

Christian Rhythms of Life

Devotional Reading: Ecclesiastes 2:20–25

Background Scripture: Jeremiah 31:12–13; Mark 2:18–28; 6:30–32;
John 2:1–11

Today's Scripture: Mark 2:18–28

I. Question of Fasting

Mark 2:18–22

¹⁸ Now John's disciples and the Pharisees were fasting. Some people came and asked Jesus, "How is it that John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees are fasting, but yours are not?"

¹⁹ Jesus answered, "How can the guests of the bridegroom fast while he is with them? They cannot, so long as they have him with them. ²⁰ But the time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them, and on that day they will fast.

²¹ "No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment. Otherwise, the new piece will pull away from the old, making the tear worse. ²² And no one pours new wine into old wineskins. Otherwise, the wine will burst the skins, and both the wine and the wineskins will be ruined. No, they pour new wine into new wineskins."

18. Our passage lands within a series of accounts depicting conflicts between Jesus' actions and Jewish religious tradition. These narratives point to a shift in faith and practice with the arrival of God's kingdom.

People inevitably compared Jesus and *John* the Baptist. They were contemporaries, and each established himself as

a prominent Jewish rabbi with devoted *disciples*. Their ministries, which shared a common goal of calling Israel back to faithfulness, overlapped in time and message. Therefore, it is unsurprising that questions over observable differences between their habits arose. The Pharisees' religious practices were well-known, and apparent differences from those of Jesus prompted the question we see here.

The Pharisees consistently meet Jesus' messages with pushback and interrogation. First, they take issue with Jesus declaring forgiveness of sins, then his choice to dine with tax collectors and sinners (Mark 2:1–17). Now, the tension builds further as the controversy moves to fasting practices.

¹⁹. Jesus responds with a parable framed as a question. First-century Jews observed the wedding as an extended feast that could last for days. The groom's family hosted the wedding at their home. Guests gathered ahead of the bride. They waited at the groom's house while the *bridegroom* went to receive the bride. The groom then escorted the bride from her home to his home, where the assembled *guests* shared in a communal celebration. Thus, the groom's arrival signaled the start of the wedding feast, a time of unity and joy. Jesus' narrative implies that there is a time and place for fasting, but this is neither!

Jesus' use of the bridal metaphor elicits

recollection of prophetic Scriptures. Jeremiah spoke of Judah's exile as an end to the joyous sound of a bride and groom's voices (Jeremiah 7:34). He then promised restoration of the nation and joy in glorious praise (33:11). Isaiah compared God to a groom who rejoices over his bride, Israel (Isaiah 62:5). Considering these familiar images, Jesus continues preaching that the kingdom of God is at hand.

20. Jesus takes the imagery into unexpected territory. No one anticipates a groom to be *taken* away from the wedding party. Although no custom corresponds to this description, 1 Maccabees 9:37–41 (a non-biblical text) records a violent episode of it happening. Naturally, feasting ceases if the groom is taken from the celebration. Joy turns to mourning, which appropriately expresses itself in fasting.

Jesus' veiled warning probably baffles hearers. But it also prepares them for future events. His cryptic speech foreshadows his crucifixion (Mark 8:31).

21. The conversation continues without a break, but Jesus moves to a second parable, utilizing new imagery. His example expands the subject from fasting to everything related to the kingdom of God. God's kingdom requires and implements a new paradigm.

If someone patched a torn *old* cloak with new, *unshrunk cloth*, it would tear when drying out after getting wet. In the same way, old religious practices will not hold up to new ways of doing things. Jesus' teaching indicates a necessary separation between the old and new.

22. To drive the point home, Jesus launches directly into a third parable. The term translated *wineskins* refers to bags made from leather that store wine while it ferments. When new, such bags are flexible and stretchy. Off-gassing occurs during the fermentation process. As gas builds up, it puts pressure on the bags. New bags expand

with the process. Old bags, however, are stiff and brittle. If new wine ferments in them, both wine and bag are ruined.

Jesus is warning all who will listen that the new is incompatible with the old. His ministry inaugurates the new. God's promises are being fulfilled, and new ways of doing things are in play. Jesus clarifies the establishment of a new way, a new covenant, and the arrival of God's kingdom.

II. Question of Sabbath

Mark 2:23–28

²³ One Sabbath Jesus was going through the grainfields, and as his disciples walked along, they began to pick some heads of grain. ²⁴ The Pharisees said to him, "Look, why are they doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath?"

²⁵ He answered, "Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need?

²⁶ In the days of Abiathar the high priest, he entered the house of God and ate the consecrated bread, which is lawful only for priests to eat. And he also gave some to his companions."

²⁷ Then he said to them, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. ²⁸ So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath."

23. This verse signals a scene and subject change. Jesus and his followers are traveling through farmland. The *grain* here refers to cereal crops like wheat and barley. This day, the grain is ripe and ready for consumption.

According to the Law of Moses, the poor are allowed to help themselves to unharvested grain in a neighbor's fields (Deuteronomy 23:25). Therefore, the distinctive feature of this passage is that the action is happening on the *Sabbath*.

24. Jesus' critics among *the Pharisees* jump on what they see, quickly conclud-

ing that the Law of Moses forbids the disciples' actions. In their minds, the disciples were working in three ways: harvesting, threshing, and winnowing. Harvesting refers to the act of picking the grain. Threshing involves separating the grain from the hull. Winnowing is where the hulls blow away, leaving only the grain. Preparation for eating requires all three.

25. Jesus answers his opponents with an analogy from Israel's history (see 1 Samuel 21:1–6). As religious leaders, the Pharisees are familiar with this story. Before ruling, young David served in King Saul's court. But Saul, jealous of David's success and popularity, wanted to kill his young rival. So David fled with several of his supporters. After a tiring journey of several miles, David and his fellow fugitives were famished and exhausted.

26. David went into the tabernacle, Israel's portable tent of meeting, looking for food. The purpose of the tabernacle (*the house of God*) was worship and sacrifice. Typically, food was present at these sacrifices, and a portion of it was set aside for the priesthood to eat. The priest at Nob informed David there was no "ordinary bread" there. The only available food was *consecrated bread* that only priests were allowed to eat. On this occasion, however, *the high priest* violated the rule and gave David the bread.

A small problem arises in this text with the name *Abiathar*. According to 1 Samuel 21:1, the name of the man who helped David was Ahimelek. Abiathar was his son, the only priest to escape the violent consequences of helping David. Abiathar joined David's entourage and eventually served in the tabernacle as high priest with Zadok. So when Jesus refers to *the days of Abiathar*, he is pointing to a general time frame. Referring to Abiathar as *the high priest* recognizes the office he eventually took and for which he was best known.

At this point we may ask ourselves, "What is the relationship between the alleged violation of the Sabbath and David's violation?" Each incident involves godly men doing something presumably forbidden to meet a valid need.

27. Jesus responds again with a whole new paradigm. He says the purpose of the law is to bless humankind. God gave his law to enhance people's lives. Where its usage is misinterpreted and misapplied, the result is undue burden. God desires good for his people, but Jesus' opponents have lost sight of the introduction to the law: "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery" (Exodus 20:2). God, who gives Israel freedom, does not intend his law to enslave and burden. The Pharisees have a decision to make: which will be their priority—human need or ritual formality?

28. Jesus' declaration is the climax of the exchange. He refers to himself as *the Son of man*, a self-designation that occurs more than 80 times across all four Gospels. This designation generally means "one who belongs to the category 'man,'" as in a human. The book of Ezekiel uses it dozens of times to delineate between a man used as the mouthpiece of God and God himself. However, Jesus uses it differently. His use connects him with power and authority, assuming he is the king of God's kingdom. He is the one who rules and reigns.

With this title, Jesus claims the authority to apply God's law. Jesus is saying, in effect, that he is the one who defines Sabbath adherence, not the Pharisees. In so doing, he strips away the trappings of religiosity and tradition and replaces them with sovereignty. Ultimately, God decides how his law applies, and Jesus says that role belongs to him. The Sabbath and its practice are subject to Jesus' authority.

Involvement Learning

Christian Rhythms of Life

Into the Lesson

Write down a general schedule of what you do each day. Specific times are unnecessary; the goal is to list at least five typical daily activities between waking up and going to sleep.

We prioritize certain activities or habits by repeating them often and consistently. These rhythms keep us balanced and healthy. In today's lesson, look for the rhythms and habits Jesus promotes and consider their relevance to our lives.

Key Text

He said to them, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath."

—Mark 2:27–28

Into the Word

How does Jesus' teaching in Mark 2:18–20 compare with God's message to Israel in Isaiah 58:1–12?

Write down one way Israel misused fasting over time.

Write down one way God redirected their practice to align with his heart.

Into Life

Make a plan to balance fasting, feasting, working, and resting.

Choose one meal or regular habit to fast (skip) and one meal to use as a celebratory feast this week; then choose one hour to intentionally work on a particular task and one hour to purposefully rest.

Meal/Habit to Fast:

Celebratory Feast:

Hour to Work on Task:

Hour to Rest:

How can you use these special times in ways that honor the Lord and help you draw closer to him?

Thought to Remember

Christ is Lord over the rhythms of our lives.