

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?"

<sup>19</sup> 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.

<sup>20</sup> The days will come  
when the bridegroom is taken away from them,  
and then they will fast in that day.

<sup>21</sup> 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.

<sup>22</sup> 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."

**John's disciples** – Now that the topic of discipleship has explicitly been broached (cf. Mark 1:15), Jesus' own disciples behavior is now being contrasted with that of the followers of John and the Pharisees themselves. It's interesting here that John is described as having disciples. Did this mean that John called people to follow him as disciples or is discipleship a way of talking about people who were his fans and followers? Were they the ones who chose John or was it the other way around? With Jesus, we know that it is He who chose His disciples and called them to follow Him.

**The Pharisees** – there is a bit of drift in the focus here. First we heard about Jesus being compared to the scribes (1:22), then we heard about the scribes questioning Jesus who forgave the paralytic (Mark 2:6), and then the "scribes of the Pharisees" questioned why Jesus was eating with tax collectors and sinners. This time, mention of the scribes is absent, but the focus is solely on the Pharisees. The distinctions probably are less important to us, but to people closer to the time of Jesus these nuances might mean more to them.

**were fasting** – Both John's disciples and the Pharisees were fasting. John was known for his odd diet of locusts and honey and his message of repentance is quite fitting with fasting. Moreover because John was arrested by this time (Mark 1:14), his

disciples were no doubt in mourning over that and praying for his release. The Pharisees' fasting though is more connected with their personal piety and devotion. Fasting as a spiritual discipline was only commanded for one day of the year, the day before the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur, which occurs in late September/early October) (Lev. 16:29). Later days of fasting were added in the postexilic period (after the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C.) (Zech 8:19 and Est. 9:31). But the Pharisees added even more fasting days, fasting every Monday and Thursday.

**Lk. 18:12 ESV** I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.'

Fasting was a form of self-denial, abstaining from the pleasure and sustenance of food, but it also meant using the time, effort, money, etc. normally used for preparing food and eating to be devoted to the Lord in prayer and worship. Fasting would be typically associated with grief, mourning, destruction, or repentance.

**people came and said to him** – The text gives us no reference as to who the people are who ask Jesus this question. It would be helpful to know who is asking in order to better understand the motive of the question being asked. Previously when the scribes were questioning things (in their hearts, rather than aloud), the motive was clear. Here, the question is either someone who is confused and trying to understand the difference between Jesus, John, and the Pharisees or else it is meant as an accusation. Everyone would assume that the fasting of John's disciples and the Pharisees were a sign of their religious devotion, but Jesus, who was doing some marvelous things, seems to lack that because His disciples aren't fasting. The context of this story would also lean toward understanding this in an accusing way. This is now the third of five "controversy" stories, where something Jesus (or His disciples) says or does is challenged or questioned by others.

**Controversies around Jesus in Mark 2-3:** (1) Can Jesus forgive sins?, (2) Should Jesus eat with tax collectors and sinners, (3) Why aren't Jesus' disciples fasting?, (4) Should Jesus' disciples pluck grains on the Sabbath?, (5) Can Jesus heal on the Sabbath?

**your disciples do not fast?** – The question raised to Jesus reminds us that the connection between the disciple and the teacher is a strong one. The disciples' behavior is a reflection of Jesus. Whether you like it or not, you are reflection of Jesus to and people judge Him by your actions. Scary thought, isn't it? In the immediate context of this question, we must note that Jesus and His disciples have just been feasting (reclining at table) at the house of Levi. One can hardly imagine what kind of a spread Levi must have had prepared for Jesus and his guests. Detractors have already commented critically about Jesus' choice of associates, but now it's the feasting itself that is called into question.

**John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees** – We know a lot about John's disciples. Even after John's death, we hear about people who were still following John (Acts 19:1-7). Some of Jesus' first disciples were said to be disciples of John (John 1:35-42). Since Jesus is now said to have disciples of His own, people are noticing that these disciples are different than the other two groups mentioned here. Most scholars are puzzled by the phrase "disciples of the Pharisees," because Pharisees didn't have disciples as such. An individual Pharisee who was a rabbi could have disciples, but no specific individuals are named here. It would have been more accurate in our minds simply to say Pharisees. Either one was a Pharisee (and adopted their practices of following the Law and their traditions) or one was not. The other possibility is that "disciple" here is not used in a real technical sense (like a rabbi who has disciples), but merely means one who follows the general teaching/principles of the Pharisees. That may be correct. Jesus first called two sets of brothers simply to follow Him, without invoking the word disciple. It was only in the previous reading where Jesus was in the company of tax collectors and sinners that people who are with Him are called His disciples.

**"Can the wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them?"** – In Jesus' day, weddings were a REALLY big deal. Wedding celebrations involved the whole community and could go on for multiple days. Recall that Jesus' first miracle in John's Gospel occurs at a wedding in Cana (John 2:1-12). Fasting during such a time of celebration would be insulting and unthinkable. So when Jesus begins this question, the answer is clear. No, of course no one fasts during the time of a wedding celebration. This is a classic Jesus move. When asked a question, Jesus often responds with a question. Jesus realizes that people aren't after a simple yes or no answer. These questions are often asked with an eye toward trapping Jesus into one or the other of two categories so that they can then skewer Him in being wrong. Jesus often refuses the very premise on which the question is framed and so goes after that. This is exactly what is happening here. The question seems aimed at disparaging the devotion of Jesus' disciples. Jesus points out that His disciples act a different way because He is different than John and the Pharisees. Whereas fasting is appropriate in a context of mourning or repentance, fasting is completely out of place in a joyful circumstance such as at a wedding. Therefore, it is right that Jesus' disciples do not fast, because they see in Jesus an occasion for joy. What might their reason for joy be? Clearly in the context of Mark's Gospel it is the fact that Jesus is proclaiming (actively bringing) the kingdom of God to the people He encounters. Demons are cast out, the lepers are cleansed, the paralyzed walk, sins are forgiven, and sinners are welcomed into the fellowship of Jesus. In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus tells parables about entering into the kingdom of heaven and compares it to a wedding feast (Matt. 22:1-14; 25:1-13). In Revelation 19:7-9, the culmination of history is described as the marriage and wedding feast of the Lamb. Even John in his ministry pointed others to

Jesus said his joy is like that of a friend of the bridegroom seeing that the bridegroom has come.

**Jn. 3:29 ESV** The one who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice. Therefore this joy of mine is now complete.

Behind all of this is how the OT speaks metaphorically of God's relationship with His people as that of a marriage and their ultimate end-time reunion as a joyful and celebratory marriage feast.

**Isa. 61:10 ESV** I will greatly rejoice in the LORD; my soul shall exult in my God, for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation; he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself like a priest with a beautiful headdress, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.

**Isa. 62:4-5 ESV** You shall no more be termed Forsaken, and your land shall no more be termed Desolate, but you shall be called My Delight Is in Her, and your land Married; for the LORD delights in you, and your land shall be married.<sup>5</sup> For as a young man marries a young woman, so shall your sons marry you, and as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you.

**Hos. 2:14-20 ESV** "Therefore, behold, I will allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak tenderly to her.<sup>15</sup> And there I will give her her vineyards and make the Valley of Achor a door of hope. And there she shall answer as in the days of her youth, as at the time when she came out of the land of Egypt.<sup>16</sup> "And in that day, declares the LORD, you will call me 'My Husband,' and no longer will you call me 'My Baal.'<sup>17</sup> For I will remove the names of the Baals from her mouth, and they shall be remembered by name no more.<sup>18</sup> And I will make for them a covenant on that day with the beasts of the field, the birds of the heavens, and the creeping things of the ground. And I will abolish the bow, the sword, and war from the land, and I will make you lie down in safety.<sup>19</sup> And I will betroth you to me forever. I will betroth you to me in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love and in mercy.<sup>20</sup> I will betroth you to me in faithfulness. And you shall know the LORD.

So Jesus is not merely using an image that all people would understand (that one doesn't fast at a wedding), He's also applying the image to Himself. He is telling the questioner that He is the bridegroom and His disciples are wedding guests in His presence. The coming of the Kingdom of God, which Jesus brings in Himself and through His ministry is such a joyful celebratory occasion it is like unto the time that will fully come when God comes to His people and their relationship is brought to full and complete union on the final Day.

**The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them** – Jesus does acknowledge that while feasting is the appropriate thing right now, there will be a time when fasting will be more appropriate. As was said, the times of fasting are often connected with grief and mourning. Here Jesus anticipates His death, a subject that

was also broached by the accusation that He committed blasphemy by forgiving the sins of others (Mark 2:7). That Jesus talks about Himself being “taken away” is quite foreboding. Jesus’ betrayal, and His suffering at the hands of the Jewish and Roman authorities, and ultimately His death on the cross seems to be in His mind even though that’s the furthest thought from anyone else. Jesus will explicitly predict His passion later on (Mark 8:31; 9:31; 33-34), but it’s hard to miss it here too. One could argue that the writing was always on the wall. The fate that Jesus suffered was no different than that of the prophets before Him.

**Mk. 6:4 ESV** And Jesus said to them, "A prophet is not without honor, except in his hometown and among his relatives and in his own household."

**Mk. 12:10-11 ESV** Have you not read this Scripture: "'The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone;<sup>11</sup> this was the Lord's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes?'"

In the opening chapters of Mark’s Gospel Jesus is seen as a blasphemer (Mark 2:7), a Sabbath breaker (2:23-28; 3:1-6), and in league with Satan (3:22-27), so His fate really shouldn’t have been surprising to His disciples either!

**they will fast in that day** – Some have taken these words quite literally, if Jesus was referring to the day He would be taken from them, that on that day they would fast. And so the Lenten practice of no meat on Fridays has at least part of its origins drawn back to this story. A question does remain though, when Jesus talks about being taken from the disciples, does He mean His death or His Ascension. If He means only His death, then even then the fast was a temporary one that was ended with the joy of Easter morning and that joy remains because Jesus promises His presence with us even today (Matt. 28:20). Even after Jesus’ Ascension, fasting was still practiced in the early church, but it never seems connected to the fact that Jesus was not with them (e.g. Acts 13:2-3; 14:23; and 27:9 (refers specifically to the normal time of fasting before the Day of Atonement)). Fasting as a spiritual practice is not commanded specifically, but we wouldn’t go so far to say that it is not something to be avoided either.

**No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old garment** – The logic here implies that Jesus is not introducing something to merely patch up the theology and practice of the people. The new cloth is what Jesus is bringing into the world through His ministry, the Kingdom of God. He is bringing something totally new, and yet not new, but rather a fulfillment of what was promised by God. Jesus is inaugurating the kingdom of God and a new age, the time of the Messiah.

**no one puts new wine into old wineskins** – In these days wine was poured into new wineskins (made from animals). As the new wine fermented, it would stretch the wineskins, which could handle the stretching because they were new and stretchable.

However, to put new wine in skins that had already been stretched out would cause those skins to burst open, making the skins completely unusable and resulting in total loss of the wine as well. The point is clear: the old skins (representing the Jewish religious tradition) are not compatible with the new. Jesus has not come to reform the Jewish religion, but to transform it into something new. This is why when He forgives sins, He is attacked. His authority bursts their limited understanding. This is why when He eats with sinners, the scribes and Pharisees see Jesus as the one in the wrong. And this is why the disciples not following the fasting traditions of the Pharisees is being questioned. They are trying to understand Jesus within their religious system, but Jesus cannot be understood through their man-made traditions. Though Jesus here is speaking about the change that He brings, one could see a similar kind of symbolism literally enacted in the miracle of the water turned into wine at Cana, where Jesus changes water found in jars that were used for Jewish rites of purification (that is something the Pharisees would very much be interested in) into wine for the wedding feast.