



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermon Notes

A Matter of Some Urgency

Mark 2.18-22

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The Challenge to Find Vitality

We humans often demonstrate a fascinating paradox. On one hand, we like our routines and are unsettled by change. We find comfort in knowing how things will be over time. But then, we also experience the lethargy of being in a rut. Our routines lose their vitality. We seek a spark, a sense of urgency for something that *really* makes a difference.

I would not suggest that the people who came to Jesus in our text were conscious of such thoughts and feelings, but I do think Jesus wanted to teach them something about his ministry's urgency, vitality, and joy, something different from the religious routines they had experienced.

A Series of Controversies

In Mark 2.1-3.6 are five conflict stories in which Jesus responded to criticisms.

1. We can examine them in terms of their shared topics.
 - b. The first two stories, the healing of the paralytic (2.1-12) and the call of and meal with Levi and others (2.13-17), are about Jesus' relation to sin and sinners.
 - c. The last three stories, concerned with fasting practices (2.18-22), eating grain, and healing on the Sabbath (2.23-28; 3.1-6), are about religious conventions Jesus did not observe.¹
2. We can also examine them in terms of who is the center of attention in the stories: in the first two, the controversy revolves around Jesus and his actions; in the last three, "it is the behavior of Jesus' disciples that is in dispute" (Hurtado, 46).

Our text bridges the first two and last two stories. The theme of sin, introduced in 2.1-17, is just beneath the surface in the fasts that are the controversy's focal point and fasting was one of the religious conventions Jesus and his disciples were not observing.

What Happens in 2.18-22

"Now John's disciples and the Pharisees were fasting" (v. 18).

1. "The OT specified only one day when fasting was mandatory upon all Israel. This was the Day of Atonement, designated as a day for cleansing from sin and affliction of the soul (Ex. 20:10; Lev. 16:1-34; 23:26-32; 35:9; Num. 29:9-11)."²

2. By the end of the prophetic period, other occasions for fasting had become traditional (see Zech 7.5; 8.19, which refer to fasts in the fourth, fifth, seventh, and tenth months, and Lane's note regarding them, p. 108).
3. The Pharisees of the day customarily fasted on Monday and Thursday (cf. Luke 18.12).

Jesus and his disciples were questioned for *not* observing these fasts.

1. Though Jesus was critical of hypocritical fasting in Matthew 6.16-18, the original intent and much of the practice "was certainly more noble" (Hurtado, 45). It was generally an expression of mourning over sin or an exercise in spiritual discipline.
2. "From later tradition of rabbinic Judaism we know that the dominant opinion among the descendants of the Pharisees was that the Messiah and the long-awaited salvation would come when Israel had made itself ready and worthy by observance of religious law. John the Baptist certainly urged repentance as preparation for the coming day of judgment and salvation, and the fasting of his followers and the Pharisees was no doubt, therefore, related to the hopes for such a day" (Hurtado, 45).
3. In other words, the fasting in question was "an expression of repentance designed specifically to hasten the coming of the time of redemption" (Lane, 109).

We must remember this assumption as we study Jesus' reply in vv. 19-22.

1. In contrast to the common expectations about God's reign, Jesus was declaring its imminent arrival in his ministry (cf. Luke 11.20; 17.20-21) and calling sinners to join in without any preparation period.
2. He did not share their view that it would not come until Israel was ready nor their understanding of the present as a time for mourning in its absence.
3. Since his reign was upon them, God's grace was prominently displayed, making it a time for joy.
4. Jesus' analogies in vv. 19-22 show this in different ways; they have in common a contrast between what was and was not appropriate behavior for the events at hand.
 - a. Wedding festivals were much more elaborate and took much more time than they do in our culture; as long as the bridegroom was present, mourning was inappropriate.³
 - b. Verses 21-22 "show how inappropriate the beliefs and practices of the past are now when the kingdom of God is already approaching. . . . The two things common in this imagery are the contrast between new and old, and the fact that both new cloth and new wine possess 'life,' that is, dynamism or power. . . . They are fitting symbols, not only of the newness of the present moment, . . . but also of the dynamic effect of the kingdom of God upon the structure of established religious practice" (Hurtado, 46).

Still a Matter of Urgency

We must exercise caution in our application of this text since God's reign in the last days has long been present (though some of its blessings are yet to be realized). Things have been and are new in Christ (cf. Rom 6.3-4; 2 Cor 5.16-17). That said, we do well to consider the following.

1. Even though considerable time has passed since the NT events, there still should be a sense of "newness" surrounding God's reign and our blessing to live and serve in it.

- a. We should be open to things that are within the authority of God's tradition even if they are not the way we prefer.
 - b. Sometimes, by not embracing the things Jesus and the apostles have "loosed" (Matt 16.19; 18.18) as the NT does, we contribute to stagnation.
 - c. To state it another way, God's traditions are always sacred; many human traditions have become sacred cows that have become stagnant and should be killed and buried. We should be open to evaluating everything that is optional and, if our evaluation shows a change is needed, be willing to modify or discontinue it as needed.
 - d. Yes, careful study is required to not confuse the obligated with the optional and thus cease the wrong things. But, for the sake of glorifying God, such study must be done.
2. It should be done because the nature of the new age, not to mention the work called for on its behalf, is too important not to do it.
 - a. With stagnation comes a loss of urgency, a "church-as-usual" mood. The sense that we are biding time, going through the motions, etc., has much to do with the disillusionment some express with the status quo.
 - b. In general terms, we've done a good job asking whether the forms and rituals we practice are aligned with Jesus' authority. Have we done the same with regard to our shrewdness in reaching the world (Matt 10.16), effort, and urgency for the work we say is so vital? Or, do we cling to human ways that fit better a different time and culture?
 3. We should reflect on the significance of the mood assumed in the analogy of the wedding feast. The King has come! He reigns! He gives grace! He cures sin! Have our routines robbed us of the joy that should be ours because of these things? If we have lost that exuberance, what is the impact of that loss?

May we revive (if necessary) or maintain the urgency and exuberance worthy of reign of the King of Kings!

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Notes

¹ Larry W. Hurtado, *Mark*, Understanding the Bible Commentary Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1983, 1989), 45-52.

² William L. Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans' Publishing Company, 1974), 108.

³ In his note on v. 19, Hurtado suggests that this wedding imagery "may have its roots in OT descriptions of God's relationship to Israel as a marriage (e.g., Jer. 3:1-14; Ezek 16:1-62; Hosea)," her unfaithfulness as adultery, and the hope of renewal when God's power was exercised on behalf of the nation. Jesus' analogy, therefore, "may have been intended not just as a symbol of joy but more specifically as a sign that the hopes of the prophets were being realized" (Hurtado, 53).