

Fasting for the Feast

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Preacher: Chris Trousdale

[0:00] If you brought a copy of the Scriptures with you, open up to the Gospel of Mark chapter 2. We're going to be in verses 18 through 22 tonight. We've been walking kind of slowly through the Gospel of Mark.

And we are now, at this point, we are in the middle of Jesus' ministry in the northern region of Galilee. And I pointed out to you last week that the opposition to Jesus is already beginning to grow. So, it's nowhere present at the beginning of Jesus' ministry that we can see in the Gospel of Mark. In fact, the people, we're told, are amazed at Jesus' teaching. They're amazed at His power to heal and His power to cast out demons.

But beginning in chapter 2, we begin to see a little slight bit of a turn as the Pharisees and other religious leaders begin to sort of question, we're told, within themselves, within their own hearts, why Jesus is doing the kinds of things that He's doing.

And they complain to themselves. And then they begin to complain to Jesus' disciples. And now there will be a complaint that is lodged directly toward Jesus in our passage tonight.

[1:10] So, we're in the middle of this growing trend toward some sort of opposition to Jesus that's going to take us all the way through the Gospel of Mark, eventually all the way to Calvary.

So, here we are in verse 18. In fact, tonight I want you guys to stand as we read the Scriptures. Mark chapter 2, verses 18 through 22. Now, 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? 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. 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.

[2:19] But new wine is for fresh wineskins. Let's pray. Father, I pray that we would be challenged by Your Word tonight.

I pray that we would examine our own hearts as we do things, or think about doing things, in the name of Christ. And that we would be, as a church, as individuals, that we would be people who are committed to seeing the name of Christ exalted in everything that we do.

That we wouldn't have things that we do, even when we do them in the name of Christ, that aren't for Christ. That there wouldn't be activities that we undertake, going to church, reading our Bibles, praying, fasting, that we wouldn't do any of those things for any reason other than to bring honor and glory to Jesus.

So I pray that even right now, as we meditate on Your Word, that we would do that for the sake of Christ. It's in His name that we pray. Amen. Amen. Every year, this time of year, there are really millions of Christians around the world who celebrate Lent.

Spent your whole life outside of denominations and churches that don't have anything to do with Lent, that don't observe the official sort of liturgical church calendar, then probably the only thing that you know about Lent is that when you were a kid, or when you were a teenager, or even now you remember your friends or co-workers who at this point in the year, at some time in the spring for a few weeks, they'd give up M&Ms, or sodas, or red meat, or something for a few weeks in the middle of the spring, and that's about all that you might know about it.

[4 : 18] What Lent is supposed to be, is supposed to be a 40-day fast between Ash Wednesday and Holy Thursday, in which Christians spend concentrated time in prayer, in reflection on the days leading up to the death of Christ, what His death means for us, and then what His resurrection following means for us.

Probably, looking around here, probably most of you have not really celebrated Lent before. I haven't. I come from a Southern Baptist background my whole life, and it's just not been a part of my Christianity.

But, I have fasted before. And the text that we're looking at tonight deals directly with the issue of fasting. There's a lot of questions I think that we should ask and try to answer when it comes to the whole issue of fasting.

I mean, should Christians fast at all? And if we should fast, what qualifies as a fast? When should we do it? How should we do it? Those are all really good questions, questions that I hope that we can at least have some sort of answers for before we're done tonight.

But before we even get to those questions, we need to look at the conflict over fasting that arises in this passage. Verse 18 tells us about the whole controversy.

[5 : 36] If you look, we're told that now 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?

Now, we know that the Pharisees, for instance, fasted every Tuesday and every Thursday of every week of the year. They fasted all the time.

Even though the law itself, if you read the Old Testament, the Old Testament only requires a fast one day out of the entire year, and that's on the Day of Atonement. But the Pharisees always went beyond the law, tried to do more than the law required, and always added on top of the law these other requirements.

And so they fasted every Tuesday and every Thursday, and everybody knew that the Pharisees fasted on Tuesdays and Thursdays. And that's how they liked it. They wanted everybody to know that they were fasting.

In fact, in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus talks about this kind of fasting that the Pharisees did. And this is what He tells His disciples. When you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces when they are fasting so that they may be seen by others.

[6 : 51] That's the kind of fasting that you would have seen the Pharisees doing every Tuesday and every Thursday. Going around with a gloomy face. They're hungry. They need to eat.

They're starving. It's getting close to evening. And they haven't had anything all day, anything since the afternoon before. And they're hungry. And everybody knows it. It's just a known fact.

What we don't know is why John's disciples are fasting. There are a lot of possible reasons. Maybe John's disciples are fasting because he's in prison.

And they're fasting and praying for his release or his deliverance or maybe just out of sadness that John is in prison. Most of the time, fasting was a sign of mourning, of sadness, of longing.

So it could be that since John's whole ministry was all about repentance for sin and recognizing your sinfulness, maybe his disciples just fasted regularly as a sign of their repentance, of their sorrow over the things that they had done.

[7 : 57] We don't really know why the disciples of John fasted. But what we know is that they must have fasted on a regular basis something like the Pharisees. And what everybody can see and everybody knows is that Jesus' disciples are different.

They're not like the Pharisees. And they're not even like John's disciples. And the assumption by everyone would be that Jesus is responsible for their behavior.

I mean, John's disciples fast, they tell him. The disciples of the Pharisees fast, but yours don't, Jesus. Why? He's responsible. Why aren't they fasting? Why aren't they doing what all these other religious groups do?

And Jesus, of course, never passes up an opportunity to teach people. And here in this passage, he uses three analogies to answer their question about why his disciples don't fast.

And all three of these analogies that we see here give the same basic explanation. But the first one sheds more light on the issue. In fact, the first one helps us to really understand how Jesus understands his entire ministry, his entire mission and purpose.

[9 : 05] So we're going to save the first analogy that he gives to us for last so that we can have more light at the end. But the basic issue in all of these analogies is really a time issue.

It's not the time for fasting. So the second example that Jesus gives is about the unshrunk cloth and the old garment. You see it in verse 21.

Jesus says, The new patch, which Jesus calls the unshrunk cloth, represents the newness of the kingdom that has now dawned with the ministry of Jesus.

If you were here towards the beginning of this sermon series and we're in Mark chapter 1, we saw Mark sort of give a summary of Jesus' message. At the very beginning of Jesus' ministry, chapter 1, verses 14 and 15, Mark summarizes the message of Jesus as this, The kingdom of God is at hand and the time is fulfilled.

Repent and believe the gospel. So Jesus' ministry is really all about sort of the end breaking of the kingdom of God into this world.

[10 : 24] Something new has come with the ministry of Jesus. The time is fulfilled and that's what the new patch, the unshrunk cloth represents, that newness of the kingdom that is different from, say, what the prophets preached under the old covenant and what the people of Israel in the first century would have known.

Something different, something new is here. And that's the patch. That's the unshrunk cloth. The old garment that's been worn and worn out so much so that now there's a tear in it represents the old covenant.

The law of Moses. The old way of doing things. Which the people here would not have thought of as old. It's just what is. If you're a Jew, that's what you've got.

It's not old. It's just who we are. And Jesus comes along and teaches that the time for that is passing. And there's something new. There's something better here. And Jesus says, if you try to take the new thing that I'm bringing in, if you try to take the kingdom of God and you just try to integrate it with the old and just mash it together with the old, it's just like taking a new patch, putting it on an old garment, and the first time that you wash it, the new patch is going to shrink, and the old, weak, thin garment is just going to tear everywhere around the patch.

And now it's going to have a worse tear than it did in the first place. You can't mix these two things. And since the fasting of the Pharisees and the fasting of John's disciples belongs to the old covenant, to the old way of doing things, Jesus says, you can't mix these things.

[12 : 01] My disciples don't fast because they understand that they're a part of something new and that's a part of something old and they can't be combined. They can't just be put together.

Jesus says the same thing about the new wine and the wineskins. Verse 22. He says, So here we are again.

New wine represents the kingdom of God and the old wineskin represents the old covenant. The wineskin is the exodus from Egypt.

It's being exiled in Babylon. It's oppression under the Romans. It's the demands of the law of Moses without the power of the Spirit to obey the law.

It's all of those things. The old wineskin. And now the kingdom has come in the new wine. And if you try to retain all those trappings and you just try to pour the new wine of the kingdom into that old form, it will just tear right through it.

[13 : 16] And it's not that the new covenant is coming in to destroy the old covenant. It's that if you try to put the new covenant into the situation, into the container that is the old covenant, both of them, he says, are destroyed.

You cannot hold them. You can't hold them together. The time for the old is over. And now it's time for the new.

That's the basic point of both of those analogies. It's a timing issue. And what the Pharisees don't understand, and even the disciples of John don't yet understand, is that Jesus has not come to add something to the old covenant.

The old covenant looked for a day when it would be surpassed. And Jesus says the day has now come. That's the same basic point that we see being made with the first analogy of the groom and his guests in verse 19.

Take a look at verse 19. It says, Jesus says, Can the wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them? As long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast.

[14:33] So Jesus says a wedding is a time for rejoicing. It's not a time for mourning. It's a time for celebration, not for sadness. So if you're a guest at a wedding and the groom is still there and the party is still going on, then you can't fast.

You can't put on a sad face. You can't mourn because you're so filled with joy that sadness is impossible in that moment. You can't fast when the groom is present.

That's why Jesus says that they cannot fast. He doesn't say, Well, you shouldn't fast. He doesn't say that they choose. My disciples have just made the decision not to fast.

He says, My disciples can't fast. Not now. Not while the groom is still here. So Jesus, who is the groom, says the wedding feast is arriving.

The kingdom of God is coming. And the disciples, the followers of Christ, they're the guests. And they don't fast because they're celebrating. It's the wedding feast.

[15:39] Now, when you understand that passage as a whole, it doesn't take a lot of effort to see why a lot of Christians conclude from that that believers in Christ shouldn't fast at all.

The argument is made that Jesus says that fasting is a part of the Old Covenant. We live under the New Covenant. Fasting belongs to the law. And we're filled with the Spirit. And so the argument goes, Christians, according to Jesus, shouldn't fast.

And I'm really tempted to agree with that. If verse 20 weren't in this text, I probably would agree with that. But look at what verse 20 says.

Jesus tells them, the days will come. So that's the future. The present is the wedding feast. The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them.

And then they will fast in that day. So for Jesus, His perspective from His earthly ministry during that time period is that fasting belongs to the past and fasting belongs to the future.

[16:49] It's not appropriate for His disciples to fast while He's with them. But He says, there's coming a time when He will be taken away from them. And on that day, fasting will be resumed.

So the question that we have to answer, really, if we don't understand this passage, is when is that day? What is the day that Jesus says He's going to be taken away from them and they'll have to fast?

A lot of people say that day is the crucifixion of Christ. That's the day when Jesus is taken away and that's the time for fasting and mourning and sadness. And that's the only time period in which it was appropriate for the disciples of Jesus to fast between His death and resurrection.

It's the only time appropriate, some say, for fasting and mourning in the Christian life. And that makes sense in this passage alone, but it doesn't make sense when you look at the whole New Testament.

See, the day of fasting can't be limited to the time between Christ's death and His resurrection. For one thing, when you read the account in the book of Acts, in Acts we find Jesus' disciples after His ascension into heaven, after His resurrection, after all those events, we find the disciples of Jesus fasting on a number of occasions.

[18:09] So in Acts chapter 13, this is what we read. It says, 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've called them.

Then after fasting and praying, they laid their hands on them and sent them off. So here we are in the middle of the book of Acts, full blown into the church age by now.

Pentecost is past. The ministry of Paul is about to begin. The gospel is about to go to the Gentiles in mass. And the followers of Jesus are fasting.

Acts chapter later, we see we're fast forward. We're not at the beginning of Paul's ministry. Now we're in the middle of Paul's ministry to the Gentiles. The church is growing.

The church is flourishing. Acts chapter 14, verse 23, it's talking about Paul and Barnabas who've been sent out. 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.

[19:13] So this is apparently Paul's normal practice as he does his missionary work out in the world. He goes to one town, plants a church. Before he leaves, he appoints elders, that's pastors, to leave the church.

And as he prays over those elders, it's a time of not just prayer, but a time of fasting as well. In fact, there's a connection between Acts chapter 13 and chapter 14, not just in terms of one comes after the other, but in terms of what's happening.

In chapter 13, it's the leaders of the church in Antioch fasting and worshiping because they have gathered together to seek the Lord's direction for the ministry of Paul.

They've got to do something with this guy. He's not normal. He's not your average follower of Christ. He was trying to kill us. Jesus personally appeared to him on the road. Jesus commissioned him to preach to the Gentiles.

So what are we going to do with him? Well, they've got to take special time to fast and pray over that whole issue. And then you move forward one chapter. Now Paul is doing something similar.

[20 : 15] Now Paul is appointing leaders in the church. And what does he do as he appoints leaders? He fasts. He prays over them. What's the point in all that?

The point is, I think, that what we see in Acts is a connection between great ministry efforts and the setting aside of leaders and fasting.

Now I'm not saying that the only time that we can fast is when we plant a church or when we appoint elders. But what I'm saying is that these instances are times where we are particularly devoted to prayer and desiring God's blessing and God's leadership.

That's when we employ fasting. You see, I think that new covenant believers should fast. But not without some specific goal in mind. It's got to be a reason to fast.

And the fact of the matter is we don't just see Christians and churches fasting all that often in the New Testament. We just don't see it very often.

[21 : 21] Maybe two instances from Acts. Those are the only clear instances from the book of Acts where we see them fasting. Paul doesn't say very much. He doesn't say really hardly anything at all about fasting in his letters. In fact, the one time where Paul really mentions fasting is in a warning about fasting.

To avoid ritualistic fasting. So he speaks of false teachers. He says, who forbid marriage and require abstinence from foods that are created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth.

So Paul's perspective is that in general food is a gift from God and should be received with thanksgiving. And so beware of those who would have you refuse what God has blessed you with. It's a warning not to enter into fasting too frequently or too flippantly or without a really good purpose as we see as Paul plants churches and as Paul is sent out by the leaders in Antioch. There's a good reason for it. Christian fasting, I think, if we're going to do it, is not a fasting that is ultimately about self-denial.

[22 : 26] It's not. It can't be a fasting that's about following rules and regulation. Christian fasting should be for guidance and blessing. That's what it's for.

Guidance and blessing. And ultimately though, I think that Christian fasting should be an expression of our longing for Christ to come again. Jesus says that the bridegroom will be taken away not a reference to his death.

It's a reference to his ascension into heaven. He's not here physically present with his people anymore. He has sent the Spirit. He has sent another comforter to lead us and guide us and point us back to his teachings and to the teachings of the apostles.

But the bridegroom has in a real sense been taken away. And our fasting is a fasting that says the wedding feast was here and yet the wedding feast is being held in the future.

It's not complete. It's as if somebody, it's as if there's an intermission in the wedding feast. Or it's as if, it's as if the wedding feast is still going on, but we're not able to, we're not able to fully participate in the celebration.

[23 : 45] There's something that's turned down the volume of the music. There's something that's gotten in the way of us, of us fully enjoying this wedding feast. And something that's gotten in the way of it is a part of God's plan.

That the wedding feast is not completed until the day when Christ arrives. So we read in the book of Revelation. In fact, I want you to turn. Revelation chapter 19.

I want you to see this for yourself. Because I think it's key to understanding what Jesus is saying in this passage in Mark. Revelation chapter 19.

In verses 6 and 7, this is what we read. John says, Then I heard what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude. Like the roar of many waters and like the sound of mighty peals of thunder crying out, Hallelujah!

For the Lord, our God, the Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and exult and give Him the glory for the marriage of the Lamb has come and His bride has made herself ready.

[24 : 54] Now the marriage has come. Now the feast is to be had. Now celebration really begins. Well, I thought the marriage feast was in the ministry of Jesus.

It was. Just as the kingdom dawned in the ministry of Jesus. And yet the kingdom is not fully present. The kingdom doesn't arrive in all of its fullness until the day that Christ returns. It just doesn't. In the same way, the wedding feast doesn't reach its crescendo until Christ returns. And He removes all those obstacles that would direct our attention to other things and that would put a damper on the sound of celebration.

He removes all of those things and then the wedding comes and the bride, that's us, is made fully ready. That's our hope as believers.

The whole Christian life and all of creation is looking to that day. Of course, the only way to be a part of it, the only way to be received not just as a guest but to be a part of the bride is through faith in the groom.

[26 : 09] I mean, if someone begins to think that obedience, things like fasting and following rituals, if they begin to think that those things will earn their way, they will never make it to the wedding feast.

You can never be invited to the wedding feast so long as you're trying to push your way through the door. It won't happen. But if you trust in Jesus, instead of all of your own efforts, you can know with certainty that you will be there on that day.

And that day is coming. It's coming as certainly as anything else. But for now, the bridegroom has been taken away.

We have the Spirit of God indwelling us, marking us as His own. He's like our invitation to the wedding feast. He guarantees us a spot at the table.

But in the meantime, the guests of the groom will, from time to time, will fast. Fast because we need guidance. Fast because we need His blessing.

[27 : 15] We'll fast because most of all, we long for the feast. fast. And since we will fast, we need some practical suggestions and pointers on how we do that.

So let me just, let me give you five, five things real quickly, six things actually, suggestions on fasting for believers. First thing that I want to say is that you need to know specifically why you're fasting.

You need to know why. There has to be the reason. Maybe there's a significant event coming up. Maybe there's some sort of special worship service coming up. Maybe you're going on a mission trip.

I don't know what it is. Different times in your life, there will be things happening that demand fasting and prayer. You have to know why you're fasting so that you'll know how to pray during the fast. Secondly, make sure that you're fasting when you do it. Make sure that it's not just about self-denial or some other even more superficial reason like losing weight or something like that.

[28 : 24] Don't ever let fasting become about you, about what you're going to gain in a superficial way. Fasting is supposed to be a fuel for your prayer.

In fact, when you look through the New Testament you see that fasting is always connected to prayer. The point of fasting is to be constantly reminded of your dependence upon God so that when the hunger pains begin to strike you in the middle of the day at lunchtime when you'd normally be sitting down for lunch, you cry out to God for help.

Help me get past this moment. I'm feeling weak. I'm hungry. And then that reminds you that man does not live by bread alone. You turn to the Word for guidance and it leads you in your prayer life. Every time that you're tempted to go to the refrigerator or to drive through the drive-thru on your way home, you fight the hunger with prayer and you will find yourself over and over the further you get into a fast, the more time you will spend in prayer because it's demanded because the hunger will not stop.

It'll keep coming. It's not about self-denial. It's not about superficial gain. It's about prayer. That means, of course, that sometimes you have to remove all the other distractions that might come.

[29 : 39] You might have to, instead of watching TV to sort of quell the hunger pains and stick them to the back of your mind which you would normally do, right? It's late at night and you're hungry and you want to eat like a whole gallon of ice cream but you know you can't because you're

about to go to bed and it'll just turn into fat.

So you watch TV or something just to put it to the back of your mind. You can't do that when you're fasting. No. You can't use TV to take your mind off the hunger. Use prayer to focus in the middle of the hunger.

You're consecrated to prayer during the fast. That's the second thing. Third thing, don't make a public showing of a fast. Don't make it superficially about your own self-denial but don't make it publicly about you.

That's the point of Jesus' words to His disciples in the Sermon on the Mount on fasting that we read earlier. Don't announce to everybody that you're fasting. I mean, don't make a scene out of not eating when you're at a lunch meeting or at dinner time with your family because pride, pride is always at the door and the most dangerous kind of pride that will sap your prayer life and take the power of the Spirit away from you, open the doors to temptation, the most dangerous kind of pride is religious pride that the Pharisees had.

It's dangerous because you justify yourself in the middle of it. You don't even see it. Number four, it's just practical. Whenever possible, fast from food.

[31 : 09] And that's what fasting is. I mean, I know that it's popular today among some people who fast to declare a fast from television or fast from secular music or from, I don't know, whatever.

But I just can't escape the fact that all through the Scripture fasting is always fasting from food. Just what it is by definition. Now, there's some people who, for health reasons, can't fast from food.

So maybe in those instances, maybe something could be substituted, but I'd be really, really cautious about doing that. Just don't, try not to do that. Fasting is about removing from ourselves a basic necessity of life so that we rely more heavily upon God and listen more carefully to His Spirit. So don't trivialize it by substituting something else. Fifth thing, don't make it trivial in the way that you choose how to fast from food.

So don't give up M&Ms; for a month. That's not a basic necessity of life. Don't give up fish if you hate fish. In fact, I would say as much as possible, don't try to fast from a certain kind of food.

[32 : 27] Fast from food. Okay? Now, I know that it's easy to veer off into legalism when you start talking about, well, how should I fast?

What qualifies as a fast? And people ask those kinds of questions like, well, does a protein shake count as a drink or does it count as food? Can I take vitamins while I'm fasting so that my body will have what it needs to function?

I don't want to be a legalist. I don't want to get into those kinds of little issues because that's pharisaical fasting. And my point is that when you fast, sacrifice.

Really sacrifice. Make yourself feel the pain of hunger so that you will feel the need to pray. That's what it's about. The last thing, the most important thing I think about fasting that we learn from this passage is when we fast as believers, we should keep our eyes set on the future.

All of our fast is a fast in hope of the future. Maybe it's just that we desire God's guidance for the future. We come to a time where we need Him to reveal clearly which way we should go and so we enter into a fast, but that's a future-oriented fast.

[33 : 43] God, show me what you want me to do. What's the next step that you want me to take? Should I do this? Should I become a part of this? Should I go there? It's dangerous. What do you want me to do? It's fasting for future guidance.

Or, it might be fasting for His blessing, for something you already know that He wants you to do in the future. You've already felt led by God to take this step and to go in this direction, to undertake this ministry, to go to this dangerous place and you know that that's where you're going to go and you desperately need His blessing to protect you, keep you safe in the middle of it, to give you success in it.

And so you fast for future protection and blessing and success in the ministry that God's called. It's still future oriented, but mostly, mostly our fasting should be an expression of our longing for the day when fasting will be no more and the feast will have begun.

So that in the New Testament, Paul cries out, Maranatha, he says, which means, Lord, come! and that should be our prayer when we fast and when we don't fast.

Our hope is a hope in the future that Christ will come and in that day there will be only feasting. And in all that we do, whether we're fasting or not fasting, we need to stay focused on that.

[35 : 08] Let's pray. Father, if there comes a time in the days ahead when you call us to fast, don't let us be like the Pharisees.

Don't let us be hypocrites. Don't let us make a show of it. Don't let us make it about us. If you call us to fast, let it not be to fulfill some ritualistic obligation, but let it be at its core an expression of our longing for Jesus.

Longing to be with Him and to see Him and to sit at the table with Him. We ask this in Jesus' name.

Amen.

Amen.