of authority. The Pharisees saw Jesus as a threat so they begin to criticize His every move. First they questioned His forgiving the sins of the paralytic. Then they criticized Jesus and His disciples for dining with tax collectors and sinners. Jesus was gaining a following, a large following. Though many sought out Jesus for all the wrong reasons, they sought Him out nonetheless. And the religious leaders found themselves losing their influence among the people. This they could not swallow. So they set out to take care of Jesus.

The actions of the Pharisees and their friends should not surprise us. Men by their very nature find it difficult to admit that they have been trying to accomplish the right thing in the wrong way. For the Pharisees, their entire system, their entire worldview, was being challenged by Jesus. They had lived their entire lives in strict obedience to the Law thinking that this was what made them righteous in God’s eyes. Now Jesus comes teaching that it is not by works but by faith that one is made whole. Forgiveness was by grace alone based on the authority of God alone. This did not fit into the tradition that had been handed down for centuries in Judaism. What we glean from our text today is that *our traditions can become a stumbling block, if not a barrier, in our relationship to Christ.*

I. A New Relationship (2:18-20)

As we noted last week, these “conflict” narratives have a recognizable outline. Mark first sets forth the scene of the conflict, followed by the source of or reason for the conflict, often in the form of a question from the religious leaders, and concludes with Jesus’ response to their question.

In the preceding text, the Pharisees questioned Jesus’ dining with the tax collectors and sinners. Having their perception shattered by Jesus, some of this same group, along with others, approach Jesus with yet another criticism.

1. A question about fasting (v. 18)

There is an apparent discrepancy over who asked this question. Matthew attributes the question to the disciples of John (Mt. 9:14), Luke states the question came from the Pharisees (Luke 5:33), and Mark says the question came from both parties. This apparent contradiction can be addressed by the fact that these disciples of John were followers of John the Baptist who had not followed Christ. They were no doubt fasting because of the recent imprisonment of their leader and followed the lead of the Pharisees concerning the question of fasting. The Pharisees, you remember, were the religious police, so to speak. They determined what was right and proper concerning the things of God. Following the lead of the Pharisees in this matter, they wrongly presumed that a failure to fast was irreligious.

The fasting of the Pharisees, on the other hand, was an outward expression of their piety, and they were more than willing to show their piety. We see this in the account of the Pharisee and the tax collector in Luke 18:11-13, “The Pharisee stood and was praying this to himself: ‘God, I thank You that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. ¹² I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get.’” It is interesting that the Pharisee compares himself with those who Jesus and His disciples dined with in the preceding narrative in Mark. Their religious piety was nothing more than spiritual arrogance and they attempt to demonstrate this piety cornering Jesus with their question, “**Why do John’s disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but Your disciples do not fast?**” In other words, “If You are who you say You are, Jesus, then why aren’t You and Your followers as religious as we are?”

John’s disciples and the Pharisees notice that they were fasting and that Jesus and His disciples, in partaking of this meal in Levi’s home, were not. According to their legalistic framework, this was not in accordance with their laws concerning fasting. Again I emphasize *their* laws. According to Old Testament Law, fasting was required once a year, on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement (Lev. 16:29-31). However, as was typical of these Pharisees, they went beyond what was required in Scripture and established the practice of fasting on Mondays and Thursdays. As Geoff Thomas points out, “The Pharisees taught that anyone serious about God would have to be far more religious than one day in 365, because they had redefined religion as frequent ceremonies and loads of regulations. So they fasted twice a week, that is, a hundred times more than God asked.”¹

We need to note here that the exceeding what was written in the Law was not the problem. If that were the case, then Jesus Himself was out of line when He fasted for forty days in the wilderness. Times of intense spiritual fasting beyond the one-day requirement was not unusual, nor was it wrong. The problem was that the Pharisees had made this excessiveness a requirement for righteousness, as they had many of their other additions to the Law. So Jesus once again addresses the root of the problem.

2. An answer concerning fasting (vv. 19-20)

Notice that Jesus does not confront them with their additions to the Law or their arrogance, which He certainly would have been right in doing. His concern was that they refused to acknowledge the newness of the kingdom, that the rules and regulations were changing based upon His authority. They did not at this point understand that they stood in the midst of the Mediator of the New Covenant and that when the priesthood changed, there of necessity took place a change of law (Heb. 7:12). They were ignorant of the truth, “There is a setting aside of a former commandment because of its weakness and uselessness” (Heb. 7:18). They did not recognize that the first covenant was faulty, not in the covenant itself, but in their fault in keeping it. The irony is that now they are trying to find fault with Jesus’ teaching and actions.

So here Jesus reveals a bit more of the mystery concerning the newness of the kingdom. He lifts the veil a bit more and again reveals who He is. “**And Jesus said to them, ‘While the bridegroom is with them, the attendants of the bridegroom cannot fast, can they? So long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast.’**” Jesus response to their question is on a plane that even these self-righteous Pharisees could understand, at least temporally. He answers their question with an illustration of a wedding feast. In ancient society, the bride and the groom did not honeymoon as they do in our culture. They stayed home for a week and there

¹ <http://www.alfredplacechurch.org.uk/sermons/mark12.htm>

was a great wedding celebration attended by their friends and family. The Jewish rabbis even allowed the attendees to be free from any law about fasting during that period.

While the Pharisees would have understood this temporally, it was the spiritual application that Jesus was trying to get across to those who had ears to hear. He introduces Himself as the bridegroom, the One who had come to wed His bride. Jesus once again shows them that the kingdom of God was at hand, that the bridegroom was present. This was a wedding, not a funeral. It required feasting, not fasting. This was a time for joy, not mourning. That is why His followers, His true disciples, did not fast on this occasion. They recognized their husband.

Jesus then interjects a bombshell, **“But the days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast in that day.”** Why do I call this a bombshell? Because this is Jesus’ first mention that He would not always be with them. It was His first announcement of Calvary, of His death, burial, resurrection, and ascension. There would come a day of departure for the Bridegroom. That would be the appropriate time for fasting. We again see irony here. It is this same group that He is speaking to about inappropriate fasting that would send Him to the Cross and provide the occasion for appropriate fasting. They would be the ones to put the Bridegroom to death. And when the Bridegroom was taken away from His bride, **“then they will fast on that day.”**

What did Jesus mean by **“that day”**? John Piper notes the following:

Some have suggested that he is referring only to the several days between his death and resurrection. In other words, the Bridegroom will be taken away from Good Friday through Easter Sunday morning. During these three days the disciples would fast. But then he would be with them again, and they would not fast any longer.²

If this is the case, then fasting is inappropriate today. The church age in which we live should be a time of great joy and celebration, not mourning and fasting. However, this view has some difficulties, the greatest being that the early church fasted on certain occasions (Acts 13:1-3; 14:23; 2 Cor. 6:5; 11:27). Either the early church fasted inappropriately, or the suggestion that the time of fasting was only for those three days is incorrect.

Another view has been offered that Piper supports which I think is correct. This is the view that **“that day”** means that after his death and resurrection he will return to his Father in heaven, and during that time the disciples will fast.³ Robert Gundry states it this way, “The entirety of the church age constitutes ‘the days’ that ‘will come when the bridegroom is taken away.’”⁴ This seems to be the better interpretation and suggests that the time of fasting is appropriate until the Bridegroom returns for His bride at the end of the age (Matt. 25:1-13). So fasting, though for a different purpose that we will return to in a moment, is appropriate for believers today. It is one of the evidences of this new relationship that Jesus came to establish between the bride and the Bridegroom.

II. A New Framework (2:21-22)

In answering this question about fasting, Jesus offers two parables to illustrate the point that this new relationship required and entirely different framework than that of the Pharisees.

² John Piper, *A Hunger for God*, 36-37

³ Piper, 37

⁴ Ibid.

1. The parable of the garment (v. 21) – Not in addition to tradition

“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.” As is the case with parables, the earthy application of this is rather simple. If you use a new piece of cloth to mend a hole in an older garment, everything is fine until you wash the garment and through it in the dryer. After a few times, you know what will happen. The newer material used to patch the garment will shrink, and when it does, it will tear away. Therefore, the patch that was supposed to solve a problem creates a bigger one.

But the earthy application is not what Jesus is shooting for here. His purpose was not to train them in the dry cleaning business. There is always a spiritual application undergirding a parable. Garments symbolized the covering of man’s sin in the Old Testament. In Genesis 3:7 we see man’s first attempt at self-righteousness. Immediately upon the Fall of Adam and Eve, “the eyes of both of them were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loin coverings.” God then intervenes and demonstrates His grace, “The LORD God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife, and clothed them” (3:21). We saw this in our Scripture reading in Isaiah 63:10, “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, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.”

So Jesus purpose in this parable is to expose the self-righteous approach of the Pharisees. This new framework was not something to simply be added to the old, like a new patch on old clothing. The new was not simply a covering up or patching of the holes in the old. It was entirely different. The requirements of the Old were but a shadow of the New. So what Jesus is telling them in this parable is that the Old was entirely done away with. As the writer of Hebrews put it, “When He said, ‘A new *covenant*,’ He has made the first obsolete. But whatever is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to disappear” (Heb. 8:13).

We see attempts to patch up the old today in the efforts of some to syncretize their religion with that of Christianity. Lori and I saw this a few years ago in a trip to Central Mexico. This area was steeped in Indian mysticism, Roman Catholicism, and forms of animism. The Christian way of salvation through Christ alone, which some professed, was nothing more than another layer of protection in their religiosity. But this is nothing more than Jesus plus. That was the problem with the Pharisees. As long as they could maintain their old belief system and simply sprinkle a little bit of Jesus in, add a patch, then they were fine. Jesus said, “No, the old must be done away with or else you will be worse off in the end.”

2. The parable of the wineskins (v. 22) – Not a fitting into tradition

Jesus then reinforced this truth with a second parable. **“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.”** Wineskins were made from the skins of an animal, typically a sheep or a goat. When the wineskins were fresh, they provided a good container for fermenting wine. The fermentation process produced gases that would expand or inflate the wineskins. These skins, while new, provided the necessary elasticity for the process. However, as the wineskins dried out, they lost their elasticity and began to crack, either leaking or literally bursting because of the expansion. Therefore, both the skins and the wine were lost. Again, the Pharisees would readily recognize the earthy application.

But again, Jesus was not concerned with the earthly, but the spiritual. Wineskins symbolized the rigidity and inflexibility of Pharisaical religion. Jesus' kingdom could not operate within those legalistic restraints. Jesus did not come to simply reform the ways of Judaism. The new was not simply something to fit into the tradition of the old. Righteousness comes not by simple reform, but through the regenerating power of the Holy Spirit. Salvation is by grace, not by works.

It is important that we recognize this today. Many professing Christians are ensnared by what I call "the performance treadmill." Their Christianity is tied to their works, their performance. They think that if they can just get rid of this or that particular sin, then they are righteous in God's eyes. The alcoholic quits drinking; the drug abuser stops buying and using; the adulterer refrains from immorality, etc. But while these people might be more moral, they are not necessarily righteous. Their attempts at righteousness are no different than that of the Pharisees. That is why Jesus was so direct with Nicodemus. "Now there was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews; ² this man came to Jesus by night and said to Him, 'Rabbi, we know that You have come from God *as* a teacher; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him.'³ Jesus answered and said to him, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God'" (John 3:1-3). Jesus' response to Nicodemus was forthright, "Nicodemus, you do not need renewal or reformation. You need to be regenerate, to be born again."

III. A New Reality

- 1. Why do we fast?**
- 2. How do we fast?**
- 3. When do we fast?**

Conclusion

- 1. We must guard our hearts against ritualism as it relates to spiritual disciplines.**
- 2. Self-righteousness blinds us of our own faults.**
- 3. Just as Jesus' ministry on this earth brought a radical change in the outworking of God's covenant, so there is a radical change in the life of a person who has truly repented of their sins and trusted Christ as Lord and Savior.**