

## “Why So Serious?”

Mark 2:18-22

<sup>18</sup> 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?” <sup>19</sup> 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. <sup>20</sup> The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast in that day. <sup>21</sup> 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. <sup>22</sup> 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.” (ESV)

We've been looking at the Book of Mark since January. The reason we've been looking at the Book of Mark is because up until Easter I'm following the church calendar this year. The church calendar goes from Advent (the birth of Jesus) to the appearance of Jesus and the beginning of His ministry up through His conflict with religious leaders, His crucifixion and ultimately on Easter His resurrection. In the first chapter of Mark, Jesus appears on the scene and He begins preaching the kingdom of God. By the end of chapter one people realize there is something about Him. Among other things He can exorcise demons and heal the sick. People come to Him from everywhere to be healed or to have demons cast out. At the end of chapter one Jesus begins to pick a fight, because He heals a leper and tells the leper after He's healed him, made him physically clean, “Go show yourself to the priest and have him proclaim you ceremonially clean.” That's going to put the priests in a tight spot because if they proclaim the leper clean then they will have affirmed who Jesus is, and if they don't proclaim the leper clean then everyone will think they're crazy because he's obviously in front of them and he's clean.

Starting in chapter two you have five conflicts in a row that Jesus has with the religious leaders, particularly known as the Pharisees. The first conflict we looked at was a couple of weeks ago when they were upset with Jesus because He somehow thought He had the authority to forgive sins. Remember the story of the paralytic who was lowered through the roof by his four friends and Jesus surprises everybody and says, “My son, your sins are forgiven.” They say what anyone would say, “Who do You think You are that You can forgive sins? Only God can do that.” And Jesus replies, “Which is easier, to forgive sins or to say, ‘Rise up and walk.’ You know I have authority to do the one. I'm going to tell you to do the other. Rise up and walk.” The paralytic walks out and everyone is amazed at him.

The first conflict has to do with Jesus' authority. The second conflict really has to do with Jesus' audacity. It's one thing to stand afar and say, “I forgive you.” It's another thing not only to forgive sinners but to actually pursue them and accept them and eat with them. We saw last week that Jesus goes and pursues the very worst of sinners, Matthew (Levi the tax collector). Levi would have been an outcast by anyone's measurement, although he's probably fairly wealthy. Jesus not only calls him to be a disciple but he hosts a party at Levi's house for all of his tax collector and sinner friends. So Jesus is eating with tax collectors and sinners. The Pharisees think that's quite audacious because they avoided those kinds of people in order to maintain their own cleanness.

Today's conflict has to do on one hand with fasting, but really it's more about the Pharisees whole lifestyle. Last Sunday evening, the sermon was entitled, “The Feast of Grace.” We looked at not just what the importance of Jesus eating with sinners is but what's the importance of eating with sinners. In other words, “Why a feast?” Why would Jesus have a big party for sinners? What's the importance of the feast and what part does that play in Christianity? So it only makes sense that after the Pharisees have seen Jesus feasting with sinners, they're going to come ask Him, “Why don't you fast?” The question that starts off this whole conflict has to do with fasting.

Just so you know, yesterday Judy asked me what I would be preaching today, this morning and tonight. I said, “This morning I'm going to preach on why you shouldn't fast and this evening I'm going to preach on why you should fast from the same text.” So if you want to know why you should fast you need to be here tonight. But, this morning I'm going to tell you why it's not important, at least in this context. We're going to look at three things. The first is the question of motivation when you talk about the fasting that they talk about. The second is the question of culmination. When they ask, “Why don't you fast,” Jesus talks about the culmination of all that God is doing. The third thing we're going to look at are two points of application. Maybe for the women who are in the theology class, we're going to look at “motivay-shun” (most of you weren't there, I guess). Come on, work with me, I'm sick. At any rate, let's look first at the motivation behind their question. In verse 18, I'm just going to read the first sentence:

<sup>18</sup> Now John's disciples and the Pharisees were fasting. . . (NIV)

It's the only passage I can think of where you're going to see John's disciples and the Pharisees mentioned in the same breath and both confronting Jesus about something. It said John's disciples (that's John the Baptist's disciples) and the Pharisees were fasting. The question is, “Why were they fasting?” Both of them were fasting but both of them probably were fasting for drastically different reasons. Why did John the Baptist's disciples fast? The answer is that they were probably fasting in keeping

with John's ministry of repentance. He came preaching repentance for the forgiveness of sins. In the Old Testament it was appropriate for you to fast in order to show your mourning over sin. So they may have been mourning their own sin or they may have been mourning the sin of the nation, but at any rate, perhaps they were fasting because of that. Or, maybe they were fasting because at this point John had been killed. We don't read about that until chapter eight of the Book of Mark, but John the Baptist is beheaded by Herod, so maybe they're fasting because of John's death. But there's another reason they fasted that we actually know of. They fasted because they believed that their fasting would help to usher in the kingdom of God, and it would help to usher in the day of redemption. In other words, they would go hungry in order to show God, "Here's how hungry we are for the coming of your kingdom." The question is, "Didn't they get Jesus?" The answer is, "Apparently not." They were disciples of John, and because John said, "That's the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world," but John's disciples just didn't uproot and follow Jesus. Some of them stayed with John and still followed John and still thought that the Messiah was going to come. They didn't buy it. But nonetheless they fasted either out of mourning for sin (or something like that) or they fasted to hasten in the coming of God's kingdom. That's what they did.

The Pharisees fasted. If the Pharisees fasted only according to when the Old Testament commanded them to fast they would fast one day a year. The Old Testament only gives one command with regard to fasting and that is on the Day of Atonement. Israel was to fast in order to prepare for forgiveness of sins. So, one day a year it was proclaimed in the Old Testament that you should fast. For those of you who are sick, if one aspirin is good, a whole bottle is better. Right? So the Pharisees had, over the course of time, sort of evolved from fasting only one time a year. Of course there were national fasts that were proclaimed at different times of the year. Maybe a prophet would come and proclaim a fast. They fasted during those times, but the typical Pharisee fasted twice a week, on Mondays and Thursdays. You actually see that. The question is, "Why did they fast twice a week on Mondays and Thursdays?" The answer was manifold. On one hand they fasted in order to gain God's merit. "The more that we do this and the more righteous we are, the more God is going to love us and the more He is going to receive us. Not those tax collectors and sinners." So they fasted. On the other hand they did it to show themselves as being righteous, but negatively. It was a sign of their self-righteousness. Jesus said that when you fast, don't contort your faces like the Pharisees and don't stand on the street corner. It was a sign of their self-righteousness. In fact, remember one of the most famous stories in the New Testament: the story of the Pharisee and the tax collector?

[Luke 18] <sup>10</sup> "Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. <sup>11</sup> The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. <sup>12</sup> I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.'

That's the case that he's making before God. When the Pharisee wants to show how good he is, the first thing that comes out of his mouth is, "I'm not like all these other people. I fast twice a week." So what's the motivation for the fast of the Pharisees? It's pure and simple self-righteousness and to be able to say to other people, "Look at how godly we are. Look at how religious we are." Anyone who didn't keep the tradition of the Pharisees was considered sort of out-of-the-loop and they would have been considered unsaved, if you will. As I was thinking about this text it struck me again the arrogance of the Pharisees, and Pharisees in general. Pharisees were only one sect of Judaism. There were many others. There were Sadducees and there were Zealots and there were all these others, but the Pharisees actually had the gall to say, "Unless you believe the exact same thing that we believe, you're not part of what God's doing in the world." We'll get to that later. John's disciples fasted out of hope and trying to usher in the day of redemption and the Pharisees fasted out of their own sense of self-righteousness and their own sense of needing to gain God's favor.

The next line says ". . . And some people came to Jesus." The language here is almost like a criticism or an attack. I love it when people come up to me and say, "Tommy, I have a criticism that I hope you take as a compliment." We don't know if it's from the Pharisees or John's disciples, or just a third party watching all the craziness going on who just didn't get it. Like, they're watching John's disciples—they fast. They're watching the Pharisees—they fast. And they're watching this new guy Jesus and his disciples don't fast. They go to Jesus and say, "The disciples of John fast and the Pharisees fast, but why don't Your disciples fast?" Let me read that to you.

<sup>18</sup> . . . "Why do John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?" (ESV)

We know their motivation, and what they're asking is, "What is the motivation of Jesus' disciples to not fast or to avoid fasting or to abstain from fasting?" Jesus answers them with a question that has to do with consummation. Let me read to you how He answers them.

<sup>19</sup> 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. <sup>20</sup> The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast in that day. (ESV)

Jesus here on one hand is asking a question, and really it's a stupid question. On the other hand, it's a bold statement, and that's really what he's trying to do here. Why is it a stupid question to them? Think about it. What is the purpose of a wedding,

especially in the Ancient Near East where the wedding could have gone days, weeks, or even months long, and it would have been nothing but rejoicing and feasting. Jesus asks, “Do you fast during a wedding?” Not just can guests at any old wedding fast, but can the guests of the bridegroom fast while the bridegroom is among them? In other words, in the middle of the wedding would the people who are standing up for the bridegroom put on a sad face and put oil on their foreheads and say, “We’re not going to partake of this feast.” That would be crazy. But that’s Jesus’ point, isn’t it? He asks them a question. Can they fast while they’re with the bridegroom? But the bigger statement here is, “I’m the bridegroom.” Throughout the whole Old Testament one of the main metaphors of God restoring His relationship with Israel was that of a wedding. “As a young man rejoices over a bride so I will rejoice over you.” [Isaiah 62:5] You read through and God sees Himself as Israel’s husband and He sees Israel as His bride-to-be. Jesus comes and says, “I am the bridegroom.” Since the bridegroom is here, this is an implicit answer to both John’s disciples and the Pharisees. In other words, John’s disciples were fasting because they hoped to usher in the coming day of redemption and what Jesus is basically saying to them is that, “The coming day of redemption is here. Everything you fasted for actually has come to fruition. It worked! I’m here now. And because I’m here now you don’t need to fast because now is the time of joy and the time of feasting, not the time of fasting. So for all of you who long to see the kingdom of God—here it is.” Some people here, I’m guessing, may not be a Christian and you’ve spent your whole life trying to figure out, “What am I supposed to be doing to pursue a relationship with God?” You’ve tried different religions; you’ve tried different paths in your life. Jesus basically says, “Your looking is over. Your longing is over. Your hope is over because I’m here now. The bridegroom is here, and when the bridegroom is here you don’t fast, you feast.”

To the Pharisees, what is He saying to them? The Pharisees fasted in order to gain God’s approval or they fasted to show other people how righteous they are. Jesus is basically saying to the Pharisees, “The reason for your fasting is bogus because you’re fasting in order to gain merit from God. You’re fasting in order to get Him to accept you. Guess what, boys? The only way that God will accept you is for you to trust in Me.” They say something in the Book of John, “We believe in Moses.” And Jesus said, “If you believed in Moses you would believe in Me because Moses wrote about Me.” They’re trying to get the merit of God, and the merit of God is standing right in front of them! They’re trying to work for God’s grace and the grace of God is standing right in front of them. He says, “You can’t work for it. It’s no good relying on your own self-righteousness. Do you do everything right all the time, even live up to your own low standards of morality? Of course not. You need something bigger. You not only need to stop fasting, but you need to put your trust in the One who has fasted on your behalf.”

You want to talk about fasting? Remember how Jesus started His ministry? You don’t read about in Mark’s gospel, you read about it in Matthew. Jesus started his ministry with a forty-day fast. God told Israel, “I’ll send you out into the wilderness and you’ll be hungry.” Jesus went with a forty-day fast in order to identify with His people, but he withstood a different and a bigger and a more grand fast at the end of His life. What’s fasting? Fasting is giving up something that you enjoy in order to pursue God’s will or God’s purposes. When you look at the cross of Jesus what you see is this great big example of the perfect fast. At the cross, Jesus gave up what was most precious to him. He gave up that which was most glorious to him—his fellowship with His Father—the perfect relationship. Jesus goes on a fast from God’s delight in order that you and I might have a feast on God’s delight. Jesus gives up His glory, He gives up His honor, He gives up everything in order that we might receive it. We receive it through the work He did on the cross. The question is, “Will you trust Him?” Will you put your faith in Him? That question, by the way, is not just for people who are not Christians. Those of you who have been Christians for a long time tend to tune out sometimes when that is said. But the question for the Pharisee is, “Will you trust Him?” Will you trust Him or are you going to spend your whole life trying to earn God’s favor when it was standing in front of you the whole time? Have you spent your whole life miserable when you could have had joy? Have you spent your whole life fasting when you could have been feasting on God’s grace? What are you going to do?

Jesus says, “The culmination is here in me.” Then He moves on to two points of application.

<sup>21</sup> *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.* <sup>22</sup> *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.* (ESV)

What are Jesus’ points of application here? The first thing He says is, “No one sews a piece of new unshrunk cloth onto a piece of old cloth because when you wash it (I guess) and put it into the dryer (or whatever their version of the dryer would be) shrink and it will tear the cloth apart and ruin both of them.” What is Jesus’ point here? I think it’s pretty simple. Many people looked at Jesus, this new rabbi, and thought, “Here He comes to add His two cents to Judaism.” The job of a rabbi would be to comment on what He thought the Bible meant. Here’s this new rabbi and He’s going to bring a patch. Maybe we’re missing some areas, maybe we’re lacking, and Jesus comes to patch up our old system. What they didn’t get was that Jesus didn’t come to add a patch to the old system of Judaism. He didn’t come to patch up where it was lacking or to fix up the traditions. By the way, ritual and tradition are not bad, it’s the motivation behind them. But Jesus didn’t come to just add a layer onto the bureaucracy, if you will. What Jesus came to do was bring something completely new that was to renew the nation of Israel, to renew the whole of creation. You can’t just patch up the old thing, but in fact Jesus said, “I came to bring a newness to all of creation.”

Maybe you've been in Sunday School classes that I've taught, and I know I've said it in sermons. This is something for you note-takers to write down, and this may be something for you people who don't take notes to write down. "Jesus plus anything equals nothing. Jesus plus nothing equals everything." Most of the New Testament letters have to do with the apostle Paul or someone else confronting people who say, "Well, okay, it's good to trust Jesus. I've trusted Him, but now we also need to do A, B, C, and D in order to be accepted by God." What the Gospel says is that the only way you have acceptance by God is through Jesus. It's not through your works, it's not through your rituals, it's not through your fastings, it's not through your Bible reading. It's through the person and work of Jesus. If you're trying to patch Jesus on, that's why some of you are so miserable, because your whole life Jesus has just been a patch to all of the things you've been trying to use to hold your life together. Whether you're in business and it's a constant influx of time management systems or whether it's at home, this constant trying to keep control of your life, and trying to put Jesus on there as a patch in the places where you're lacking creates a problem. The problem is it keeps getting ripped off and you never experience the joy of the feast. You never really experience the wholeness that you think you're going to get by using Jesus as a patch.

He takes things up an ante in the next thing he says. "No one puts new wine into old wineskins." As a side note, this whole metaphor is built around the fact that the wine that they used was alcoholic. I know people argue that the wine in the New Testament was just really grape juice. It wasn't, because if that were the fact then this parable would be worthless. Jesus was accused in the other passage that's a parallel to this, when they asked Him this question. He said, "I don't get you guys. You got upset at John the Baptist because he's a teetotaler, and then the Son of Man comes and you call Him a winebibber and a glutton. Which is it? You guys are never happy." Here's why. He says, "You can't put new wine into old wineskins or it will burst the wineskins, destroying both the skin and the wine." Apparently when you got a new wineskin and put new wine in the wineskin and put the cap on that wine, the juice would begin to ferment into real wine, and as it fermented it would have gases that would stretch the wineskin. But once the wineskin had been stretched, it was at that level and if you put in new wine that you expected to ferment, the wineskin wouldn't have anywhere to go. In other words, when that started to expand, it would burst. Jesus says, "Trying to use Me like that is the same as trying to put new wine into old wineskins." You put it in there and you're not just going to ruin the wineskin, but you're going to ruin the wine. What's the point here? Maybe it's easier to use a metaphor we may be more familiar with. How many of you have spent the good bit of your lives trying to shove Jesus into a box? Jesus is in your Sunday morning box, or Jesus is in the box that you go to when things go poorly for you. The problem of putting Jesus in a box is that He will not stay there. He keeps breaking out of it. Some people are miserable, I think, because their whole lives are geared around trying to put Jesus in a box or because they feel Jesus has disappointed them. If you're going to be a Christian, you better be prepared for Jesus to surprise you. If you're not a Christian, that's something for you to keep in mind as you make your decision. Just when you think that you've got Jesus under control, He pulls the rug out. Just when you think you've prayed for someone to get well, they get worse. Just when everything seems to be going right, it goes wrong. Jesus' constant refrain is, "Are you going to trust me? This is new wine. This isn't just jumping through the hoops in order to get God's approval. This is a relationship. The question is: Are you going to trust Me? Are you going to put your faith in Me? Are you going to believe in Me?"

There's a word here, I think, for every church. I know Presbyterians would never think this, but there are some churches that think the way they do things is the only way that God intends things ever to get done. We would never do that. Maybe the Baptist or the Methodists, but the good Presbyterians who are decent, the Presbyterians with the Book of Order and *Robert's Rules of Order*, we would never try and control things. What I think Jesus is warning us about here as well is that new wine needs new wineskins, but don't be surprised when God does something you're not expecting. Don't be a Pharisee. Don't be the ones who say, "We're the only ones who know what's going on here" because, in fact, we're not. The question is, "Are we going to live that way?" Think about that.