

2025-07-27

Traditions About Fasting

Mark 2:18-22

There is at least one consistent thing in our lives. We live in a changing world. Lots of the changes are small and take time. Like time. Every second of time changes from future, to present, to past. We keep getting older. I know, you don't want me to remind you. Day is changing into night, and night into day. The weather is changing from sun to clouds, maybe some rain, some places too much rain and back to sun. The temperature is changing each day and every year. Some days are warmer than others. Sometimes we will have a cold front move through and the temperature will drop into the 90's. **These changes that come every year** we get used to and live with them. Many of our behaviors are formed over time and we get used to them and then later they can become hard to change. The Jews of Jesus day had their traditions. John the Baptist came on the scene and challenged how people were treating each other. He called for people to repent and "*bear fruits worthy of repentance*" (Luke 3:8). He told the people to share with those in need, to be honest, be kind and be content (3:10-14). He called for people to get ready for the One who would come after him. John came and had some of the same behaviors as the Pharisees. He came fasting, neither eating or drinking to get ready for the Messiah (Matthew 11:18). When Jesus, the Messiah began His ministry, He "*came eating and drinking*" (11:19). Why? The bridegroom had arrived. It was time for the feast to begin.

Mark 2:18 "*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'?*" At this point in Jesus' ministry, John the Baptist was alive but in prison (Mark 1:14). Mark does not record the death of John the Baptist when it happened. Mark recorded John's death after King Herod gave the explanation of why Jesus was able to do such great miracles. King Herod believed that John the Baptist had "*risen from the dead, and therefore these powers are at work in him*" (Mark 6:14). We will talk more about King Herod's theology and John's death when we get to that scripture. For now, even though John was in prison, his disciples were still following Him and His teachings, which were bound up in tradition. I say tradition because God's law only required all His people to fast only one day a year, on the Day of Atonement. When you read Leviticus 16:1-34 / 23:26-32 and Numbers 29:7 you will not find the command to "fast." What you find is on the Day of Atonement "*you shall afflict your souls, and do no work at all*" (Leviticus 16:29). **This was the purpose of fasting.** What does it mean for us to afflict our soul? One day a year and only one day a year God required all His people to remember how sinful they are. People were to humble themselves, "*afflict your soul,*" feel bad about

their sinfulness. “*No work at all*” was to be done so that they had time to reflect on their sinfulness, without distraction. The high priest offered the required sacrifices on this Day to cleanse people from their sins (Leviticus 16:30). The people were also to look forward to the Day when God would pay the debt for all sins so that this Day of afflicting our souls would be over. God brought that Day with Jesus’ crucifixion.

So, why was Jesus asked this question? Was He and His disciples eating on the Day of Atonement? No, they were not. It just so happened that the day Jesus and His disciples were eating with Matthew and the other tax collectors was a fast day. You see, over time the one fasting day a year had turned into a tradition of fasting two days a week (Luke 18:12). The Pharisees and every good Jew would fast on Monday and Thursday of each week. When the Pharisees fasted, they “*disfigured their faces that they may appear to men to be fasting*” (Matthew 6:16). Jesus criticized them for such hypocritical behavior. **They ask Jesus this question** because these disciples of John and of the Pharisees were watching Jesus and His disciples eating with Matthew and the tax collectors on a fast day. It seems that everyone knows everyone else’s business. The disciples of John and of the Pharisees were divided on many things, but they were united on this one thing, fasting. I wonder why some of John’s disciples kept following John and not Jesus. John knew that his disciples needed to follow Jesus (Luke 7:19-23 / John 3:30-35), but it appears that they were caught up in their traditions. They could not make the change. This can happen to anyone. People get caught up in the traditions of their religion, church or denomination. They follow those teachings instead of following the teachings of Jesus. It happens. Be careful. “*Examine yourselves as to whether you are in the faith*” (2 Corinthians 13:5).

Verse 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.’*” Jesus answered their question with a question. He asked if anyone fasted at a wedding? Well, have you ever fasted at a wedding? Of course not! Weddings are to be happy occasions with lots of food. All those attending the wedding should not fast. They are to rejoice as long as the bridegroom is with them. In this case, who is the bridegroom? Yes, it is Jesus. “*The friends of the bridegroom*” here are the disciples of Jesus. Were the disciples of Jesus fasting? No, not with the spread that Matthew put out! It appears that the disciples of John and of the Pharisees were out of touch with reality. The Messiah was with them and they did not know it! This was not the time to fast. This was the time to rejoice and eat! They should have set aside their traditions and joined the party. They did not.

Verse 20 “*But the days will come when the bridegroom will be taken away from them, and then they will fast in those days.*” Jesus was not opposed to fasting on

different days than the Day of Atonement. Jesus wanted His disciples to fast when it was **necessary**. He wanted His disciples to fast with the **right attitude** (Matthew 6:17-18). There would come a time when His disciples would fast. That last word “*days*” in the verse is actually singular in the Greek. Jesus was saying that on the day He is crucified, the disciples will fast. Why did the translators make it plural? I would guess that after Jesus was arrested, the disciples did not eat very much if at all and spent a lot of time praying. That was not all. Then, from the crucifixion and those three days and three nights, until the resurrection, the disciples probably did not eat very much at all either. If they fasted, they probably did it for more than one day. They were together praying, trying to figure out what to do. It was also a tradition for people of that culture to fast around a person’s death.

Verse 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.*” Have you ever done this? I remember doing this one time. I think it was when I was in Boy Scouts working on a merit badge. We intentionally did this to learn that you cannot use new, unshrunk material to patch old garments without having a disaster. **Why did Jesus say this?** What does this have to do with fasting? It does not have anything to do with fasting. **It has everything to do with systems**, your way of life, your way in the world. The disciples of John and of the Pharisees were following one system, a traditional system which included fasting on certain days. That is the old system.

Jesus brings in a new system, a new way of life a new worldview. The two cannot be mixed. If you try to mix them you will destroy them both. The old way taught by the religious authorities was to follow legalism and tradition to have a right relationship with God. **Jesus called for repentance and faith in the good news.** God brings redemption through the sacrifice of His Son for our forgiveness. This is what the Hebrew sacrificial system was pointing to but it got covered up and ignored by the legal and traditional system. Some have tried to make the two, the old and the new work together. For example, some teach that Jesus died for our past sins before we come to faith in Christ. But after we trust Him as Savior, we have to work off our sins. This cannot work. Jesus died to forgive all our sins, past, present and future. “*If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness*” (1 John 1:9). This was the major problem in Galatia that Paul sought to rectify (Galatians 2:11-21). Paul ended that argument by saying that if I can earn a right standing before God by the things I do, then Christ died for nothing. We have a right standing with God because Jesus died for us.

Verse 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.” Jesus further explains that the old way and the new way cannot mix without the destruction of both. Wineskins were made from animal skins. You always put new wine into new wineskins. There was a fermentation process that would take place within the wineskin. The new wineskin would expand with this process. This was similar to yeast in dough. If someone put new wine into an old wineskin that had already been expanded, the old wineskin would burst open and all would be lost. Jesus brings a New Covenant in His blood (Luke 22:20). When we have the Lord’s Supper, we remember His blood that He shed to establish this new covenant. We do not remember the Ten Commandments nor do we call for an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth (Leviticus 24:20). No, we do not call for justice. We seek God’s forgiveness and mercy through the sacrifice of Jesus. Salvation does not come by obedience to the Law. It never has. Salvation comes through God’s grace through our faith in Jesus as Savior and Lord (Ephesians 2:8-9).

This filling with new wineskins with new wine can also be an illustration of God wanting to permanently fill His followers with His Holy Spirit. We are to be filled with the Spirit and be led by Him.

Jesus calls people to follow Him a new way. We are to be crucified with Christ. *“It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me”* (Galatians 2:20). We are to walk in the Spirit, being led by the Spirit (5:16-26). This is different than following the law. Oh, the law is still important. Without the law I would not know right from wrong, I would not know my sin (Romans 3:20). Thank God for the Law. Now I know I am a sinner. Thank God for His word. Now I know that the wages of sin is eternal death (6:23). Thank God for Jesus. Now I know I need His forgiveness. Thank God for His sacrifice and resurrection. Now I know that He gives eternal life to all who believe in Him (John 3:16). John came preaching repentance and people followed the law. Jesus came preaching repentance and said, *“Follow Me”* (Mark 1:17, 2:14, 8:34, 10:21). Repent and follow Jesus. He is *“the Way, the Truth and the Life”* (John 14:6).

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Our mission statement: **Spread the gospel of Jesus Christ;
Teach believers to worship God; Foster growth in the Christian faith**

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Traditions About Fasting

Mark 2:18-22

Questions to ask yourself:

Intro: What consistencies in life are you aware of?

Verse 18: Why did the disciple of John and of the Pharisees ask if the disciples of Jesus fasted?

What was God's purpose for fasting? Why was this necessary?

Why didn't John's disciples all follow Jesus?

Verse 19: Have you ever fasted at a wedding?

Who is the bridegroom? Who are the friends of the bridegroom?

Verse 20: Is it alright to fast? Do you think the disciples of Jesus fasted when Jesus was crucified?

Verse 21: Are you living under God's New Testament system of grace?

Are we still supposed to obey the 10 Commandments?

Verse 22: God's New Testament system includes His Holy Spirit living in us. Are you letting God's Spirit lead you?

Actions to take:

Learn to let God's Spirit lead you. Let Him expand your understanding of who God is and what He wants to do in your life.
Be filled with the Spirit of God.

Next week: Mark 2:23-3:6

Traditions About the Sabbath