

## ***Fasting in the Kingdom – Mark 2:18-22***

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*[What follows is the transcript of a sermon. It was initially intended to be heard, not read, so the tone is more conversational than academic. It has only been loosely edited, so forgive any grammatical, syntactical, or spelling errors. If you have questions, don't hesitate to get in touch with Pastor Derek at Derek.berry1990@gmail.com.]*

Take your copy of God's Word and meet me in 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."*

Oxford's dictionary defines fasting as "a period during which you do not eat food, especially for religious or health reasons." This raises an interesting question. Is fasting Christian? In other words, is fasting automatically connected to Christ and his glory? Or is there a way in which you can fast, and it has absolutely no spiritual gain? Well, virtually every religion in the world practices fasting. And even nonreligious people fast for political and health reasons. Perhaps you're familiar with Ramadan, where Muslims fast for a month. And there's severe fasting in the Hindu high caste of Brahmans. So, fasting is indeed a universal religious practice. It's also been used as political persuasion. Perhaps the most notable example is Mahatma Gandhi. And then, of course, there is fasting as a health regimen.

So, these glimpses of worldwide religious, political, and health fasting free us from the notion that fasting, in and of itself, is peculiarly Christian. In fact, it may be emphatically anti-Christian, as seen in the book of Acts when they swore not to eat until Paul was dead.

And it may also be distorted, as we'll see soon with the Pharisees. Therefore, what is this new type of distinctly Christian fasting that Jesus refers to in this text? I'm glad you asked.

Let's reread verse 18. Last week we identified the Pharisees as this pious religious sect known for their strict adherence to the law and adding traditions that will ensure others don't break the law. Jesus reserves his harshest words for these religious hypocrites who look good on the outside but are dead on the inside, for they trusted in their deeds to make them right with God. Last week we considered that the only path to justification is by God's grace through faith alone in Jesus. The law, or commandments, were only meant to show us our sin, and therefore thrust us to the feet of the cross. The Pharisees, however, followed the law as a pathway to justification. Remember the prayer of the Pharisee juxtaposed with the tax collector in Luke's gospel?

<sup>12</sup> *I fast twice a week... -Luke 18:9-12a*

As stated in the prayer, the tradition of the Pharisees was to fast twice a week, on Mondays and Thursdays. Matthew's gospel reveals that it's John the Baptist's disciples asking this question about fasting. They wonder, "if fasting is a spiritual act that both the Pharisees and we observe regularly, why do we never see you and your disciples fasting Jesus?" It's a fair question that seems to be from a genuine place. Before we consider Jesus' answer, I think it's important to reflect on the warnings surrounding fasting, especially considering the Pharisees' self-righteous approach to fasting. So, it may sound like I'm discouraging fasting at first, when in fact, I'm only discouraging the distortion before considering its beauty at the end. Consider what Isaiah has to say:

<sup>3</sup> *'Why have we fasted, and you see it not? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you take no knowledge of it?' Behold, in the day of your fast you seek your own pleasure, and oppress all your workers.<sup>4</sup> Behold, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to hit with a wicked fist. Fasting like yours this day will not make your voice to be heard on high. <sup>5</sup> Is such the fast that I choose, a day for a person to humble himself? Is it to bow down his head like a reed, and to spread sackcloth and ashes under him? Will you call this a fast, and a day acceptable to the Lord? <sup>6</sup> "Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? -Isaiah 58:3-6*

So, the Lord warns his people that abstaining from food and drink without a repentant heart and obedient conduct was in vain. Unfortunately, the Pharisees seem to miss the memo. They believed vigorous fasting was a foolproof method of earning God's favor. And then we flip to the New Testament and find the Apostle Paul's zeal for the full enjoyment of Christian liberty. We actually don't see Paul instructing the churches to fast. However, we do find Paul warning believers of false teachers who require that they abstain from eating as a form of spiritual boast.

*Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons,<sup>2</sup> through the insincerity of liars whose consciences are seared, <sup>3</sup> who forbid marriage and require abstinence from foods that God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth. <sup>4</sup> For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, <sup>5</sup> for it is made holy by the word of God and prayer. -1 Timothy 4:1-5*

So, Paul here affirms the goodness of food. He warns against a kind of asceticism that exalts fasting in such a way that the goodness of God in the gift of good is overlooked or distorted. When writing to the church at Colossae, he warns of the weakness of asceticism. If done wrongly, fasting can stir carnal pride instead of supplying spiritual aid.

<sup>20</sup> *If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the world, why, as if you were still alive in the world, do you submit to regulations— <sup>21</sup> "Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch" <sup>22</sup> (referring to things that all perish as they are used)—according to human precepts and teachings? <sup>23</sup> These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh. -Colossians 2:20-23*

So beloved, abandon any simplistic view of fasting that thinks it'll automatically do a person spiritual good. C.S. Lewis sounded the warning surrounding this issue well,

“Fasting asserts the will against the appetite—the reward being self-mastery and the danger pride.”

So, eating and not eating are not what's essential. The question is, “is this being done for Christ's glory?” Hopefully, you've caught thus far that your fasting, or spiritual discipline, will not earn you favor in the sight of God. Perhaps you walked into those double doors this morning believing that your religious piety would achieve you favor with God. Maybe it isn't fasting per se, but perhaps it's meditation or just your good deeds outweighing your bad. Well, God's Word makes clear that this isn't enough to close the gap that exists between you and God. This is what the Pharisees believed, and they were sadly mistaken. What are you trusting in this morning?

So, John's disciples ask a valid question. And there's no denying that Jesus' apostles didn't fast. When defending the ministry of John the Baptist, Jesus makes this point himself.

*<sup>33</sup>For John the Baptist has come eating no bread and drinking no wine, and you say, 'He has a demon.' <sup>34</sup>The Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you say, 'Look at him! A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!' -Luke 7:33-34*

So, Jesus and his disciples were known for grubbing! So why didn't they fast? Jesus provides the answer. Let's reread verse 19. We discover that, by and large, fasting was associated with mourning in that day. We also get this idea directly from the Old Testament.

*When I wept and humbled<sup>ed</sup> my soul with fasting, it became my reproach. -Psalm 69:10*

*<sup>12</sup>And they mourned and wept and fasted until evening for Saul and for Jonathan his son and for the people of the Lord and for the house of Israel, because they had fallen by the sword. -2 Samuel 1:12*

So fasting is what they did when things weren't going as they wanted. But that's not the situation here. The anointed Messiah has come! And he's inaugurating his kingdom! And Jesus' point is that this is too good to mingle with fasting. I remember seeing Captain America: Civil War for the first time in the movie theatres. I was elated. I vaguely remember my wife stating that she had bad news to tell me. But I told her I didn't want to hear it because it wasn't an appropriate context for the bad news. That movie was too good and highly anticipated for me to mingle some bad news with it. Or, for you football fans, imagine being at the Superbowl and someone tries sharing bad news with you in the middle of the game. You'd say, “no, wait until the game is over!”

This is the point Jesus is making here. The king is here! The one you've been waiting for since Genesis 3. The seed of the woman would crush the serpent's head and thereby bring a new kingdom where Jesus rules. Therefore, now is not the time to mourn. Jesus gives the example of wedding guests while the bridegroom is with them. This illustration is potent for several reasons. Firstly, according to commentator William Barclay, guests of a bridegroom in a Jewish wedding

were exempted from all fasting through a rabbinical ruling that said, “All in attendance are relieved of all religious observances which would lessen their joy.” Kind of hard to rejoice to your full potential when your stomach is growling.

Secondly, this is an extraordinary claim for himself. In the Old Testament, God had pictured himself as the husband of his people Israel.

*<sup>19</sup> And I will betroth you to me forever. I will betroth you to me in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love and in mercy. <sup>20</sup> I will betroth you to me in faithfulness. And you shall know the Lord. -Hosea 2:19-20*

So, this is more than a random illustration of a wedding that Jesus is providing here. This is a claim of divinity. Jesus, God the Son, has arrived and is the Bridegroom, or husband, to his people, who will be the true Israel consisting of both Jews and Gentiles. And this is such a stunning and glorious development that it's meant to be marked by joy and not mourning.

Just let that sink in. The honor of being the people of God is that we are the bride of Christ. In these times, particularly in Jewish culture, it was typical for a father to find a bride for his son. A virtuous woman would catch a father's eye, and assuming agreement between the families, a legal contract would be drawn, and the two would become one. What do you think God the Father has done for his beloved Son? He's found him a bride! This is why Ephesians 1:3-6 emphasizes the Father as the one who predestines us to salvation because it's the Father choosing the bride for His son; with this framework, the doctrine of election, or predestination, should become much more evident.

*<sup>6</sup> “I have manifested your name to the people whom you gave me out of the world. Yours they were, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. <sup>7</sup> Now they know that everything that you have given me is from you. <sup>8</sup> For I have given them the words that you gave me, and they have received them and have come to know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me. <sup>9</sup> I am praying for them. I am not praying for the world but for those whom you have given me, for they are yours. -John 17:6-9*

If you're a believer, you're a part of the bride the Father has chosen for his Son! And the legal contract is the New Covenant purchased by the blood of Jesus. And now he sanctifies us with his Spirit, that we may be presented as a spotless bride to God the Son.

*<sup>25</sup> Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, <sup>26</sup> that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, <sup>27</sup> so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. -Ephesians 5:25-27*

This is such good news! After all these years of dreaming, longing, hoping, and waiting, the bridegroom is finally here!

So, when will the disciples fast? Jesus answers this in verse 20. So here, Jesus is alluding to death, resurrection, and ultimate ascension because that's what he came to do. God's plan of

establishing his kingdom includes two phases, in which we're currently in the middle of the two. We talked about this several weeks ago. In his first coming, the Jews expected him to slaughter the enemy of Rome and free them from this oppressive nation. However, he came to deal with a much more insidious and powerful villain, and that's sin. The Jews needed to be freed from the oppression of sin, as do we today. But his kingdom has indeed been inaugurated, although it isn't yet fully realized. This brings this multi-ethnic and multi-generational people together on the Lord's Day. Most of us have nothing in common except the hope we cling to in Jesus Christ. This is evidence of the gospel. After Jesus' resurrection, he ascended unto heaven until the day of his return, where the kingdom will be fully realized. But in this time between the ascension and the return of Christ, the disciples will fast.

Now there is a sense in which the Lord Jesus is still present with us, and that's through the third person of the Godhead, the Holy Spirit. Do you remember his promise in the Great Commission?

*And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age." -Matthew 28:20b*

He fulfills this promise through his Spirit. The Spirit is even referred to as "the Spirit of Jesus" in Acts 16:7.

*<sup>16</sup> And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever, <sup>17</sup> even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you. <sup>18</sup> "I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. -John 14:16-18*

So this is not meant to downplay the glorious truth that the Spirit of God abides within us. Nevertheless, there's a greater degree of intimacy that we'll enjoy with Christ in heaven when this age is over.

*<sup>8</sup> Yes, we are of good courage, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord. -2 Corinthians 5:8*

So, in this age, there's an ache inside every Christian that Jesus is not here as fully and intimately and as powerfully and as gloriously as we want him to be. We hunger for more; therefore, we fast. This brings us to our final two verses. In 21-22, Jesus gives two parables hinting at the newness of the fasting that the disciples will participate in after his ascension. To this, we turn our attention. Let's reread those verses.

The patch of unshrunk cloth and the new wine represent the new reality that's come with Jesus, namely, the Kingdom of God! It's here! Jesus died for our sins once and for all, and the Spirit was sent into the world as the reigning presence of Jesus in the hearts of his people. The reality of the gospel of the Lord Jesus is the new wine. The old unshrunk patch of cloth and the old brittle wineskins relate directly to fasting as an old Jewish custom. In other words, Jesus' disciples will fast, the fasting that they knew wasn't suitable for the new reality of his presence and the current inbreaking kingdom of God. So it's not that there won't be any fasting, but rather a new type of fasting because the gospel changes everything.

Let me provide a parallel example to see if it will help.

<sup>34</sup> *A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. -John 13:34*

<sup>7</sup> *Beloved, I am writing you no new commandment, but an old commandment that you had from the beginning. The old commandment is the word that you have heard. <sup>8</sup> At the same time, it is a new commandment that I am writing to you, which is true in him and in you, because the darkness is passing away and the true light is already shining. <sup>9</sup> Whoever says he is in the light and hates his brother is still in darkness. <sup>10</sup> Whoever loves his brother abides in the light, and in him there is no cause for stumbling. -1 John 2:7-10*

So the commandment is not new, love; however, because of the gospel, there's a newness to it because the gospel changes everything.

I like what Warren Wiersbe said about the newness of Christianity when compared with Judaism:

“Jesus came to usher in the new, not to unite with the old. The Mosaic economy was decaying, getting old, and ready to vanish away. Jesus would establish a new covenant in his blood. The Law would be written on human hearts, not on stones, and the indwelling Holy Spirit would enable God's people to fulfill the righteousness of the Law.”

There's a document called the *Didache*, written near the end of the first century. In it, there's a section on fasting. One verse goes like this, “Let not your fasts be with the hypocrites, for they fast on Mondays and Thursdays, but do you fast on Wednesdays and Fridays.” Now switching the days may seem strange, but the early church understood that there is a discontinuity between the Old Testament and Jewish customs, and they wanted to make that clear. So yes, we embrace fasting, but our fasting is inherently Christian, not Jewish. I think they caught what Jesus was trying to establish here.

I like what John Piper says: “The mourning over sin and the yearning for deliverance from danger and the longing for God that inspired the old fasting were not based on the great finished work of the Redeemer and the great revelation of his truth and grace in history. These things were all still in the future. But now the Bridegroom has come. And in coming he struck the decisive blow against sin and Satan and death.” What distinguishes Christianity from Judaism is that the longed-for kingdom of God is now present as well as future. The King has come.”

So, our hope is rooted in the past triumph of God over sin and hell through the death and resurrection of Jesus. And as stated earlier, based on that work, nothing can ever be the same again. Beloved, we have more hope than the Old Testament saints had. It's phenomenal to read the Old Testament stories of the saints weeping and mourning as an example of repentance; however, we don't possess the same mindset of fasting that they did. We look back to a hope that they only dreamt of. To quote Piper again, “The newness of our fasting is this: its intensity comes not because we have never tasted the wine of Christ's presence, but because we have

tasted it so wonderfully by his Spirit, and cannot now be satisfied until the consummation of joy arrives.”

Let’s conclude with two application points regarding our Christian New Testament fasting today. First, Christian fasting affirms the goodness of food. Recall the passages from the Pauline epistles that I read earlier. To be clear, Paul’s praise for the goodness of food and the freedom Christians have to enjoy is not a contradiction of fasting but rather a warning of its distortions. However, fasting acknowledges that food is good, but God is better. So I hope you walk away from this not only encouraged to fast in a Christian way but also to enjoy food in a Christian way. The goodness of food itself is a pointer to the gospel as well. Jesus refers to himself as the bread of life because he knows how satisfying food is; he created it!

*The one who eats, eats in honor of the Lord, since he gives thanks to God, while the one who abstains, abstains in honor of the Lord and gives thanks to God. -Romans 14:6b*

This text is not referring to fasting; however, the principle stands. Forgive me as I quote Piper once more:

“When we eat, we taste the emblem of our heavenly food—the Bread of Life. And when we fast we say, “I love the Reality above the Emblem.” In the heart of the saint both eating and fasting are worship. Both magnify Christ. Both send the heart-grateful and yearning—to the Giver. Each has its appointed place, and each has its danger. The danger of eating is that we fall in love with the gift; the danger of fasting is that we belittle the gift and glory in our willpower.”

That’s good! So enjoy the gift of food.

Second, it’s good to buffet the body, not as meritorious religious rituals and not as an end of itself, but as a weapon in the fight of faith.

*27 But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified. -1 Corinthians 9:26*

And this is dealing with the good gifts of our lives because we don’t fast from sin. We stay away from sin. We fast from good gifts because they can quickly become the greatest enemy of hunger for God. This includes more than just food. As Martyn Lloyd-Jones said, “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.”

In Luke 14:18-20, for all the ill that Satan can do, it’s a piece of land, a yoke of oxen, and a wife that keep us from the banquet table of his love. These aren’t vices; they’re gifts from God. And yet all of them can become deadly substitutes for God. I like what St. Augustine said, “For the most part, the human mind cannot attain to self-knowledge otherwise than by making trial of its powers through temptation, by some kind of experimental and not merely verbal self-interrogation.” In other words, we can easily deceive ourselves that we love God unless our love

is frequently put to the test, and we must show our preferences not merely with words but with sacrifice. We see this in the almost fast of Abraham's son, Isaac.

So, what good gift in your life have you possibly elevated to the point of idolatry? Perhaps this will be a good discussion question over lunch. But for now, let's pray.