Fasting & Feasting

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[0:00] Well, good morning, church. Would you turn with me to Mark, chapter 2, verses 18 through 22? That is page 786 in the Pew Bible.

We'll have it on the screens as well when I read it in just a second. We're continuing in our series in the Gospel of Mark this morning. Let me pray for us as we come to God's Word, and then I'll read.
Oh, Father, what a powerful prayer that is. To want and to desire and to long for nothing but the Lord Jesus, the Lord Jesus above all else, above all the pleasures that this world can offer, above all the success and fame, and, Lord, all the things that might pull our hearts away.
So we pray as we come to your Word now that you would indeed, by your Holy Spirit, give us Jesus, present Christ to us with fresh splendor, so that our hearts might know true and deep satisfaction, the satisfaction we were created for in our Lord.
Make it so, God, by your grace. In the name of Jesus we pray. Amen. All right, let me read for us Mark, chapter 2, verses 18 through 22. Now, John's disciples and the Pharisees were fasting.
[1:23] 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? 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 they will fast in that day.
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. 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.
New wine is for fresh wineskins. So at this point in his public ministry, Jesus seems to have a knack for stirring up controversy.
[2:30] In chapter 1 of Mark, things seem to be smooth sailing. Jesus was teaching, healing, exercising, and the crowds were getting larger every day.

It seemed like this was the Messiah everyone had been waiting for. But then in chapter 2, the mood starts to change.
Jesus begins talking about his authority to forgive sins, and the radical welcome of God's kingdom for sinners. And suddenly, things start to heat up.
These controversies will continue through the rest of chapter 2 into the beginning of chapter 3, until suddenly Jesus is debating with his contemporaries one of the central practices of first century Judaism, the keeping of the Sabbath.
But here, the flashpoint in our text, in the midst of these controversies, is the issue of fasting. Fasting. But this surface question about fasting soon opens into a deeper and much more profound question.
[3:38] A question about who Jesus really is and what exactly his presence means. What starts as a conversation about appropriate religious practices, fasting ends up becoming a question about the radical turning of the ages.

And Jesus is suddenly talking about new wine, exploding old wineskins. The door of redemptive history is swinging open, and the banquet of festival joy is beginning.
It seems the old garments and the old wineskins cannot contain the new thing that Jesus is bringing about.
And this is exactly what Jesus has come to bring. Something new. The inbreaking of God's kingdom. The new thing that Israel's prophets had foretold. The new thing that cannot possibly be contained contained or restrained by familiar human traditions or comfortable religiosity.

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And all that gives many a deep cause for concern. Why? Well, because the familiar ways of doing things are, well, familiar, right?
[4:57] They're comforting. And Jesus seems to be upsetting this familiar, comfortable, even seemingly pious way of doing things.

But the presence of Jesus means much more than that the old way of doing things needs to be revised. The presence of Jesus on the scene, his arrival, his presence, means that the whole thing needs to be made new.
That we need to be made new. So let's look at our passage closely in two parts. That's how the passage kind of naturally divides. We see it kind of dividing verses 18 through 20 and then the second half, verses 21 through 22.
And first we see that the presence of Jesus and the newness of what he brings has sort of this immediate relevance to the traditional practice of fasting. Verse 18 tells us that now John's disciples, that is John the Baptist and his followers, his disciples, and the Pharisees were fasting.
Okay, now, biblically speaking, what is fasting? Fasting is the practice of abstaining from food for a short period of time for a spiritual purpose, right?
[6:07] That's how we might just sort of quickly and easily define biblical fasting. Lots of people today, right, fast for all sorts of reasons. You know, maybe you think about something like intermittent fasting or something like that, right?

Which is really about the physical outcomes, right? We're fasting in that sense to sort of, you know, lose weight or feel better or whatever. But in the Bible, fasting is for a spiritual purpose.
And that spiritual purpose is almost always to accompany and to focus the act of prayer. Fasting is a means to intensify prayer.
And as we look at fasting across Scripture, we see fasting accompanying prayers of intercession, asking God for help, for rescue, for deliverance, or accompanying prayers of confession and repentance, or accompanying prayers of lament, or accompanying prayers for the advance of God's kingdom.
So fasting, abstaining from food for a short period of time as a means of sharpening prayer, is a regular and healthy biblical practice. And in the Old Testament, you see, there was actually only one day a year that Israelites were required to fast under the law of Moses.
[7:23] And that day was the day of atonement. The one day when the high priest went into the holiest place in the tabernacle or the temple to make atonement for the people's sins before the Ark of the Covenant, that symbolic place where God was present.

On that holy day, God, under the law of Moses, wanted everyone to fast and pray as their sins were symbolically covered and forgiven.
So that was it. Just one day a year when everyone under the Old Testament had to fast. But by the time of the first century, many, many other practices had cropped up that prescribed fasting on other days of the year.
Many of these sort of regular fast days that had developed and been picked up in tradition were related, a lot of them, to the destruction of the temple and the exile in the sixth century.
So they became ways to commemorate and to remember the fall of Jerusalem and to express a longing for God to come and to restore his people. And you know, even after the temple was rebuilt, when the exiles returned, those additional traditions about fasting, they continued.
[8:39] They kept going. And some groups, some movements within first century Judaism even went beyond those prescribed fasting days. The Pharisees, for example, they prescribed fasting twice per week.

Do you remember Jesus' story of the Pharisees and the tax collector? The Pharisee and the tax collector from Luke's gospel? What does the Pharisee say when he's praying in the temple? Oh Lord, I fast twice per week.
Right? Do you remember that? Now on the surface, this wasn't necessarily a bad thing. In fact, many people looked to the Pharisees as models of piety, as models of serious godliness.
And the disciples of John the Baptist. Well, the disciples of John the Baptist might not have fasted twice per week, but they probably also practiced regular fasting. And yet, to the surprise, and the scandal of many, the disciples of Jesus, they didn't fast like that at all.
They weren't fasting regularly like John the Baptist's disciples. They certainly weren't fasting twice a week like the Pharisees. Or, you know, the many people who were attracted to the model of the

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Pharisaical spiritual life.
[10:02] You know, that's probably what disciples of the Pharisees means here. Those people who look to the Pharisees as their model for how to do their life with God. And this is the problem, right?

So how could Jesus say, how could Jesus say that he was here doing God's work when clearly Jesus and his disciples were falling way below the mark of what serious spiritual people are supposed to be doing?
Why do John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but your disciples don't? But notice in verse 19 what Jesus' answer is.
You don't fast during a wedding, do you? And of course the answer was in the first century, no, you would never fast during a wedding, right?
Now if you think weddings today are a big deal, they were an even bigger deal in the first century. You know, you think about planning a wedding today and you're like, we've got to plan a whole day of festivities from early sunrise till sundown.
[11:09] We're planning a service and we're planning a party and we've got to invite all of our relatives, the ones that we like and the ones we don't like and we've got to feed them. You know, this is a problem and it costs a lot of money and it's a lot of effort and it's a huge logistical challenge to plan a whole day, a party that lasts a whole day.

But most wedding celebrations in the first century lasted a whole week. They were meant to be times of celebration and joy.
They were one of the handful of times in a community where for a whole week they would just let down and celebrate. Even the serious scribes, the religious scholars of the day were willing to give themselves a pass when a wedding was afoot.
Even they could sort of lay off their rigorous spiritual routines and celebrate. The tables were set, the wine was poured, the music was played, and you didn't fast.
You feasted. So why don't Jesus' disciples participate in the traditions of fasting of their contemporaries?
[12:25] Because according to Jesus, during the time of his earthly ministry, that's not what time it is. It's not the time for fasting.

It's the time for feasting. The kingdom of God is breaking in. The blind are receiving their sight. The lame are walking.
The prisoners are being set free. The poor have good news preached to them. It's like a wedding feast is at hand. It's time to celebrate. But notice, as wonderful as all that is, Jesus is saying, it's the time of the wedding feast.
We can't fast. Jesus is saying something even more pointed than that. Verse 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. So you see, it's not just a question of when, but a question of who.
[13:32] The bridegroom is here. And if he is here, then they simply cannot fast. And Jesus is obviously referring to himself here, right?

He is the metaphorical bridegroom. He's here. He's with them. Imagine yourself, you know, sitting down at a rehearsal dinner, right? In our sort of cultural context, rehearsal dinners are put on by the groom and the groom's family, right?
Imagine you're at a rehearsal dinner. The groom and his family have made preparations for a wonderful meal. You sit down, and you say, oh, I'm sorry. I'll just watch you all eat because I'm fasting, right?
How silly. No, you sit down and you eat the food and you feast because you're in the presence of the groom. But you know, Jesus is saying something even more pointed.
He's not just saying, I'm here and that's why we're fasting. That would have been bold and controversial enough and it would have raised a number of eyebrows. But consider Jesus' choice of metaphor.
[14:39] Of all the metaphors he could have chosen to describe the time and his identity, he chooses not just a wedding but a bridegroom.

You know, it's interesting that many of the Old Testament metaphors for the coming Messiah, there are a lot of them, right, that describe sort of what this coming king would be like, what his ministry

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would be like, what his reign would be like.
In the Old Testament, there are a lot of metaphors for the coming Messiah but bridegroom is not one of them. We don't find the coming Davidic king spoken of in these terms.
So what is Jesus doing here with this choice of metaphor? Well, when we look at the Old Testament, we find that someone else is spoken of in that way.
In the Old Testament, this metaphor of a groom and his bride, of the husband and his bride is used most often of the Lord God himself.
[15:40] The Lord, God, the creator of all things is Israel's husband, Israel's bridegroom. And the prophets speak again and again of when the Lord will come and bring his wayward bride back home.

They tell the story again and again of how the Lord loved his people and how he took them to himself but tragically how they turned away and sought other lovers but full of compassion.
The prophets say the Lord will remain faithful and he will bring his people, he will bring his bride back to himself. He'll renew his covenant with them. In fact, he'll even make a new covenant with them, one that this time can never be broken.
Can the wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them? Ah, do you see what Jesus is doing here in this early stage of his ministry?
Slowly, patiently, he's trying to get their minds to open. He's trying to get their eyes to see that his presence in their midst is so much greater than another rabbi or another prophet or even another would-be Messiah.
[16:54] He is, of course, all those things, prophet, teacher, king, but would they be willing to see that he is the Lord come in the flesh?

And if God has indeed come in the person of Jesus to bring home his wayward bride, then indeed it is time to celebrate and to rejoice.
Jesus is in their midst. The Lord is in their midst. It is not time for fasting but for feasting. Is that still the case for Christians today?
Well, you know, here in this passage Jesus acknowledges that in the future his disciples will indeed fast, right? Look at what he says. He says, the days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them and then they will fast.
They will fast in that day. Jesus speaks here of the bridegroom being taken away. You see, Jesus knows that in order to win back his wayward people, he will need to give himself over on their behalf.
[18:10] He will be handed over. He will be taken away. He will lay down his life for his beloved. He will be taken away, taken away to the cross, taken away to be condemned and die.

Why? So that our sins can be forgiven. So that our unfaithfulness can be covered by his utter faithfulness.
Faithfulness even unto death. Jesus says, they will fast in that day. And indeed, Mark tells us in his passion account that comes later in his gospel how after Jesus' arrest, the disciples are scattered and afraid and the feasting stops and it seems like the wedding is over.
But three days later, what happens? Jesus is raised. Having paid sin's penalty, death no more has dominion over him.
He's raised in power and he comes to his disciples with what? With a message of grace and peace and the forgiveness of sins for all who believe in him.
[19:21] And then he ascends on high and he pours out the Spirit at Pentecost and the church begins to testify in his name with great boldness and great joy.

And so for the church today, we kind of ask again, well, is it a time of fasting or feasting? Well, the answer is both.
Fasting remains a biblical practice to accompany and empower prayer. And indeed, we see the church in the book of Acts so bristling and cracking with joy. What are they doing?
They're fasting and praying, right? And we see God mightily answering those prayers. And for us today too, we still await the Lord Jesus' return in glory.
And so our prayers continue and at times we will punctuate those prayers, sharpen those prayers with fasting. But the church age, this time that we live in, this age between the first and the second coming of Christ, is not just a time for fasting.

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[20:27] It is also supremely an age for feasting. The joy that Jesus brought in His earthly ministry has been sealed by His resurrection and the outpouring of the Spirit.

We have joy because our sins have been forgiven and we've been reconciled to God. Joy because the new creation has begun and we see its fruit sprouting around us. Joy because eternal life, eternal life has been secured.
King Jesus has inaugurated God's kingdom and what is that kingdom about? Paul will say in Romans 14, righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit.
If the righteousness of Christ is ours, and it is, then the peace of God is ours. And if the peace of God is ours, then surely we must know the joy of the Holy Spirit.
And so as Christians, we make fasting a practice, but we also make feasting, celebration, a spiritual practice. To be a serious Christian doesn't mean wearing a somber face and never having fun.
[21:50] a spiritual thing. Serious Christianity takes serious the reality that death has been defeated and one day God will make all things new.

And so we celebrate. We take time. We make it a practice not only to fast but to feast. But you might ask, you know, is it right, I mean, is it really right for Christians to make a practice of celebration, of feasting, when there is so much going wrong in the world?
I recently ran across a statistic that in 1991, the National Park Service, so that's the organization, the governmental organization that runs the national parks all across the country, I ran across a statistic that in 1991, the National Park Service, after decades of cutting its budgets and laying off staff and closing campgrounds and buildings due to disrepair, they decided to spend half a million dollars on a 75th anniversary gala in Vail, Colorado.
Okay, so like, clearly everything's not going great at the National Park Service and they're like, let's spend half a million dollars on a gala in Vail. Was that really the best way to spend their budget, right?
Should they have been feasting when everything was going so wrong? Are Christians essentially doing the same thing if we make a practice of celebration in a world where so much is going wrong?
[23:21] Even if we aren't so financially foolish as the National Park Service, is it still just not the right thing to do? Should we be lamenting, not rejoicing? Well, to be sure, there is a place for lament in our broken world, but consider, consider what feasting says in a world where so much is going wrong.

Do you remember the scene in the line The Witch and the Wardrobe? It's kind of towards the end of the book when spring has just started to set in and the snow is starting to melt and the white witch is sort of driving her sled through the melting snows and she's just sort of plowing along and trudging along, probably going out, I think at this point in the story she's going out to meet Aslan and do battle and spread wickedness and all that sort of fun stuff.
She's sort of driving along and then what happens? As she's sort of trudging along, she comes across a small group of woodland creatures and what are they doing? She kind of stumbles across them.
What are they doing? Well, they're holding a small feast. They're raising glasses. They're eating together and the witch basically says to them, who told you you have a right to throw a party? Stop it right now or I'll turn you to stone. And what do the creatures do? They raise their glasses and basically say, turn us to stone. The king's on his way and no amount of evil is going to stop him from making all things new.
[24:54] So what does the witch do? In a rage, she turns them to stone, right? It's okay. Spoiler alert, you find out they get brought back to like, you know, fleshy woodland creatures after Aslan wins.

But what's the point, right? What's the point? You see, friends, in a fallen world, feasting, feasting can be an act of war, an act of spiritual warfare.
Feasting is a way of saying to the powers of evil and darkness, you shall not win and you cannot win because Christ has died, Christ has risen, and Christ will come again.
So no matter what darkness may come, Christians in this age can raise a glass and celebrate our king with hope and joy that the final word over this fallen creation belongs to him and to him alone.
So the first point of our passage is that the presence of Jesus and the newness he brings means that we have reason to feast, reason to be joyful and to celebrate.

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[26:09] But the passage ends with a second point. In verses 21 through 22, Jesus gives two quick parables or metaphors to point to the deeper significance of what he's accomplishing.

You know, this whole thing isn't just about fasting. Jesus talks here about new cloth and new wine and even new wine exploding old wineskins. Something deeper is afoot.
This is about more than whether we should fast or not. This is about something so new, so good on its way that the old structures and the old systems simply won't and cannot contain it.
Fasting is just a little sample of what's about to be utterly transformed by Jesus and his ministry.
And isn't that so? Think about it.
What else in the practice of first century faith would Jesus utterly transform when he had finished his new work?
[27:16] Temple, sacrifice, priesthood, the whole ceremonial law that had led and instructed Israel for hundreds of years would pass away because of the new thing Jesus was bringing about.

Could the new wine of Jesus' sacrificial death on the cross, the once for all atonement for sin, be put back in to the old wineskin of the sacrificial system of bulls and goats?
Could the new cloth of Jesus' perfect high priesthood, standing at the Father's right hand, forever to intercede with us, be stitched back into the old garment of the Levitical priesthood?
With the arrival of Jesus, the shadows of the Old Testament were giving way to substance. The old covenant was giving way to the new. And this is what God had planned all along.
You see, Jesus wasn't replacing the sacrifices, the temple, the priesthood. He was fulfilling them. He was bringing them to their completion.
[28:29] They were signposts all along, pointing ahead, preparing the way for what He would ultimately accomplish. The work Jesus was accomplishing through His earthly ministry wasn't going to go back into the old bottles.

It was making something new. But were the people of His day ready for it? Many people in Jesus' day wanted His person and His work to fit into their agendas and their expectations.
Right? The people who came to Jesus on this particular day in Mark 2, 18 through 22, they wanted Jesus to look just like the serious religious folk that they knew. Jesus, You should look just like the Pharisees.
You should look just like John's disciples. That's what we know. That's what we're familiar with. That's what we can control. But it wasn't going to work like that.
Some of Jesus' own disciples thought that Jesus' kingdom was going to bring them prosperity and political power. Jesus, who gets to sit at your right and left hand when you enter into your kingdom?
[29:39] But it wasn't going to work like that. How about us? Are we trying to fit Jesus into the old clothes and old wineskin of our former life or of the world around us?

Do we think that we can take the new wine of Jesus' person and work and fit it into the tired old agendas for money and sex and power that are so rampant around us?
Are we going to try to take the new wine that Jesus offers and put it into the old wineskins of our post-enlightenment, late-modern, tired, anxious culture? Or are we willing to become something radically new?
New wine is for new wineskins. Friends, the gospel is about so much more than just whether you fast or not. The gospel of Jesus Christ is about so much more than just putting on a few new spiritual practices here, doing a little bit of personal betterment there.
No, Christ didn't come to tweak and to revise. He came to fulfill God's redemptive plan and to make all things new. And he wants to start with you.
[31:05] Why did Jesus come, lay down his life, and fulfill all the types and signs of the Old Testament? Why did he come to be the true and better sacrifice, the true and better priest, the true and better temple where heaven and earth meet?

Why did he come to do all this? He did it to make you new. The apostle Paul puts it this way in 2 Corinthians 5, 17, therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation.
The old has passed away. Behold, the new has come. And friends, if Jesus can make you and me new, what else could he make new?
If he can take your life and my life and make us a new creation by the power of his spirit, if he can take the new wine of what he's done and in pouring it into us, make us a brand new wineskin, if he can take the fresh cloth of his perfect righteousness, throw it over us, and suddenly we can be a new garment altogether, if he can do that for you and me, then what else could he make new?

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Could he make our churches new? Could he make our communities, our neighborhoods new? Could he renew our marriages and our friendships and our schools?
[32:31] Could he renew our economies and political processes and the way we relate to one another on the most meta scale all the way down to the most micro scale?

Could he do a work like that? He can make it all new. And one day when Jesus returns, he'll make even the fabric of the material creation new and he'll liberate it from its bondage to decay.
You see, friends, that's where the work of Jesus Christ is headed. New wine is for fresh wineskins. Jesus won't be squeezed into our old agendas, but when we come to him in repentance and faith, he promises not merely to reform us, but to transform us, to make us new.
How about you, friend? Do you want to be made new? Then come to him. Let's pray. Father in heaven, we pray that you would pour out your Holy Spirit, give us a true conviction of sin and a true vision of Christ our Lord, crucified, risen, reigning, utterly sufficient.
Oh, Lord, grant us faith to be united to him and be made new. Amen.

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