

Mark 2:18-22, Jesus Our Bridegroom

18 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?" 19 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. 20 The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast in that day. 21 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. 22 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."

In our last lesson, we saw that Jesus seeks and saves even the most scandalous of sinners. In this lesson we will see Jesus revealed as our Bridegroom who brings in a New Age.

I. Jesus Questioned About Fasting -

1. Questioners, Question, Intent

a. Not an Innocent Question - William Lane comments, "The demand to know why Jesus' disciples do not fast is critical in intention; the unidentified questioners wish to expose the disciples of Jesus to their disadvantage."⁽¹⁾

b. Who Dares? - Luke 5:33 appears to connect the inquisitors to the Pharisees, while Matthew 9:14 identifies them as some of John's disciples. Mark mentions both parties together, but leaves the identity of the inquisitors ambiguous. A harmony of these accounts suggests that there was a group including some Pharisees and some of John's disciples who challenged Jesus about fasting.

c. A Plot Afoot! - Jesus is facing increasing opposition. Having been confronted by the Scribes and Pharisees, even some followers of the Baptist begin to question Jesus and his message. Calvin considered this evidence of a malicious Pharisaic plot to divide the disciples of Jesus and John, and perhaps even convert some of the Baptist's followers to their own party:

"This reminds us that prudence and caution are necessary to prevent wicked and cunning men from sowing divisions among us on any slight grounds. Satan has a wonderful dexterity, no doubt, in laying these snares; and it is an easy matter to distress us about a trifle. But we ought especially to beware lest the unity of faith be destroyed, or the bond of charity broken, on account of outward ceremonies."⁽²⁾

d. Miscellaneous Translation Note - The phrase "were fasting" in Greek is understood by many scholars to be in the "customary imperfect" tense, which "indicates a regularly recurring activity in past time (habitual)."⁽³⁾ James Brooks writes, "...a better translation might be 'made a practice of fasting.'⁽⁴⁾ Some versions: "used to fast" (KJV); "had a habit of fasting" (CEB); "made a practice of fasting" (MSG); "were accustomed to fast" (NAB); "often went without eating" (CEV).

2. Fasting in the Old Testament -

a. Repentance, Mourning for Sin - The only regular prescribed fast in the Law of Moses is the Day of Atonement:

26 And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, 27 "Now on the tenth day of this seventh month is the Day of Atonement. It shall be for you a time of holy convocation, and you shall afflict yourselves [i.e., fast] and present a food offering to the Lord. 28 And you shall not do any work on that very day, for it is a Day of Atonement, to make atonement for you before the Lord your God. 29 For whoever is not afflicted on that very day shall be cut off from his people. 30 And whoever does any work on that very day, that person I will destroy from among his people. (Lev. 23:26-30)

Fasting and repentance accompanied any other non-prescribed time of mourning for personal and corporate sins:

3 Then I turned my face to the Lord God, seeking him by prayer and pleas for mercy with fasting and sackcloth and ashes. 4 I prayed to the Lord my God and made confession, saying, "O Lord, the great and awesome God, who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments, 5 we have sinned and done wrong and acted wickedly and rebelled, turning aside from your commandments and rules (Dan. 9:3-5).

b. Self-abasement While Imploring God's Aid -

21 Then I proclaimed a fast there, at the river Ahava, that we might humble ourselves before our God, to seek from him a safe journey for ourselves, our children, and all our goods (Ezra 8:21).

c. Mourning a Tragedy -

11 Then David took hold of his clothes and tore them, and so did all the men who were with him. 12 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 Sam. 11-12).

3. Fasting in First-Century Judaism -

a. Practice of Fasting - By the time of Jesus, most Jews fasted regularly on Rosh Hashanah (New Years' Day) as well as Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement). Fasting also accompanied personal and national tragedies, as in the Hebrew Scriptures. The Pharisees fasted twice a week (Luke 18:12), on Monday and Thursday.⁽⁵⁾ John's disciples also fasted often (Luke 5:33), though we have less specific information about their practices.

B. Attitude Toward Fasting - "Failure to fast...constitutes a serious breach of custom. In the eyes of first-century Pharisees, it placed one at odds with the tradition of the elders. Fasting symbolized contrition for sin and ranked as one of the cardinal virtues of their piety."⁽⁶⁾ Fasting could even be a source of spiritual pride:

11 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. 12 I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get' (Luke 18:11-12).

II. Jesus Revealed as the Bridegroom

1. Not a Messianic Title -

"...the bridegroom was not, as far as we know, a current image for the Messiah."⁽⁷⁾

"...neither in the OT nor in later Jewish literature was the Messiah represented as the bridegroom."⁽⁸⁾

2. Yahweh is Israel's Bridegroom in the OT -

a. Isaiah 62:4-5:

4 You shall no more be termed Forsaken,
and your land shall no more be termed Desolate,
but you shall be called My Delight Is in Her,
and your land Married;
for the Lord delights in you,
and your land shall be married.

5 For as a young man marries a young woman,
so shall your sons marry you,
and as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride,
so shall your God rejoice over you.

b. Hosea 2:19-20

19 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. 20 I will betroth you to me in faithfulness. And you shall know the Lord.

3. Jesus is the Church's Bridegroom in the NT -

a. John 3:28-30 (John the Baptist speaking) -

28 "You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, 'I am not the Christ, but I have been sent before him.' 29 The one who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice. Therefore this joy of mine is now complete. 30 He must increase, but I must decrease."

b. Revelation 19:7 -

7 Let us rejoice and exult
and give him the glory,
for the marriage of the Lamb has come,
and his Bride has made herself ready;

4. An Implicit Claim to Deity -

"The divine associations inherent in the bridegroom imagery are consonant with Mark's Christology, whose chief christological category is not Messiah but Son of God. The latter conveys not simply messianic service of God but shared nature and essential union with God. At the baptism Jesus is declared to be God's Son and is endowed with God's Spirit. His divine status and empowerment combine in his *exousia*, his divine authority to defeat demonic powers (1:25) and even to forgive sin (2:10). The imagery of the bridegroom recalls not a messianic function but the person of God himself. In this suggestive metaphor Jesus continues, naturally and without arrogance, to presume the prerogatives of God to himself."⁽⁹⁾

5. Sons of the Bridegroom and Other Wedding Customs -

"A wedding celebration in a Jewish village normally lasted seven days ... Friends and guests had no responsibility but to enjoy the festivities. There was an abundance of food and wine, as well as song, dance, and fun both in the house and on the street. Even rabbis were expected to desist from Torah instruction and join the celebration with their students."⁽¹⁰⁾

The Greek phrase behind the ESV rendering "wedding guests" is a Semitic idiom that is literally translated, "sons of the chamber of the bridegroom." According to translation experts Bratcher and Nida, "Commentators are divided over whether the word means, generally, 'wedding guests' ... or, in a more restricted sense, 'the bridegroom's attendants'"⁽¹¹⁾, i.e., groomsmen.

6. The Bridegroom Taken Away - The Bridegroom being "taken away" was not an element of Jewish custom. Jesus' intent is to foreshadow his own death. Ordinarily, the guests would leave at the end of the seven days and the groom would stay with his bride. But Jesus could not stay, for

25 ...Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, 26 that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, 27 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).

7. Fasting in the Not Yet -

“The image of Christ as bridegroom...connotes in this Marcan passage joy in the presence of the Lord and celebration of the ‘already’ dimension of the Kingdom of God. A second aspect of the bridegroom analogy unfolds in verse 20, which speaks of a coming time ‘when the bridegroom is taken away from them’; then the disciples will fast. This word of the Lord warrants the practice of fasting by Christians after Jesus’ earthly ministry had ended. Fasting here connotes sorrow at the absence of the Lord and is appropriate to the ‘not yet’ dimension of the Kingdom of God.”⁽¹²⁾ (For examples of the post-ascension fasting of Christians, see Acts 13:1-3 and Acts 14:23)

III. Jesus and the New Covenant Age

1. The Old Must Give Way to the New -

“Jesus had come to make all things new. The Pharisees had assumed that the way to hasten and prepare for the coming of the new age was through stricter adherence to the old covenant. They did not seem to see that the coming of the new age was a gift of God’s grace, not a response by God to Israel’s faithfulness.”⁽¹³⁾

2. Two Illustrations -

a. New Patch on Old Garment -

The “unshrunk cloth” is new cloth that has not been washed. Both linen and wool, the most common fabrics of the day, shrink when washed the first time. If you sew a new, unshrunk patch over a rip in an old garment, the new will shrink but the old won’t, with the result of a new, possibly worse tear. You can’t simply “patch up” the old with the new. The Epistle to the Hebrews makes the case that the Old Covenant was a preparatory economy with a built-in obsolescence:

11 Now if perfection had been attainable through the Levitical priesthood (for under it the people received the law), what further need would there have been for another priest to arise after the order of Melchizedek, rather than one named after the order of Aaron? 12 For when there is a change in the priesthood, there is necessarily a change in the law as well...18 For on the one hand, a former commandment is set aside because of its weakness and uselessness 19 (for the law made nothing perfect); but on the other hand, a better hope is introduced, through which we draw near to God (Hebrews 7:11-12; 18-19)

13 In speaking of a new covenant, he [the prophet Jeremiah] makes the first one obsolete. And what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away (Hebrews 8:13).

b. New Wine in Old Wineskins

New wine continued to ferment after being poured into a wineskin. The skin had to be flexible to contain the pressures of fermentation. Old wineskins got brittle and would burst from the fermentation of new wine. As in the above illustration, the old and the new are incompatible. Paul shows that the New is incontestably better:

7 Now if the ministry of death, carved in letters on stone, came with such glory that the Israelites could not gaze at Moses’ face because of its glory, which was being brought to an end, 8 will not the ministry of the Spirit have even more glory? 9 For if there was glory in the ministry of condemnation, the ministry of righteousness must far exceed it in glory. 10 Indeed, in this case, what once had glory has come to have no glory at all, because of the glory that surpasses it. 11 For if what was being brought to an end came with glory, much more will what is permanent have glory (2 Cor. 3:7-11).

3. Jesus Makes Us New -

In the same chapter of 2 Corinthians quoted above, Paul speaks of the presence of the Lord Jesus through the Spirit (c.f. John 16:7), and the freedom Christians have in the Spirit, beholding Jesus and being disciplined into his image...almost as if he were here in the flesh!

17 Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. 18 And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit (2 Cor. 3:17-18).

If we are in Christ, then we are part of the new creation, the new wine in new wineskins, with new garments of righteousness given us by our Lord.

17 Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. 18 All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; 19 that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. 20 Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. (2 Cor. 5:17-20).

The New Creation has come! Live like you belong to it! Tell others about the joy of it!

Notes

1. Lane, William. The Gospel According to Mark [New International Commentary on the New Testament], p. 109
2. Calvin, John. Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists: Matthew, Mark, Luke, v. I p. 405.
3. Wallace, Daniel B. Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics, p. 548.
4. Brooks, James A. Mark [The New American Commentary], p. 63.
5. Edwards, James R. The Gospel According to Mark [The Pillar New Testament Commentary], p. 89.
6. Kingsbury, Jack Dean. Conflict in Mark: Jesus, Authorities, Disciples, p. 71.
7. France, R. T. The Gospel of Mark [New International Greek Testament Commentary], p. 139.
8. Lane, William. The Gospel According to Mark [New International Commentary on the New Testament], p.110.
9. Edwards, James R. The Gospel According to Mark [The Pillar New Testament Commentary], p. 90.
10. Edwards, James R. The Gospel According to Mark [The Pillar New Testament Commentary], p. 89.
11. Bratcher and Nida. A Translator's Handbook on the Gospel of Mark [Helps for Translators], pp. 91-92.
12. Williamson, Lamar Jr. Mark [Interpretation Commentary], p. 69.
13. Witherington, Ben III. The Gospel of Mark: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary, p. 127.