

## THE RADICAL RABBI: "A RADICAL PRIORITY"

(Mark 2:18-22; Luke 5:33-39)

9.13.20

### INTRODUCTION

We can probably all relate to times where our priorities have become a little out of whack, where we made choices that later, upon reflecting, left us with little more to say than, "What in the world was I thinking?"

For instance, there are many stories of people who have dropped their cell phones and gone to great lengths to retrieve them - including one guy who unfortunately drowned after jumping into a river in an attempt to retrieve his phone. But maybe my all-time favorite is of a guy who obviously considers nothing in this life more important than being a friend in need. So when his buddy dropped his cell phone into a portable toilet (just think of a "porta-potty"), and he saw that he was the only one in the group skinny enough to go in after it, that's precisely what he did - finding himself thigh-deep in the sweet deposits of "nature's finest." Once in, however, he couldn't get out. As he said, "I panicked. I hate confined spaces." He also mentioned that it smelled a bit, too. Once authorities were called, it took them about 10 minutes to get him out. The two most embarrassing aspects of this story? 1) He never did find his friend's phone, and 2) let's just say I am now very embarrassed to be Norwegian. That's right; this "porta-potty pilot" showed his loyalty and friendship, if not his brains, right in his native land - in southeastern Norway.

But one more story about misplaced priorities: A New Jersey schoolteacher named Marie Murphy got a call telling her that her house was on fire. She obviously dropped everything and rushed to her home. Now both her husband and her mother, who had been staying with them, were safely outside and uninjured. However, Marie rushed into the blazing inferno anyway. Was someone in there that nobody except Marie knew anything about? Why else would she do such a dangerous thing, even to the point of ignoring the flames that by now had completely engulfed the entire building?

Only after she miraculously came back out of her burning home did everyone find out what she valued more than her own life: no, not her certificate of fire insurance (which was still inside and burned with the rest of her house), but rather her Philadelphia Phillies baseball season tickets. She and her husband wound up in a motel for some time while working through their insurance coverage. And while the Phillies were duly impressed with this show of fan loyalty, even arranging a visit to her school by the famed "Phillie Phanatic" team mascot, they also informed her that, had her tickets burned, they would have reprinted her new ones. Now, in our message today, Jesus is going to be addressing misplaced priorities - as only He can. So, as we begin, let's look to the Lord in prayer.

### TEXTS (harmonized)

*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?"... "John's disciples often fast and pray, and so do the disciples of the Pharisees, but Yours go on eating and drinking" - Mark 2:18; Luke 5:33.*

While there seems to be no sense of a specific sequence in this story as it relates to how we've

progressed over the last couple of weeks, it does appear to have occurred after the miracle we looked at a couple of weeks ago, of the paralyzed man being healed and, more importantly, that miracle validating Christ's power over spiritual as well as physical issues. Jesus is continuing to be ministering in and around Capernaum. And those in his audience continue to include Pharisees and others of the Jewish religious leadership.

The question that comes up in this moment concerns "fasting." Now specifically, fasting is the practice of denying oneself food so that the time normally spent in food prep and eating could now be devoted, along with the rest of the day, to seeking the Lord through meditating on His scriptures, fellowshiping with Him through prayer, and a deep and earnest desire for confession of sin. It was certainly a subject that would have resonated with a Jewish audience. At many celebrated times in their history, when faced either with national crisis, or at a time of national spiritual reawakening and reckoning, fasting had been a part of the call from leaders for seeking the Lord's forgiveness and for pleading for His divine intervention. When that time of fasting was seen as a true expression of the nation's sincere grief at their sin and their very genuine desire for repentance, God restored their relationship. When seen as a cry for help when faced with some sort of national emergency, that cry coming from within that relationship, God would intervene, often miraculously.

There were different practices concerning fasting and, as it was primarily a visual activity, it was relatively easy to notice differences between groups, which is behind this moment of questioning of Christ. Now Jews would have normally understood only one commanded time of fasting - the Day of Atonement, as God commanded Moses: ***"The tenth day of this seventh month is the Day of Atonement. Hold a sacred assembly and deny yourselves (fast), and present a food offering to the Lord" - God speaking, Leviticus 23:27.*** Now the idea of "denying yourself" would have come from the Hebrew word for "afflict," and it basically meant to deprive yourself of something. Now while most people would have understood the command to fast as an annual occurrence, the Pharisees fasted twice a week. The other group in this story, followers of John the Baptist, had simply followed the example of John, who had obviously lived his entire life in a sense of denial of self, although theirs was likely not as regularly scheduled a practice as the Pharisees. The point, though, is that fasting was a common sight.

Well, now you have Jesus of Nazareth, each day becoming a more visible presence, both in terms of His amazing works, but also in terms of His teachings. As such, both friends and enemies were beginning to focus their attention on Him, to see what His teachings would look like in the real world. And one of the first things to catch their eye was this idea of fasting. Actually, what caught their eye was: He didn't do it. He didn't practice it and He didn't teach it. In fact, the longer they watched Him and listened to Him, the more obvious it became that this self-styled Rabbi from Nazareth seemed to have nothing whatsoever to do with fasting. And, as they are continued watching, they saw that His disciples were not only not fasting, but instead continuing with "eating and drinking" - very unfasting behavior. So, the natural question was, what gives?

Jesus gives a powerful response to their question - in two parts. First, He compares Himself with a bridegroom: ***"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" - Jesus Christ, Mark 2:19-20.***

Now, to our modern ears, this might not seem that important, other than of course the bridegroom being a center of attention at a wedding. But for Jewish ears, particularly those well-versed in the Scriptures, Christ's use of the bridegroom metaphor would have had very significant meaning. One of their greatest prophets, Isaiah, some 700 years before this moment, had written this: ***As a young man marries a young woman, so will your Builder marry you; as a bridegroom rejoices over his bride, so will your God rejoice over you - Isaiah 62:5.*** Jesus is not so subtly using Isaiah's comparison of God's loving relationship with Israel as that of a bridegroom to His bride to speak to His being here now, and paralleling how God presented Himself to His chosen people with the love and the desire for relationship that He Himself has been communicating with His disciples and with the crowds that have gathered around Him. It is a clear sign that Jesus is once again telling the world that He is in fact God, making a direct connection between Isaiah's picture of God's relationship with Israel and His own descriptions of relationship to God through their relationship with Him.

Then, continuing the bridegroom idea, Jesus connects it with the one place where bridegrooms are found - at a wedding. Weddings were one of the most joyous celebrations in Jewish culture - a celebration of love and familial continuity that often went on for as many as seven days. Food and drink were found in abundance because it was a time of joy and unbridled celebration. Everything else was forgotten or put aside so that nothing distracted from this joy. Fasting was a response to a person's (or even a nation's) alienation and separation from God. But that was not for now: Jesus, God's Son, was here. For the time being, there was no separation from God. And as long as Jesus was present with His followers, a similar spirit of joy and celebration should be the rule of the day.

Next Jesus illustrates by means of two very commonly-used items to get His audience to understand what it is He is intending to bring to people - a new way to live, essentially, a new life: ***"No one tears a piece out of a new garment to patch an old one. Otherwise, they will have torn the new garment, and the patch from the new will not match the old. And no one pours new wine into old wineskins. Otherwise, the new wine will burst the skins; the wine will run out and the wineskins will be ruined. No, new wine must be poured into new wineskins" - Jesus Christ, Luke 5:36-38.***

No one would use new, unwashed (meaning unshrunk) cloth to repair a tear in an old garment. As the new cloth would shrink upon being washed, it would make the tear in the old garment even worse. New cloth is best used on a new garment. But what is often overlooked in this illustration is that the old garment has a tear in it, implying that there is a need for repair. But because of the worsening of the situation that would occur if new cloth was affixed to an old garment, what is shown is the need for something entirely brand new and not merely a patchwork remedy.

Likewise, nobody would pour new wine into old wineskins. The reason? New, unfermented wine expands as it ferments. In a brittle, old wineskin, that expansion would result in the old wineskin breaking, not only ruining the wineskin but causing the new wine to be poured out and wasted. New wine demands new wineskins.

Both illustrations are intending to head His audience the same direction. Jesus is bringing in a brand-new life - a new way of thinking, a new way of reacting, a new way of relating to God, ultimately a new covenant for Jews and Gentiles alike.

That new life cannot behave and respond like the old ways of Judaism. God is getting ready to do something brand new, and that will start with providing something brand new, specifically through this very Nazarene who is talking to them: a new life offered through a new redemption offered through a new sacrifice, a once-and-for-all sacrifice that is going to make all the old ways of dealing with sin through animal sacrifice and other means obsolete. That will also, to a great extent, render the practice of fasting obsolete as well. There may still be at times a call to fasting that will be absolutely appropriate, but there will no longer be a requirement.

While this message may have been new to the ears of some in His audience, it was never a new message but rather the reissue, if you will, of a divine promise of God based on His enduring love for His people, spoken in several places, starting with God speaking this promise through the prophet Isaiah:

- 1) ***"From now on I will tell you of new things, of hidden things unknown to you. ... See, I will create new heavens and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind" - God speaking, Isaiah 48:6b, 65:17.***
- 2) According to the prophet Ezekiel, that new life would begin at the very foundation of our lives - our hearts: ***"I will give them an undivided heart and put a new spirit in them; I will remove from them their heart of stone and give them a heart of flesh. ... I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you" - God speaking, Ezekiel 11:19, 36:25-26a.***
- 3) And the prophet Jeremiah told of a wondrous new covenant, promised by God as a way of making "all things new" for the people of God: ***"The days are coming," declares the Lord, "when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors . . . This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel after that time," declares the Lord. "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people" - Jeremiah 31:31-32a, 33.***

Now what Jesus was saying with these two illustrations - new cloth on an old garment, and new wine in old wineskins - was that this new life that Jesus was bringing could not be superimposed, overlaid, on the old. Jesus had no intention of "patching" the old; His intention was to introduce something completely new. The old patterns of relating to God had to be done away with, as Christ's life will be providing a new way of not only relating to God but also relating God Himself to the world. And Jesus already understood the opposition that He would be facing, as He closes by saying: ***"And no one after drinking old wine wants the new, for they say, 'The old is better'" - Jesus Christ, Luke 5:39.*** This would be the essential position of the Pharisees that, as Jesus brings the "new wine" of a new covenant, they will stubbornly hold onto the "old wine," trying desperately to convince people, including themselves, that the "old wine," meaning the old ways of Judaism - the annual atonement, the sacrificial system for sin, the rigid demands of the law, the stubborn belief that the favor of God could be earned - are best, and that Jesus must therefore be opposed by every means

possible due to this heretical teaching of His. Not once did they consider that it was God Himself, in the person of Jesus, bringing this new life. And not once did they understand how absolutely necessary this new life was going to be - for everybody.

## APPLICATION

Now, as we look at lessons for us these 2,000 years later, what do we find?

First, one reason that the Pharisees fought so tenaciously against Christ was that practicing their faith, particularly in full view of the people, was in some ways a validation of their powerful role as buffers between the people and the occupying Roman forces. And certainly they seemed to be holy: speaking long prayers, wearing their fancy robes, teaching the unyielding requirements of the law and making sure the people understood truly how important all these rules and regulations were, and certainly making their fastings very evident to any who might be looking their way - all with an eye toward making themselves acceptable to God.

But focusing attention on outward appearances, or on things we have done that should make us pleasing to God, has been and continues to be a way that our culture views itself. For instance, many people when discussing the prospects of hell, will counter that they are "good people," that, after all, "nobody's perfect," and "I'm doing the best I can." Sometimes they will fall back on these "definitions" of being in right relationship with God: "I've been baptized, I've been confirmed," even "I go to church."

But before we giggle too much at those comments - all of which, incidentally, are quotes from people with whom I've spoken - how many of us, in viewing our culture, particularly during the last few turbulent months of so many troubling images on TV or reported in the news, are tempted to consider ourselves "better" than the people we watch in the news? That is very much a pharisaic viewpoint. Remember the story Jesus told of the Pharisee and the tax collector arriving at the temple to pray? This is what the Pharisee prayed: ***"God, I thank you that I am not like other people - robbers, evildoers, adulterers - or even like this tax collector" - Jesus Christ, Luke 18:11a.*** Remember Christ's rant against all the religious leaders? Matthew tells us by first giving us Christ's words to the people gathered around Him: ***"[Y]ou must be careful to do everything [the teachers of the law and the Pharisees] tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach. ... Everything they do is done for people to see ... And then he goes after the Pharisees and their colleagues big-time: You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of the bones of the dead and everything unclean. In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside, you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness" - Jesus Christ, Matthew 23:3, 5a, 27b-28.***

We can never forget that, pardon my grammar, "we ain't any better than anybody." Whatever goodness, whatever truth, whatever wisdom is in us is planted and grown and matured in us through the indwelling power of Christ's Holy Spirit. I can no more claim the work the Holy Spirit is accomplishing in me than I can claim my blue eyes. Anything beautiful in me, anything good, anything true, anything wise, is nothing more than the beauty and goodness and truth and wisdom of Jesus Christ in me. Period.

Second, it can be very easy to become satisfied in ourselves, even as Christians, that we are pleasing God because of the things we do - going to church on Sundays, tithing, etc. We become content in thinking that is the extent of God's demands on us. That is a grossly mistaken view of what God intends for us. While we are all different in terms of our gifts and talents, our passions and perspectives, one way in which we are all the same is that we are all desired by God to be changed, to be made into something new, that brings honor and glory to Him - something that reflects the Son He so completely loves. That is the work of the Holy Spirit. Let me rephrase that. That is the constant, ongoing work of the Holy Spirit. The only time in our existence that we will ever be completed and perfected in Christ is upon our arrival in heaven - either by death or by Rapture - in which case our salvation in Christ will have been perfected. Until then, the expectation from God is of our continuing to grow and mature into the image of His Son. As long as we live, as long as we exist on this planet, that is always the goal: to become more and more like Jesus.

And because God is never content with where we are in Christ, should never be content with where we are in Christ. We should never think that we have done enough to love one another, we should never think that we have done enough to reach out with the gospel, we should never think that we have done enough in tithing our resources (which God gave us in the first place). We should never think that our knowledge of Scripture is enough, that our understanding of the Bible is enough, that we have learned enough. No aspect of our Christian life should ever invite us to be content. In that way, we should always be unsatisfied, even selfish, in that we always want more.

And third, we must always pray for freshness in all the expressions of our faith, that they are always honest and sincere outcomes of our hearts. God made note of this through Isaiah, as He said this about Israel seeking to manipulate Him through the action of fasting - an action that contained no heart: ***"For day after day they seek me out; they seem eager to know My ways, as if they were a nation that does what is right and has not forsaken the commands of its God. They ask me for just decisions and seem eager for God to come near them. 'Why have we fasted,' they say, 'and you have not seen it? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you have not noticed?'" - God speaking, Isaiah 58:2-3a.***

And then God answers them: ***"[O]n the day of your fasting, you do as you please....You cannot fast as you do today and expect your voice to be heard on high" - God speaking, Isaiah 58:3b, 4b.***

We can never forget that our relationship with God, individually as well as collectively in the body, is not about religion or ritual, but relationship. Relationship is something living and breathing and growing, always full of joy and surprise. Relationship needs to be the basis for how we praise and worship, how we fellowship, how we do outreach, how we tithe – relationship between us and God, and between us and each other.

And in addition, we have the miracle of the presence of God in our midst in the person of Jesus Christ. What an amazing privilege! When Jesus used the metaphor of the bridegroom as He spoke, He was reminding His audience that the wedding feast could not begin nor the invited guests even assemble until the bridegroom was there to serve as host of the feast. Once

the bridegroom was present, "Let the celebration begin!" Jesus was even now offering to show others the feast that would be available through Him - the messianic bridegroom! It also serves as a reminder that the life in Christ is meant to be a feast, not a funeral.

## CONCLUSION

One final thought as we close: God hit me with this as I was prepping this message. He brought to mind one of the most joyous testimonies found anywhere in Scripture, and it actually comes from a little bit of an unlikely source: the OT book of Lamentations, believed to be written by the prophet Jeremiah. You can probably guess the hymn that was inspired from these verses: ***Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed, for His compassions never fail. They (His compassions) are new every morning; great is Your faithfulness - Jeremiah, Lamentations 3:22-23.***

Last week, after considering the miracle that is living in the reality of Christ's forgiveness the week before, we introduced a second wonder: the miracle of Christ's presence. What an amazing wonder that is - that the Son of God maintains His perfect presence with us through the indwelling of His Holy Spirit in our lives. What joy that should cause us.

Now, as "frosting on the cake," we have this week another reason to rejoice in the miracle of Christ's presence: The Bible tells us that the Lord's "compassions" never fail; they are never left unrepresented to us, they never let us down. Now the picture in the Hebrew of "compassions" is of a deep, kindly sympathy and sorrow felt for another who has been struck and is struggling with misfortune, that sympathy bringing with it a desire to relieve the pain and suffering being endured. But then also notice that the end of our troubles is not the end of the Lord's mercy - Jeremiah tells us that the Lord's compassions "are new every morning." Wow - every day another picture, another experience of God's love through the miraculous presence of His Son in our lives. That's why Christ said an emphatic "No" to fasting. How can you do that when the source of the greatest joy of our lives - the presence of Jesus Himself - is living with us every moment of every day?

As we celebrate the fact of Christ's ongoing presence and relationship in our lives, the question becomes: Do we notice His "new every morning" compassions? Do we notice newness in our relationship with Him at all? We should. The Lord never stops working in our lives, as the apostle Paul made note of: ***[H]e who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus." Philippians 1:6.*** So as He never stops working, we can never stop noticing - but we can praise and worship and testify to His working in our lives. What a great way to celebrate His presence! Let's pray!