

*Where we start . . .*

The holidays are soon upon us. Share one or two “family traditions” that are part of the unique way your family celebrates.

Why do you prize the traditions that you do?

*What we read . . .*

For a variety of reasons, we all end up collecting “traditions;” the people in Jesus’ day did as well. Things were done because it was considered “spiritual” –even when the reason for the practice might have become lost in the process. That appears to be the background to the exchange Jesus has with some religious people in Mark 2:18--2.

What is the concern of those who ask Jesus about fasting? What was their expectation?

Why do you think they had that expectation?

Jesus answers with three short parables or analogies: the guests at the wedding, the patch, and the wineskins. Take each one and try and come up with a short sentence that summarizes the point.

The guests at the wedding:

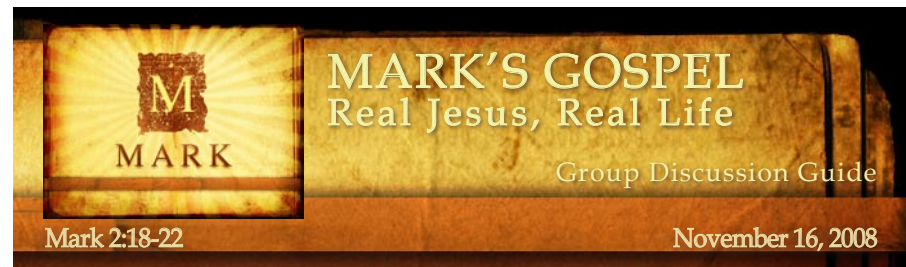
The patch on the garment:

The wine in the wineskins:

When taken all together, what Jesus seems to be saying is . . . .

*Why this matters . . .*

We might not struggle with the fasting issue as did the religious people in Jesus’ day; but we might well have “ways of doing life” that bump up against how Jesus does life. What do you think Jesus wants you to grasp about what life is going to be like in fellowship with Him?



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*Diving in . . .*

When we read the Gospels and watch Jesus' interaction with people around Him, it is easy to distance ourselves from what is happening and what He is saying. We tell ourselves: I don't do *those* things! I don't think *that* way. And, as a result, we don't sense our connection to Jesus' words and ministry. This week's passage may be one we could easily treat that way. Jesus talks with some religious people about fasting. And, seeing as fasting is not a big issue for most of us, it might be easy to skip over the magnitude of what Jesus is saying. But, the bottom line speaks directly to each one of us. Simply put, Jesus drives home a single point: The way I do life will likely conflict with the way you think life should be lived!

*Discussing . . .*

The discussion questions begin with sharing about "family traditions." This is important, because when we get to the text we need to keep in mind that the way fasting was being practiced was a "family tradition." (That is, some serious-minded and passionate Jews adopted fairly stringent views on fasting and it became, for them, a "holy tradition.")

It is helpful to know a little bit of the background about fasting in Jesus' day. The basic word for fasting doesn't appear in the first five books of the Old Testament (the Torah). In Leviticus 16:29-31 and 23:26-32, God does call the people of God to "afflict their souls" on the Day of Atonement (one of the high holy days), and many commentators understand this to include a time of fasting. However, there are very few commands to fast in the Old Testament. In places like Judges 20:24-28, 1 Samuel 7:3-6, 2 Samuel 12:13-20, and Nehemiah 1:4-11, we do see glimpses of fasting as a voluntary practice that pictures a humbling of oneself before God either in repentance or in times of supplication and prayer.

By Jesus' day, certain groups among the Jewish people practiced fasting on a more regular basis; it was, in a sense, a "tradition" that was, to a large degree, self-imposed and which was often understood to be a token of genuine spirituality. Some who fasted did so with a right heart and spirit, as is the case with Anna as mentioned in Luke 2:37. Others, however, adopted the practice of fasting as something of an outward show of "spirituality," as seen in Jesus' story in Luke 18:12.

John's disciples were apparently involved in regular periods of fasting; this could well have been an expression of John's call for people to prepare their hearts and lives for the coming of the Lord (Mark 1:1-8). Those who followed

the Pharisees (a conservative and pietistic sect within Judaism) also practiced fasting; typically those of the Pharisee party fasted twice a week. It could well have been that many of those so engaged in fasting were sincere in the practice (although, as seen in Jesus' story mentioned above, some were not).

Being aware of the practice of fasting being carried out by those seen to be "spiritual," some asked Jesus about the absence of the practice among His disciples (Mark 2:18). Jesus answers with three short parables or metaphors.

In 2:19-20 He points out that it is unreasonable for guests at a wedding feast to fast. Although some might see Jesus, in this, making reference to Himself as the "bridegroom," that doesn't seem to be the primary point of this first little parable. The point is simple: During celebrations fasting is out of place.

Jesus then adds two other, closely-related parables to His explanation. Both share the same "big idea." Simply put, Jesus' point is that "new stuff" doesn't typically fit well with "old stuff."

Thus, whether talking about the wedding guests or talking about the new patch or the new wine, Jesus' parables here all speak about what is "fitting" in one way or another. Jesus is raising the issue of whether the fasting (as one example of the traditions adopted by the religious people of the day) "fits" with what Jesus is all about. And, the answer clearly is "No." Jesus' approach to life, Jesus' understanding of the Kingdom, and Jesus' perspective about what is supposed to happen when the presence of God breaks into life is at odds with the traditional thinking of the religious people who were raising the questions.

It is not a matter of Jesus opposing the Old Testament; it is about Jesus' way of doing life and way of seeing the Kingdom of God being different than the way the religious people were thinking. And something has to give! So Jesus is underscoring the necessity of seeing that if one tries to get Jesus and His way of life to "fit" one's own way of doing and seeing life, there's going to be some tearing, some loss, some lack of fit.

Keep in mind that fasting is simply one example (among many possible options) of a tradition that has been prized that is getting in the way of how Jesus intends to approach life. Where Jesus is going, the presence and the power of God is breaking in. He has announced that the Kingdom of God is near (1:15)! That is reason to celebrate, and the kind of fasting being undertaken was not the appropriate response to the presence of God's messenger and Messiah.

We might not have the same commitment to fasting that these religious people did and, so, it might be easy for us to dismiss what Jesus says here. But we must not miss the substance of what He is saying: *The way Jesus does life will likely conflict with the way we think life should be lived.* That's not because Jesus is a trouble-maker; it is because Jesus is the only one who sees life as it really should be seen! And, if we let Jesus speak into our lives, we just might feel a little "tearing" as He readjusts our priorities and practices away from our personally privileged traditions in order to bring our living more in line with His way of life.