

Mark 2: 18-22; “The Friends of the Bridegroom”, Sermon # 11 in the series – “Astonished at His teaching”, Delivered by Pastor Paul Rendall on June 15th, 2014, in the Morning Worship Service.

It is always good, when you do not understand a thing, to ask questions. It doesn't do any good to be going through life thinking that you know everything and understand everything when God has seen fit to conceal a good many things from your understanding. “It is the glory of God to conceal a matter.” “It is the glory of kings to search it out,” it says in Proverbs 25: 2. And yet sometimes when we do ask questions, our questions are not asked from right thoughts or motives. They are asked in a demanding way that assumes that we already have all the religious knowledge that we need to live a life that is pleasing to God. And so, when we ask questions in a demanding way, it is because we have assumed that all of what we know and hold to now, is all that there is to truth. But perhaps it is not the full truth, and perhaps we don't want to stop to think about the fact that our knowledge needs to be added to. I think that it is spiritual pride that causes us to do this. The disciples of John and the Pharisees were fasting, and they couldn't understand why the disciples of Jesus did not. So they asked Jesus why not. Why didn't His disciples fast when they, the ones who were supremely concerned with doing God's will, were fasting? The implication was that the disciples of Jesus were not doing the right thing. They were just trying to be different. They were breaking with religious unity. Did they understand something more about true religion than the disciples of John and the Pharisees? But the disciples of John and the disciples of the Pharisees needed to understand something which perhaps you and I need to understand this morning. We may assume that our own reasonings on how we practice our religion are right, when something more of knowledge needs to be added to us. Our current practice of our Christianity may not be complete. In fact, it may be deficient.

This passage of Scripture is teaching us that Jesus Christ Himself is to be sought to, for the answers to all the questions that we have about our personal and our corporate religious practice; because all the fullness of wisdom and knowledge are found in Him. The real question that we want to consider this morning is this: Do we know the Lord Jesus Christ in all the ways that He has chosen to reveal Himself? If we do not, our knowledge is incomplete. The disciples of John needed to learn something more about Jesus than what they already knew. They needed to learn more about the joy of knowing Jesus as their spiritual and heavenly bridegroom and to become His friend. For in learning about the Lord Jesus Christ in this way, they would be learning to go beyond simply being religious. This is what you and I may need this morning as well. There are 3 parables in this text which we are looking at, which if we understand them and receive the truth of them, they will allow us to go beyond just being outwardly religious. They are three parables of a new perspective which Christ came to bring. He brings a new perspective to our obedience to Himself, in 3 ways, in these verses that we are looking at. I hope that you will joyfully consider these with me this morning.

The 1st parable teaches us that the friends of the Bridegroom are not to fast, while He is with them. (Verses 18-20)

The question which was asked was this: “Why do the disciples of John and of the Pharisees fast, but Your disciples do not fast?” And Jesus' answer was, “Can the friends of the bridegroom fast while the bridegroom is with them?” “As long as they have the bridegroom with them they cannot fast.” This does reveal to us something more about the nature of true fasting than what we may presently know. Fasting, true fasting, most people know, is related to sorrow. Physical fasting is abstaining from our regular intake of food in order to find wisdom and strength to deal with our sins, or our ignorance, or both. There is a sorrow that comes to the heart and mind which attends true fasting. It is called "afflicting our soul" in Isaiah 58: 3. There is, in fasting, a

sorrow over what we are lacking, or what others are lacking; whether it is obedience to God's Word, or further knowledge or wisdom on a particular subject. But sometimes our fasting may not be accomplishing what we think. It may be accompanied by a sadness which is a show to men, as the disciples of the Pharisees had. They thought that they were very spiritual when they were not. Theirs was a kind of "put on" sorrow which Jesus made an observation upon in Matthew 6: 16. He said, "Moreover, when you fast, do not be like the hypocrites, with a sad countenance." "For they disfigure their faces that they may appear to men to be fasting." This is a false sorrow. Then, there is also a true sorrow, a sorrow which it was hoped, by the disciples of John, would lead them to a true repentance. And here, this sorrow, Jesus says, was related to sorrow over not having the immediate presence of the Bridegroom. In other words, there is a fasting which is right and appropriate at a certain time, and there is a fasting which is wrong and inappropriate at another time.

This use of the word "Bridegroom" by Jesus, was not unfamiliar to the disciples of John. Turn over with me to John chapter 3 and you will see this. John had been baptizing in Aenon near Salim, it says in verse 23, "Because there was much water there." "And they came and were baptized." A question arises at this point in the minds of some of John's disciples. In verse 26 it says that they came to him and said to him, "Rabbi, He who was with you beyond the Jordan, to whom you have testified—behold, He is baptizing, and all are coming to Him!" "John answered and said, 'A man can receive nothing unless it has been given him from heaven.'" "You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, 'I am not the Christ, but, I have been sent before Him.'" "He who has the bride is the bridegroom; but the friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly because of the bridegroom's voice." "Therefore this joy of mine is fulfilled." John was saying that it was Jesus who is the Christ, and that He is the spiritual bridegroom of any person who believes in Him. He is the bridegroom of the entire Church of God's Elect people. They are betrothed to Him spiritually in the New Birth, and they have Him with them spiritually as their husband from the moment that they exercise saving faith in Him. In Isaiah 54: 5 it says, "For your Maker is your husband, the Lord of Hosts is His name; and your Redeemer is the Holy One of Israel; He is called the God of the whole earth." John says of himself that he was the friend of this Bridegroom. He, John, was a teacher and preacher sent from God, but he rejoiced greatly to stand and hear the bridegroom's voice. Let me ask you whether you know the Lord Jesus in this glorious way? Are you married to Him spiritually? It is by faith in Him that you come into saving relationship with Him. It is by faith in Him that you are betrothed and married to Him spiritually.

Now when it comes to fasting, Jesus is saying that it cannot be done; it does not need to be done, when the Bridegroom is with His people. In the context He was referring to the fact that He was with His people personally and visibly at that very time. "As long as they have the bridegroom with them they cannot fast." He, their Master and Lord was right there with them; and they knew this, and they could easily resort to Him to have all of their questions answered and their sins forgiven. Why should they weep and mourn and abstain from food; why should they be sad and sorrowful when the very One who brings them every blessing related to their salvation and their life, is actually standing right in front of them? No, they should not fast. They should be thankful and rejoice just as the friends of the bridegroom were, at the weddings of those days. Weddings are not a time for sorrow and sadness and abstaining from food. They are a time for gladness, and rejoicing, and feasting. This is the way that it was, physically, in terms of weddings in Israel. I am told by Alexander Maclaren in his sermon on this place that, "According to the Jewish wedding ceremonial it was their business to conduct the bride to the home of her husband, and there to spend seven days in festivity and rejoicing, which were to be so entirely devoted to mirth and feasting that the companions of the bridegroom were by the Talmudic ritual absolved even from prayer and from worship." "They had it for their one duty to

rejoice.” Isaiah 62, verse 5 says, “For as a young man marries a virgin, so shall your sons marry you; and as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you.”

Have you ever thought of fasting at a wedding? I should say not! It would be entirely inappropriate! Even so, it would have been wrong for the disciples of Jesus to have fasted in those days of His flesh when they were with Him. There would come days when the bridegroom was taken away from them, and then they would fast. The days after the crucifixion until the resurrection were just such days. The days after Jesus ascended in to heaven, when the disciples were awaiting the descent of the Holy Spirit were just such days. And I would say that because the presence and power and wisdom and grace of our Lord Jesus Christ have been given to His Bride, His Church, in the person of His Holy Spirit forever, there is every reason for us as Christians to rejoice forevermore. Christ's presence is always with His Church and it is always and forever with each one of His believing people.

But we do not always sense His presence, do we brethren? We know that He will never leave us nor forsake us, but there are still many times when we do not consciously realize His presence with us and that is why there are still some times when we need to fast. We still need wisdom as those praying saints in the church at Antioch did when they were thinking about sending out missionaries. It says in Acts Chapter 13, verse 2, “As they ministered to the Lord and fasted, the Holy Spirit said ‘Now separate to Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.’” “Then, having fasted and prayed, and laid hands on them they sent them away.” How important is fasting for this kind of wisdom and guidance and selection of those qualified for ministry. We still need greater power to overcome the temptations and schemes of the evil one. We still need power to cleanse ourselves from all the defilements of our flesh and spirit. And this is why the Lord Jesus told his disciples of their great need to fast in their day. Jesus had on one occasion cast out a demon from a child which had caused that child to have a mute spirit. Jesus was able to cast out the demon, but the disciples could not when they had tried to, before. Mark 9: 28 says, “And when He had come into the house, His disciples asked Him privately, ‘Why could we not cast it out?’” “So He said to them, ‘This kind can come out by nothing but prayer and fasting.’” Sometimes we do not realize how great the power of Satan is, to draw away our hearts from the good things of Christ. Sometimes we do not see the connection between all of our self-indulgences in rich foods and our inability to overcome our temptations.

May we all consider the words of our Lord as the way to greater power in overcoming all of our temptations. And in times of trouble and distress; when we particularly need the Lord's help, will we not remember the words of the Apostle Paul in 2 Corinthians 11: 27, “...in weariness and toil, in sleeplessness often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often....”. Why did Paul fast often at those times? Because he knew that this would be the way to find more the wisdom, power, and grace of the presence of the Lord Jesus coming to him in a very real way. Brethren, there are certain times when you and I need to covet the Lord's presence and His Word coming to us with power, even more than our necessary food. Christ will indeed bring a new perspective to our obedience when we fast.

Now let us turn our attention to a 2nd Parable which Jesus gives to illustrate the new perspective He came to bring to our obedience. (Verse 21)

“No one sews a piece of un-shrunk cloth on an old garment; or else the new piece pulls away from the old, and the tear is made worse.” Now we should keep in mind the fact that the subject which this second parable builds upon is the subject of fasting, the same as the first; and so, we must also interpret the second parable in that same context. It is speaking of the joy of the Bridegroom's presence in relation to the duties of our Christian religion. We will be able to apply it more widely than just to the subject of fasting. We will be able to apply it to the whole way that God is to be served and worshipped. The un-shrunk cloth is the new piece; the old garment was evidently a favorite garment, in the past. It had been worn often and continually

for many years. The object in view is to patch up the old garment. But it is obvious that it cannot be done. There is a basic incompatibility between the two; the new patch and the old garment. What the disciples of the Pharisees, and perhaps also these disciples of John wanted to see Jesus and His teachings as, was a new patch of cloth sewn on to their old system of worship and service to God. They wanted to be able to add Jesus to that Old Covenant system of worship and those Old Testament duties of religion without it changing or coming to an end. They hoped that Jesus had come to do that very thing; to be the patch which would let their Judaism continue on and to be improved in its look. But Jesus is saying that this could not possibly be. He had not come to be a patch to the Old Covenant system, to the old and well-worn garment. He had come as an entirely New garment altogether. The Old could not be patched up and made better looking by patching. It needed to be replaced. Christ came to bring to all men a new perspective in that religion that He taught; to clothe them in that new garment that He came to bring. This is the truth of the new perspective of grace coming through His blood and righteousness. It would be through this new and living way that men would learn to serve God. The system of the law contained in ordinances would be fulfilled and set aside.

How then can we apply this great truth? We can apply it by saying that all the people who have tried to observe all the duties of the Old Testament ceremonial law, who will not believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, are wearing an old tattered garment of self-righteousness. Persons who believe in being religious in this way of trying to keep the Old Testament laws and ceremonies, and the duties of fasting and prayer in order to be just before God, have a spiritual garment with holes in it. Sometimes people want to add Christ to their own religion, as a patch. They think that a little of His teachings on love and kindness, a little instruction on faith in God in a general sense, a little of the power of positive thinking coupled with lectures on morality and decency; this is what true religion is all about. There are many people who believe this very truth and think that this is true religion and that this is what God is looking for from them. And they truly believe that He is satisfied with that.

There are others who are in the long-established Roman Catholic Church and are faithfully observing the duties of their religion; penance, the mass, confession of sins, and even times of fasting during Lent and at other seasons. And they do this all in the name of Christ in order to merit favor with God. They hope to be saved by this means. They are the descendants and disciples of the Pharisees in this regard. The garment that they cloth themselves with, is the old garment of a legal and ceremonial righteousness. It cannot be patched with the new cloth of Christ's righteousness. Christ's righteousness is a seamless garment, just like the tunic that He was wearing just before He was crucified. In John 19: 23 it says, "Now the tunic was without seam, woven from the top in one piece." "They said therefore to themselves, "Let us not tear it, but cast lots for it, whose it shall be...." You either take Christ's righteousness as a whole new garment or you cling to your old garment. But you do not tear it up into pieces. You cannot patch your righteousness up with a piece of Christ's righteousness. You can add nothing to the salvation that He came to bring. You cannot mend the holes in your own incomplete, imperfect obedience to God, with a patch of Christ's righteousness. He offers you a better garment. One that is perfect and seamless, just as His obedience was. You don't tear His righteousness in pieces and say, "This piece I will take, because I am deficient here; but that piece I do not need because my own righteousness is sufficient there." No, "all our righteousnesses are like filthy rags" in God's sight. We need a whole new garment.

The question is obvious. Do you see you need for a whole new garment, or are you coming to church looking for a patch? Christ might be able to help me in some ways in my religion, but I want to hold on to my own conception of religion and just have Christ give me a little help in some things so that I can be more religious. You see, that was the religion of the Pharisees of Jesus' day. No, all of your being religious in order to find God will never bring you an inch closer

to God without you coming to take all of Christ. You might remember that fine and upstanding religionist Cornelius in Acts chapter 10, verse 2. It says that he was a devout man and one who feared God with all of his household, who gave alms generously to the people, and prayed to God always." He still needed more than this to be saved. What could he possibly need? He needed Christ. He needed Christ's righteousness, not his own. I urge you to consider this carefully. In relation to fasting; when you fast, Christ is asking you to do something more than just abstaining from food and looking sad. If you turn over to Matthew 6 you can see the difference between the old garment and the new one of Christ. Verse 16 says, "Moreover, when you fast, do not be like the hypocrites, with a sad countenance." "For they disfigure their faces that they may appear to men to be fasting." "Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward." Who is their reward from? It is from other men who think that they are spiritual for acting in this way.

But God knows better than this. This is why Jesus adds, "But you when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, so that you do not appear to men to be fasting, but to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly." God wants you to know the joy and refreshment of His presence and blessing in that time of your self-denial. You are looking for a secret blessing and hoping secretly to find a greater power and more wisdom to live to God's glory and to truly be a help to other people. That is the wonderful truth of the difference between the old garment which men try to patch, and the new garment, the seamless tunic of Christ's teaching and His righteousness. We, who are Christians know that we do not need a patch. We need to be found in Christ's righteousness. And when we are clothed in His righteousness, then we perform our duty of devotion in fasting, not to be seen by men as spiritual. We fast because we know that we are not truly spiritual at all without Christ's righteousness being applying to the things that we do to serve and worship God. We are humbled into seeking the blessings from God privately rather than for the approval of men publicly. God will reward you openly, Jesus says, if you understand this new perspective.

This truth leads us on to a 3rd parable which Jesus gives to illustrate the new perspective He came to bring to our obedience. (Verse 22)

It is the parable of putting new wine into old wineskins. "And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; or else the new wine bursts the wineskins, the wine is spilled, and the wineskins are ruined." "But new wine must be put into new wineskins." In Luke's gospel, Chapter 5 and verse 39, Jesus adds one more line. He says, "And no one, having drunk old wine, immediately desires new; for he says, the old is better." Once again in this parable, the new relates to the new spirit and power and joy that Christ came to bring to all who will believe in him and obey His teaching. This is the "new wine". Wine is that which makes glad the heart of man, it says in Psalm 104: 15. The new wine is the gospel of grace which Christ came to bring. The heart of man is merry and glad when He tastes the goodness of the Lord in the salvation which comes through Jesus Christ. A sinful man or woman, young person or child, who places their faith and trust in the Lord Jesus Christ receives not only the forgiveness of sins but also the gift of the Holy Spirit. The Apostles on the day of Pentecost were filled with the Holy Spirit it says in Acts Chapter 2, and what was the initial reaction of the people who beheld this mighty working of God? Verse 12 says, "So they were all amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, whatever could this mean?" "Others mocking said, "They are full of new wine." But Peter preached to them and told them that this was rather the "new wine" of the gospel. This was the gift of the Holy Spirit being poured out upon them, and which would be given to anyone who believes in Jesus Christ.

This new wine needs a container in which it can expand. R.C.H. Lenski says about this, "A wineskin was a goatskin that was removed without slitting it; the openings at the feet and the tail were closed, leaving the neck as the mouth." "When it is fresh the skin stretches considerably, but when it is old it becomes stiff and bursts under pressure." I believe that one of the things

which the old wineskins represented were the Old Covenant ordinances of the ceremonial law. There were many laws concerning how men were to worship God that are mentioned there; how He was to be approached, where He was to be prayed to, and how He was to be served. The Old Covenant people were to observe many important ceremonies such as circumcision and Passover, certain feasts, such as the Feast of Unleavened bread, the Feast of Weeks, and the Feast of Tabernacles. All of these things, and many more observances, taught the people of what they were to expect in the fulfillment of their types. The fulfillment of all their types was to be our Lord Jesus Christ. But many in Israel, when Jesus came, did not see Him as the fulfillment of their types, or their ordinances, or their Messiah. They wanted their nation to be the only people of God and they wanted their national laws and ceremonies to continue on. They did not understand that Jesus had come to bring, not only the new wine of the gospel, but also the new skins of the New Testament Church and His ordinances, to put His teaching of grace into. The New Testament Church would be composed of Jews and Gentiles, and all kinds of men would be brought into covenant with God and a personal relationship with Him through Jesus Christ our Lord. This would mean that the vilest of sinners, the barbarians, the Scythians, and the slaves, could become a part of the covenant community of God. This was an awful thing in the minds of Jews whose eyes had not been opened to understand the greatness of the grace of Christ, or the greatness of the plans that God has concerning His Elect. This new wine of gospel grace could not be contained in the old forms of Judaism.

But the new wine of the gospel cannot be contained in the old forms of religion of any age or any classification. Men, from that time to this time, try to force the new wine of Christ into a form which pleases them. They try to put the new wine of Christ, which needs room to expand in men's minds and men's souls into a form which is too confining. Formalism can be the attempt to confine the true gospel to sacramental and ceremonial works. Or, it can be the attempt to bring our own human and worldly pleasures into the worship of God. In both cases it is trying to make the new wine of Christ's gospel palatable to a heart which has never really seen that God cannot be put into a box of their own religious making. I like the words of Alexander Maclaren when he says, "Our Lord did not object to fasting; He expressly approved of it as a means of spiritual power." "But He did object to the formal use of it or of any outward form. The formalist's form, whether it be the elaborate ritual of the Catholic Church, or the barest Nonconformist service, or the silence of a Friends' meeting-house, is rigid, unbending, and cold, like an iron rod." "The true Christian form is elastic, like the stem of a palm-tree, which curves and sways and yields to the wind, and has the sap of life in it."

The truth of the matter is, there is always something new, something fresh with God and our Lord Jesus Christ. This is because there is life in Him and life in the grace that He brings to us. He is the water of life, so that we never will thirst. He is the new wine of life that we might always be glad and joyful in His presence. You remember what the first miracle was, that the Lord Jesus performed? It was His changing the water into wine. He took the common element of water and turned it into something that delighted the hearts and refreshed the bodies of those who attended the wedding in Cana of Galilee. Let us remember and let us be thinking about how everything that Jesus does, needs room to expand in our minds and hearts and in the minds and hearts of others around us. "When the master of the feast had tasted the water that was made wine, and did not know where it came from (but the servants who had drawn the water knew), the master of the feast called the bridegroom, and he said to him, "Everyman at the beginning sets out the good wine, and when the guests have well drunk, then the inferior." "You have kept the good wine until now." You and I who believe in Jesus are the servants who draw the water of life for people around us, but only Jesus can change it to wine. Let us pray to understand this truth better in the days to come.

