

## “Joyless Religion”

Mark 2:18-28

Turn with me in your Bibles to the second chapter of Mark, and in just a minute we will read beginning in verse 18. We have been working our way through Mark’s account of the life of Jesus. And in chapters 2-3 in particular, Mark shows how the conflict begins between Jesus and the Pharisees, who were proud of their religious devotion but were void of any inward life. Jesus has come to do what man through religion could never achieve. That is the difference between the religion of self-achievement versus relationship with God offered through divine grace. It is in this sense that ‘Jesus is Greater Than Religion,’ our series of messages through these chapters. In 2:1-12, we saw how the Pharisees had religion without forgiveness. In 2:13-17, we see religion without mercy. And in 2:18-28, we see religion without joy. Jesus, however, extends forgiveness to the undeserving, mercy to the undesirable, and as we will see in the passage now under consideration—joy to the unqualified. (Read)

Thanks to the legalism that was imposed by the Pharisees, in a number of ways the Jewish religion had become a burdensome and joyless thing. These Jewish people were crushed under the weight of man-made rules and regulations that Jesus even said were impossible to obey. He said of the Pharisees in:

**Matthew 23:4—“They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on people’s shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to move them with their finger.”**

I think you can see why the Pharisees were so appalled that Jesus was feasting on what, for them, was a fast day. And you can see also why Jesus and His disciples were not fasting, but feasting. It was to make a point. To drive this

point home, Jesus uses three illustrations to contrast dead, joyless legalistic religious form with the living liberty of the joy of grace that is found in Him.

### **1 – Joyless religion EMPHASIZES obligation over celebration (2:18-20)**

*“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.’”*

Keep in mind that Jesus has been in the house of Levi. In a show of gratitude for what Jesus had done in his life, Levi invited Jesus into his home and called all his tax collecting friends over. Verse 15 says that many tax collectors and sinners were reclining with Jesus and His disciples. But not everyone is enthusiastic about it. Upon seeing Jesus eat with sinners, the scribes ask critical questions.

#### The comparison

While Jesus and His disciples had been in the home of Levi feasting, verse 18 says that John’s disciples and the Pharisees had been fasting. So that another question is asked, “Why do John’s disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but Your disciples do not fast?” And there is this notable difference in the spiritual approach of John’s disciples and the Pharisee’s disciples compared to Jesus and His disciples.

Why were they ‘feasting’ at a time the Pharisees had set apart for fasting?

This is the first time that Mark uses the term ‘Pharisees.’ It means ‘separated one.’ A common question that I’ve been asked is why they are not mentioned in

the Old Testament, but we frequently read about them in the New Testament. And the answer is that they emerge during the 400 years between the Old and New Testament. They developed out of a movement of Jews who were committed to preserving the Law of Moses and Jewish identity during a time of foreign oppression and cultural pressure. Their goal was to maintain ritual purity and covenant obedience, not only for priests but for everyday Israelites. They believed that if the nation of Israel would faithfully keep the Law, God would in kind bring restoration and blessing. By the time of Jesus, the Pharisees were one of the most influential religious groups in Judaism.

Their original desire was noble—to remain faithful to God in a corrupt world. Yet many had drifted into externalism, self-righteousness, and legalism. Jesus did not condemn their concern for holiness, but He rebuked their hypocrisy and tendency to elevate man's tradition above God's Word. And as far as fasting is concerned, the Law of Moses required only one day a year to be set aside for fasting, and that was the Day of Atonement (or Yom Kippur). That was it. But the Pharisees, in an effort to show how committed they were, designated more and more fast days. They routinely fasted twice a week so that it became a thing of pride. But Jesus and His disciples had been feasting on a day that the Pharisees had set aside for fasting, and so it drew their condemnation. They say, "Why do John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but Your disciples don't?"

### The clarification

In verse 19, Jesus responds by saying, "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." Jesus responds to their criticism with an

illustration—nobody fasts at a wedding, for it is a time of celebration. A funeral, yes. But a wedding? No way.

Obviously, this doesn't mean that Jesus is against fasting. He saw value in fasting, for He fasted Himself, and He even taught fasting. In this very text, He implies that His own disciples one day, when He is taken away from them, will fast. But the main issue here that results in controversy with the Pharisees is the abuse of the practice among Jews in His day. They fasted in an ostentatious way, or in a way that brought attention to itself.

**Matthew 6:1 — “Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven.”**

Why do we do what we do?

Essentially, what Jesus is saying here in verses 19-20 is that life in God is meant to be like a wedding, not like a funeral. That's what He's saying. It's meant to be like a feast, not a famine. A joyful celebration, not a pity-party. Jesus came to give us life, and that is something that no amount of religious observance can do. So that now, the living presence of Christ through all the situations of our lives turns every day into a 'feast' day. Knowing Jesus is like a wedding, and the life of the believer like those who attend a marriage celebration. To know Jesus is to know joy unspeakable and full of glory!

I wonder why there is a loss of joy so often in our Christian experience? I think there are a number of reasons for this. One reason perhaps is unconfessed sin in our lives. This was true in David's life. Remember how he said:

**Psalm 51:12—“Restore to me the joy of Your salvation, and uphold me with a willing spirit.”**

Unconfessed sin led to a loss of joy in David’s life. And so it will in our lives as well. It is hard to enjoy worship with a sense of integrity when there are things you are trying to hide in your life. Repentance also brings with it a sense of relief and a return of joy that might have become lost.

Forgetfulness of God’s blessings can lead to a loss of joy in our lives. We fixate so much on what we don’t have that we lose sight of what we do in fact have. We get frustrated over unanswered prayer that we forget the ways in which God has answered other prayers. We get restless, we get moody, we brood and become little storm clouds.

Not taking time to get our cup filled can lead to a loss of joy in our lives. We’re constantly on the go. There is a never ending stream of texts, emails, and messages to respond to. Or we binge watch media non-stop 24/7. And then we come to church, empty and all worn out, and the pastor expects us to be excited and full of enthusiasm. If we were to be honest, we’d say, “Pastor, just be glad I came today and leave me alone!” Empty cups trying to pour out!

**Proverbs 15:15—“All the days of the afflicted are evil, but the cheerful of heart has a continual feast.”**

The NLT translates it like this: “For the despondent, every day brings trouble; for the happy heart, life is a continual feast.” The ‘feast’ refers to a mental and emotional state of satisfaction and joy, rather than a physical meal. A cheerful heart or attitude is linked to contentment and trust in God, which allows one to experience joy consistently. We find what we’re looking for. Is your soul feasting on Christ?

Joyless religion confuses celebration with obligation. But then notice a second thing:

## **2—Joyless religion ELEVATES traditionalism over transformation (2:21-22)**

*“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.”*

A second thing that I want you to understand about joyless religion is the way in which it prefers ‘traditionalism’ over transformation. Jesus came with a new, fresh message that brought hope and transformation. But the Pharisees had been steeped in a system of their own devise. They had enshrined what is referred to as ‘traditionalism.’ And what I mean by that is the elevation of man-made stuff over and above that which is most important to God. Now, there is a big difference between tradition and ‘traditionalism.’ In 2 Timothy 1:5, Paul encourages Timothy to embrace the traditions of the faith passed down from his grandmother and mother. And in 2 Thessalonians 2:15, Paul says the church to “stand firm and hold to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by our spoken word or by our letter.” He’s referring to the central truths of the faith, the body of doctrine that he passed down to the church, which they in turn must pass on to others. Tradition is the faithful passing down of truth, wisdom, and insight from one generation to the next, but ‘traditionalism’ is different.

Tradition is the living faith of the dead, while ‘traditionalism’ is the dead faith of the living. It is when the form becomes more important than the purpose, when convention is more important than conviction. It says, “We do it this way cause

we have always done it this way,” even when the practice is merely cultural and not commanded by God. And it will resist change because preserving custom matters more than pursuing truth. It confuses preference with principle.

It is this spirit that Jesus confronted in the Pharisees. Later in Mark 7, they’ll criticize His disciples for not following the ‘tradition of the elders,’ but Jesus says that they were making ‘the word of God of no effect through your tradition.’ Their problem was not that they had traditions, but that they elevated human custom to the status of divine law. That’s traditionalism. And they didn’t like the fact that Jesus often went against their religious conventions. So there is a real contrast between Jesus and the Pharisees, seen in this way:

**John MacArthur** — *“They were into self-righteousness. He preached grace. They were into denying that they were sinful. He preached repentance from sin. They were proud of their religiosity, He preached humility. They were into external ceremony, He preached a transformed heart. They held tightly to the Old. He offered the New. They loved the approval of men. He offered the approval of God. They had ritual, He offered a relationship.”*

And then to make clear to them how different these two were, Jesus gives a couple of analogies. The first one is seen in verse 21 and is that of a cloth being patched. He says no one takes an unshrunk piece of cloth and sews it onto an old garment, for it would only make the tear worse. If you’ve ever had to have a pair of pants ‘patched’ at the knees, you know what this means.

The new fabric which Christ brings cannot be interwoven with the tired fibers of old religion. Jesus is saying, “If I take this new cloth, the message of grace that I’m bringing to you, and try to patch up your old dead religion,” and the word ‘old’ here is not old in terms of time, but it means old in terms of use. All those old

constructs of Judaism had served their purpose and found their fulfillment in Christ. His point is this—“I’ve not come simply to do a patch up job on Judaism. My intention in coming into this world is not to prop up dead religion, but to bring a brand new thing.” It is the garment of grace, and not about patching up the worn out garment of the old Mosaic system.

**John 1:17—“The law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.”**

The second illustration Jesus uses is seen in verse 22 as He says, “No one puts new wine into old wineskins. If he does, the wine will burst the skins—the wine is destroyed, and so are the skins. But new wine is for fresh wineskins.” What is meant by ‘wineskins?’ In those days, wineskins consisted of an animal hide that had been prepared and sewn up to make a leather container. At first, the leather had a lot of elasticity and could expand. But given enough time, they became stiff and brittle and no longer useful as their purpose had been served.

**Kent Hughes** —*“When Christ fills the wineskins of our lives, the swelling life within stretches us to new limits. The inner pressure expels unneeded things and fills every aspect of life. Those who have not yet had Christ take up residence in their life can scarcely imagine how fully they will be filled; how every aspect of the humanity from their intellect to their emotions will be changed. So dynamic is the new life that the ‘old wineskins’ must give way.”*

**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.”**

The old life is gone, and a new life has begun! Just like the old dead leaves on a tree are expelled by the fresh, new life of spring growth. When you come to

Christ, God puts His life in you. And that life grows and so that it transforms every part of you. That's the personal application.

But there is a corporate application here as well. Ministry methods are a lot like wineskins because they are the containers, not the content. In verse 22, Jesus says that new wine must be put into new wineskins. And the 'wine' represents the living, dynamic work of God—His gospel, the power of His Word, and His Spirit's transforming work. 'Wineskins' represent the structures, systems, and methods used to carry out that work.

A wineskin had to be flexible enough to expand as new wine fermented. An old wineskin became rigid and brittle. If new wine was poured into it, it would burst. In the same way, ministry methods that once served well can become inflexible if people begin treating them as sacred rather than practical. A church can become so attached to a way of doing things (traditions, programs, schedules, preferred styles) that it resists the fresh ways God may want to work. The gospel never changes, but our methods often do! Preaching the Word, making disciples, prayer, and worship remain constant truths—the 'wine' never changes. But how we communicate and reach out to people may need to adapt depending on the generation, culture, and need. Friend, it is when we confuse the methods with the message that we become like the Pharisees—protecting old wineskins while missing the new work Christ is doing.

The danger is not the old methods themselves, but making them sacred. A method is only valuable if it still serves the mission. But when the container becomes more important than the content, ministry becomes stiff, joy evaporates, and things begin to dry up. It is a wise church that protects the new 'wine' of the gospel and stays flexible with the wineskins. Again, we should always ask:

Why do we do what we do?

We cling to things that we think are to be equated with 'the truth,' when in fact it is nothing more than traditionalism. It is not based on what Scripture teaches, but often the ideas of other people. The Lord gives us a lot of flexibility. He's a lot easier to live with than most Christians. He gives you liberty, frees you in grace, so how about doing the same for others? Stop comparing yourself to others, who fast when and how. That's what Jesus is saying here.

### **3—Joyless religion EXCHANGES blessings for burdens (2:23-28)**

*“One Sabbath He was going through the grainfields, and as they made their way, His disciples began to pluck heads of grain. And the Pharisees were saying to Him, ‘Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?’ And He said to them, ‘Have you never read what David did, when he was in need and was hungry, he and those who were with him: how he entered the house of God, in the time of Abiathar the high priest, and ate the bread of the Presence, which is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and also gave it to those who were with him?’ And 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.’”*

I won't say too much here, because we will come back to this next time. But one of the criticisms frequently thrown at Jesus and His disciples was related to the Sabbath. Why did they not follow the same convention? Here, we read that one particular Sabbath day, Jesus and His disciples are passing through the grainfields. And as they are going along, the disciples are picking off some of the heads of grain and are eating them. But it riled up the Pharisees.

The problem, from the Pharisees perspective, is not what the disciples are doing but when they are doing it. The OT Law specified that the edges of the grain

fields were to be intentionally left unharvested so the poor or travelers could do precisely what the disciples are doing here. And so the issue is not the eighth commandment (don't steal) but the fourth (honor the Sabbath). The Pharisees accuse them of violating the Sabbath.

To help protect the written Law, they had developed a large body of oral tradition known as the 'Mishna.' These were extra rules and interpretations meant to keep people from even coming close to breaking God's commands. Instead of simply obeying the fourth commandment, they came up with countless restrictions about what could or could not be done on that day. This 'hedge around the law' was intended to preserve holiness but it became burdensome and man-centered.

There was nothing in the Law that said what they were doing was contrary to God's command. But the Pharisees had added so much to the Law by their traditions that the disciples seemed to be violating a divine proscription. The rule that was broken was the Pharisees' rule, not God's. So Jesus challenges their understanding and application. He says to them, "Have you not read?" And of course, He is referring to 1 Samuel 21 where David and his men were on the run from King Saul. They came to the Tabernacle and the priest, who fed them the bread of the Presence which the law specified was reserved only for the priests. David was God's anointed, but Saul had him on the run.

**William Barclay** — *"The shewbread was never so sacred as when it was used to feed the starving men of David. The sabbath was never so sacred as when it was used to help those who needed help. The final arbiter in the use of all things is love, not law."*

Jesus says in verse 27, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath." It was intended to be a blessing for the spiritual well-being of God's

people. But instead of a blessing, the Pharisees had turned it into a burdensome thing. And so Jesus is saying that One who is greater than David is among them! And as One with authority He says, “The Sabbath is not yours to regulate. The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath.”

Before I close, let me make some application...

The Christian life is a wedding feast, friends. And Jesus is the Bridegroom. He offers us joy and life and salvation, but the Pharisees and their legalism are still with us. And we ought to be on guard. I suppose there is a sense in which all of us are ‘recovering’ Pharisees in one way or another. Because the longer that we are around the faith, the easier it becomes to fall into the trap of legalism. We can trade a relationship of joy for joyless religion if we’re not careful.

Steve Brown said that the difference between a legalistic church and a grace-oriented church is like the difference between a taxidermist and a veterinarian. If you take your sick dog to the wrong place, you’ve got problems. In both cases you get your dog back, but one collects dust while the other wags its tail with the joy of seeing you. It is the difference between a stuffed dog and one full of life and all that is associated with that. Far too many people have a ‘stuffed’ religion and not a vibrant, liberating faith. Jesus said:

**John 8:32—“If you abide in My word, you are truly My disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”**

**S. Lewis Johnson** — *“One of the most serious problems facing the Christian church today is legalism...In every day it is the same. Legalism wrenches the joy of the Lord from the Christian believer, and with the joy of the Lord goes His power for vital worship and vibrant service. Nothing is left but cramped, somber, dull and listless profession. The truth is betrayed, and the glorious name of the*

*Lord becomes a synonym for a gloomy kill-joy. The Christian under law is a miserable parody of the real thing.”*

Beware the trap of legalism, friends. Legalism is one of the greatest thieves of joy because it shifts the focus of the Christian life from Christ to us. Instead of resting in grace, it burdens your soul with the constant pressure to measure up and maintain appearances. It is a natural born joy killer. How so?

- Legalism makes you feel like you have to prove your spirituality instead of resting in Christ's grace

It turns the Christian life into a constant attempt to earn the approval of God rather than resting in His grace. Instead of rejoicing in being accepted through Christ, a person feels like they have to continually prove themselves. Joy will disappear when faith becomes a performance review and not a relationship with a loving Father.

- Legalism creates constant guilt and pressure because you will never be able to meet every expectation

Because no one can perfectly keep every rule, legalism creates a cycle of failure, guilt, and spiritual exhaustion. Rather than the freedom Jesus offers, the believer feels trapped under endless expectations. Obedience becomes heavy when it is driven by fear rather than love. Joy can't thrive where condemnation constantly rules.

- Legalism leads you to judge yourself and others by outward appearance, resulting in pride

Legalism causes people to measure themselves against others instead of looking to Christ. Some become proud because they think they are doing better than

others; others become discouraged because they feel they never measure up. Either way, comparison replaces gratitude. Joy is lost when spirituality becomes competition instead of communion with God.

- **Legalism focuses on the minutiae while missing Christ**

Like the Pharisees in Mark 2, legalism can become so focused on fasting, on Sabbath rules, and religious tradition that it totally misses the presence of the Bridegroom. A person may be busy doing religious things without delighting in Jesus Himself. True joy is found in Christ, not merely in religious activity. When man's 'stuff' becomes central and Christ becomes secondary, joy is forfeited.

The issue here in Mark 2 was never really fasting, old garments, wineskins, or Sabbath regulations—it was the heart behind them. The Pharisees had reduced faith to a performance. They had ritual, routine, and religious appearances, but they completely missed the presence of the Bridegroom standing right in front of them. Jesus was showing them that true life is about knowing Him.

**John 17:3—“And this is eternal life, that they know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent.”**

He is the new garment that doesn't patch up the old, but replaces it with something new. He is the new wine that cannot be contained in old wineskins. He is the Lord of the Sabbath, greater than every ceremony and every tradition. He did not come to patch us up. He came to make us new. Joyless religion says, “Measure up.” Jesus says, “Come to Me.” Joyless religion says, “Perform so you can be acceptable.” Grace says, “You are accepted in Christ.” And so don't settle for old wineskins when Christ offers you new life. Friend, He is the Bridegroom, and He offers you the invitation to joy-filled life. Come to Jesus!