

Introduction

1. Fasting in our day has fallen out of popularity and practice.
 - a. Fasting developed a bad reputation in the Middle Ages due to excesses in the outward practice which became devoid of any real spiritual power.
 - b. Our culture today has convinced us we must have three large meals a day with several snacks as well.
 - c. We are a consumer society and one of the things that we love to consume is food.
2. In Jesus' day, fasting was a part of the regular religious practice of a pious Jew.
 - a. There are three great pillars of the Jewish faith in which the Pharisees and other self-righteous Jews took great pride: fasting, giving alms to the poor, and prayer.
 - b. Unfortunately, these practices were undertaken more to draw attention to themselves and their piety than for the spiritual purposes of repentance and relationship for which God intended them.
 - c. Jesus addressed abuses of these three practices in his Sermon on the Mount (cf., Mt 6:1-18).
 - d. In this passage, Jesus was accused of error because he and his disciples did not fast regularly.
3. **Read Mk 2:18-22.**

A. A Question about Fasting (18)

1. "Now John's disciples and the Pharisees were fasting" (18a)
 - a. Why were they fasting?
 - b. James A Brooks elucidates, "The only biblically prescribed fast was on the day of Atonement (Lev 16, especially vv. 29,31), although other fasts grew up late in the Old Testament period (Zech 7:5; 8:19). Furthermore, the Pharisees fasted every Monday and Thursday (cf., Luke 18:12). The Jews sometimes fasted as a result of personal loss, sometimes as an expression of repentance, sometimes as preparation for prayer, and sometimes merely as a meritorious act. The disciples of John may have been fasting because of the imprisonment or death of their leader, his ascetic life-style, or his emphasis on repentance" (James A. Brooks, *Mark*, 64).
2. "Some people came and asked Jesus, . . ." (18b)
 - a. It may have been some of John the Baptist's disciples or others in the crowd who asked the question.
 - b. The text is not clear on who asked, but this question was in the minds and on the lips of the Pharisees.
 - c. ". . . 'How is it that John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees are fasting, but yours are not?'"
3. This is the third of five confrontations between Jesus and Jewish leaders in Galilee in Mk 2:1-3:6.
 - a. In Mk 2:1-12 they complained about his apparent blasphemy of God when he declared the forgiveness of a paralytic's sins before healing him physically.
 - b. In Mk 2:13-17 they complained about Jesus' association with sinners and believed that he had defiled himself based on the company that he kept with them.
 - c. In this passage their complaint implies that Jesus and his disciples were less righteous than they were because of their failure to practice regular fasting.

B. The Place of Fasting in Jewish Life

1. The Pharisees and teachers of the law meticulously obeyed the letter of the Law.
 - a. They were seen by their fellow Jews as the most righteous people in the Jewish community of faith and followed the Old Testament law strictly.
 - b. Jesus respected Old Testament law but he came with a new purpose regarding the law. He declared, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. . . . I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven" (Mt 5:17,20).
 - c. That was a tall order in the minds of his hearers—fulfill the law and live with greater righteousness than the Pharisees seemed to them to be impossible.

2. In Mt 6:1-18, Jesus unpacked the theme of righteous living by sharing examples from the worship life of the Pharisees and other pious Jews.
 - a. Jesus addressed the three fundamental parts of Jewish worship: 1) alms (Mt 6:1-4), 2) prayer (Mt 6:5-15), and 3) fasting (Mt 6:16-18).
 - b. Jesus came to fulfill the Law and so to enable those who believed in him to move beyond the legal, self-righteousness of the Pharisees through obedience to a new law, the law of love.
 - c. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength and your neighbor as yourself.
 - d. Jesus came not to live in the old patterns of the law but to bring a new pattern with the arrival of the kingdom of God and his self-sacrifice for human sin (cf., Mk 1:15).

C. Jesus' Answer on Fasting (19-20)

1. "Jesus answered, 'How can the guests of the bridegroom fast while he is with them? They cannot, so long as they have him with them. But the time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them, and on that day they will fast'" (19-20)
2. Warren Wiersbe observes, "The Jews knew that marriage was one of the pictures used in the Old Testament to help explain Israel's relationship to the Lord. They had been 'married to Jehovah' and they belonged only to Him (Isa. 54:5; Jer. 31:32). . . . John the Baptist had already announced that Jesus was the Bridegroom (John 3:29), and our Lord had performed His first miracle at a joyous marriage feast (John 2:1-11). Now He was inviting people to come to the wedding!" (Warren Wiersbe, *Be Diligent*, 36).
3. Jesus answered their question with a metaphor. "How can guests of the bridegroom fast while he is with them? They cannot, so long as they have him with them." (19)
 - a. Jesus is the bridegroom.
 - b. Jesus' disciples, his followers, are the wedding guests.
 - c. Daniel Akin comments, "Jesus is essentially saying, 'I am here now with My followers. Like a Jewish wedding feast, this is a joyous occasion where the bridegroom and his friends celebrate, not mourn,' Fasting would be inappropriate, out of the question. His presence with them is a time of joy and celebration, not a time of sorrow and sadness" (Daniel L. Akin, *Exalting Jesus in Mark*, 55).
 - d. The implied feast that they enjoyed together is none other than that of the Messiah with his followers in the eternal kingdom of God (cf., Rev 19:6-10).
 - e. This is the same image invoked by Jesus' words concerning the accusation of his "eating with sinners" in last week's study of Mk 1:13-17.
4. The coming of the bridegroom and the proclamation of the arrival of the kingdom of God is a time for rejoicing and feasting not a time for sadness and fasting.
5. Jesus extended the metaphor with an interesting twist, "But the time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them, and on that day they will fast" (20).
 - a. In hindsight, we can see this as a prediction of Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension back to heaven. It is the first such allusion in Mark's gospel.
 - b. This insight would have been lost on the original hearers, but we see it plainly.
 - c. Truly the day of Jesus' death on the cross would be a day of mourning for his disciples. Fasting would be an appropriate expression of the depth of their grief. But it would soon be replaced with the joy and celebration of his resurrection.

D. Two Parables to Reinforce and Broaden the Point (21-22)

1. Following Jesus' primary answer about fasting with the bridegroom metaphor, he provides two short parabolic sayings.
 - a. Some scholars see these sayings as separate from his answer about fasting. William L. Lane writes, "The twin parables appended to Jesus' initial statements may have been delivered on some other occasion. They possess a relevance which is broader than the narrow issue of fasting, and Mark makes no attempt to link them narrowly to the preceding verses. Their appropriateness to the issue at hand lies in the commentary they provide on the significance of Jesus' presence with his disciples. . . . The images of the wedding, the new cloth and the new wine are distinctly eschatological in character, like that of the messianic banquet in [Mk] 2:15-17. . . . They stress the element of fulfillment which is marked by the presence of Jesus. His person is both the sign that the old situation has been radically altered and the pledge that the reality described by these images shall be experienced in the appropriate time" (William L. Lane, *The Gospel of Mark*, 112-13).

- b. However, I and others see a more direct connection. Akin observes, “The imagery now shifts to two concise parables. The connection is to Jesus and what His first coming means. . . . The pertinent question isn’t why Jesus’ disciples didn’t fast, but why the Pharisees didn’t feast and celebrate the presence of the Messiah! Here Jesus informs us that He came to make things new and not perpetuate the old” (Akin, 56).
2. Parable 1 – Patching an Old Garment with Unshrunk Cloth (21)
- When I went to Egypt in 2006, I bought a shirt from a vendor on the cruise ship with my name written on it in Egyptian hieroglyphics. It was pure Egyptian cotton. I asked the vendor if it was pre-shrunk, and he assured me that it was. It wasn’t. The first time that I washed it, it shrunk so much that even a child couldn’t wear it.
 - It would be silly to patch an old garment with a piece of new, unshrunk cloth. When you washed the mended garment the unshrunk cloth would shrink and do more damage to the garment than the original hole.
 - The “old garment” with the hole is the Law by which the Pharisees attempted to gain righteousness through strict observance. It was worn out and no longer useful.
 - The “unshrunk cloth” is the kingdom of God which Jesus had come to inaugurate.
 - Akin summarizes, “With the coming of Jesus, everything is new. The old was not bad, but it is no longer usable. It has been replaced by something better. To continue to try to prop it up and give it a new face is useless. It is futile” (Akin, 56).
3. Parable 2 – Putting New Wine into Old Wineskins (22)
- In Jesus’ day, the skins of goats were sewed to form bag-like vessels and filled with new wine.
 - The new wine continued to ferment once in the skin, but the new skin stretched and was supple and strong. It held the wine as it expanded.
 - Unlike a new skin, an old skin had already been stretched and become dry, brittle, and weak. The expansion of the new wine caused an old skin to burst, destroying both the skin and the wine.
4. Akin notes that both of these parables “. . . illustrate the radical new era in Jesus’ coming. Jesus is the new cloth and the new wine. He is not an attachment, addition, or appendage to the status quo. He cannot be integrated into or contained by preexisting structures—even Judaism, the Torah, and the synagogue” (Akin, 57).
5. As we come to Jesus, we are changed from old to new.
- Paul proclaimed, “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!” (2 Cor 5:17)
 - God does not patch the old version of us up for life in his new kingdom.
 - We are not slaves to the past living in legalistic obedience to the Law.
 - We are new creations in Christ Jesus ready to be filled with the new wine of the Holy Spirit.
 - We live out our new lives in the kingdom following the law of love for God and our neighbors.
 - The old ways could not contain the joy of the good news of the coming of God’s kingdom.
 - Jesus had come to open a new and better way for relationship with God through himself.
6. Wiersbe concludes, “Salvation is not a partial patching up of one’s life; it is a whole new robe of righteousness (Isa. 61:10; 2 Cor. 5:21). The Christian life is not a mixing of the old and the new; rather, it is a fulfillment of the old in the new. There are two ways to destroy a thing: You can smash it or you can permit it to fulfill itself. An acorn, for example, can be smashed with a hammer, or it can be planted and allowed to grow into an oak. In both instances, the destruction of the acorn is accomplished, but in the second instance, the acorn is destroyed by being fulfilled. Jesus fulfilled the prophecies, types, and demands of the law of Moses. The law was ended at Calvary when the perfect sacrifice was once offered for the sins of the world (Heb. 8-10). When you trust Jesus Christ, you become part of a new creation (2 Cor. 5:17), and there are always new experiences of grace and glory. How tragic when people hold on to dead religious tradition when they could lay hold of living spiritual truth. Why cherish the shadow when the reality has come (Heb. 10:1ff.)? In Jesus Christ we have the fulfillment of all that God promised (2 Cor. 1:20)” (Wiersbe, 38-39).

E. Questions for Reflection

1. Should I fast? Maybe.
 - a. Brooks observes, “During [Jesus’] absence fasting may be desirable now and then, but it is not a normative Christian practice as the paucity of reference in the New Testament shows. Christianity is characterized by joy, not mourning” (Brooks 64-65).
 - b. Jesus said that it should “. . . not be obvious to men that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you” (Mt 6:17).
 - c. Fasting as an act of self-sacrificial worship of God, a sign of repentance, or as part of a time of deep reflection in listening to and hearing from God are good for us as part of the Christian life.
 - d. Fasting should be done privately and never to impress others. It is between us and God.
 - e. As with giving and prayer, the way to greater righteousness in our worship and devotion to God comes down to what is in our hearts.
2. Am I doing things the old way simply out of habit?
 - a. What old habits need to be dropped or new ones adopted?
 - b. What new things is God calling me to do in this new season of life after the pandemic?
3. How is my life before Christ like an old garment that cannot be patched up?
 - a. What changes need in my life to take it off and leave it behind?
 - b. What changes in my attitude and actions will demonstrate that I have put on the new garment of life in Christ?
4. How is my relationship with Jesus like new wine that cannot be contained in your old way of life?
5. How am I stretching and growing in my walk with the Lord as his Spirit stretches and expands my life in Christ?