

Fast Break

Mark 2:18-22 April 16, 2025

Pixar's classic movie *The Incredibles* is not really about super powers or saving the world. It's about one man's realization that the greatest adventure of his life is *not* the bad guys he overpowers or any of his feats of strength. It is his family relationships that matter most - the love he has for them and they for him that truly make his life worth living. He finally realizes that *they* are his greatest adventure and because he was so caught up in the past, he almost missed it.

When Jesus came in His incarnation, the *vast majority* of people were so caught up in the past that they missed the chance to be in relationship with Him. Even those who did follow Him had a very hard time letting go of their assumptions, their traditions, their preconceptions. We really struggle to accept what God has revealed and to allow Him to define spirituality on *His* terms.

We are much more prone to chase after achievement than relationship, checking boxes than intimate communion, self-reliance than submission and dependence on the Holy Spirit.

That's what our text tonight is about. We're in a section of Mark where he shares five instances where people challenged Jesus' methods and the behavior of His disciples. The antagonists always come with absolute confidence that *they* know how things should be done - what practices and perspectives please God and honor Him. Jesus does not fit their framework. Meanwhile, the Lord compassionately tries to change their mind. He tries to lead them to understanding for their good.

Tonight's scene starts with an unheard-of partnership: Pharisees and disciples of John the Baptist.

Mark 2:18 - ¹⁸ Now John's disciples and the Pharisees were fasting. People came and asked him, "Why do John's disciples and the Pharisees' disciples fast, but your disciples do not fast?"

First thing's first: This text is not really about fasting. We'll consider the topic of fasting, but what's *really* happening is that all the religious people of Judea don't understand why Jesus and His followers don't conform to *their* preferred practices and perspective. It bothered them.

It bothered them so much that these very separate groups came together with this complaint. Mark doesn't say who is asking, but Matthew says it's John's disciples and Luke says the Pharisees came.

Both of these groups were so bothered by the fact that Jesus was different, they came together to say, "Listen, *WE* both fast, so *YOU* need to, too. We've decided what spirituality is."

The fact that there was still a group of people who identified as disciples of John reveals how hard it was for even sincere, genuine people to get on board with Jesus' new way. John was arrested by this point - he may have been killed already. But John was very clear when Jesus showed up. He said, "Look! *There's* the Messiah. *He's* the One I told you about. He's the Son of God. He must

increase, I must decrease." Andrew had been a disciple of John, but after hearing what John said, Andrew left John to become a disciple of Jesus. Obviously that's what should happen.

But here's this group of people *still* identifying as disciples of John. And they had their way of doing things. They couldn't let it go. And of course we also have the Pharisees.

Both of these groups fasted, but they did so in different ways and for different reasons. The Law of Moses only commands a single fast - the Day of Atonement. That fast was not just from food but even water.¹ After the Babylonian exile, five more annual fasts were added to the calendar. You find them in Zechariah and Esther.² Pharisees believed in even stricter adherence to the old covenant,³ so they also fasted every Monday and Thursday.⁴

Everyone knew these groups did these things because they did so *publicly*. The Pharisees may have started these practices in a desire to remain holy, but by the time of Jesus it had morphed into mere performance. They did what they did so people would be impressed. It was virtue signaling self-righteousness.

Jesus comes along with power and truth, telling people God was doing a *new* thing, but they were offended that He was actually doing something *new*. "Fall in line with how we want You to behave and with what we want You to prioritize. You need to agree with our version of spirituality."

Christians and religious people still have a tendency to treat Jesus this way. We have our priorities. We have things that we think are important. And we start to fashion the message and the Person of Jesus in a way that validates what we think matters most. This tendency flares up during elections. You'll see on social media pastors or teachers saying things like, "If your church doesn't preach on *this* issue *this* Sunday, you need to find a new church." "We fast. Why don't *Your* disciples fast?"

Mark 2:19 - ¹⁹Jesus said to them, "The wedding guests cannot fast while the groom is with them, can they? As long as they have the groom with them, they cannot fast.

In response, Jesus gave three parables. What we need to remember is that parables are meant to deliver a major thought. Not every single element needs to be assigned and dissected.

The point Jesus made with all three of these examples is: You cannot combine the new thing God was doing through Jesus' life and ministry with the old traditions they were devoted to.

In the first parable, He counters their complaint by redefining what religion should be. They were concerned with rituals and He wanted them to be concerned with relationship with God.

¹ George Gianoulis *Did Jesus' Disciples Fast? BSAC 168:672*

² Zechariah 8:19, Esther 9:31

³ Ben Witherington *The Gospel Of Mark: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*

⁴ Darrell Bock *Luke*

Christian faith is properly defined by joy and celebration and satisfaction. That doesn't mean our circumstances will always feel good or we'll never have any problems. But being right with God is *not* about who can deny themselves the most or who does the most acts of piety. What God desires is real, personal communion with His people - an active and joyous relationship.

These religious Jews were missing out on a backstage pass to spend time one-on-One with the Messiah Himself. They were missing the opportunity to be part of the bridal party.

Jesus suggested that He was the Groom in the story. To a Jew, this is a big deal. The Old Testament has many allusions to God acting as a Husband or a Groom to Israel. Isaiah, Ezekiel, Hosea, Psalms all make references to it. And now Jesus was saying in a round about way that *He* is that figure.

Don't ever believe someone who says that Jesus never claimed to be God. He absolutely did, multiple times and in various ways.

Before we move on, let's think about this parable. We're not as off-base as the disciples of John or the Pharisees, but *all* of us need to wrestle with our spiritual perspective. Do we know Who Jesus is? Do we surrender our perspective and our priorities to what *He* has revealed?

Do we think of Jesus as our joyous, loving, celebratory Bridegroom? Or, is it easier for us to think of Him as a cosmic vending machine? Or as a political ally Who will establish *our* preferred policies? How do we think of Him? *This* is Who He says He is. Our part is to accept and apply *His* revelation.

Mark 2:20 - ²⁰ But the time will come when the groom will be taken away from them, and then they will fast on that day.

It would be wrong for the disciples of Jesus to be fasting and afflicting themselves while Jesus was with them. But He points to a time when not only will He be *gone*, but He will be *taken* away.

Jesus didn't hide the fact that He was going to die. The disciples just had such a hard time understanding what He meant, even when He told them outright. We're slow to understand. Maybe that's why Jesus had to use *three* parables to make *one* point.

Mark 2:21 - ²¹ No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment. Otherwise, the new patch pulls away from the old cloth, and a worse tear is made.

It would do no good to combine the new covenant of relationship with Jesus and the old trappings of religious traditionalism. Not only would it not be good, it would actually make things worse.

Everyone knew that when it came to clothes, what Jesus was saying is true. Kind of like how most of us know if you buy a brand new bright red t-shirt, you better not put it in the wash with your whites. You're going to create a problem for yourself that can't just be undone.

But in our spiritual lives we tend to forget these truths. For decades now, among evangelicals, there has been a push to bring back in “ancient” practices. You’re told you need more ritual, you need more formality, you need these *old* methods that will unlock real spirituality. But it’s not true. And, according to Jesus’ parable, not only does it not help it will, in fact, make your spirituality worse.

But humans like human ideas. It makes the human heart feel like we’re contributing something. But Jesus came to make all things new. And so, *no*, you do *not* need to keep the Sabbath. *No*, you do *not* have to follow the Jewish dietary rules. *No*, you do *not* need medieval prayer practices.

Instead of trying to force old and new together, what we must do is put on the vestments Christ delivered to us. Spirituality on *His* terms. When we try to put His new work onto old systems, tearing is the inevitable result. What happened at the end of Jesus’ life? When His work came to a climax, Caiaphas the high priest *tore* his robes in anger and rejection. When Jesus breathed His last on the cross, what happened? The veil in the temple was *torn* from top to bottom. The old was done. Christ reconciled us into a *new* covenant in His blood.

Mark 2:22 - ²² And no one puts new wine into old wineskins. Otherwise, the wine will burst the skins, and the wine is lost as well as the skins. No, new wine is put into fresh wineskins.”

The old wineskins weren’t evil.⁵ It’s just that their time was over. Old skins, like Jesus is describing, could not hold new wine that was still fermenting because over time they had become too brittle. They weren’t pliable, they weren’t flexible. And so, if you put in new wine, the expansion and changes necessary would not only break the old skin but spill the wine as well.

The Pharisees perfectly demonstrate this rigid, religious inflexibility. They had no room for tax collectors in their company. No room for grace. No room for mercy. Jesus comes along and says, “I’m bringing in tax collectors *and* sinners *and* Gentiles *and* all who are willing to repent and believe.” But the Pharisees couldn’t bear it. It *broke* them. They would rather *conspire to murder* Jesus than to accept that God might love sinners.

We shake our heads at the Pharisees - and rightly so - but it will serve us to recognize how difficult this issue was not only for them, but even for the Twelve. Not *just* the issue of fasting, but of ritual versus relationship. Look at the book of Acts. The Christians *struggled* with this.

The problem persisted after the Apostles. The *Didache* is an important book. It’s one of the earliest treatises that collected the teaching of the Apostles telling the church how to be the church.

On the issue of fasting it commands that Christians must *not* do what the hypocrite Pharisees do, fasting Mondays and Thursdays. *No, don’t* do that! Instead, you need to fast Wednesdays and

⁵ James Brooks *The New American Commentary: Mark*

Fridays!⁶ And *don't* pray like the hypocrites do. Instead pray the Lord's prayer...but you *must* pray it three times a day!⁷ Already there was a ceremonial rigidity trying to take hold.

It is so easy for us to start patch-working religious garments of our own design, convinced that *they* are the best robe for us. But usually they are nothing more than fig-leaf coverings.

That *doesn't* mean we don't do spiritual or religious things. The lesson here is that *Jesus* gets to define spirituality for us. And as we discover what God has revealed in scripture, we find that the Lord wants us to live by grace and truth and generosity and love for Him, *not* ceremony.

But what about fasting? Should fasting be a regular part of our Christian activity? Believe it or not, many scholars try to make the case from this passage that Jesus was saying it was *only* appropriate for Christians to fast in the time span between the crucifixion and the resurrection and that fasting *after* Christ rose again is wrong.⁸

Meanwhile, in His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, "*When you give, when you pray, when you fast.*" And though we don't see Christians fasting often in the New Testament, it does happen. In Acts 13 the church at Antioch is worshiping and fasting and praying and the Holy Spirit tells them to set apart Paul and Barnabas for a special work. Later we see Paul and church leaders in other towns fasting as part of their seeking the Lord for the life of the church.

But we're never *commanded* to fast in the New Testament.⁹ But it is still a way we can commune with the Lord - *if it's done to commune with the Lord!* Not for self-righteousness, not to try to prove that we're worth forgiving or to show people how religious we are. For relationship, not ritual.

God wants us to consider our spiritual lives through the lens of personal relationship with Him as the One Who *loves* us and rejoices over us. But rather than just club us over the head, He graciously invites us to think through these things on our own.

That's why Jesus taught in parables: So that those who truly wanted to understand would consider them, meditate on them, and follow up with the Lord because of them.

These people came to Jesus with a *very* direct question: *Why don't Your disciples fast?* And in response Jesus gave them a *very indirect* answer. His answer was, "Let's think about what being right with God is really about. Don't base your spirituality on tradition - whichever tradition you're a part of - but on *revelation*. Allow the Messiah to define your perspective and practices"

Mr. Incredible told his family that he realized he had been blind to what he had. His eyes were finally opened and it changed everything in the story.

⁶ *Didache 8:1*

⁷ *Didache 8:2*

⁸ See *Lexham Context Commentary: New Testament*, David Garland, *Mark (NIVAC)*

⁹ Robert Utley, Robert James *The Gospel According To Peter: Mark and I & II Peter*

But the Pharisees and the disciples of John couldn't see it. Here they are saying, "We've kept religion *much* better than Your disciples." And Jesus essentially says, "You don't get it. You think you're Moses the Law Giver, but you're *Ruth* the Moabitess. There's *no* hope for you, no matter *what* you do *unless* you have a Kinsman-Redeemer. You need a loving Groom to come and *save* you. Why don't My disciples fast? *That's* the wrong question. The question is: Why don't you accept *Who I Am* and what I say?"

So, in *your* life, as you seek to grow in your spirituality, if you want to make progress in your walk with the Lord, don't look for practices more than you're looking for the Personal closeness of Jesus Christ. He *may* lead you into a fast. He may lead you to pray every day at the same time. He may ask you to do something we might describe as religious, but the *fast* is not the end goal. The goal is that we *hold fast* to Him, remembering *Who He is*: *your* Kinsman Redeemer. *Your* Bridegroom. Calling you into communion with Him as you walk together day-by-day in the life He has given you.