

Challenging the Good

Mark 2:18-22

- There is an idea that is commonly found in leadership books and athletic training books: people who excel are the ones who give up good things for the best things.
- Take someone who is a highly sought-after public speaker. They have too many invitations to choose from, so they have to turn down some really good opportunities to take advantage of the best opportunities for getting their message out.
- Businesses have to do the same thing...you have to choose not to sell some good products or invest in some good ideas so you have the capital available to invest in the best.

- What does that have to do with Jesus and the book of Mark?
- Well, this morning, we are going to see Jesus showing us that we sometimes have to make a similar choice.
- There are habits, attitudes, and actions we pursue that may seem good and may even start off that way, but when we see the truth of the message of the Gospel, we have to surrender our attitudes and patterns and allow Jesus to challenge the good things for the best thing.
- Turn in your Bibles to **Mark 2:18-22**.
- This morning's passage is a little bit unusual, so it's going to take some explaining. Hang with me, though, and we will make sense of it together.

- As Mark has been laying out the story of Jesus, he has grouped several accounts together of conflicts Jesus had with the religious leaders.

- If you remember, these guys are called the “scribes and the Pharisees”.
- Two weeks ago, we saw that Jesus confronted them with His ability to forgive sins, and we were reminded that we must be willing to go to great lengths to help our friends find Jesus’ forgiveness.
- Last week, we saw that Jesus was constantly looking out for the lost and investing in people who were willing to acknowledge that they were spiritually sick. That upset the Pharisees because they thought Jesus shouldn’t hang around people like that, but Jesus corrected their understanding.
- This morning, we are continuing the conflict as once again, Jesus’ way of doing ministry doesn’t line up with what the Pharisees thought He should be doing.
- To get a sense of the problem, read **Mark 2:18** with me.
- This time, it’s not just the Pharisees who are upset, it’s the remaining disciples who had been following John the Baptist.
- John has been thrown in prison at this point, and some of the people who followed him aren’t sure yet about whether they should follow Jesus.
- It is really unusual that these folks are teaming up with the Pharisees because John called the Pharisees a “brood of vipers”. They weren’t exactly friends!
- Yet, they have something in common: they both are practicing the discipline of fasting.
- Typically, fasting is when you abstain from something, usually food and sometimes water, for a set period of time.
- This wasn’t intermittent fasting for health reasons; it had a religious motivation behind it.

- Sometimes, people would fast because they were mourning someone who died. They might fast because they were feeling especially broken for their sin. Other times, they would fast during intense seasons of seeking God's direction, giving up food to demonstrate that they needed God's presence, wisdom, and direction more than food.
- Although there were times when individuals declared a fast in the Bible, there is only one fast that God commanded on a regular basis, and that was on the Day of Atonement, which was the one day every year all Israel sought forgiveness for sin.
- However, by Jesus' time, the Pharisees and others had developed habits of fasting on a regular basis.
- Most Pharisees would actually fast two days a week, even from water, although that is never commanded anywhere in the Bible.
- But, as they said in **verse 18**, Jesus' disciples didn't fast with them.
- How could they claim to be godly people if they didn't do the same things the other religious folks did?
- Jesus responds to their question with some powerful and challenging words.
- Here's what's challenging about it. He didn't condemn them for fasting, because fasting in the right context is good!
- Jesus challenged the disciples of John and the Pharisees to look at the good things they do in light of the Gospel.
- That's the same thing I believe He is challenging us to do this morning: Examine the good things you do to see how they look in the light of the Gospel.

- Let's read Jesus' response to the question. Pick up again in **verse 19-22.**
- **From what we see in this passage, we need to allow Jesus to challenge us in two ways this morning:**

1) Challenges our attitude.

- Go back up to **verse 19.**
- Jesus uses an analogy here, one that is clearer to those of us who know Christ now than it would be to those who heard Him say it first.
- We hear the New Testament use this picture of the church being Jesus' bride and Him being the bridegroom, but that language is new to His followers when He said it.
- However, they would have known the picture.
- You see, Jewish weddings weren't like our weddings. We may have a couple hour reception at the end of a wedding and then the couple runs off together for their honeymoon.
- That's not how they did things in Jesus' day. The wedding feast went on for a week.
- For seven days after the wedding, people would come and go from the house, having a huge party to celebrate the way God had brought this couple together.
- Even though our weddings aren't as lavish as all that, can you imagine how strange it would seem if everyone got to the reception and just stood around and stared at the food, but no one ate?
- I'm not talking about that awkward time when you're waiting for the bridal party to get to the reception; I'm saying that all day and night long, no one ever touched the food.

- That wouldn't be right, would it? Because this is a time for celebration!
- Jesus says that this is exactly why His disciples aren't fasting.
- If one of the main purposes of fasting was to seek God, they didn't exactly have to do that right then.
- They didn't have to seek Him; they could see Him! They could literally look at Jesus and ask Him to pass them the loaf of bread.
- How can you fast in a time like that? How can you be sad and sorrowful when you know that God is literally, physically, right in the middle of you?
- In using this analogy, then, Jesus is challenging John's disciples and the Pharisee's disciples to evaluate their own good ideas about fasting and interpret them in light of what was going on.
- **Verse 20** goes on to say that there are appropriate time where fasting isn't bad, but He challenged their attitude towards the discipline of fasting.
- For many, it may have become just something else they did.
- It was a dry, religious ritual, and they were so caught up in it that "they missed the forest for the trees".
- They couldn't see that the God who was the source of all their joy and could satisfy their deepest longings was right there in front of them.
- In getting caught up in the good thing they were doing, their hearts were cold to what God was doing.
- Their attitude in fasting was out of duty, not delight.

- Is that you? Have you become so accustomed to the rhythmic patterns of church that you have lost your joy?
 - You come, shake some hands, sing a bit, throw some money in the plate, hear me talk for a bit, and then leave and go get lunch.
 - You may even get up and pray the same kind of prayer every morning and go through the same devotional book you've been using for years or go through some other habit, and it has become dry, rote exercises that have lost their joy!
 - Those are all good things, but don't let doing good things rob you of your joy!
 - Allow Jesus to challenge that by reminding you of who He is and what He has done.
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- By the way, we have the first foreshadowing of what's to come here in **verse 20**.
 - That phrase "*taken away from them*" implies removed by force.
 - Oh, there would be a time for fasting, but it would come when Jesus was arrested, beaten, and crucified for our sins.
 - This is the first hint Jesus has given us that He knows how this story will end.
 - Obviously, those listening to Him that day had an incomplete idea of what that would mean, but for Jesus, He knew what it would cost.
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- So do we.
 - We know that Jesus would go to the cross, taking my sin, dying in my place.
 - The fasting of the disciples that day wouldn't have been merely ceremonial; it was a fast of mourning because the groom had been taken away and murdered.

- “Sean, I thought you said Jesus challenged the good we do by changing our attitude. You said it was about joy, but that sure doesn’t sound joyful.”
- If it stopped there, it wouldn’t be, but remember that Jesus rose from the dead, proving that death had been conquered once and for all, that there was a promise of new life in Him, and that the power of sin could be destroyed in your life.
- That fills us with joy, so as we do good things, we do them out of a joy-filled heart that is awe-struck with what God has done.
- As you see God work in your life, it leads you deeper and deeper into awe over what He has done.
- You can’t pay Him back, but that overwhelming joy causes you to want to let Him work more and more in every area of your life, bringing Him honor and glory.
- At times, that might mean fasting or any other number of Christian disciplines, but they come out of a new attitude of joy, not simply a sense of duty.
- **Not only does that challenge our attitude, as we have already hinted at, the message of Jesus also...**

2) Challenges our patterns.

- Read **verses 21-22** with me again.
- Let’s explain these examples first, and then we’ll see what we can draw out about what Jesus is teaching us here.
- First, how many of you have a favorite shirt that you can’t wear out in public anymore because of the holes?
- My wife had a maroon hoodie that was this way. She kept trying to sew it back together, but it finally all but disintegrated and she had to get a new one.

- Okay, now let's say you are trying to patch that sweatshirt, and you try to do it with a brand new, never washed, piece of cotton.
 - You wash it, throw it in the dryer, and what's going to happen? That cotton is going to shrink and tear an even bigger hole in your favorite shirt.
 - You can't mix the old fabric with the new fabric.
 - We'll talk about what that means in a second, but let's cover the other example first.
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- In Jesus' day, you didn't have lots of glass bottles and corks around, so many people would put their wine in an animal skin.
 - As wine ferments, it releases gasses, which puts pressure on whatever container the wine is in.
 - New wine would put a lot of pressure on the skin, which would only work if you had a fresh wineskin.
 - Older wineskins had already stretched to their limits and would burst open, destroying both the wine and the skin.
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- So, then, you wouldn't put an unshrunk cloth on an old garment, and you wouldn't put new wine in an old skin.
 - Great...are we clear now?
 - I imagine, like me, you still have some questions.
 - What do these two pictures have to do with anything?
 - Jesus is challenging the Pharisees and others by letting them know that His ministry is setting up a new era in history.
 - Here's how John said it:

For the Law was given through Moses; grace and truth were realized through Jesus Christ. (John 1:17, NASB95)
 - The Pharisees and John's disciples were accustomed to the old patterns of the way life worked under the Law.

- Let's talk about that for a second: God gave His Law to Moses. It wasn't an exhaustive list of everything that could possibly be sinful, but it was a representative list that clearly taught us that God was good, perfect, and holy, and we weren't.
 - No matter how hard we tried, how often we fasted, how much money we gave, we could never keep the Law.
 - Jesus, then, is coming to save us from the penalty of sin we deserved for breaking God's Law.
 - He is fulfilling all the pictures from the Law, which the Bible says in Colossians were shadows of what Christ would do.
 - He is the final sacrifice, He is the only one who could keep the Law, and that changed things.
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- That reality, the understanding that Jesus came to save us from our sin, was the new wine and the new patch...it didn't fit with the old way of all the sacrifices and ceremonies.
 - He didn't throw out the Law, He fulfilled it! He kept every commandment and became the perfect sacrifice.
 - As a result, He gives us life based of His grace and His sacrifice, so we can't look at life the same way we used to.
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- The Pharisees were trying to prove how good they were by fasting, and Jesus said, "Guys, that's not going to work."
 - That never would have saved them, and Jesus said it isn't going to work like that.
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- Most of us don't try to follow the Jewish feasts and dietary laws, but at the same time, we may have developed patterns that don't fit with what Jesus is doing.
 - You may be trying to save yourself or prove how good you are by doing good things, coming to church, going through the motions.

- Let me ask you: why?
 - Why do you do what you do?
 - You should absolutely do good deeds; that's the natural outworking of salvation in your life.
 - However, the message of the Gospel reminds us that we can't even do the good deeds on our own, so anything good we do is simply God working through us, driving us deeper and deeper in to love of Him.
 - Our obedience is never to promote ourselves or to make ourselves look better or to pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps; it is always because God worked through us to accomplish what only He could so that He alone would get the glory.
 - The new wine of the Gospel challenges our old patterns of self-reliance and outward obedience.
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- Are you willing to allow Jesus to challenge your attitudes and your patterns?
 - What is the heart motivation behind what you do? It should be joy in what Christ has done, and if it isn't, ask God to break your heart until it is.
 - What patterns of obedience have turned into self-reliance and self-promotion? Stop trying to put the new wine of Jesus' grace into your old wineskin of trying to do it all for yourself.
 - Surrender afresh and anew to Him today.