

Study Notes: Mark 2:18-22
February 28, 2021: “Something New”
Prepared by Reverend Robert W. Rice
Pastor, Muncy Baptist Church

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?”

- Fasting was a common practice among Jews during the time of Jesus, and in fact, one of the three major activities of the Jewish religion (the other activities were prayer and almsgiving) Fasts lasted for a specific time and were often a sign of mourning or repentance. The Faithlife Study Bible explains: “Fasting was a key element of Judaism in the first-century AD, even though only one day of fasting was required by the law (Lev 16:29–30).”
- Both the disciples of John the Baptist and the Pharisees engaged in this practice, though probably for different reasons. John’s disciples were likely fasting as part of their own repentance from sin, while the Pharisees were doing it merely to show their piety (see Luke 18:11-12).
- When people noticed that all the other religious people of the day were fasting and Jesus’ disciples were not, they questioned Jesus about this. The Pillar New Testament Commentary explains the intention behind this question: “Their question, “ ‘How is it that John’s disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees are fasting, but yours are not?’ ” insinuates that if Jesus and his followers intend to be taken seriously they had better pay greater attention to fasting protocol.”

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. But the time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them, and on that day they will fast.

- In contrast to the somber idea of fasting, Jesus speaks of the joyous time of a wedding. At a wedding, fasting would be inappropriate because it was a time of celebration. In the same way, it does not make sense for the disciples to fast when this is to be a time of joy and celebration, because God is in their midst. The New American Commentary helps explain the imagery that Jesus uses: “Christianity is characterized by joy, not mourning. Indeed a wedding is a symbol of the salvation associated with the kingdom of God. The passage further suggests that the way to God is not through religious practices but through joyful association with Jesus.”
- However, Jesus is not condemning the practice of fasting. Instead, He does note that the day will come when He is taken away, and then fasting will again be part of the life of His disciples. This is an early and veiled reference to His impending death.

“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. 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.”

- After answering the question about fasting, Jesus uses two parables or short sayings to further instruct the people about what He has come to do. The New American Commentary explains: “The twin parables here teach the incompatibility of the old (scribal Judaism) and the new (Christianity). Judaism is the old garment and the old wineskin. Christianity is the new garment (implied), the new wineskin, and the new wine (on the last cf. John 2:1–11, especially v. 10). The point is not that the “old” is wrong or evil but that its time has passed.”
- Jesus’ first saying is about a garment. It would be foolish to repair an old garment by tearing a new one to fix it. This would ruin both of them. It would ruin a perfectly good new garment by tearing it up, and it would ruin the old garment because a new unshrunk patch would tear away when the garment was washed. Jesus is making the point that His ministry is a new thing, and cannot simply fit into the current system.
- Jesus’ second saying is about wine. New wine could only be poured into fresh wineskins because when it fermented it needed to be able to stretch the skins. Old wineskins were somewhat brittle and could not be stretched. Again, what God is doing through Jesus is going beyond Judaism, and cannot be confined to the old system.
- The Pillar New Testament Commentary does a wonderful job of summarizing the point of Jesus’ words in this passage and how they relate to the disciples: “The question posed by the image of the wedding feast and the two atom-like parables is not whether disciples will, like sewing a new patch on an old garment or refilling an old container, make room for Jesus in their already full agendas and lives. The question is whether they will forsake business as usual and join the wedding celebration; whether they will become entirely new receptacles for the expanding fermentation of Jesus and the gospel in their lives.”