

Mark - Feasting and Fasting

by J. Glyn Owen

J. Glyn Owen explores the significance of feasting and fasting in the context of Jesus' ministry, emphasizing joy in His presence as the heavenly bridegroom.

Duration: 31:52

Scripture: Mark 2:18

Topics: "Fasting"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher emphasizes the joy and celebration that comes from being united with God through Jesus Christ. He explains that this joy cannot be contained within the old rituals of Judaism, as Jesus brought a new message of great joy for all people. The preacher also discusses the distinction between the old and the new, highlighting that the sorrow experienced by Jesus' disciples during his crucifixion would turn into joy when they saw him again after his resurrection. The sermon concludes with a reminder of Jesus' command to spread his teachings to all nations and the assurance that he will always be with his disciples.

Transcript

Although this is an occasion when we meet at the Lord's Table, I felt it was appropriate that we should continue our theme as it unfolds in Mark's Gospel, where we are studying currently each Lord's Day morning. And therefore I invite you to turn with me to Mark chapter 2, verses 18 to 22. I shall simply read now verses 18 and 19, for the bulk of what we shall have to say this morning will be based upon these two verses, though with reference to the others.

And the disciples of John and of the Pharisees used to fast, and they come and say unto him, that is to Jesus, Why do the disciples of John and of the Pharisees fast, but thy disciples fast not? And Jesus said unto them, Can the children of the bride chamber fast, while the bridegroom is with them? As long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast. Jesus and his disciples did not always conform to established custom. You have seen that recently in your studies here in Mark's Gospel, if not from any other passage of scripture.

Last Lord's Day you will notice that our Lord Jesus, according to the study you had then, which Mr. Greg Scharf took, according to that study we saw Jesus, or you saw Jesus, I was far away, you saw him sitting with tax collectors and sinners, sinners of the worst kind in that ancient society, rejoicing with them, making glad with them, but at the same time there to win them to himself. But it was something which was

undone in those days. He was certainly not conforming to the known standards and the recognized rules of the day.

Well now here in our passage today we have another illustration of the same kind of thing. Not simply, Jesus did not simply go and join with people in their merriment, in so far as that was legitimate, but he did not fast regularly. Now we have to add that word regularly, because you will remember that we have already noticed that Jesus did fast at the beginning of his ministry.

And there may be records scattered here and there throughout the Gospels which indicate that he did something of the kind again later on. But Jesus did not regularly fast, neither did his disciples. And so the disciples of John the Baptist, according to Matthew, came to him or to his disciples and they raised the question, why is this? The Pharisees and the Jews generally, they fasted, so did the disciples of John the Baptist, but Jesus did not fast.

Now the first thing I would like us to notice then this morning is a difference that was discernible. This is one feature that separated, that divided our Lord Jesus Christ from the Pharisees especially, from the Jews generally too, but especially from the Pharisees and also separated him from John the Baptist and John's disciples. Now when you come to the Old Testament, you will find that it has much more to say about fasting than the New Testament.

Though it is true to say I believe that there is only one occasion when the Old Testament required every Jew to fast. And that was on the Day of Atonement, that one outstanding day in the history of every Jew, coming annually, the Day of Atonement, when a sacrifice was to be made for the sin of the whole nation. A very significant day it was.

Now says the Old Testament it is necessary for every Jew on that occasion, every child of Abraham to fast. He can't share in the glories and in the privileges of that day without fasting. And usually they wore sackcloth and poured ashes upon their heads.

But even so, fasting was voluntarily observed in many circumstances in the Old Testament. For example, at a time of mourning people would fast to show that they really sorrowed after someone who had been taken away. Again in a time of disaster or national calamity, as in Nehemiah chapter 1 and verse 4, or as evidence of genuine sorrowful sin.

You have a number of people in the Old Testament who fasted, who went off eating and drinking for a time because they wanted to show the Almighty God that they were really concerned about their sin, they were really sorry. In the course of time however, there was a distinct change of emphasis. You will remember that the Jews were carried away to Babylon for seventy years' captivity.

And when they emerged from Babylon again, they had an entirely different attitude towards fasting. From their time on, they looked upon it as something quite different. Now, whether we are right or not, the suggestion is made by many scholars that what happened is something like this.

In Babylon, they could not of course offer the regular sacrifices that they had been offering before they were taken into captivity. They didn't have the temple, they didn't have the means at their disposal. And they came to believe that in refusing to eat and to drink for a period, in fasting in other words, they were able to do something which God would accept in place of the sacrifices they offered when they were in their own land.

Now, whether that is precisely true or not, I cannot tell you, but one thing is quite clear. Following the Babylonian captivity, they appeared to believe that this had some merit to it. That when they fasted, they were establishing some kind of merit before God.

And the longer they fasted, the better they were and the better their chances of salvation. In other words, they believed that they could procure salvation by just going through this kind of ritual. And it is because of that that some of the prophets of the Old Testament thundered even against this and said it's no use at all unless it is indicative of the penitence of your heart on account of sin and of a change of attitude towards anything and everything that is wrong in the sight of God.

Now, the Pharisees inherited this kind of attitude. Do you remember the Pharisee in the temple, for example, in presenting his supposed credentials before God said this to himself, I fast twice of the week. I give tithes of all that I possess.

Mondays and Thursdays the Pharisees fasted regularly. John the Baptist likewise fasted and his disciples. But I think we are right in believing that there was a world of difference between the fasting of John the Baptist and his disciples on the one hand and that of the Pharisees and of the Jews generally.

John's summons was a summons to repentance. And if we rightly understand the New Testament, the fasting that he enunciated and required of men was that which really showed that they wanted to turn from sin. They mourned on account of their waywardness.

And they wanted to turn from all known evil to God. By way of contrast then, Jesus did not fast, nor his disciples. At least, as we've indicated, they did not do so regularly.

Now, when you come to the New Testament, the New Testament gives less positive teaching concerning the duty of fasting than might at first appear. There are a number of references in the King James Version which are not found in the older manuscripts that we have today. Two or three at any rate are not found in the older manuscripts.

So that when we take them out, what we have left in the New Testament is simply illustrations of certain individuals fasting. Now, you will find them. Anna, Luke Chapter 2, verse 37.

Paul, often times. Cornelius. And then of course, the church at Antioch, they fasted.

Now, what does this mean? What does this mean? Why do not the disciples of Jesus regularly, consistently fast? That was the old question and I believe that is a question we would want to ask today. Before I go on however, let me, in case somebody is going to read into what I'm saying more than I want you to read. Let me say that Jesus did imply in one or two places that there will be times when his children and his followers will fast.

In Matthew Chapter 6, for example, he says to them, when you fast, do such and such a thing. As if implying there will be times, there will be occasions when his disciples too will have to fast. But fasting is not prescribed in the New Testament as something that is essential for the Lord's people to do.

If it comes, it comes spontaneously more or less or as we shall see in a moment, out of the necessity of certain circumstances. Now why then did the disciples of Jesus not fast? I'm glad we're on this theme this morning when we're coming to the communion table. And for my part, I would be glad simply to confine myself to verses 19 and 20.

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. The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them and then will they fast in that day when the bridegroom is away. Now we'll return to that in a moment.

Our Lord met this criticism then with great grace. You notice that he's not upset because people have criticized him, but immediately he comes to the heart of the issue and he answers. What's the answer? What's the reply? Well here it is in principle.

Jesus said, it would be quite incongruous for his disciples to fast just then. He did not thereby attribute any blame to John the Baptist and his disciples for fasting. But he says, as far as my disciples are concerned just now, it would be quite out of order.

How could they? Because they have the bridegroom with them. Now put bluntly, what Jesus is saying is this. Because of the person I am, and because of my ministry to my disciples and their relationship to me, we are involved in marriage joys.

And at this time whilst they have the bridegroom with them and they know him and they recognize him as such, they can no more mourn than they can run away. They must sing. They can only rejoice.

If they know me, then they can do nothing else. Can the wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them? The thing is impossible, says the Lord Jesus. These people are beginning to know me and they are beginning to recognize me as the bridegroom of their souls.

And because of that they can't fast, they can only sing and rejoice. The determining factor is the presence or absence of the bridegroom. Now let's not miss that point.

Jesus is here claiming to be the heavenly bridegroom. I suppose it was rather disconcerting for the disciples of John the Baptist to be told this. Because you see, it was John the Baptist who introduced Jesus as the bridegroom.

Do you remember that? Let me quote from John 3, 28-30. John the Baptist says this, You yourself bear me witness that I said I am not the Christ. That's John the Baptist.

But I have been sent before him. He 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 full. He must increase, I must decrease. It was John the Baptist who introduced Jesus as the bridegroom.

Now what John thus conceded Jesus now refers to in order to explain the inability of his disciples to mourn and to fast at that stage in their history. They have the bridegroom with them. That means it is a time of rejoicing, it is a time of joy.

You remember in Eastern weddings in our Lord's day, the festivities lasted at least 7 days. And the old Jewish Talmuds will tell you that people were even absolved from public worship at that time. It was so important that on a marriage occasion people rejoiced.

All the people stayed together for 7 or 8 days and sometimes longer. It was a time of rejoicing. It says Jesus, I the heavenly bridegroom have come.

I've sought you with love and I've made you my own. And I've come to lavish my marital love upon you and to commune with you. My disciples simply cannot fast on this occasion.

They can only rejoice. This is a beautiful comment upon what Jesus deems to be the essence of the Christian experience. Now we can describe the Christian experience in many, many ways and in many metaphors, but this is a beautiful one.

You have it in many places in the New Testament. Paul, for example, in that rather complicated passage in Romans 7, 1 to 4, is speaking of the wife married to her husband. And then he says that when a husband dies, if her husband dies, she is free from the law that binds her to her husband whilst he's alive.

And if she marries another man, she is not an adulteress. And then he says this. Likewise, my brethren, you have died to the law through the body of Christ so that you may be married to another.

The Christian is a man who has been wedded to the Lord Jesus Christ. He's the bridegroom of the church. He has loved us with an everlasting love.

And he's won over our hearts. And whilst he is with us, this is joy. This is joy.

Do you know anything of this? The Apostle Paul in his second letter to the Corinthians describes his evangelistic ministry in precisely the same terms. He's a little bit concerned about the Corinthians and he tells them, I'm jealous for you with a godly jealousy. Why, Paul? Well, he answers, I promised you to one husband, to Christ, so that I might present you as a pure virgin to Him.

And I'm jealous over you. You're attempting to get away from Jesus Christ and you're allowing other lords to have dominion over you. He says, I'm jealous for you.

I promised you to one husband. Now, it is evident actually from Matthew's Gospel, if you read our text in Matthew's Gospel, you will find that Jesus there is referring, right there in this very context, He's referring to a passage from Hosea. You can very rarely understand the New Testament fully, save in terms of the Old Testament.

Jesus is referring there to Hosea. The picture that we have in the context in Hosea to which He refers is this. It's the picture of Jehovah as the bridegroom, the husband of His people.

But the people of God are playing fast and loose with their God. They're an adulterous people. They're going astray.

But God, in infinite compassion, comes back in love and in mercy to try and keep the wedding together, keep the marriage intact. The same metaphor, of course, is brought over even into our Christian hymnology. In John Newton's renowned hymn, this is how the relevant verse was originally written.

Jesus, my shepherd, husband, friend, my prophet, priest, and king, my Lord, my life, my way, my end, accept the praise I bring. Jesus is the husband of His people. My friend, are you wedded to the Lord Jesus? If so, then all of us ought to know something of what it is to have wedding bells pealing in our hearts and marriage joys flooding our souls.

I cannot put it any other way. And there should be something in your heart and in your spirit this morning which rejoices with joy unspeakable and full of glory, as Peter's language. In other words, if the bridegroom is with you, are you walking with him? Are you keeping company with him? If you're divorced

from him, if you're separated from him, well, now that's all different, of course.

And I can understand your gloom and your sadness. But men and women, if Jesus is your husband, if you're bound to Him in covenant terms described in the Bible, which He will never break, and if you're living within the bond of that marital love of the Son of God for His own, then joy, joy, joy must needs be the order of the day. Now, our Lord Jesus was very realistic.

Later on He went on to tell His disciples, Oh, there will come a time when you'll have to mourn and there will come a time when you'll know sorrow too. Jesus didn't hide realities from them at any given point. Truly, truly, I say to you, He says, you will weep and you will lament, but the world will rejoice.

You will be sorrowful, but, He says, your sorrow will turn into joy. When a woman is in trouble, she has sorrow because her hour has come. But when she is delivered of the child, she no longer remembers the anguish for joy that a child is born into the world.

So you have sorrow now, but I will see you again and your hearts will rejoice and no one will take it from you. What's He referring to? He is referring to those three days when He was taken away, buried in the tomb, and they saw His face no more and they waited for Him, and some of them looked for Him and wondered what had happened to Him. Up from the grave He arose with a mighty triumph for His foes and one of His last words to His disciples were these, Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have taught you and lo, I am with you always.

Hallelujah. Do you know anything of that? And if you do, my friend, there ought to be wedding bells ringing in your soul and this morning, whatever else may be within the compass of our mood, there ought to be this background of music and this undercurrent of joy that God in Christ has made us His own and we look at the gale and we face the fury and the snow and the ice and whatever you have out of the knowledge of the fact that we're wedded to our Lord. A difference that was discernible, a disclosure that was reasonable, just one last word, a distinction that was vital.

Jesus proceeds in the words of verses 21 to 22 to explain that there is a vital distinction between the old and the new, puzzling words these are to many. He says, No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old garment. If he does, the patch takes away from it the new from the old and a worse tear is made.

And no one puts new wine into old wine skins. If he does, the wine will burst the skins and the wine is lost and so are the skins. But new wine is for fresh skins.

Now can I briefly just relate the two? I believe that Jesus wants to show the real difference here between the religion of the Old Testament and the religion of the new. The religion of the Old Testament which was anticipating something, looking forward to something, glad in hope oftentimes, rejoicing in hope many times, but never having possessed the fullness of the blessing that God was promising. But you see when Jesus came, the mood changed.

The mood changed. Do you remember the angel? He announced to the shepherds, the ordinary shepherds, the ordinary person of the day and age. He says, Don't be afraid.

I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Now this is tremendous. I bring you good news, yes, but not just that.

I bring you good news of great joy which will be to all the people. Joy for everybody. Now that joy bringing message cannot be tacked on to the old garment of Judaism without tearing it to pieces.

You cannot express the joys of the Christian faith and the Christian experience within the limitations of the Judaistic ritual of the Old Testament. You've got to go further. Let me put it to you like this.

I went to minister in a church in Belfast where they only sung psalms. And I did enjoy it. You know there is something about the psalms that you don't get in some of our very superficial modern hymns.

But there was something lacking in the psalms. Sometimes they were looking forward to the death of Christ, to the resurrection of Christ and to much else because they are messianic in terms. But Bethlehem is too big a thing to allow me to give praise to God for the incarnation in terms of the psalms.

In the light of Calvary and of the resurrection and of Pentecost I found that I could not express my Christian spirit and participation in these things in terms of praise for the fact that He was yet to come. Christ has come. He has been born.

He's died. He's risen again. He sent the Holy Spirit.

And all of these things have an impact upon our Christian experience. And therefore we cannot contain our praise to language that is still looking forward to it. It's something of that kind we have here.

You cannot tag on the new faith as a patch on to a dress. It'll tear the whole thing to pieces. Or let me put it differently.

The joy bringing message of Christianity is like new wine. New wine. This may sound terrible to some people.

New wine. The Christian man is a man who's had new wine. Fresh wine.

And you see, you don't put fresh wine into old bottles. The bottles will break. And the bottles can't contain the fresh wine.

It's effervescent. My friend, is your spirit effervescent? Is there something in you that wants to jump over the traces? Well, do so. If the spirit of God is in your soul and in your heart and you know the joys of your salvation, you simply cannot continue on the morose straight jacket of Judaism.

The only occasion that requires fasting, says Jesus in principle, is when we don't have the bridegroom with us. Now, I believe that principle is a very important one, though I cannot, I cannot take it up this morning. Time doesn't allow.

But I'll put it to you like this. Because we have the bridegroom and we recognize him as such and we're wedded to him and he to us, because of that we have to rejoice. But now there do come times when a cloud comes between us and our heavenly bridegroom.

We're not sure whether he's there or not. Do you ever have days like that? Christian people, do any of you know anything of that this morning? You're not quite sure of your Lord. Is he mine or is he not? Does he love me, does he not? Does he listen to me, does he not? Are his promises true, are they not? Are we together, are we not? Where are we? Now, I know, my friend, if that is so, then what you need to do is to repent of your sin with sackcloth and ashes and if needs be, fast, in order to seek his face again and not

let him go until you find him.

Show your earnestness in any biblically conceived manner in order that you may manifest your repentance to God. You know, my friends, it would show some of us, it would show that some of us are real if we went without a couple of meals a week just to seek the knowledge and the awareness of the presence of God again for his people generally. Is it evident that Jesus is with us here in Knox? Now, some of us know that he is, but is it evident to people? Are you satisfied with a measure of the awareness of the presence of the Lord that we enjoy? If not, if not, then it may be necessary for us as a church to fast again, to seek it and to show that we are sorry that he is not glorified but rather the more in our midst and magnified and sought by outsiders and found by sinners.

But insofar as we have him, we must rejoice. And the song ought to be in our souls this morning as we come to his table, the song of gladness. It was a hymn I used to love very much.

I've not heard it now for a long, long time. But it's often expressed my spirit as I sought the Lord early in the morning. Since Christ my soul from sin set free, this world has been a heaven to me.

For mid-earth sorrow and its woe, tis heaven, my Jesus, here to know. Oh, hallelujah, yes, tis heaven. Tis heaven to know your sins forgiven.

On mountaintop or in the dell, tis heaven with Jesus here to dwell. If we have the bridegroom, then the knowledge of his presence and the sweetness of his love ought to make us sing and rejoice. And at that point, we cannot fast.

May something of the sense of his presence today gladden us as we come to his table. And may we be able to express it in a manner that is pleasing to him and perhaps profitable to one another.

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