

Mark 2:18-3:6 Discussion Guide

TEXT - Read Mark 2:18-3:6 (ESV) A Question About Fasting

¹⁸Now 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?" ¹⁹And 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. ²⁰The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast in that day. ²¹No 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. ²²And 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." ²³One Sabbath he was going through the grainfields, and as they made their way, his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. ²⁴And the Pharisees were saying to him, "Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?" ²⁵And he said to them, "Have you never read what David did, when he was in need and was hungry, he and those who were with him: ²⁶how he entered the house of God, in the time of Abiathar the high priest, and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and also gave it to those who were with him?" ²⁷And he said to them, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. ²⁸So the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath."

Mark 3 Again he entered the synagogue, and a man was there with a withered hand. ²And they watched Jesus, to see whether he would heal him on the Sabbath, so that they might accuse him. ³And he said to the man with the withered hand, "Come here." ⁴And he said to them, "Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to kill?" But they were silent. ⁵And he looked around at them with anger, grieved at their hardness of heart, and said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He stretched it out, and his hand was restored. ⁶The Pharisees went out and immediately held counsel with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him.

- What sticks out to you in this text? Any questions that come up?
- What is going on in this text (summarize the main points)? What is the context for the text?
- How does this text connect with the Gospel? What Gospel themes do you see in the text?

THEOLOGY - What do we learn about God from this text?

- What attributes or aspects of the character and nature of God do you see in these passages? What else can we learn about God from the text? Take a moment to list these out together.

LIFE

- Jesus answers the question about fasting in a way to show that His teaching is about a new time and a new way to follow God. What religious rituals are you holding onto that you need to ask Jesus to exchange for accepting His grace?
- The Pharisees accused Jesus' disciples of breaking the Sabbath laws. Jesus showed an important principle – *human need is more important than religious ritual*. Are there any religious rituals you need to let go to meet someone's needs?
- Jesus commanded the man with the withered hand to do something impossible – to move his paralyzed hand. The man put forth effort, God did the rest. Where do you need to make the effort of showing your faith to allow God to show His power?

PRAYER

- Pray in response to what God revealed to you in this text. If there is sin, confess it to him in prayer. If there is a need, petition God in prayer. If there is encouragement, praise God and share with others.
- What is one personal need you have that we can pray for you as a group?
- Pray for one friend, family member, or coworker with who you want to share the love of Jesus with.

Commentary on Mark 2:18-3:6

Why do the disciples of John and of the Pharisees fast, but Your disciples do not fast? The Pharisees were well known for fasting twice a week ([Luke 18:12](#)). It made sense for the disciples of John to fast because his ministry stressed repentance. Yet Jesus and His disciples did not have the same emphasis on fasting as these other spiritual men.

God is not against fasting; He is *for* fasting. But fasting has its time and place in the Christian life. Most of us have *no time* or *no place* for fasting, and so we are out of balance. These questioners came from the other side.

Can the friends of the bridegroom fast while the bridegroom is with them? By using the illustration of a wedding (the bridegroom), Jesus drew on a powerful picture among the Jews. During the weeklong wedding celebration, rabbis declared that *joy* was more important than observing *religious rituals*.

In the days of Jesus some Rabbis declared that if the observance of any law came in the way of having a good time during a wedding, you didn't have to keep the law. You could just go and have a good time. "Marriage feasts were times of extraordinary festivity, and even of *riot*, among several people of the east." (Clarke)

Jesus' message was bold and clear: "I'm not like the Pharisees or John the Baptist. I am the Messiah, the bridegroom to the people of God. Wherever I am, it is appropriate to have the joy we associate with weddings."

The days will come... they will fast in those days: Jesus knew His physical, immediate presence would not always be with the disciples. When He was physically gone, it would be more appropriate to fast.

No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old garment: The danger of trying to put something new on something old is clear in the illustration of a garment and its patch. But the same principle was true for wineskins. A wineskin expanded under the pressure of fermentation. So if new and unfermented wine was put in an old and brittle wineskin, it was sure to burst.

New wine must be put into new wineskins: Jesus' point was made clear by these examples. You can't fit His new life into the old forms. Jesus traded fasting for feasting; sackcloth and ashes for a robe of righteousness; a spirit of heaviness for a garment of praise; mourning for joy; and law for grace.

Through the centuries, old rigid forms could rarely contain the work of the Holy Spirit. Through the generations, God often looks for new wineskins because the old ones won't stretch any further.

Jesus came to introduce something new, not to patch up something old. This is what salvation is all about. In doing this, Jesus doesn't destroy the old (the law), but He fulfills it, just as an acorn is fulfilled when it grows into an oak tree. There is a sense in which the acorn is gone, but its purpose is fulfilled in greatness.

His disciples began to pluck the heads of grain: There was nothing wrong with *what they did*, because their gleaning was not considered stealing according to [Deuteronomy 23:25](#). The issue was only *the day* on which they did it. The Rabbis made an elaborate list of "dos" and "don'ts" relevant to the Sabbath, and this violated one of the items on this list.

When the **disciples began to pluck the heads of grain** on the Sabbaths, in the eyes of the religious leaders they were guilty of four violations of the Sabbath. They violated traditions against *reaping, threshing, winnowing, and preparing* food.

At this time, Rabbis filled Judaism with elaborate rituals related to the Sabbath and the observance of other laws. Ancient Rabbis taught that on the Sabbath, a man could not carry something in his right hand or in his left hand, across his chest or on his shoulder. But you could carry something with the back of your hand, with your foot, with your elbow, or in your ear, your hair, or the hem of your shirt, or your shoe or your sandal. Or on the Sabbath, you were forbidden to tie a knot – except a woman could tie a knot in her girdle. So, if a bucket of water had to be raised from a well, you could not tie a rope to the bucket, but a woman could tie her girdle to the bucket.

Look, why do they do what is not lawful on the Sabbath? Jesus never violated God's command to observe the Sabbath or approved of His disciples violating God's command to observe the Sabbath. But He often broke man's legalistic additions to that law, and He sometimes *seemed* to deliberately break them.

Have you never read what David did: In referring to David's use of the "holy bread" in 1 Samuel 21:1-6, Jesus showed an important principle – *human need is more important than religious ritual*. The Sabbath was meant to serve man (**the Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath**).

This is exactly what many people, steeped in tradition, simply cannot accept: that what God really wants is mercy before sacrifice (Hosea 6:6); that love to others is more important than religious rituals (Isaiah 58:1-9); that *the sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, a broken and a contrite heart; these, O God, You will not despise* (Psalms 51:17).

"Any application of the Sabbath Law which operates to the detriment of man is out of harmony with God's purpose." (Morgan)

In the days of Abiathar the high priest: Some find a problem here because according to 1 Samuel 21:1, it says that *Ahimelech* was the high priest at that time, and that his son **Abiathar** served as high priest after him (1 Samuel 22:20 and 1 Chronicles 18:16). Most people reconcile 1 Samuel 21:1 with Jesus' statement here by saying that both father and son *together* served as co-high priests at that time, or by saying that Jesus simply said this happened **in the days of Abiathar**, that is *while he was alive*, not while he held the office of high priest.

Wiersbe has a different solution: "Also it is likely that our Lord used 'Abiathar' to refer to the Old Testament *passage* about Abiathar rather than to the man. This is the way the Jews identified sections of the Word since their manuscripts did not have chapters and verses such as we have today in our Bibles."

Therefore the Son of Man is also Lord of the Sabbath: The second principle was even more dramatic. Jesus declared that He was the **Lord of the Sabbath**. If He, the very **Lord of the Sabbath**, was not offended by His disciple's actions, then these sideline critics should not have been offended either.

A man was there who had a withered hand: "The man's hand was withered, but God's mercy had still preserved to him the use of his feet: he uses them to bring him to the public worship of God, and Jesus meets and heals him there. How true is the proverb – *It is never so ill with us, but it might be much worse!*" (Clarke)

They watched Him closely, whether He would heal him on the Sabbath: The critics of Jesus *expected* Him to heal this man with the withered hand. By their expectation, they admitted that Jesus had the power of God to work miracles. Knowing this, they **watched Him closely... so that they might accuse Him**. They knew what Jesus could do, yet their knowledge didn't draw them *to* Jesus. It was as if a man could fly, but the authorities wanted to know if he had a pilot's license.

The religious leaders **watched** Jesus **closely** but with no heart of love for Him. They knew *about* Jesus, but they did not know Him.

They also *knew* Jesus would do something when He saw this man in need. In this sense, these critics had more faith than many of us because we sometimes doubt that Jesus wants to meet the needs of others.

Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill? In His question to the religious leaders, Jesus emphasized the truth about the Sabbath: there is never a *wrong* day to do something *truly good*.

According to their Sabbath traditions, if you cut your finger, you could stop the bleeding – but you could not put ointment on the cut. You could stop it from getting worse, but you weren't allowed to make it better.

He had looked around them with anger, being grieved by the hardness of their hearts: This is one of the few places where Jesus is described as having **anger**, and He was angry at the **hardness** of men's hearts.

Jesus was angry because this was a perfect opportunity for these critics of His to change their minds about Him and their traditions. But they refused to change their minds and rejected Jesus instead. In this we can see that Jesus deliberately used this occasion to provoke a response. Jesus *could* have done this the next day. Jesus *could* have done it privately. But He chose to do it at this time and place.

Stretch out your hand: In this, Jesus commanded the man with the withered hand to do something impossible – to move his paralyzed hand. But as the man put forth effort, God did the rest. God never commands us without enabling us.

“This man might have reasoned thus: ‘Lord, my hand is *withered*; how then can I stretch it out? Make it whole first, and afterwards I will do as thou commandest.’ This may appear *reasonable*, but in his case it would have been *foolishness*. At the command of the Lord he made the effort, and in making it the cure was effected!” (Clarke)