

In with the New
Mark 2:18-22

This morning, we return to Mark's gospel in chapter 2 to resume looking at our Savior Jesus Christ and His ministry and what is taken place so far, and as we continue to work through it here in chapter 2. We are still early on, but we've seen some things clearly stated so far; for instance, the purpose that Mark is driving, with writing this in the first place, in chapter 1:1; "The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." The good news of the Messiah has come, and he wants to give this letter, give this account of Christ's work and His ministry, for the church in Rome as a historical kind of undergirding, a foundation, for what they believe. What is the good news? And it centers upon Jesus, Jesus the Messiah. We saw Jesus presented by John the Baptist and officially recognized by the Father when He was baptized, and then we saw Him going forth in obedience, enduring the temptation of Satan, and then, beginning His ministry in Galilee as He went back up north from Judea to the region of Galilee. We saw His message clearly stated in 1:15; "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel."

The rest of chapter 1 goes on to unfold Jesus in this preaching ministry; Jesus in these preaching tours, as He's going through the region of Galilee from city to town, doing miracles to back up the very message He was bringing to these people as He went through. We saw a shift in chapter 2 take place, though, as Jesus went through the rest of chapter 1 preaching this message. In chapter 2, we saw a controversy start to stir up when Jesus was interacting with this paralytic man that was brought into the house where He was teaching. Jesus did not heal this man physically, first, but rather told him, "...your sins are forgiven." And, immediately, that sparked some controversy within the hearts and minds of those that were watching. Jesus addressed this and healed the paralytic to prove that He did in fact have that authority. The controversy only continued, from what we saw last time, when Jesus not only claimed to have authority to forgive sins, but, last time, we saw Jesus associating, actually, hanging out with, eating with, tax collectors and sinners... that He would call Levi, this tax collector Matthew, to follow Him and then to go to this feast at his house afterwards to dine with other tax collectors and sinners.

Jesus has been stirring the pot, in this sense, as far as controversy goes, and that will continue into our passage today. Join with me in looking at Mark 2:18; “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?’ 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. The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast in that day. 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. 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.’ ” Today, we see this interaction, really, takes place because of one thing, that is this topic of fasting.

And so that’s the issue that we see in verse 18. The issue that’s presented, the issue that strikes this all up and brings it onto the table, is this concept, this practice, of fasting. Once again, if you just look at verse 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?’ ” This is the issue. We see this progression taking place when Jesus told the paralytic “...your sins are forgiven.” There were people questioning in their heart, not out loud, but just questioning in their heart why Jesus would say something like that. But when Jesus interacted with Levi and then went into his house and ate with tax collectors, there’s people that were actually saying things out loud. They’re, actually, saying why? Why does He do this? ...talking to Jesus’ disciples and asking this question. Now, we see them coming straight to Jesus with this concern, straight to Jesus about this concern of His disciples not fasting, when others are.

Notice that we have John mentioned again; “Now, John’s disciples...” This is John the Baptist. John the Baptist that we’ve seen, only briefly, in the gospel of Mark. The last time we saw John mentioned was in 1:14; “Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God...” So, John the Baptist’s been off the scene for a little bit. He did have a booming and amazing ministry that took place in Judea as all were coming out to him and being baptized by him and listening to his teaching, but as we saw in verse 14, he was arrested, and eventually he would be killed. This is

where John is; however, his disciples are still, really, a mass of them throughout the nation of Israel, and even, if you look into Acts, when we get to Acts 19, you see that there are disciples of John that are all the way in Ephesus. Somehow, they made their way there, and they had still not heard the full news, the finished story, of Jesus being the fulfillment of what John preached. John's ministry was large. John's ministry was impactful; so, even though John is in jail, you still have his disciples following what he was teaching.

And these two groups have some big spiritual leaders at this time. If you think about it, the Pharisees, we've already seen these scribes, these people, that knew the Law really well. They were the experts. If people had questions, they'd go to the Pharisees. In fact, they just naturally looked at the Pharisees for a model, a model of what it looks like to know and understand and live it out. That's what they understood. But then, you also had this movement that John the Baptist had started and his followers. So, they, too, were becoming popular, and they, too, were another movement that was recognized at this time. And the commonality between both of them is that they both were fasting. Both these movements of spiritual leaders and people that were mature, so to speak, at that time, were engaged regularly in this process of fasting. Interesting to note Mark's perspective here. Luke makes it sound like it's the Pharisees that are coming up with this question. Matthew makes it sound like it's the disciples of John that have this question. Mark just puts them together, and he just leaves it vague for us; "And people came and said to him..." So, people, a group of people, came and said to Jesus and had this same concern; why are we fasting but you aren't and your disciples are not?

Since this is the issue, since this is the topic at hand, it helps us to know a little bit more about fasting. What is fasting? I mean, there's a lot of people that take fasting in different directions, and they apply it to all kind of things, fasting from TV and internet and other things like that. Simply put, fasting is abstaining from food, though, as we've already seen with Jesus and being tempted by Satan and His fasting. And you look throughout the Old Testament, and there's lots of examples of fasting. It's interesting to see that in the Old Testament there's only one place where the Israelites were commanded to fast, just one place, and that was in reference to the Day of Atonement in the Law. In the Torah, in the first five books, they were commanded to observe the fast for the Day of Atonement, but other than

that, there wasn't a direct command for them to fast a certain amount or how often.

However, as you go throughout the Old Testament, you recognize that a lot of fasting takes place. People are doing it often, and there were different reasons for it. Some of the most simple and basic ones were the loss of a loved one. If a loved one passed away or there was this pressing situation when someone's physical life... there would be this time of mourning and grieving; and with that, so much hurt, so much heavy depression, that people wouldn't even eat, and there was fasting. It didn't just limit itself to that though, fasting was not just for the times of loss physically, but also the spiritual times of drought even, when people recognize their mistake before God, when people, actually, saw how sinful they were in the presence of the Holy God. When prophets came onto the scene and told the people you need to repent. You need to change. You are not living in accord and standard with what God would have for His people, and the nation of Israel sometimes would listen, and they would recognize how far off track they'd become, and they would feel so hurt by it, they would actually repent, and the repentance would involve this refraining from food. They would fast in order to come back to God. In other times, it was just simply a, like, really, a devotion to God. They were so concerned with something. There's something so pressing upon them that they couldn't think about eating, and they would be in prayer before God. It was connected with prayer so often.

So, there's a whole gambit of, you know, examples of fasting in the Old Testament, and we have them over and over again. For example, when the first king of Israel... when Saul died there was David and tons of other men who would fast in grieving for that loss. There was also people that were, really, fasting because they recognize their sin before God and were attempting to repent. And the classic case is Nineveh; when Jonah came as a prophet to the Ninevites and brought this message saying you guys don't have much time until He destroys you. God will destroy you. And what do they do? Immediately, they respond to this message. Immediately, they call for a fast throughout the city to come back to God, and God relents. So, it's combined with recognizing their sin and their attempts to repent and come to God. Nineveh was the classic case. In addition, just other times when there were petitions to the Lord, when they were requesting things to God. Esther is a good example; this pressing time of the, really, the Israelites being wiped out because of Haman's decree, and so, Esther calling for a fast,

calling for prayer. Or, Ezra as he's taking God's people from captivity back into the land, going through this dangerous and treacherous journey, and Ezra calls for a fast that God would protect them on their way. So, there's different examples of fasting. And there's, safe to say, several and numerous, countless, examples in the Old Testament where we see fasting taking place even though it was only, really, commanded once a year; but there were times where it rose, where people were so pressed by something or some situation that they would refrain from eating,

What do we find in our passage? It's pretty vague. Verse 18 just says, "Now John's disciples and the Pharisees were fasting." Do we know why? No, we don't. We don't have a specific situation or scenario. Did someone just pass away? Was there some pressing revelation of some sort that... where they're recognizing sin that they didn't know before? But we don't know. It doesn't say at all. We, actually, get a little bit of help from parallel passages at this point. In Luke 5:33, it says, "And they said to him, 'The disciples of John fast often and offer prayers, and so do the disciples of the Pharisees, but yours eat and drink.' " ...implying that this fasting is just a practice. It's a normal occurrence for these Pharisees. It's a normal occurrence for the disciples of John. This is what they do. Like they pray, like they normally go to God in prayer, they also have this time where they refrain from eating. This is a regular thing. In fact, we see in Luke 18 when we have the story between the Pharisee and the publican and how they approach God in prayer, and the Pharisee in all of his arrogance and pride says thank you, God, that I'm not like this man, this sinner, because I fast two times a week. That's how holy I am. I'm fasting all the time. I don't wait for some scenario to come up where I refrain from food and go to You in prayer. I regularly implement fasting into my week. That's how holy I am. That's how much I want people to know I follow You.

Thus we have all these different reasons and possibilities out there. The point is, at this moment in Christ's ministry, at this moment in the nation, fasting was pretty common, very common. The spiritual leaders were leading the way in this, in this manner of fasting often, some of them not for good reasons as we mentioned. The Pharisees were not doing it well, that's why Jesus has to warn His disciples in Matthew 6:16-18. Jesus says, "And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, anoint your head and wash

your face, that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.”

How about the disciples of John? Was their fasting the same way? Was it hypocritical? Was it showy? Was it just like the Pharisees? It could be. God knows their hearts, but some of them, it’s probably safe to say, were more in line with whatever John was preaching. And what we know about what John was preaching is back in 1:7-8. John the Baptist ...preached, saying, “After me comes he who is mightier than I, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.” So, John the Baptist made this message known; there is someone coming greater than me. I’m just the forerunner preparing the way. So, the disciples, the followers of John the Baptist, in their fasting, in their praying, more than likely revolved around this, this expectation, this crying out, this desire for the greater one to come that John the Baptist was talking about. So, not all fasting is bad here, and that’s probably even in our scenario. We have a wide variety of some that was hypocritical fasting and some that was legitimate, sincere fasting taking place.

The question still remains, why do these men fast yet Jesus and His disciples you don’t see fasting? More than likely this question makes sense when we think about the passage we had just before this. Right before our text in verse 18, we had Jesus and His disciples in a house with tax collectors and sinners, eating, feasting, Levi holding this banquet. So, you have Pharisees, people that were regarded as the holy ones, and the followers of John the Baptist, a new radical uprising of spirituality in Israel, and they’re fasting. And then, they see this controversial person on the scene. Jesus is stirring the pot through His miracles and preaching, and now, He’s not just associating with tax collectors, but He’s just... He’s eating. He’s feasting. And they’re thinking this is interesting. The mark of a spiritual man seems to be fasting, yet here’s Jesus feasting away with His disciples and the tax collectors, thus bringing about this question. As normal, as we see in the gospels, we see Jesus’ response in the way of teaching even. In verses 19 and 20, we see the instruction that Jesus gives. We’ve already seen controversy over His authority in forgiving sins. We’ve seen controversy regarding His association with tax collectors and sinners, and now this controversy comes up regarding His actions, His choosing not to fast but instead to feast. Jesus takes this opportunity to instruct in two ways.

In verse 19, the first mode of instruction we see is the presence of the bridegroom -the presence of the bridegroom. Once again, verse 19 states, “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.’ ” Again, as normal, Jesus likes to use illustrations and analogies, and He does this again as we saw last time in reference to a physician, and how they heal the sick and not the well. And in this sense, Jesus says picture a wedding. What’s the first thought that pops into your mind when you think of a wedding? It probably wasn’t mourning. It probably wasn’t sorrow and sadness or fasting. And that’s what Jesus does; He goes to a perfect example of what is the opposite of this concept of this deep seated destitute and depression almost. He says picture a wedding. If the bridegroom is there and you have a wedding, then the guests of the bridegroom... you don’t expect them to show up fasting, do you? You don’t go to a wedding, you don’t go to a reception, and expect to see people refusing the cake, and saying I can’t eat, and let me sit here in my sack cloth and ashes and make sure everyone sees how terrible I look and how much cake I’m not eating. This is not the point. This... I mean, so much more for them in their time, weddings were a weeklong event. The whole village, the whole town, got involved. They shut down to celebrate this new marriage taking place, and so a week of getting ready, getting excited and having this celebration. Still, in our day, we understand there’s celebration when it comes to the concept of a wedding.

Jesus stating here... the bridegroom is here and the wedding guests or even the groomsmen (it can go either way here). They’re with the bridegroom. What do you expect them to do? You expect them to enjoy it, to partake. They can’t fast. Jesus has to state, “...they cannot fast.” It’d make no sense. Interesting to see here that Jesus is comparing Himself to the bridegroom. This bridegroom illustration or analogy is used often in the Old Testament in reference to God. God declaring that He is the bridegroom. He’s the groom and Israel His people that He actually loved and secured for Himself. You have this illustration, you have this understanding, bouncing around in the Jewish person’s mind as Jesus is saying the bridegroom and connecting Himself with that very person and individual. This is Jesus making this bold, really, identification with God. He is God. He is that bridegroom that is here.

To confirm this, John the Baptist alludes to this imagery as well. In John 3:28-30, John the Baptist says, “You yourselves bear me witness, that I said,

‘I am not the Christ, but I have been sent before him.’ The one who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice. Therefore this joy of mine is now complete. He must increase, but I must decrease.” This is the time. This is the time that was upon all the people that were there, not just Jesus’ disciples, but all the nation of Israel, to recognize this was the time for John the Baptist to step back and to allow Christ to take front and center stage, for the spotlight to be upon Him. This was the time. The bridegroom is here, and John the Baptist is privileged to just be a friend attending this moment, this occasion, this wedding, when you have the bridegroom here. Thus, if it is true that Jesus is in fact the one who’s to come after John the Baptist, if He is the one that John has been talking about, then you would expect things that are connected to the Messiah, the conditions, the joy, the celebration, the feasting, this concept of a wedding, you would expect that to unfold. And that’s what Jesus’ saying; this is who I am. I’m here among you as that bridegroom. And you’re going to try and tell me that I and My disciples should be fasting? You don’t understand the time that this is. I am the bridegroom, and I am here, the Messiah among you. This is not a time for fasting. You need to recognize what time this is, your visitation from God right in front of you, but you’re still obsessed with fasting and your understanding of it.

Jesus goes on and speaks even more in His instruction, not just the presence of the bridegroom, but the absence, the absence of the bridegroom. In verse 20, He goes on to say, “The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast in that day.” Jesus has already rattled their cage a little bit in what He said, in claiming once again to be the bridegroom. He’s already made the claim that He had the authority to forgive sins, a bold claim showing that He is God and Messiah. He’s already done miracles that show and indicate that only the Messiah could do something as such, and now, He’s using this illustration that He is the bridegroom, and there’s no longer this need for fasting right now. So, this already starts to, once again, be another way of this message going forth to them, that He’s claiming He’s the Messiah, and He’s there. However, Jesus throws a curve ball at them by saying, “The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them...”

“...the bridegroom [will be] taken away...? For them in their understanding of the Old Testament, when they read and understood and heard the prophets

and everything that was to come, they saw it all, all, really, advancing towards a single moment, an occasion, when the Messiah would come and everything would be made right, everything. You'd have physical deliverance. You'd have the Romans put to death. You'd have Israel exalted as the greatest nation. You have Jerusalem higher, and the temple and everyone streaming to it, and Jesus the Messiah reigning as King. That was their expectation. All of this converging on this moment when the Messiah would come, yet here's Jesus in our text saying that He is that Messiah. He is the bridegroom; however, He's going to be taken away from them? This wasn't something they were ready for. They were not ready for this message, and the rest of Mark's gospel shows this over and over again. Jesus will keep telling His disciples this. He will keep repeating Himself; the Son of Man must be arrested and killed, and on the third day He will rise. He had to tell this plainly to His disciples several times, and they still didn't understand it because they were so wrapped up in the concept of the Messiah coming now and changing everything in one shot. But Jesus introduces, here, this concept that the prophets actually did talk about the suffering servant, the suffering Messiah, but also the victorious and reigning Messiah. They were not ready for this. So, Jesus has no qualms with fasting. There's nothing wrong with fasting. He's not trying to say fasting's terrible because a time will come when fasting will be necessary again because He will leave, and the Messiah will be gone.

Interesting to even hear a little bit of how Jesus describes this time to come. When He was about to be crucified, right before He got delivered up to go on trial and be crucified, listen to some of the things He told His disciples: In Mark 13:9; "But be on your guard. For they will deliver you over to councils, and you will be beaten in synagogues, and you will stand before governors and kings for my sake, to bear witness before them." Mark 13:12-13; "And brother will deliver brother over to death, and the father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death. And you will be hated by all for my name's sake." Luke 17:2; "And he said to the disciples, 'The days are coming when you will desire to see one of the days of the Son of Man, and you will not see it.'" John 16:20; "Truly, truly, I say to you, you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice. You will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will turn into joy." Jesus has to put this on the table, that, yes, He is the bridegroom. Yes, He is the Messiah, and He is here among them now; however, the time is coming when He will, in fact, leave, and that time will be a time that is full of trials and tribulations and

difficulties for His disciples as well as the church. And that's why He does state, in fact, they will fast in that day. That time is coming. They will fast in that day. Jesus has just introduced and presented a concept that would go way over peoples' heads. It's just... it's too much for them. They don't understand this. They have one understanding. They have a one track mind when it comes to the Messiah and what He would do, but He's just presented a coming of the Messiah and a leaving of the Messiah. This is totally new to them, and that's the point. This is completely new. This is how off track they were.

They weren't ready for this, and Jesus has to address some of the problems here, the danger in their thinking and their expectation that they have, and that's why He gives these final illustrations that we see in verses 21-22... the illustrations that surface; "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." If you have an old garment that's been washed over and over again, with a hole in it, you would not take a new piece of cloth from a new garment that hasn't been washed to patch that hole because as we know things shrink when you wash them. So, the shrinking would then tear away from that old garment once again, and you'd have a worse hole. The new and the old, in that sense, they're not compatible. That's not a good thing; "...a worse tear is made." They don't go together. In verse 22, a similar illustration; "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." The wineskins that they had back then to hold their wine, they were good for when you put wine in once because when the wine was fermenting in the wineskin, the wineskin itself would also expand, expand in that process, and it'd be good for that one-time use; but if you tried to keep that wineskin and pour new wine back into it, when it came time for the wine to ferment again while it was in that wineskin, this wineskin was already worn out. The elasticity had expired, and so it would just burst. That's why Jesus says, "But new wine is for fresh wineskins."

His point is once again hammering on and showing and indicating that these Pharisees and even these disciples of John did not fully recognize the time in front of them. They had no idea what Jesus was bringing. What Jesus had just introduced was so far beyond them - they weren't ready for it. The Pharisees completely wrapped up... putting Jesus in a box. When the Messiah comes, He's going to look just like us. He's going to do everything

we do. He's going to fast just as much as us, maybe more. He's going to give just as much as us, and He's going to make sure everyone knows it. He's going to look just like us. These were the Pharisees totally putting the Messiah in a box. And Jesus says absolutely not! I do not fit into your box. I am that new piece of cloth. I am the new wine, and I will not, and there's no way we can work together. It's not going to fit. You are so far off the road, you need a complete course correction, and that's what I'm here to do. Even in your expectation of the Messiah, you have this expectation of a reigning king, a ruler, a military general, to come, and you totally miss the fact that the Old Testament prophesied a suffering Messiah; that's what I'm here for. I'm here to suffer because I will leave. I will no longer be with you.

There's an absolute, just complete, difference in their way of thinking and what Jesus came to do, and that's what He's revealing in these illustrations. Fasting is just a little example that reveals a bigger problem. Just their understanding of fasting in and of itself showed that they had this massive need for change, and they didn't even know what it was. Even what they thought the need was, was wrong. It was based on externals and what you looked like or was based on a political, physical leader to destroy everyone. They didn't recognize that the new, that Jesus was saying that would not work with their way of thinking, was the new covenant. It was the fact that He would come and lay down His life. He would come and offer up His body so that they could receive a new heart, the very need that they had. The greatest need they had, yet they had no recognition of it. Thus Jesus says My way of ministry and what I'm here to do is not compatible with what you're thinking. They can't go together. This is totally new.