

## *It was never about the wineskins*

If you have a Bible with you, or a Bible app on your device, open it with me to

Mark 2:18-22.

If you are just joining us today, we are on **week 8** of a study in **the gospel of Mark – on the gospel of Jesus**. A study we're calling – **"Into the Life of Jesus"** – as our way of naming our goal – and God's goal – that we would come to not just understand Jesus and his gospel, but we would experience the grace of being **drawn into the life of Jesus** – and through Him, **into the very life of God...**

That's our consuming passion and vision as a church – **Life with God for the World** – so that's what we are after in this study in Mark's gospel.

And before we dig into today's text, I want us to step back for a moment to notice something that is going on **through the whole of Mark 2** – in **all** of the stories told here.

Last week, Glen walked us through **Mark 2:1-12** – where we hear the account of Jesus' forgiving and healing a paralyzed man whose friends had carried him to Jesus (who had, in fact, climbed up on the roof of the home where Jesus was teaching – and actually tore open the roof so they could get their friend to Jesus...).

And in response to Jesus' words of forgiveness, the teachers of the law are **confounded... perplexed... irritated... confused by Jesus... by His words, His actions,**

*His perspectives and His teaching about God, and Himself, and how life with God works...*

And if we were to keep reading – through **all four events** in Mark ch.2 – we'd see this happening in **every instance**.

**Jesus' words, actions, convictions, and increasingly those of his followers – confounded the Pharisees and the Teachers of the Law** – the devout people in his day.

In fact, in every scene in Mark 2, Jesus' actions or words, or that of his disciples - what they do or do not do because of Jesus – provokes **questions**.

**v.7** – in response to Jesus' declaration of forgiveness to the paralytic, they asked, *"Why does this fellow talk like that? He's blaspheming! Who can forgive sins by God alone?"*

**v.16** – in response to Jesus' choice to have dinner at Levi, a tax collector's, house – they asked, *"Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?"*

**v.24** – in response to Jesus' disciple's picking grain as they walked through a field on the Sabbath day, *they asked Jesus, "Why are they doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath?"*

And here in our text for today – **Mark 2:18f** – they ask Jesus *directly, "How is it that John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees are fasting, but yours are not?"*

I mention all this to help us see that our text today **doesn't stand alone**, nor it is simply about fasting, though it clearly speaks to this. But it is about something **deeper**

and **larger** than just fasting – something more **far-reaching** that has relevance for every follower of Jesus – today and in every age...

Simply put, to use the metaphor that Jesus’ uses, at every turn in Mark 2, in every word and action of Jesus and his disciples – Jesus is explicitly and intentionally **bursting the wineskins** of the devout in His day.

And by wineskins, Jesus is referring to the **defining practices** of one’s faith.

Which we all have!

For instance, **we are all here right now!** Because it’s Sunday morning, and coming together as a church is core to the **practice** of our faith! Right?

Not that we’d say that going to church is what it means to be a Christian, or what makes one a Christian. **It’s not!** But it is an essential expression of our faith in Jesus and union with Him. A core **practice** of our devotion to Jesus.

Similarly, many of us **pray** – as both a habit and a way of life - with God...

And many of us have some habit or practice of regular engagement with God’s revelation in **Scripture** – whether in devotional reading, or lectio divina, or scripture memorization, or rigorous bible study – on our own, and/or maybe with others.

Truth is, **this is what we are doing right now!**

And not as a way of **earning** God’s forgiveness or favor, but as a way of drawing near and living near to the God who **has** forgiven us and showered us with mercy and grace... To the God who **seeks us** in love...

Christian faith **involves** practices, doesn't it? Or **wineskins**, as Jesus calls them.

I've always appreciated how Gordon Smith, one of my former professors, now the President of Ambrose University and Seminary, explains this. He writes,

"Jesus once identified the empower gift of grace as 'living water' (John 4:10,13). This living water has a property remarkably similar to the water we drink daily: it needs a container. Just as we cannot drink water unless it is contained in a pitcher or cup, so the living water of Jesus needs the **container** of spiritual discipline." (On the Way, p.11).

Or **wineskins**, as Jesus calls them.

Practices that serve as **receptacles – containers** – vessels that enable us to **hold** and **experience** and **savor** the Wine of God's Presence and Grace...

Which was not a new idea in Mark 2.

In Jesus' day, the religious, the devout, the faithful had a very clear and defined collection of practices – wineskins – that shaped their lives.

One of which is named **in our text today – fasting**.

In Jesus' day, the essential **practices** or **wineskins** of Jewish piety were **charity**, **prayer** and **fasting** – all of which Jesus acknowledges explicitly in the Sermon on the Mount – Matthew 6. He says, "*When you give to the needy...*" and "*When you pray...*" and "*When you fast...*"

We don't have time to unpack all that Jesus says there, but it's worth noting that Jesus, in no way, **refutes** or **rejects** these practices – these wineskins – but He does

seek to **renew** and **reframe** them – to **re-align** them with God’s character, kingdom and will.

And then with these, as we discover in the New Testament, the devout in Jesus’ day also practiced **ritual washings**, and **sabbath-keeping**, and followed rigorous **dietary restrictions** – all as *integral expressions* of their faith... ways they **practiced** their faith. These were the **wineskins** that revealed and carried their faith...

And yet, as I said a moment ago, at every turn in Mark 2, in every word and action of Jesus and his disciples – we find Jesus is explicitly and intentionally **bursting the wineskins** of the devout in His day.

And not because their wineskins were inherently bad or wrong, but because *they’d come to be more important than the Wine!* Even, at times, *to restrict and displace the Wine!*

Which is something Jesus is concerned about in all of our lives.

I would dare to say that if you have never experienced Jesus bursting any of your wineskins – and by that, I mean confronted and reframing the way and ways you practice your faith – then *it is possible that you are not following Jesus, but hoping He will simply follow you...*

Because, according to Jesus, His New Wine **requires New Wineskins!**

And we hear it explicitly in our text today – so let’s turn to it now – and let me read it for us. **Mark 2:18-22**

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?"

**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.

**"Now 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."

**Let's pray** – *O Jesus, burst our wineskins – that we might hold, and experience, and savor the Wine of Your Presence and Grace!!*

Alright, so here's the question they ask Jesus – **"How is it that John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees are fasting, but yours are not?"**

And in typical fashion, Jesus responds with a question.

He asks, **"How can the guests of the Bridegroom** fast while he is with them?"

I love this response – because Jesus, as always, gets right to the heart – of fasting – and with that, of all of our wineskins.

**So, what's the purpose of fasting?** And in particular, why were John's disciples – who are explicitly named here – **why were they fasting?**

Well, the gospels tell us. In the gospel of **John, chapter 3, verse 28-30**, John the Baptist himself explains the heartbeat of his calling and faith... **He says,**

*"I am not the Messiah but am sent ahead of him. The bride belongs to the bridegroom. The friend who attends the bridegroom waits and listens for him, and is full of joy when he hears the bridegroom's voice. That joy is mine, and it is now complete. He must become greater; I must become less."*

Do you hear what John was saying? John and his disciples fasted **for one reason – and one reason alone**. They fasted in **longing** for the coming of Israel's **bridegroom** – for the coming of **God Himself!** They fasted in longing for **God's Presence!** For the Feast of the kingdom – when God would come again and enter into the human story – and set all things right – for His glory, and for the good of the world...

And so, using John the Baptist's own language (which is drawn from the Hebrew scriptures), Jesus asked, *"How can the guests of the Bridegroom fast while he is with them?" "While He is with them!"*

Do you hear what Jesus is saying?

He's saying – ***In Me, God has come...*** In Me, the Bridegroom has come – and the wedding feast is ON and OPEN to all! This is no time for fasting. These are days of FEASTING!!!!

*"How can the guests of the Bridegroom fast while he is with them? They cannot, so long as they have him with them."*

Can you imagine if throughout the gospels, Jesus' disciples slipped away to fast and pray for the coming of God? It would have made no sense – because in Jesus, God was with them – walking with them, bringing the Kingdom in power and grace.

**Just as there will be no fasting in heaven – only *feasting* – this was not the time for fasting...**

**“But the time** will come,” Jesus goes on to say, “when the bridegroom will be taken from them, and on that day they will fast.”

Which tells us, Jesus is **not** declaring the end of all fasting – as an **essential practice** and expression of true faith! As an **essential wineskin** in the life of God’s people...

**Jesus Himself fasted** – for 40 days in the Wilderness. And in the days, years and centuries following His Ascension, Christians have fasted (as we see evident in the Book of Acts). And many still do. I suspect many of us have and do fast – from time to time – according to the Spirit’s leading.

Jesus is not against fasting or wineskins. What’s he’s against is **when the wineskins become everything to us and to others**. And especially, **when the wineskins become more important than the Wine they are intended to hold!**

As Jesus – the New Wine – experienced in the question of these devout men and women.

Because, honestly, wine is the whole reason for wineskins!! As someone else wisely distilled it, **“Wineskins are superfluous** – useless – without the wine they are meant to hold” [Harold Snyder].

Their whole reason for existence is ***the enjoyment of the wine!***

And yet sometimes **they become everything** – the heart and soul of our faith and spirituality.



Imagine if you moved to **BC's wine country**, and a friend invited you over to introduce you to the world and **love** of wine. But all night, all you did was ask about **bottles** and **barrels**?

At some point, your new friend – the **wine-lover** – would be bound to respond,  
*"It's not about the bottles!"*

It's not about the bottles... It's about the Wine! **"Come, taste and see!"**  
And all the more so in the kingdom of God, Jesus is saying to the devout in his day – and to us: **it's not about the wineskins!**

*It's not about the wineskins!*

**It's about the Wine** – experiencing and savoring the Goodness and the Power of the Wine!

And in Jesus, the Wine is now available! In Jesus, the Bridegroom has come!

And yet, in that moment, these folks were so preoccupied with their **wineskins** – so fixated on the importance of fasting – that they were oblivious to the New Wine that was being poured out right before their eyes, to the Feast of God that open to them in Jesus...

The very fulfillment of their fasting was standing before them – and all they could do was talk about wineskins... because their faith had become nothing more than just a collection of wineskins... empty containers... meant for so much more...

And so Jesus, in love, invited them to open their eyes and join the Feast!

**The Bridegroom has come! The Wine is being poured out!**

**This is no time for fasting! *You don't fast during a wedding feast!***

Which, literally, was the one exemption for fasting in Jesus' day.

As historians explain, "Wedding feasts required seven days of festivity; one was not **permitted** to fast or engage in other acts of mourning or difficult labor during a wedding feast." (Keener, 141)

Another scholar explains, "Friends and guests had no responsibility but to enjoy the festivities. There was an abundance of food and wine, as well as song, dance, and fun both in the house and on the street. Even **rabbis** were expected to desist from Torah instruction and join the celebration with their students." (Edwards, 89)

And that's exactly why Jesus says that disciples weren't fasting – *because you don't fast during a wedding feast!* You don't fast when the Bridegroom has finally come!

"Look around you!" Jesus is saying. "The Bridegroom is here – the Feast of the Kingdom is at hand – the sick are being healed, the blind given sight, the sin-sick forgiven, the outcast restored. Now is the time for Feasting, not fasting!"

"**But**" Jesus says, "*the time will come when the Bridegroom will be taken from them, and on that day they will fast...*"

Or as a more literal translation has it, "*The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast in that day.*"

Which is exactly what we see – in the years that followed the resurrection and ascension of Jesus.

**Never once** in the gospels – in the days of Jesus’ Incarnation – do we see Jesus’ disciples fasting. *But after his death, resurrection and ascension, and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit*, we find Jesus’ disciples – the church – fasting. And not as a rejection of Jesus’ teaching, but **as a fulfillment of what He said...**

And I can’t help but think again of **the Christians in Rome in 70 AD** – suffering under the crushing hand of Emperor Nero – who were **Mark’s first readers**.

And how these words of Jesus must have been an incredible comfort to them – that Jesus **knew** and **named** the reality that the days of the Kingdom Feast would not continue forever – **not yet**. But that there was coming a time when He – the Bridegroom – would be taken from them.

And in those days **they would** – and **we would** – once again find ourselves **fasting** – and praying – in **longing** and **deep ache** for Jesus – the Bridegroom – to come again – **for good...** Fasting in longing for more of His will and His power and His Presence and His Glory – on earth as it is in heaven... for us... for others... for all.

As John Piper once wrote, “**There is an ache inside every** Christian that Jesus is not here as fully and intimately and as powerfully and as gloriously as we want him to be. We hunger for so much more. That is why we fast.”

**Because Jesus** – the Bridegroom – is not with us as He once was and ultimately will be.

I love the honesty of Jesus. *We need this.* We need to be honest that **our day** is not the Kingdom Feast we see happening in the gospels...

No, **this is a time for fasting...**

**And yet!!!**

And yet, according to Jesus, though these are days for fasting – though these are days for wineskins – we are invited to do so not from a place of emptiness, despair and abandonment, but as those who have already experienced something of the New Wine of Jesus, by the Spirit – which **gives us hope** and **makes us hungry** for more...

This, as far as I can see, is what Jesus is getting at when he says in v.21-22,

**"Now 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."

It's worth naming that both of these metaphors, that of patching **a worn garment** and **preparing new wine**, are naturally connected to the wedding theme. And together they highlight Jesus' point: *Something new is taking place – something worth celebrating (There is New Wine at hand! The Bridegroom has come!) and the old ways won't fit this new reality (new wineskins are needed).*

In Jesus' life, ministry, death, resurrection and ascension, **the reign of God** – the **Feast** – has **begun** to be revealed on earth in human experience. The decisive in-breaking of God's reign is no longer simply something **off in the future**, but **IS** something that can **already be experienced** – **now** – **in part** - through faith in Jesus and the presence of His Holy Spirit.

*The gospel of Jesus is the new wine, and the unshrunk cloth.*

The long-awaited Bridegroom has **come**.

The festivities have **begun**.

The new Wine is **being served**...

And those who come in faith to Jesus are given a **foretaste** of the kingdom of God by the grace of the Spirit...

As the New Testament is abundantly clear, **the Kingdom has not yet come in its fullness**. Not everything is restored, not every sin is left behind, not every war is ceased, not every sickness is healed. **There is more to come**...

*But in Jesus Christ, it has begun* - the future has broken into the present.  
The new wine **is** being served...

*And so we are invited in these days to fast – and seek God – in a new way...* To fast, not like John's disciples – empty containers – but as those who have already experienced something of **God's New Wine**...

To fast not simply out of hunger for what has yet to come, but out of hunger for **the fullness** of what we have **already begun** to experience.

In a sense, by the presence and work of the Spirit, we have already begun to **savor** something of the Feast that is to come, and our hunger is **aroused for more** – for what is still to come.

Again to quote John Piper, from his beautiful book on fasting, A Hunger for God. He writes,

“We have tasted the powers of the age to come, and our fasting is not because we are hungry for something we have not experienced, but because the new wine of Christ’s presence is so real and so satisfying. **We must have more...**” (42)

Not more wineskins – but more of God’s Presence – and Kingdom – and Power – and Grace... The New Wine of Jesus.

Which is what changes and renews all of our wineskins...

We PRAY for the kingdom to come – as those in whom the King is already present and at work – by the Spirit...

And we come together as a church seeking God’s Presence and Voice – as those already breathed to life by the grace of God’s Presence and Voice...

The Gospel of Jesus is the New Wine – and in the grace of the gospel, He is making us new! The New Wineskins of His Kingdom – wineskins filled with His New Wine...

So where might Jesus be wanting to burst your wineskins?

Has your life with God – your walk with Jesus – become more about maintaining your wineskins, or savoring the Wine?

Today – as ever – Jesus invites us to come to Him in faith – that He might *make us new* and *give us new wineskins* – by the grace and power of His New Wine...

*for God’s glory, for the sake of the world, and for your joy in Him...*

Let’s pray.

*O Jesus, burst our wineskins – that we might hold, and experience, and savor the Wine of Your Presence and Grace!!*

Invitation to the Lord’s Supper