

ANSWERING HIS CRITICS

Mark 2:18-28

In gratitude to Christ and to express his allegiance still more definitely Levi, or Matthew, prepared a feast, at which the Lord Jesus was the guest of honor, and to which the new disciple invited a large number of his former friends. These publicans and sinners sat at meat with Christ and His disciples.

Our Lord first offended the Pharisees by His claim to forgive sins and later by His treatment of sinners. For this reason He aroused their anger by His attitude toward the forms and ceremonies which, to the mind of the Pharisees, constituted the very essence of religion. This attitude had been expressed by the failure of Christ to remind His disciples to observe the feasts which had become so prominent in the system of legalism taught by the religious leaders of the Jews. The Law had required but one fast a year, but the rabbis had so multiplied this form of religious observance that a Pharisee could boast of fasting "twice in the week."

Apparently Christ was feasting in Matthew's house on a day of fasting. The Pharisees fasted, and mentioned it to their own credit. Trained under Pharisaic influences the disciples of John took up the custom, though nothing in the teaching of John required it. The Pharisees fasted twice a week, and, on this occasion, a fast of John's disciples coincided with one of theirs. The disciples of John were taught to fast frequently, not as an empty form but to express the solemn character of the ministry of John who had come preaching "repentance unto remission of sins."

The very fact that Christ associated with Matthew and his friends was too much for the Pharisees, but they did not approach and challenge Him at once. Instead, they waited until they could attack Him on some other grounds. It was not long until such an occasion presented itself. It is not strange therefore that at their first opportunity the enemies of Christ approached Him with the complaint and the question, "Why do John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but thy disciples fast not?"

In His reply Christ first expressed clearly the relation of His followers toward fasting, and also toward all religious ceremonies and rites, "Can the sons of the bridechamber fast, while the bridegroom is with them? as long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast. But the days will come, when the bridegroom shall be taken away from them, and then will they fast in that day."

The answer of Christ to their inquiry is wonderful. The critics had said, not only that Christ ate with the wrong people (verse 16), but that His disciples ate at the wrong time (verse 18). His reply was given in the form of three illustrations -- a marriage, a garment and wine-skins.

A wedding is not a time to fast, but to feast. Some people seem to think that they can find Christ only at funerals. Not so; He performed His first miracle at a wedding. Our Lord suggested that fasting, like all religious rites, may be appropriate if it is a true expression of religious feeling. On the other hand, if it is a matter of rule, or requirement, or a supposed ground of merit, it is an absurdity and an impertinence. If one fasts to improve bodily health, or to keep the mind more free for spiritual exercises, the practice may be innocent, but if one fasts because he is required to do so by some ritual or calendar, his self-denial may be a meaningless form, or a hateful exhibition of self-righteousness.

"The sons of the bridechamber" might have fasted while Christ was with them, but it would have been incongruous for them to have done so. Our Lord declared that it would have been absurd for His followers to have fasted while He was with them. The time for fasting was approaching rapidly enough, when He would be taken from them. In the hostility of the Pharisees He saw the signs of the approaching storm, the certainty of His rejection and

death; at such a time fasting might fitly express the sorrow of His friends; now fasting for them would be an empty form. So it is with many religious ceremonies; they may be proper, when expressive of true feeling, when appropriate for the occasion; but, when required, or performed irrespective of sentiment or of the attitude of the heart, they may be purposeless, perfunctory and absurd. Thus Christ strikes at the very heart of all ceremonialism in religion.

In the second part of His reply, Christ taught that even the most expressive rites and the most significant ceremonies have but a small place in religion as established and interpreted by Him. He had not come to regulate or to require the Jewish ritual, nor could its forms rightfully express the new spirit of truth He embodied and proclaimed. Such is the general meaning of the two brief parables which form the conclusion to His answer.

"No man also seweth a piece of new cloth on an old garment: else the new piece that filled it up taketh away from the old, and the rent is made worse" (Mark 2:21). Christ had not come to piece out Judaism by adding a few new rules and requirements. He had something new to impart, but it was not His purpose to patch an old system, or to increase for His followers the minute regulations and oppressive observances which the Pharisees, in the name of religion, were binding on the consciences of men. Such an attempt would be as foolish and disastrous as to put an unshrunk patch on an old garment.

The idea is that there is a hole in the old garment, and that if a piece of new cloth were used to patch it, when it got damp it would shrink and draw to itself a margin of the old garment, and, in that way, the hole would be made worse. Lindsay said that a treble mischief follows such a course: the new garment, rent to patch the old, is spoiled; the mend on the old is unsuitable, the new patch is glaringly out of place; and the rent in the old is increased by the shrinking of the undressed cloth cut from the new garment.

The Christian dispensation is not patched on to the old garment, which was woven out of heathen fancies and Jewish traditions.

"And no man putteth new wine into old bottles: else the new wine doth burst the bottles, and the wine is spilled, and the bottles will be marred: but new wine must be put into new bottles" (Mark 2:22). The bottles referred to were made of goat-skins. When they were new they were elastic, but the old skins were dry and hard, and sometimes worn thin. Hence, one can see the folly of putting wine which would ferment into skins which would not expand. Naturally they would burst and the wine would be lost.

So, as Christ suggested, it would be impossible for the old forms and ceremonies of Judaism to contain the spirit of religion as taught by Him. Christianity cannot be comprehended by any system of rites and observances, it cannot be bound up by any set of rules and requirements, it is not to be confused with any ritual. Its very essence is a new life, imparted by faith in Christ; it controls men, not by rules but by motives; its symbol is not a fast, but a feast, for its pervasive spirit is joy.

Our Lord would have us learn that Christianity is not a patched-up Judaism, that the new life which He had brought could not be tacked on to the old law. The patch illustration gives the outward aspect of this truth, and the skins illustration gives the inward aspect. Judaism and Christianity, the Law and the Gospel, legalism and freedom are incompatible. The new material of the Gospel must not be used to patch the old garment of the Law, neither must the new wine of Christianity be put into the decaying skins of Judaism. When this is done, the results are always disastrous. The teaching of Christ here is sufficient condemnation of ritualism and sacramentarianism. What Christ offers is something joyful, new and expansive.

The Pharisees had imposed upon God's law such restrictions that it was impossible to do the things that were good and necessary. These ultra-legalists banned both the gathering of the necessary food and the healing of the sick on the Sabbath.

One Sabbath Christ, His disciples, some Pharisees and others were walking along a path through a field of standing grain. Because of their hunger, the disciples began to pluck some of the heads of the ripe wheat and to eat them. Ever watchful for something about which they could find fault, these critical Pharisees saw a chance to make a point against Christ, thereby hoping to counteract His influence with the people. Seizing the opportunity to challenge Him, Whom they held responsible for what the disciples were doing, they contended that He permitted His disciples to violate the law with reference to the Sabbath. Their attempt to get at Him through His disciples is another example of the indirect approach which cowardly people so often use to injure someone whom they would not dare to face personally. These fanatical Pharisees sought to make it appear that plucking the ears of grain, shelling and masticating the corn were equivalent to reaping, threshing and grinding. God never intended for His Word to be covered up with any such man-made traditions.

Christ immediately brushed aside all of their traditions, and expressed His personal approval and decisive support of His disciples. He defended their right to do what they did. In contrast to the traditions of the Pharisees, Christ referred them to the Scriptures which related how their hero, David, had eaten the shewbread when he and his men were hungry. He also called attention to the work of the priests on the Sabbath in their making of the necessary preparation for the sacrifices. Then, He emphasized the fact that He was Lord of the Sabbath. He used the Sabbath for rest, worship and doing good to others, and we should use the Lord's Day in the same manner.

It is exceedingly important that all Christians heed the admonition of Hebrews 10:25 not to forsake the assembling of themselves together in the Lord's house on the Lord's Day. We should strive diligently to honor Him in all things. Calling upon those whom we might persuade to attend the services at the house of the Lord is certainly one good work that we can do on the Lord's Day. Striving to win the lost to Christ and calling upon the sick are excellent things to do on Sunday.