

The Right and Wrong Times for Fasting: Mark 2:18-22
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Sunday, March 7, 2010

One of our great passions as a church is to be a people of the Book. We want to focus everything we do on the truth that God has revealed to us in the Bible. These are the words of life to us, and it's our joy and privilege to gather each week to study the Bible together and apply it to our lives and encourage one another with the truth of the Word. What is so glorious about this Book is that it communicates to us the Good News of Jesus Christ. The whole theme and message of the Bible is Christ crucified for sinners. This is the Gospel! I want us to be a church that, week after week and day after day, marvels at the astounding message of Gospel. It seems too good to be true, but it is true. Jesus Christ died on the cross to bear the punishment for our sins! For all who will repent of sin and put their trust in Jesus, there is forgiveness. I hope this morning that we will all see what a radical message this is.

We are working our way through the Gospel of Mark right now, which has been an exciting experience for me. I'm learning so much each week as I study these passages, and I'm excited to see how God is going to use our corporate study of this book to make us more in awe of our Savior and to draw unbelievers to Jesus. Each Sunday we get to look closely at the things Jesus said, the things He did, the ways that people reacted to Him. And with each piece of the story we should walk away saying, There is nobody like Jesus. There is no one like our Savior.

We saw this last week in the account of Jesus calling Levi to be one of His disciples. Levi, also known as Matthew, was a tax collector, a despised position in that society. But Jesus called him and changed him and even used him to write the Gospel of Matthew. What an awesome example of the radical change that Jesus brings about in the lives of those whom He calls. Then Jesus went to Levi's house and ate with tax collectors and sinners, an act which greatly offended the religious leaders. They couldn't believe that Jesus would stoop so low as to eat with such people. But Jesus went right to the heart of the scribes' problem by confronting their self-righteousness, and He said to them in verse 17, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners." He is saying to these self-righteous religious leaders, You think you don't need any help, then I won't help you. I have come for those who recognize their desperate condition. I have come for those who know they are sick. I have come for those sinners who will admit they are sinners.

Jesus is calling people to repent of sin and believe in the Gospel, but as long as someone thinks they are righteous, as long as they think they are well, they will not repent, nor will they look to Jesus as their only hope.

In the first section of chapter 2 (verses 1-12) we saw that Jesus has the authority to forgive sins (and the scribes questioned this), and then this statement in verse 17 in response to the scribes shows us whose sins He will forgive, namely, those who see that they need forgiveness.

This morning we're going to look at the next section, verses 18-22, where again Jesus is questioned. This time the question concerns his disciples, but it's just another way of opposing Jesus Himself. And the issue at hand is fasting. Again, Jesus is not conforming to the practices of the religious leaders, and this evokes a negative response.

I've entitled this message, *The Right and Wrong Times for Fasting*.

Just to give you an outline of what we'll be looking at in these verses, let me give you three headings that will guide our study. First of all, verse 18 contains *a question about fasting*. Secondly, in verses 19-20 Jesus responds to that question by asserting that *the bridegroom is here*. And you don't fast when the wedding feast is going on. Thirdly, in verses 21-22 there are two brief parables that illustrate *the radical newness that Jesus brings*.

A Question about Fasting (verse 18)

"John's disciples and the Pharisees were fasting." John's disciples refers to the disciples of John the Baptist. And even though John's ministry was designed to point people to Jesus, apparently some of John's disciples still did not recognize the significance of who Jesus was. They do not realize that the time for fasting had ceased for the time being, while Jesus is present with them. And so they are still fasting. The Pharisees, also, are continuing to fast. They refuse to see Jesus for who He is and reject His claims.

The Old Testament only mentions one *required* fast, and that is on the Day of Atonement. There were voluntary fasts, but the Day of Atonement was the only mandatory fast. It speaks of fasting in terms of afflicting oneself. They were to afflict themselves by going without food for a day, from evening to evening. Leviticus 16:29-30 says, "And it shall be a statute to you forever that in the seventh month, on the tenth day of the month, you shall afflict yourselves and shall do no work, either the native or the stranger who sojourns among you. For on this day shall atonement be made for you to cleanse you." The Pharisees, however, in developing the regulations of their traditions, had

designated every Monday and Thursday, from dawn to dusk, as days of fasting. In Luke 18:12, in the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector, the Pharisee congratulates himself for fasting “twice a week.”

John’s disciples also fasted often. We’re not sure exactly how often, but in the parallel passage in Luke 5 the question opens with the statement that “the disciples of John fast often and offer prayers” (Luke 5:33). And in the Matthew parallel, it specifies that the disciples of John are asking the question (Matthew 9:14). So this question, and this opposition, is not just coming from the Pharisees, but also from John the Baptist’s disciples who are still trying to figure this all out.

People are noticing this huge discrepancy between what John’s disciples and the Pharisees are doing and what Jesus’ disciples are doing. They see the Pharisees fasting twice a week. They also see John’s disciples fasting regularly. And, by the way, this makes us think of Jesus’ exhortation in Matthew 6 where He says, “when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others.” And He says, rather, that our fasting should not be seen by others but by our Father who is in heaven (Matthew 6:16-18). Here’s the scene that prompts the question. There were the gloomy, disheveled people who were fasting and wanted everyone to know they were fasting. And then there was Jesus and His disciples who were feasting. They were doing the opposite of fasting. They were going to parties. They were reclining at Levi’s house enjoying a great feast.

And so the question comes up, “Why do John’s disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?” There seems to be something very wrong with Jesus’ ministry if He and His disciples are not fasting. For those observing this scene, Jesus’ ministry seemed suspect because fasting had been replaced by feasting. Of course, we remember that Jesus *did* fast. He had fasted in the wilderness for 40 days right after His baptism, right before He launched His public ministry. There is a right time for fasting, and Jesus’ fasting in the wilderness was an integral part of his temptation experience. But now there is no more fasting, but instead feasting. During Jesus’ earthly ministry it was now the wrong time to fast.

The Bridegroom is Here! (verses 19-20)

This leads us to our second heading where verses 19-20 contain Jesus’ answer to this question. And the essence of His answer is, the bridegroom is here. There is a right time to fast, and there is a wrong time to fast. And when the bridegroom is in your midst, it is the wrong time to fast. At a wedding celebration you

do not fast. Rather, you have a feast. And that's what is going on here.

Do you see in these verses that there's a focus on the timing of things? It's not that Jesus is saying that fasting is a bad thing. He's not saying that there should never be any fasting. But it's a matter of timing. There are right and wrong times for fasting, and when Jesus was on the earth, ushering in the Kingdom of God, it was the wrong time to fast.

He says, "Can the wedding guests fast *while* the bridegroom is with them? *As long as* they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast." It's a matter of timing. It's a matter of Christ's presence with us. During His earthly ministry, as He ushered in the Kingdom of God, it was to be a time of celebrating and rejoicing. The bridegroom is here! In the Old Testament God is spoken of as the bridegroom of His people. For example, Isaiah 65:5 says, "as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you." And now Jesus is identifying Himself as the bridegroom. He is God incarnate who has come to save His people. And the appropriate response should be to celebrate. The time of mourning and fasting and longing is over. The Messiah has arrived!

Imagine if a group of people at your wedding reception sat in a corner and sulked through the entire celebration. They wouldn't eat or drink anything. They wouldn't sing or dance. They wouldn't talk with other guests. They wouldn't laugh or even smile. They just sat there looking glum. And imagine if one of those folks walked over to the head table where you were sitting and said, Why aren't you over there in the corner with us? Why do you look so happy? You shouldn't be enjoying this food and drink. You should be with us, looking sad and depressed.

What does that reveal? It reveals that the people in the corner have missed something really big. They do not know where they are. They don't know who they're talking to. They think they're at a funeral, when in fact they are at a wedding feast. And that's exactly what Jesus is saying in response to this question.

He's saying, you're acting as though somebody died, when in fact your long-awaited Messiah has arrived. But you're too blind to realize it. To fast at a time like this is absolutely ludicrous. This is the not the right time for fasting. It's the time for feasting and celebration.

But then verse 20 brings a solemn tone to the statement because Jesus makes it clear that this celebrating is not going to continue on indefinitely. "The days will come *when* the bridegroom is taken away from them, and *then* they will fast in that day." A time for fasting is on the horizon, and that time will come when the bridegroom is taken away. Jesus is already looking

toward the cross. He knows that He will die, and that He will then rise again, and that He will then ascend to heaven. And then, even though He is still with us in a profound way through His Spirit, there is also a profound sense in which we long for Him to come again so that we can experience the fullness of His presence.

And this is the time we now live in. We live in the time between Christ's first coming and His second coming. In one sense Christ is not here with us, not in the way that we long for Him to be. Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 5:8, "we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord." And he writes in Philippians 1:23, "My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better." We are not now experiencing the fullness of Christ's presence like we will in heaven. And therefore it is now the right time for fasting. But it's a new kind of fasting, because it's not as though the bridegroom has not come. The bridegroom has come, but has now been taken away. And we are waiting and longing for His return. But we now fast on this side of the cross. We fast knowing that the bridegroom has died in our place to redeem His bride. So it's an entirely new kind of fast. It's a new cloth, new wine.

What we ought to participate in now is *Christian* fasting. Not a fasting that is merely a mourning over sin, like the Israelites were to do on the Day of Atonement, although we should mourn over our sin. Not a fasting that is awaiting the *first* coming of the Messiah, which is what John's disciples seemed to be doing, still lacking understanding of who Jesus was. Certainly not a fasting that is showy and self-righteous like the Pharisees. Christian fasting is to be a humble expression of our longing for Christ's *second* coming.

We stand in this unique place in history, between the first coming of Christ and His second coming. We stand in between the cross and the consummation of all things. The Kingdom has been inaugurated, but not yet consummated. And so we are in the overlap of the ages. The Kingdom of God is already here with power, but not yet here in all of its fullness. And so we live with the tension of feasting and fasting. We celebrate what Christ has done for us, and we also desperately long for His return. We look back to the cross, and we rejoice in what Christ accomplished for us. And our hearts ache as we see the remaining sin in our hearts and in our world. And we yearn for Christ to return and set all things right. We look forward to that marriage supper of the Lamb that is mentioned in Revelation 19. Once Christ returns and we enter into the eternal enjoyment of that feast, we will fast no more. But presently in our yearning for that feast, we now fast.

Now let me ask the question, What does this look like practically? What should fasting look like in our lives? What

should we go without, and what should we be thinking about and praying about as we go without certain things? When we think of fasting, we mainly think of fasting from food—going without food for a certain period of time. This is what Jesus did in the wilderness for forty days just before the beginning of His ministry. Luke 4:2 says, “he ate nothing during those days. And when they were ended, he was hungry.” So we primarily think of fasting in terms of eating nothing for a certain period of time, whether that is skipping one meal, or a day of meals, or going without food for several days. But when we see the principle behind fasting, we can apply it more broadly as well. The principle is: food is a good gift from God that we are to enjoy, but there ought to be times when we go without that enjoyment as a reminder that the Giver is far greater than the gifts. It reminds us that our ultimate enjoyment is not the food, but the One who provides the food, and it serves to intensify our desire for the ultimate enjoyment of feasting with Jesus forever in heaven.

And when we think of fasting as temporarily going without one of God’s good gifts to us, we can then apply this in a variety of ways. Martyn Lloyd-Jones wrote that “Fasting, if we conceive of it truly, must not . . . be confined to the question of food and drink; fasting should really be made to include abstinence from anything which is legitimate in and of itself for the sake of some special spiritual purpose. There are many bodily functions which are right and normal and perfectly legitimate, but which for special peculiar reasons in certain circumstances should be controlled. That is fasting.”¹ For some, totally abstaining from food may not be realistic. If you’re pregnant, for instance, or if you have some physical condition that would make it unsafe for you to go without food, then you need to consider those factors in your life. But I want to encourage all of us to fast in one way or another. If not food, something else. Maybe for a period of time you would go without candy or dessert, or abstain from coffee or soft drinks, or go on a media fast and not watch TV or surf the net. Maybe you would decide that you’re not going to shop for clothes for the next month, or you’re going to put away your video games for a length of time. Find something in your life that is a legitimate enjoyment when done in moderation, but may be a helpful spiritual exercise to go without it for a time. It’s not a sin to enjoy a dessert or a coffee or a soft drink. It’s not a sin to watch TV or use the internet. It’s not a sin to shop for clothes or play video games. All of these things are legitimate enjoyments when done in moderation.

But the amazing thing about Christian fasting is that when we decide to go without food, or something else, it can begin to

¹ *Studies in Sermon on the Mount*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960), page 38. Quoted in John Piper, *Hunger for God*, page 200.

reveal that maybe we are more dependent on that thing than we thought. It serves to diagnose our spiritual condition in many ways. Maybe we're pretty nice people as long as we're well fed and comfortable and sufficiently entertained. But if we take away a couple of those things and we turn into monsters, then we realize that we have some heart issues to deal with. I know this to be the case in my own experience. When I'm fasting I can be more irritable, less patient.

The thing I have faced most often in fasting is a feeling of being down and discouraged, not looking forward to fasting, wanting it to be over. And in a sense that may be partially appropriate because in fasting we are mourning the fact that the Lord is not yet with us as He will be when He returns, and we are yearning for that Day to come. But I also know that my feelings toward fasting reveal that I love food far too much. My happiness is too dependent on whether my appetite is satisfied. And I pray that as I continue in the discipline of fasting that God will intensify my hunger for Him so that my happiness is not so affected by whether my stomach is full or not.

Fasting reveals the idols of our hearts so that we can turn away from those idols and worship the One true God. Maybe food is an idol in your life, and every time you feel the slightest growl in your stomach you are accustomed to satisfying that hunger immediately. Maybe sweets and desserts are an idol, and to go any length of time without them would be agonizing. Maybe coffee or soft drinks or TV or the internet or clothes or video games are an idol. Let's each consider a fast so that we can see more clearly those things that have a hold on our hearts. And then, by God's grace, we can war against those heart idols, those lesser joys, and intensify our delight in God.

When Stacy and I were in college we dated long-distance for quite awhile. She was at Michigan State University in East Lansing, and I was at Wheaton College outside of Chicago. Stacy and I longed to be together, and that was evident in a lot of different ways. I would work odd jobs so that I could rent a little Geo Metro for the weekend and drive to East Lansing. And we would spend as much time together as we could in two days. And then a month or two later Stacy would drive over to Wheaton and we enjoyed some phenomenal dates in downtown Chicago. And in between those visits we would have long talks on the phone, we would send emails to each other (which was relatively new at that time), and we would send real letters (written by hand on pieces of paper and sent in envelopes; do you remember those?). And I remember when I would get a letter from Stacy it was like a priceless treasure had just been dropped in the mail box. I would find a place to sit down where my roommates weren't going to

bother me, and I would pour over every word of that letter. Some of the letters even had a little bit of Stacy's perfume on them, and it was almost like she was there. And our hearts ached for one another. We longed to be together.

Now suppose in addition to that relationship that I had another girlfriend at Wheaton whom I dated when Stacy was gone, and that Stacy had another boyfriend at Michigan State whom she dated when I wasn't there.² Suppose that we were each dating other people? How would that affect the intensity of our longing for each other? We probably wouldn't talk on the phone nearly as much, or send as many emails or letters. We probably wouldn't make as much of an effort to travel to see each other.

We wonder why our longing for Christ's return is so weak. It's because we have other lovers. We are numbed with the satisfaction of a full stomach, a comfortable life, an amused mind. We fall in love with the things of this world and then we don't long for that which is infinitely better. We need to sever these adulterous relationships. We need to crush these idols. And in doing so we will awaken a greater longing to see our Savior. Fasting will help us greatly in this, in identifying the idols, dismantling those idols, and focusing our attention on the bridegroom.

For a few months now the elders have been encouraging the congregation to fast in some way on the second Tuesday of each month. That happens to be this coming Tuesday. It's our desire that as a church we would join our hearts together in prayer and fasting for genuine spiritual revival among us. We want more of God. We want to see Him and experience His power in our lives and in our church and in our city. We want to see people saved. We want to see lives changed. And fasting is a way for us to express those desires and intensify those desires as we go without food, or something else, and give special attention to prayer. I encourage you to consider what this might look like in your life—this Tuesday.

The Radical Newness that Jesus Brings (verses 21-22)

In closing let's briefly look at these two parables Jesus shares in verses 21-22. Each of these short parables points out the same thing: the radical newness that Jesus brings. There's a parable about cloth, and a parable about wine. And the point is the same. You can't mix new and old. "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

² I owe this illustration to a friend of mine, Kris McGee, who used a similar illustration in a sermon he preached on this passage.

burst the skins—and the wine is destroyed, and so are the skins. But new wine is for fresh wineskins.” These statements apply to the discussion on fasting, but also more generally to Jesus’ whole ministry. He did not come to patch up the Pharisees’ religion. He did not come to supplement something else. He did not come as just a new teacher who would assume the same old wineskins. He bursts onto the scene with a radically new teaching, a teaching that is incompatible with every other religion.

Here’s the point for us: The person and work and message of Jesus cannot be mixed with any other system of religion. You cannot take the legalistic religion of the Pharisees and patch onto it the message of the Gospel. You cannot mix Islam or Buddhism or Hinduism or Mormonism with the radical message of Jesus Christ crucified for sinners. What Jesus came to preach and to do is completely at odds with the false religions and cults of the world. You cannot patch them together. You cannot treat spirituality like a salad bar, like so many people would like to do. Take a little bit of this and a little bit of that and put together a set of spiritual beliefs that are to my liking. If there is such a thing as Truth, then the salad bar approach to spirituality is utterly ridiculous. And what I hope you’ll realize this morning is that the message of Jesus Christ is a package deal. You can’t separate it out and say that you like Jesus as a person, you like His morality, but you don’t accept the fact that He died on the cross and rose from the dead, or you refuse to submit to His absolute Lordship over your life, or you feel like Christ has done so much for you but you still have to add your good works to the equation in order to be right with God. In various ways we’re tempted to mix the Good News of Jesus Christ with the views of false religions, but we have to understand that the Gospel is utterly distinct and set apart from these other beliefs.

There’s no one like Jesus. He makes radical claims. He does radical things. And He calls us to follow Him in a radical way. Please don’t try to fit Jesus into your spirituality medley. He won’t allow it. Either you submit to His call to repentance and faith in the Gospel, or you reject Him entirely. There’s no middle ground.

If these things are new to you, I would encourage you to sit down and read through this Gospel of Mark in its entirety. If you don’t have a Bible, we invite you to take one of ours. Read about the things Jesus says and does. Talk to people in this church who have been changed by this Savior. And consider the Good News of Jesus Christ crucified for sinners like me and you.