

The Presence of Christ Changes Everything

The Gospel of Mark: Mighty and Mild / Mark 2:18-22

Introduction:

Consider an important question with me. What place does Jesus Christ hold in your life? Since the first verse of this gospel, Mark has meticulously crafted story after story to help us truly see the gospel of Jesus Christ, ensuring we know the gospel is centered on both the person and the work of Jesus. We have seen how Jesus is the promised messiah, who is mightier than John the Baptist. We heard the proclamation by John that Jesus was bringing a greater baptism and were shown Jesus' own baptism and temptation in the wilderness to help us begin to see Him as the spotless lamb of God. Mark has revealed Jesus' focus on proclaiming the forgiveness of sins, His disciple's immediate response to His call, the demons obeying His voice, and His compassion and power to heal sickness and disease. And we have been led to think deeply on Jesus' authority to forgive sins and His call for sinners to repent and follow Him. Each story presses us to know Jesus Christ more fully, and our story today is no different, as it helps us to understand how the presence of Christ changes everything. Through the response by Jesus to a seemingly innocent question about fasting, we are given 2 changes Jesus' presence brought about, that call for us to examine what place He holds in our lives. The first change we see is in verses 18-20, how

THE PRESENCE OF JESUS TEMPORARILY PUT FASTING ON HOLD

Look at how the scene opens in verse 18, "Now John's disciples and the Pharisees were fasting." Mark begins by centering this story on fasting, which was one of the main pillars of Judaism. While there was only one prescribed fast in the Torah, on the day of Atonement, the Mishna, a written collection of postbiblical Jewish laws, speaks of three main types of additional fasts. One type was fasting to lament national tragedies. Another was fasting during major crises. And the final type of fasting was for personal reasons. The Pharisees ended up taking fasting even further by choosing to fast two times a week on Mondays and Thursdays. By the time of this story, fasting had become a sign of religious zeal, and was viewed as a significant act of piety, or religious reverence. In Matthew 6, Jesus exposes how many would hypocritically walk around looking "gloomy" and "disfigure their faces" so that people would know they were fasting and admire their religious zeal. But notice it isn't just the Pharisees mentioned as fasting, but the followers of John the Baptist as well. Look at what happens next in verse 18, "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?'" Notice how the question isn't from the scribes but people who came to Jesus. People are starting to monitor the situation around Jesus closely, even watching what his followers are doing do. We have no reason to think John's disciples were fasting hypocritically, but we can see that even their fasting is contrasted to Jesus' disciples. The comparison, then, isn't just hypocritical fasting to true fasting. There is a significant difference between Jesus' followers and both the followers of John and the Pharisees. Jesus' followers don't fast at all. So, they go to Jesus to ask why. Now, the question likely isn't coming from curiosity, as much as from accusation. It's more like they are saying, "If you are a great teacher, calling people to follow the ways of Yahweh, why aren't your disciples as pious as the Pharisees, or even John's?" Do you feel the subtle accusation? I love how Jesus is never phased by these questions. Look at His calm and collected response in verses 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.'" Jesus' answers them with very specific imagery of the relationship of a bridegroom to his wedding guests. There are a couple points of importance in this imagery. First is an understanding of wedding celebrations in that day. Jewish wedding celebrations would last anywhere from 3 to 7 days, depending on whether it was a virgin bride or remarried widow. And the celebrations were meant to be just that, days of joyful celebration. Several commentators note that there was even an expectation for rabbis to cease from their strict adherence to the Torah to celebrate with their students. So, Jesus is invoking this concept of joyful celebration as a reason His disciples don't fast.

The second point of importance is the concept of the bridegroom. This is another pointer to who He really is. You see, throughout the Old Testament God is often pictured as the husband of His people. Connecting Himself to the bridegroom is another subtle way of showing He is God dwelling among His people. Do you see what Jesus is saying in this? Why would his disciples fast when the bridegroom is with them? Why would they fast when they are enjoying the presence of their God? The joy Christ's presence brought to them, while He walked on the earth, made fasting inappropriate. He isn't just saying they aren't required to fast, but it would have been wrong to fast. They shouldn't mourn when their God with them. They should be filled with joy of His presence. The presence of Jesus called for celebration because it marked their salvation. However, there is a time when fasting would be appropriate again. Look at verse 20, "The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast in that day." Jesus knows there was something coming that would cause Him to be taken away from His disciples. He is fully aware of the cross ahead of Him. As Isaiah 53:8 tells us, the Messiah would be taken away and considered to be "cut off out of the land of the living, stricken for the transgression" of His people. When Jesus is taken away, fasting would become appropriate again. The presence of Jesus temporarily put fasting on hold, but His death, resurrection, and ascension would bring back reasons for His disciples to fast. Before we consider those reasons, we need to consider the additional change we see in verses 21-22, that

THE PRESENCE OF JESUS BROUGHT SOMETHING ENTIRELY NEW

After addressing their question directly, Jesus gives two short parables to show a deeper reality for them, and us, to understand. Consider the parables together with me. Starting with the first in verse 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." The first parable focuses on the problem of adding something new to something old. Our quilters and seamstresses in the room have the upper hand in understanding this parable. Imagine with me your favorite shirt, or pants getting a hole in them. You are devastated because you have had it for years and can't imagine throwing it out. Now, my youngest daughter just got some money to shop with for her birthday. When they went shopping last week, we discovered it was almost a prerequisite that her clothing already had holes in it. So, if you are like her and enjoy pre-made holes in your clothes, bear with me in this and imagine, for a moment, you didn't like that. Because you don't want to get rid of this clothing, you decide to patch the hole up so it will last longer. If you were to take a brand-new piece of fabric, and use it as a patch, the moment it goes through its first wash, the new fabric would shrink up and make things worse than they were to start with. You get the picture of the parable, right? You can't add a new cloth to an old garment, because they aren't compatible with each other. That is the point, adding the new to the old simply won't work. The second parable gives a similar truth from a different angle. Look at verse 22 with me, "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." This takes some more imagination for us because we don't use wineskins anymore. Wineskins were bags made from the skins of goats to hold wine because they were elastic enough to stretch while the wine fermented and expanded inside of them. But there is only so far the wineskin could stretch. So, if you placed new wine, that needed to ferment and expand, in a used wineskin, the skin would only stretch so far before it bursts open. And what happens to the wine inside? It's ruined, unable to ferment and no longer useful to drink. And the wineskin is destroyed. So, in order to protect and secure the wines flourishing, you needed fresh wineskins. Where the first parable focuses on the destruction of the old garment by the new cloth, this parable focuses on the impossibility of the new wine to flourish in the old wineskin. Both show the old and new are incompatible with each other. The old garment and wineskin are the traditions of Judaism, and the new cloth and new wine, the message and person of Jesus. Through these parables, Jesus goes deeper than the simple question of fasting to show how it is impossible to, as one commentator says, "simply fuse the message and person of Jesus to everything that Judaism had been" (David Turner and Darrell L. Bock, *Cornerstone Biblical Commentary*, Vol 11: Matthew and Mark (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2005), 422.).

Jesus' presence brought something entirely new that fundamentally changed how people would relate to God. The bible proclaims, with no hesitation, that the way to be reconciled to God, and live in joyful communion with Him, does not come through religious practices, but through being united in a personal and intimate fellowship with Jesus Christ. Jesus isn't an addition to your works. He isn't the cherry on top that seals the deal for you. He is everything and the only thing we need. His blood shed on the cross is the only thing that can secure our pardon. His resurrection from the dead is our only hope in life and death. The joy of His presence, through the Spirit, is what we need for life and godliness. The spiritual practices we do now seek to united us more to His presence. While God does promise great rewards for our obedience in this life and calls for us to pursue Him through the means of His grace, we need to know that no amount of effort adds to what He accomplished. And everything we do in our life, following our trust in His work on the cross, should stem from a desire to be more satisfied in Him and never a thought that we are accomplishing anything to warrant His favor and grace. The analogy of the bridegroom and these parables point us to see how the presence of Jesus changes everything, and they call for us to focus on the importance of Him in our lives. That is the main point of this passage, and before we consider the purpose of fasting now, we need to ensure we have responded properly to that truth. We need to ensure that our trust is firmly placed in the person of Jesus Christ and in His death and resurrection. Without that, any fast we choose to do is meaningless. But when our trust is placed rightly, our fasting finds great meaning, purpose, and reward. So, pause for a moment and reflect in your heart on whether you are trying to add Jesus to your works, or truly finding your joy and peace in Him. Now, let's consider an important question for practical application.

WHY DO WE FAST NOW?

Look again at what Jesus says in verse 20, "The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast in that day." The bridegroom has been taken away from us physically on this earth. Therefore, we are in the days when fasting is appropriate. Yet, what is interesting is how little the New Testament speaks about fasting. Outside of this passage, and its parallels in Matthew 9 and Luke 5, we only see fasting mentioned a handful of times. And what we mainly see about fasting is how it was a practice of the early church, with very little prescriptions on it. Matthew 6:16-18 is the most extensive teaching on fasting, where Jesus says, "And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you." Here, we see a few things about fasting. First, Jesus expects for us to fast. Notice He says, "when you fast" not "if you fast." Secondly, He tells us not to fast like those who draw attention to themselves, but to do so in secret. Third, He tells us God the Father rewards our fasting. This tells us our fasting is not for physical gain, but spiritual gain. Christian fasting is never about losing weight, looking religious, or being healthier. True Christian fasting always has the primary desire of gaining something from God. If that is not your purpose in fasting, then what you are doing is not Christian fasting. Let me share at least 2 things we see the scriptures calling us to seek through fasting. The first is

1) TO CAUSE A GREATER LONGING FOR CHRIST AND HIS RETURN

Notice how verse 20 gives us this reason, "The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast in that day." Fasting was temporarily on hold when Christ was physically present with the disciples, but it becomes necessary when He is taken away. This points to fasting serving a primary purpose of reminding us of the full joy of Christ's presence. In 2 Timothy 4:8, Paul tells Timothy that the Lord will award the crown of righteous to "all who have loved His appearing." Church, we are still longing for the day when our salvation and redemption is fully realized at the return of Christ. We only have a taste of it now, but true and everlasting joy awaits us in the presence of God forever. Fasting is a way to build in our hearts a longing for that day. Yet, fasting doesn't just cause a longing for His future presence, at

times God rewards us with tastes His glory and presence in response to our fasting here on earth. Fasting is a way of saying, “I want more of you now Jesus!” When we fast, we abstain from something our bodies desire, like food, to gain more of Christ now. Listen to how Charles Spurgeon, pastor of the Metropolitan Tabernacle in the late 1800s, described the result of a season of fasting in His congregation, “Our seasons of fasting and prayer at the [Metropolitan] Tabernacle have been high days indeed; never has Heaven's gate stood wider; never have our hearts been nearer the central Glory.” Our vision, as a church, is to be a people passionate about knowing, loving, and sharing the glory of God in Christ. Fasting can be a tool to draw our hearts closer to that glory. The second reason I see for our fasting is,

2) TO ENGAGE IN CHRIST’S PURPOSES FOR US ON EARTH

We see this from the examples of fasting we see in the early church. Consider how the church, in Acts 13:2-3, was led to send Paul and Barnabas on their missionary journey. Luke records, “While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, ‘Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.’ Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off.” After this, we read, in Acts 13-14, about the churches they planted in many cities. Then, listen to what Luke records before they leave those churches, in Acts 14:23, “And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed.” These examples show us how fasting helped them to engage in Christ’s purposes of sending missionaries, planting churches, and establishing those churches. They longed to see God bless the work of the kingdom, so they committed their desires and work to the Lord through prayer and fasting. I think 1 Corinthians 9:25-27 can also give us a clue in how fasting helps to engage in Christ’s purposes for our own sanctification. Paul says, “Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. 26 So I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air. 27 But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified.” While it is not specifically mentioned in these verses, I believe fasting is likely one of the ways Paul kept his desires under control, because he shares, right before this, of how he abstained from certain things for the sake of being used to glorify Christ. Fasting refuses a material and earthly pleasure to gain a spiritual and heavenly perspective and reward.

Conclusion:

As we close, let me share a helpful tool you can use to think through how to apply the scriptures to your lives. We share this each week in our Colossians class. I believe every passage in the Bible is working to influence one of these things in our lives: our beliefs (what we think), our desires (what we long for), or our actions (what we do). So, as you consider your response to what we have seen in this passage, think over what God may be calling you to believe, desire, or do. Is He calling you to believe that Christ has brought something entirely new? So, you need to stop trusting in any effort you can muster for your salvation and turn to Christ. Maybe today is the first day you believe that. Is He calling you to desire the joy of His presence more? So, you need to pray and ask God to show you His glory in Christ and delight your heart more with it. Is He calling you to fast for His purposes to reign more in this church, or your own life? So, you need to set a time aside to abstain from food or some pleasure and seek the Lord. As Pastor David and the worship team come up to lead us in a time of response, press into however God is leading you to respond. You are invited to come and kneel before the Lord as a physical representation of your posture of humility before Him if you desire to. Or you can remain where you are at and cry out to Him. You are encouraged to sit and reflect as long as you need to, or sing, when you are ready, for your heart and others around you. We also have a team of people ready to pray for you and with you. You can find them worshipping in the corners of the front rows or bottom of the stairs in the back with lanyards on. I know they would be delighted to pray with you over any need you have.

Let’s pray together as we press into this time of receiving God’s grace.