

Things Were Different Now that Jesus Had Come

Mark 2:18-22

Mark 2:18-22 – *“The disciples of John and of the Pharisees were fasting. Then they came and said to Him, “Why do the disciples of John and of the Pharisees fast, but Your disciples do not fast?”* ¹⁹ *And Jesus said to them, “Can the friends of the bridegroom fast while the bridegroom is with them? As long as they have the bridegroom with them they cannot fast.* ²⁰ *But the days will come when the bridegroom will be taken away from them, and then they will fast in those days.* ²¹ *No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old garment; or else the new piece pulls away from the old, and the tear is made worse.* ²² *And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; or else the new wine bursts the wineskins, the wine is spilled, and the wineskins are ruined. But new wine must be put into new wineskins.”*

Background Notes

“John’s disciples” (v18) were disciples of John the Baptist. They may have been fasting because John had been thrown into prison, and the situation certainly did not look hopeful. But even aside from this, it appears that John’s disciples fasted regularly. The Pharisees practiced fasting as well. Luke 18:12 indicates that the religious Pharisees practiced fasting twice a week. In Luke 18:12, the self-righteous Pharisee stood up to pray and said that he had done this and he’d done that, and that he fasted twice a week, and so forth. So it appears that religious Pharisees may have emphasized fasting twice a week.

In verse 21 the Lord gave a little parable about the problem of sewing a patch of new cloth on an old garment. In that day, of course, they didn’t have pre-shrunk fabric. A worse tear would result when the garment was washed, because the new cloth of the new patch would shrink and actually rip the old garment.

In verse 22 there is another little parable about wine and wine skins. In that day wine was stored in containers made of goatskins. The goatskins were sewed up to make a container. However, you never put new wine into old wine skins, because new wine expanded as it fermented. So it’s no problem if you put new wine into new wine skins because the new wine skins were still elastic. But old wine skins were brittle, and if you put new wine into old wine skins, the old skins would break or tear when the new wine fermented and expanded, and the wine would spill out.

What’s the meaning of these two little parables? Let’s go to our doctrinal points.

Doctrinal Points

1. Christianity is more than legalistic fasting.

When the Lord was asked why His disciples didn't fast, He said (v19), *"Can the friends of the bridegroom fast while the bridegroom is with them? As long as they have the bridegroom with them they cannot fast."* The Lord likened Himself to the bridegroom and his disciples to the attendants of the bridegroom, and His point was, you don't fast at a wedding! It's a time of joy. It's a time of celebration.

Under God's Law, there was only one required fast day: Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 23). Over the years, however, the Jews had added more fast days. In fact, they had added them to the point where it appears that the Pharisees fasted, legalistically, twice a week. No longer, then, was fasting an expression of deep sorrow. It was rather a routine ritual. The Pharisees were fasting legalistically.

Our Lord's essential point here is Christianity is more than legalistic fasting. The kingdom of God was at hand. The King was here! Like a wedding, it was to be a time of joy and celebration. In Romans 14:17 we read, *"for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit."* The Bridegroom was here—it was not a time for fasting. It was a time of joy and celebration.

In verse 20 the Lord said that the days would come when the bridegroom would be taken away from them, and then in those days they would fast. This statement is the first hint of the cross in the Gospel of Mark. Here the Lord was predicting what was to come - He would be taken from them in death. The word *taken* here implies a violent removal. What the Lord meant, of course, was that it would be a time of fasting then, because it would be a time of sorrow.

The Lord didn't mean that from that day on they would fast. No, because joy would return with the resurrection. John 16:19-20: *"Now Jesus knew that they desired to ask Him, and He said to them, 'Are you inquiring among yourselves about what I said, 'A little while, and you will not see Me; and again a little while, and you will see Me'? Most assuredly, I say to you that you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice; and you will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will be turned into joy.'"* The Lord was saying that sorrow would come with our Lord's death, but joy would return with His resurrection. Christianity is certainly more than legalistic fasting.

What about fasting for the Christian today? While Christianity is more than legalistic fasting, it's not wrong for a Christian to fast for the right reasons. The early Christians fasted on certain occasions (Acts 13 & 14), but it was not *legalistic* fasting. In times of prayer about serious matters and major decisions, fasting may be practiced today - but it's not to be *legalistic* fasting. Remember, Christianity is more than legalistic fasting.

2. Christianity is more than ritualistic Judaism

What about the meaning of the two little parables about the cloth and the wineskins? The old garment and the old wineskins represent *the rituals and forms of ceremonial Judaism*. The new wine and the new cloth represent Christianity – which is new and alive and characterized by the power of the Holy Spirit. There was no way that you could take what our Lord was teaching and preaching and adapt it or confine it to the old forms of ceremonial Judaism. God had given the Law as a foundation and as a “teacher” to prepare and lead the way to Christ. (Read Galatians 3.)

But now Christ had come. There was no way you could mix law and grace. You certainly could not put Christianity into the old wineskins of Judaism or use it to patch up the old garment of the old order. The new wine of Christianity must be put into fresh wine skins, that would be provided in the Church built by our Lord Jesus. The Church as a new wine skin is certainly much more elastic and flexible than the Old Testament Law and its forms and ceremonies ever were. And certainly that’s what our Lord was driving at here. He was teaching that Christianity can never be put into the old, inflexible, rigid forms and ceremonies of the Law—and certainly that legalistic system that the Law had become with and under Judaism. Christianity is more than ritualistic Judaism.

Practical Applications

1. Let's not lose the joy of the Lord through legalism.

Christ has come! It’s a time of joy! Romans 14:17 says that *the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit*. The context of the teaching in Romans 14 is that some Christians in Rome were trying to set up a bunch of rules about eating and drinking. “**NO!** That’s legalism!” - is what Paul wrote to the Roman Christians. A sure way to lose your joy is to become a legalistic Christian - to start running your life by a bunch of nit-picking rules. And not running only your own life by a set of self-imposed rules, but judging other Christians on the basis of your own set of rules! That will lead to loss of joy in their lives, as well. That’s legalistic.

Now we’re not talking about obeying Scripture or being a disciplined Christian - or even about the proper use of Christian liberty. We’re talking here about judging your own spirituality and the spirituality of other Christians (as the Pharisees did) based on your set of rules. You’ll cause everyone around you to lose his or her joy - and you’ll lose your joy as well.

Just as examples - How much makeup or jewelry should a Christian woman should wear? What should a man wear to church on Sunday? Christians differ. Some people have a set idea about how much jewelry should be worn or makeup used - and if you go any further, you’re “worldly.” Or, some feel that if a man is not wearing a tie for church on Sunday, somehow he doesn’t measure up to God’s standards. Christians differ. They have varying standards of what is “right,” and what they think is conservative, and what they think is “worldly.” Where it becomes legalism is when you use your

own set of standards to judge not only yourself, but you use your own set of standards to judge other Christians as well. That's being "legalistic."

A sure way to lose your joy is to become a legalistic Christian. You start running your life by a bunch of rules – and then you start judging other Christians on the basis of your rules. When you start judging *their* spirituality based on *your* set of rules, that's legalistic. It's OK to have your own tastes or your own standards of how best you should represent your life as a Christian. But when you begin to impose those standards and rules on others, and begin to judge their spirituality (either verbally or non-verbally) based on your set of standards, you're a legalistic Christian. Not only will you lose your joy in the Lord, but you'll cause others to lose their joy in the Lord as well. Let's not lose the joy of the Lord through legalism!

2. Let's not go backwards in the faith through ritualism.

Remember that in the two parables the Lord was teaching that Christianity should not be confined to forms and rituals. We must not hinder or suppress the power of the Holy Spirit. Anytime we move in the direction of ritualistic Christianity we're going backwards in the faith. If certain good forms and positive ceremonies become rigid and ritualistic through tradition so that the Spirit of God is no longer able to have freedom, we are moving backwards in the faith.

In some churches, everything is so formalized and programmed that the services have become like a rigid old wine skin – there's no flexibility, no freedom for the Spirit of God to lead the worship.

Let's not go backwards in the faith through ritualism.