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MINISTRIES

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Garments and Wineskins (Mark 2:18-22)

In Mark 2, Jesus, whose Hebrew name is *Yeshua*, gave a parable called the parable of the wineskins. This parable is also found in Matthew 9, and Luke 5. Unlike many of *Yeshua*’s other parables, the gospels do not give us an explanation of what this parable means, so we must do our best to interpret it. In this teaching, we’re going to provide an interpretation of this parable. To do so, we’re going to first look at the most popular interpretation of it and show why that interpretation is insufficient. We will then go through a lot of history and scripture and present our own interpretation of this famous parable.

To start, let’s read the parable in context. *Yeshua* gave this parable in response to a question about fasting:

Mark 2:18

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?”

To answer this question, over the next four verses, *Yeshua* gives three parables:

Mark 2:19-22

And Jesus [*Yeshua*] 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. The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast in that day. 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. 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.”

Before we dive deep into the meaning of these parables, there are a few things that we can note right away. First, the point of the second and third parable is obviously the same. A new patch cannot be used to fix an old garment, and new wine cannot be put in old skins. Doing these things will result in destruction. That idea is clear enough, but what is not immediately clear is how that idea pertains to fasting or not fasting. Second, it is not immediately clear how those two parables relate to the first one,

about fasting in the presence of the bridegroom. However, since these three parables were all told in response to a single question, it should be possible to connect all three together. Third, we should recognize that these parables were in fact given in response to a specific question. Any adequate interpretation of these parables should provide an answer to that question. That question is, why are Yeshua's disciples not fasting like the Pharisees?

As we mentioned earlier, there is a popular explanation of these parables. If that explanation is sufficient, then there's not much reason to come up with our own. So, let's start by examining that interpretation and seeing if it gives us insight into what this parable means.

The popular interpretation goes as follows: First, the bridegroom in verse 19 is interpreted as a metaphor for Yeshua himself. As an article from one evangelical website says:

The first one is a parable of a bridegroom with his groomsmen at a wedding feast. Jesus' point is that fasting during the wedding feast is pointless. In this story Jesus is the Bridegroom, and while He is present in this world, it is a time of celebration because He is the fulfillment of their Messianic prophecies.

- "What is the meaning of the parables of fasting at the wedding feast, the old cloth, and the wineskins?" *Got Questions?* www.gotquestions.org

Second, the new cloth and the new wine in verses 21 and 22 are interpreted as metaphors for faith in Jesus, while the old garment and the old wineskins are interpreted as metaphors for the old religious standards, which are equated to both Pharisaic practice and to the law of Moses. The same article states:

These two parables illustrate the fact that you can't mix old religious rituals with new faith in Jesus. Jesus' disciples were not fasting along with the Pharisees and John's disciples because they were now under the new covenant of grace and faith in Christ. As mentioned earlier, Jesus fulfilled the law; therefore, there is no longer any need to continue with the old rituals. Jesus cannot be added to a works-based religion. In the case of the Pharisees, they were consumed with their own self-righteousness, and faith in Jesus cannot be combined with self-righteous rituals.

- "What is the meaning of the parables of fasting at the wedding feast, the old cloth, and the wineskins?" *Got Questions?* www.gotquestions.org

So, under this interpretation, Yeshua calls himself the "bridegroom," and says that his disciples, the "wedding guests," will not fast while he is with them. He goes on to say that his new faith, his new covenant, is incompatible with the Pharisees' teachings, which were based on the old covenant. He illustrates this by talking about what happens if new cloth is sewn onto old clothing, or new wine is placed in old wineskins.

At first glance, this explanation for these parables seems to make some sense. However, when we examine this interpretation closely, we find that it actually contradicts itself, and it also contradicts some of Yeshua's other teachings. To demonstrate this, we will show three major problems with this interpretation, and demonstrate why we need a better explanation for these parables.

Why Will the Disciples Destroy the Wineskins?

The popular interpretation says that Yeshua is the “bridegroom” mentioned in verse 19, and that the disciples are the “wedding guests.” Verse 19 means that the disciples will not engage in the Pharisees’ fasting tradition while Yeshua is with them. However, verse 20 says this:

Mark 2:20

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

So, under the popular interpretation, Yeshua says that the disciples are not engaging in the Pharisees’ fast because Yeshua is there with them. Once Yeshua ascends, however, then they will fast along with the Pharisees.

Yeshua’s words in verse 20 present a huge inconsistency in this interpretation. Why? Because the popular interpretation says that the point of verses 21 and 22 is that faith in Yeshua is incompatible with the Pharisees’ teachings. It says that to “add Jesus to a works-based religion” would be like putting new wine in old wineskins. Well, if that’s the case, then how could the disciples engage in the fast of the Pharisees after Yeshua is gone? Is faith in Yeshua compatible with the Pharisees’ teachings, or is it incompatible? Does Yeshua *want* his disciples to metaphorically destroy the wineskins? Why is he saying that they will engage in their fast? Verse 20 undermines what the popular interpretation says about verses 21 and 22. Moving on to those verses, we find a second problem there.

Are Yeshua’s Teachings “New Wine”?

Another major problem with the popular interpretation is the symbolism it attaches to “new wine” in verse 22. It says that the “new wine” is a reference to faith in Yeshua. Why is that a problem? Well, whenever new wine is contrasted with old wine, new wine is said to be worse. As wine ages, it becomes more desirable and more expensive. As the Talmud states:

A man should not pass off new wine for old when giving his friend a drink because that is a kind of robbery.

-Minor Tractate Derech Eretz Rabbah 8:5 (www.sefaria.org)

This inferiority of new wine is why the apostles were mocked in Acts 2:13 with the phrase, “[they are full of new wine](#).” New wine, because it is inferior, is cheaper. The implication is that the disciples bought lots of cheap wine and got themselves drunk.

Now, new wine is not always mentioned in a negative light; after all, before wine becomes old and better, it must first be made new. But whenever it is compared to old wine, new wine is said to be inferior, and it is compared to old wine in this very parable. In Luke chapter 5, which gives a parallel account to Mark chapter 2, Yeshua ends these parables by saying this:

Luke 5:39

And no one after drinking old wine desires new, for he says, ‘**The old is good.**’

Remember, in the popular interpretation, Yeshua is saying that faith in him, which is “new,” is superior to the ways of the Pharisees, which are “old.” Well, if that is what Yeshua is saying, then why would he call his faith “new wine,” which is an inferior product? If his point is to say that a new thing is better than an old thing, then he wouldn’t use wine to make that point. He could have talked about freshly baked bread, and compared it to old, stale bread, or he could have talked about fresh water from a spring and compared it to old stagnant water from a pond, or he could have used any number of other metaphors that would have been much more appropriate. Wine is something you would use to show how *older* things are better, not how *newer* things are better. So, it makes no sense for Yeshua to call his faith or his teachings “new wine.” It seems very much like the popular interpretation got this part wrong.

What Question is Yeshua Answering?

A third problem with the popular interpretation is that it makes Yeshua’s answer to the question completely off-topic. It does this by claiming two things are the same when they are actually completely different. Again, here is what it says:

These two parables illustrate the fact that you can’t mix old religious rituals with new faith in Jesus. Jesus’ disciples were not fasting along with the Pharisees and John’s disciples because they were now under the new covenant of grace and faith in Christ. As mentioned earlier, Jesus fulfilled the law; therefore, there is no longer any need to continue with the old rituals.

- “What is the meaning of the parables of fasting at the wedding feast, the old cloth, and the wineskins?” *Got Questions?* www.gotquestions.org

As you can see, this interpretation equates the Pharisees’ rituals with the law of God. However, the Pharisees’ rituals and the law of God were not the same thing at all. For example, the law of God does not require regular fasting, which is the ritual that Yeshua was being asked about in Mark 2:18. That was not a commandment of God, but a Pharisaic tradition. What’s more, Yeshua himself says that the Pharisees do *not* keep the law of God:

Matthew 23:27-28

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people's bones and all uncleanness. So you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.

Mark 7:5-8

And the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, “Why do your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?” And he said to them, “Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written, “‘This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.’ **You leave the commandment of God** and hold to the tradition of men.”

John 7:19

Has not Moses given you the law? Yet **none of you keeps the law**. Why do you seek to kill me?

These verses, and many others, show what Yeshua thought about the Pharisees’ practices. Yeshua did not equate the Pharisees’ practices with keeping the law of God; on the contrary, he continually

chastised the Pharisees for *breaking* the law of God. He said that they valued their own traditions more than God's commands. So, why does the popular interpretation of this parable assume that the Pharisees' practices and the law of God are interchangeable things? Yeshua, who is the one giving the parable, clearly thinks that they are not interchangeable at all.

This conflation of the law of Moses with the teachings of the Pharisees leads to yet another problem with this interpretation. Remember, the question that Yeshua was asked in verse 18 was, "[Why do John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?](#)" The fasting they were asking about was a tradition of the Pharisees. This tradition has nothing to do with the law of God, or with God's covenant with Israel. But the popular interpretation would have us believe that when Yeshua was asked about this Pharisaic tradition, he responded by saying that he was replacing Israel's old covenant with a new one. If that's what his response meant, then that doesn't answer their question.

Israel's covenant and Pharisaic tradition were completely different things. God's law does not require, nor even mention, regular fasting. So why would Yeshua mention the law at all in response to their question? The plain answer is, he wouldn't and he didn't. Neither God's covenant, nor Moses, nor the law is mentioned at all in these parables. In fact, when we examine Mark 2 in context, we find that Moses or the covenant isn't mentioned anywhere in the chapter. Neither are they mentioned in Luke 5 or Matthew 9, which give parallel accounts of this same series of events.

So, aside from its other problems, on this point the popular interpretation is bizarre. It inserts the Sinai covenant into a passage where the context is about something completely different, and it portrays Yeshua as someone who gives irrelevant answers to the questions he is being asked. This part of the popular interpretation is logically and textually bankrupt. It bears no relation to any of the things actually being discussed in this part of the Scriptures, and it blatantly contradicts what Yeshua said at other times.

A Better Foundation

There are other questionable things about the popular interpretation as well, but these three major problems demonstrate that it is not a good explanation of these parables. If the wine and clothing parables mean that Yeshua's teaching is incompatible with the Pharisees' teaching, then verse 20, which says that the wedding guests will fast, is at best confusing, and at worst outright contradictory. If the point of the parable of the wineskins is that a new thing is better than an old thing, then using wine as an illustration actually makes the opposite point. And, if the point of these parables overall is that Yeshua is replacing Israel's old covenant with a new one, we encounter the problem that he wasn't being asked a question about the Mosaic covenant, and furthermore, the Mosaic covenant isn't mentioned anywhere in Mark chapter 2. It seems that we need an interpretation of these parables that is more logically and textually consistent. We need a better interpretation.

So, then, what would be a better interpretation? Why are Yeshua's disciples not fasting like the disciples of John or the Pharisees? What is the meaning of the parables that Yeshua gave in response to that question?

To answer this, we need to do some digging. First, we will do a deep dive into the question that Yeshua was asked. What was this fasting all about? Why did the Pharisees think it was important? Why did they expect Yeshua to fast along with them? Understanding the question Yeshua was asked should lend us some insight into his answer. Second, we will see what Yeshua had to say about fasting in his other teachings. Whatever he says in this parable should at least be consistent with things he said at other

times. Third, the Scriptures record what some of the prophets said when they were asked about fasting, so we will examine those passages too. Whatever Yeshua says about fasting in these parables should agree with the things God said about fasting through his prophets. Fourth, we will look at some of the context of Mark chapter 2. Mark in his gospel is describing events a certain way in order to tell a coherent story, and these parables will likely fit neatly into that story. In the end, we will connect all of these things together to form an interpretation that is more scripturally and logically consistent than the one that has become the most popular.

Why Were the Pharisees Fasting?

Let's start by taking a closer look at what this fasting of the Pharisees was all about. Mark chapter 2 does not explicitly say what was involved in this fasting, but we can use other historical and Scriptural sources to infer some things about it.

The first thing to notice about this fasting is that it was being practiced as a group. This was not a fast that an individual would choose to engage in for his own personal reasons, but it was a fast that a group of people performed collectively. These kinds of corporate fasts have existed in Judaism for a very long time. The Talmud describes four fast days that were observed every year. It says:

We are required to fast on the 9th of Av, [and] on the 17th of Tammuz, and on the 3rd of Tishrei, and on the 10th of Teves because of the bad occurrences that occurred on those [days].

-Shulchan Arukh, Orach Chayim 549:1 (www.sefaria.org)

These days of fasting were observed every year, and they were days for grieving over disasters that had befallen Israel, including the destruction of Solomon's temple. These are likely the same four "fasts" mentioned in Zechariah chapter 8:

Zechariah 8:18-19

And the word of the LORD [YHWH] of hosts came to me, saying, "Thus says the LORD [YHWH] of hosts: The fast of the fourth month and the fast of the fifth and the fast of the seventh and the fast of the tenth..."

While it is likely that these annual fast days were being observed in Yeshua's time, it is unlikely that these are the fasts that Yeshua was being asked about in Mark 2. In the parallel account in Luke 5, it says that the fasts Yeshua was asked about were observed "often":

Luke 5:33

And they said to him, "The disciples of John fast **often** and offer prayers, and so do the disciples of the Pharisees, but yours eat and drink."

Four times a year is not exactly "often," so it is more likely that the fasting that Yeshua was being asked about was instead another Pharisaic tradition, in which they fasted twice a week. We see this tradition described in Luke chapter 18:

Luke 18:9-14

He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt: "Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a

tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. **I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.**’ But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.”

This Jewish practice of fasting twice a week is also attested to in the Didache, which is a guide to Christian practices that was written some time before 300 A.D. It states:

But as for your fasts, let them not be with the hypocrites, for they fast on the second and fifth days of the week, but do ye fast on the fourth and sixth days.

-Didache, chapter 8 (www.sacred-texts.com)

Later Jewish tradition also prescribes fasts with this exact schedule, fasting on the second and fifth days of the week. The Talmud states:

...if private individuals commenced to keep the fast-days, they should fast on Monday, Thursday, and the following Monday;

- *Taanit* 10a (www.sefaria.org)

So, since the Pharisaic fasting that Yeshua was asked about happened “often,” it seems likely that it was this same Monday and Thursday fasting that these other sources attest to. As a side note, sometimes these fasts involved abstaining from more than just food. The Talmud again states:

If these (three fast-days) have passed without their prayers having been favorably answered, the supreme court shall decree three more public and general fasts; on the nights preceding these it is not permitted to eat or drink, and on the fast-days it is prohibited to work, to bathe, to anoint the body, to wear shoes or to perform the duty of cohabitation, and the public bathing places are to be closed.

- *Taanit* 12b (www.sefaria.org)

These additional prohibitions, specifically the ones on bathing and anointing the body, are mentioned in another one of Yeshua’s critiques of fasting found in Matthew 6:

Matthew 6:16-18

And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, **anoint your head and wash your face**, that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

So, it is likely that the fasting days that Yeshua was being asked about were observed twice a week and that they were days of mourning and sorrow. It is also possible that they involved abstaining both from eating and from other kinds of pleasures. It is also worth noting that these fasts were traditions established by the Pharisees, not commandments of God. These fasts are not found in God’s law, and

they are not part of God's covenant, but they are traditions of men. So, that's what these fasts were, but what was their purpose? Why were these fasts instituted, and what were they meant to accomplish?

While we can't say for sure why this fasting was being done, again, we can get some more clues from the Talmud. The Talmud describes a number of conditions that make public fasting days appropriate. The most prevalent one is drought; fasting was part of a process of asking God for rain (*Taanit* 10a). However, there were also other reasons to call a public fast. The Talmud says:

...And likewise, if a city is afflicted by pestilence or collapsing buildings, that city fasts and cries out, and all of its surrounding areas fast but they do not cry out. Rabbi Akiva says: They cry out but they do not fast.

...For the following calamities they cry out in every place: For blight; for mildew; for locusts; for caterpillars, a type of locust that comes in large swarms and descends upon a certain place; for dangerous beasts that have entered a town; and for the sword, i.e., legions of an invading army. The reason that they cry out about these misfortunes in every place is because these are calamities that spread.

- *Taanit* 19a (www.sefaria.org)

At the time of Yeshua's ministry, Israel was being occupied by legions of an invading army, specifically the army of Rome. So, according to the Talmud, that would have been sufficient reason to declare a time of fasting and crying out to God. There may well have been an entirely different reason, but whatever the case, the justification for the fast was most likely some kind of calamity or undesirable situation.

As for what the fast was meant to accomplish, the most likely explanation is that it was intended to be a display of sorrow that would move God to have mercy on the people who were fasting, and to grant their requests. There are many examples of this logic being applied to fasting, and one such example is in the fasting of King David after his affair with Bathsheba.

2 Samuel 12:15-18, 20-23

[A]nd the LORD [YHWH] afflicted the child that Uriah's wife bore to David, and he became sick. David therefore sought God on behalf of the child. And David fasted and went in and lay all night on the ground. And the elders of his house stood beside him, to raise him from the ground, but he would not, nor did he eat food with them. On the seventh day the child died... [verse 20] Then David arose from the earth and washed and anointed himself and changed his clothes. And he went into the house of the LORD [YHWH] and worshiped. He then went to his own house. And when he asked, they set food before him, and he ate. Then his servants said to him, "What is this thing that you have done? You fasted and wept for the child while he was alive; but when the child died, you arose and ate food." He said, "**While the child was still alive, I fasted and wept, for I said, 'Who knows whether the LORD [YHWH] will be gracious to me, that the child may live?' But now he is dead. Why should I fast? Can I bring him back again?** I shall go to him, but he will not return to me."

David fasts here to try to convince God to spare his child's life; however, once he sees that God will not be persuaded to grant his request, he stops fasting. This is the usual logic behind fasting; if prayer alone is not enough to get God's attention, then prayer and fasting might be more effective. We can see in this case that the fasting did not work, but we also see the logic behind it.

So, while we don't know exactly why the Pharisees and John's disciples were fasting, we do know that they wanted God to help them in some way. Since they were fasting corporately, it is likely that they were not asking for personal help, but rather for help that would solve a problem that was affecting the entire nation. This problem could be the Roman occupation of their land, or it could be something else. Whatever the problem was, they thought that their fasting might convince God to help them, to have mercy on their nation.

So, these Pharisees were fasting twice a week in hope of receiving God's mercy. In Mark 2:18, they ask Yeshua why his disciples are not doing the same thing. So, their question was not just about why Yeshua's disciples were eating. This wasn't a casual question about their diet. In their mind, their fasting tradition was motivating God to have mercy on them. So, they were really asking why Yeshua's disciples were not beseeching God for mercy. Don't they want God's mercy? As we will see, Yeshua's answer exposes a major flaw in their tradition, because they are not going to obtain God's mercy by fasting.

What Did Yeshua Teach About Fasting?

Before we get to Yeshua's answer, let's see what Yeshua says about fasting in his other teachings. Does he think fasting is a good thing? Let's start by reading a passage we mentioned earlier:

Matthew 6:16-18

And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, **anoint your head and wash your face**, that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

Here, Yeshua teaches that a person who is fasting should not abstain from personal hygiene. He says that the reason people avoid washing their face and putting oil on their head is simply to let everyone else know that they are fasting; in other words, they only do things that affect their physical appearance in order to look righteous in the eyes of other men. He says that it is more important to really be righteous, because that's what God sees. If we fast as an outward display of our righteousness, but in reality we are not righteous on the inside, then that accomplishes nothing in the eyes of God. Yeshua says a similar thing about fasting in Luke 18:

Luke 18:9-14

He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt: "Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. **I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.**' But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted."

Here, Yeshua makes a contrast between a Pharisee who fasts twice a week in order to exalt himself, and a tax collector who is truly sorry for his sins and is repenting before God. He says that the sinner, who is humbling himself, is the one who is justified, not the Pharisee who is exalting himself. The sinner's humble repentance is superior to the Pharisee's boastful fasting.

In both of these passages, Yeshua is critical of the fasting traditions of the Pharisees. He considers these traditions to be vain. He says that they do not justify a person before God, but they only serve to exalt a person before other men. In particular, he is critical of the Pharisee in the parable who chooses to fast twice a week while at the same time treating his brother with contempt. The implication is that even though the Pharisee is fasting in order to get God's mercy, he will not receive that mercy. Instead, the one who truly humbles himself before God will receive God's mercy. If this Pharisee really wanted God's mercy, he would need to stop treating his brother with contempt and start having mercy on him. As Yeshua also said:

Matthew 5:7

Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.

This statement comes straight from a Psalm, which also condemns pride and contempt:

Psalm 18:25-27

With the merciful you show yourself merciful; with the blameless man you show yourself blameless; with the purified you show yourself pure; and with the crooked you make yourself seem tortuous. For you save a humble people, but the haughty eyes you bring down.

Yeshua's consistent teaching throughout the gospels is that it is more important to be humble and to have mercy on others than it is to engage in fasting rituals. God will have mercy on those who are merciful, but he will not have mercy on those who exalt themselves and mistreat their brothers, no matter how often they fast. We might expect Yeshua's point in Mark 2, when he is asked a direct question about the Pharisees' fasting rituals, to be similar to what he said at other times. When the Pharisees ask him why he is not fasting, we might expect that Yeshua would tell them that God is not impressed with their fasting, and that if they want to receive God's mercy, then they should be showing mercy to others. As we will see, there is an interpretation that fits with these ideas. But, before we get to that, let's look at another piece of context. That is, what did the prophets say about fasting? When the nation of Israel was facing difficulties that were brought on by their sins, did the prophets instruct them to fast, or did they say to have mercy on their brothers?

What Did the Prophets Say About Fasting?

The prophet Zechariah preached during a difficult time for the people of Israel. When he was asked about fasting, here's what YHWH said through him:

Zechariah 7:5-14

"Say to all the people of the land and the priests, 'When you fasted and mourned in the fifth month and in the seventh, for these seventy years, was it for me that you fasted? And when you eat and when you drink, do you not eat for yourselves and drink for yourselves? Were not these the words that the LORD [YHWH] proclaimed by the former prophets, when Jerusalem was inhabited and prosperous, with her cities around her, and the South and the lowland were inhabited?'"

And the word of the LORD [YHWH] came to Zechariah, saying, "Thus says the LORD [YHWH] of hosts, Render true judgments, show kindness and mercy to one another, do not oppress the widow, the fatherless, the sojourner, or the poor, and let none of you devise evil against another in your heart." But they refused to pay attention and turned a stubborn shoulder

and stopped their ears that they might not hear. They made their hearts diamond-hard lest they should hear the law and the words that the LORD [YHWH] of hosts had sent by his Spirit through the former prophets. Therefore great anger came from the LORD [YHWH] of hosts. “As I called, and they would not hear, so they called, and I would not hear,” says the LORD [YHWH] of hosts, “and I scattered them with a whirlwind among all the nations that they had not known. Thus the land they left was desolate, so that no one went to and fro, and the pleasant land was made desolate.”

We see here that people’s sins, specifically their lack of compassion for the poor, is what has caused this national desolation. Zechariah told them that their fasts were ineffective, and that they should instead be repenting from their evil ways. Rather than fasting, they should instead stop their oppression of the widows, fatherless, sojourners and poor. His point was that fasting was not a valid substitute for righteousness and mercy.

What about the prophet Isaiah? What did God say about fasting through him?

Isaiah 58:1-9

“Cry aloud; do not hold back; lift up your voice like a trumpet; declare to my people their transgression, to the house of Jacob their sins. Yet they seek me daily and delight to know my ways, as if they were a nation that did righteousness and did not forsake the judgment of their God; they ask of me righteous judgments; they delight to draw near to God. ‘Why have we fasted, and you see it not? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you take no knowledge of it?’ Behold, in the day of your fast you seek your own pleasure, and oppress all your workers. Behold, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to hit with a wicked fist. Fasting like yours this day will not make your voice to be heard on high. Is such the fast that I choose, a day for a person to humble himself? Is it to bow down his head like a reed, and to spread sackcloth and ashes under him? Will you call this a fast, and a day acceptable to the LORD [YHWH]? ‘Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh? Then shall your light break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up speedily; your righteousness shall go before you; the glory of the LORD [YHWH] shall be your rear guard. Then you shall call, and the LORD [YHWH] will answer; you shall cry, and he will say, ‘Here I am.’”

Here, we see again that the nation’s afflictions were being caused by their sins, and that fasting was not a remedy for those afflictions. As long as the people continued to sin, God would not hear their requests to have their afflictions removed. The sin that was causing the affliction is what had to be addressed. Rather than fast, they should be feeding the hungry, housing the homeless, clothing the naked, and so forth. Zechariah and Isaiah are both very clear that fasting is not a solution to sin. Repentance and love is the solution.

Yeshua’s words about fasting in Matthew 6 and Luke 18 sound almost identical to the words of these prophets; Yeshua said that the Pharisees were fasting so that men would be impressed by their “righteousness,” when they should have instead been repenting and changing their sinful behavior. As Zechariah would say, they were not fasting “to God.” If they wanted to get God’s attention and mercy, then they should have been turning their hearts back toward God, serving him and loving their fellow men. Instead, they were continuing to sin; they were disobeying God and exalting themselves over their brothers. They were continuing to do the very things that brought their calamities upon them in the first

place. So, the prophets and Yeshua have very similar messages about fasting. They say that the way to get God's mercy is to show mercy to others, not to engage in fasting rituals.

Mark 2 in Context

As we return to the parables in Mark chapter 2, we now have some more knowledge that we can use to try to interpret them. We know that the Pharisees' fasting was a corporate sign of mourning and was designed to get God's attention so that he would have mercy on their nation. We know that the prophets said that fasting was not an appropriate solution to the problems of a nation, and that the real solution was to repent and love others. We know that Yeshua viewed fasting the same way that the prophets did. He said that fasting could not replace true repentance and was, often times, a hypocritical display of "righteousness" that was designed to impress other people rather than to do what was right in God's eyes. There is one final piece of context that will help us interpret these parables, and that is the verses leading up to the question Yeshua is asked in Mark 2:18. You see, right before he was asked about fasting, Yeshua was spending his time eating with sinners and tax collectors—the very same people that the Pharisees treated with contempt. The Pharisees criticized him for this, but Yeshua explained that these were the people who needed his ministry the most:

Mark 2:13-17

He went out again beside the sea, and all the crowd was coming to him, and he was teaching them. And as he passed by, he saw Levi the son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, "Follow me." And he rose and followed him. And as he reclined at table in his house, many tax collectors and sinners were reclining with Jesus [Yeshua] and his disciples, for there were many who followed him. And the scribes of the Pharisees, when they saw that he was eating with sinners and tax collectors, said to his disciples, "Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?" And when Jesus [Yeshua] heard it, he said to them, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners."

This story is connected to the question about fasting that follows it. In verse 16, Yeshua is asked why he is eating with tax collectors and sinners; then, in verse 18, he is asked why he is eating at all, because this is all happening on a public fast day. When Yeshua was asked why he was eating with sinners, he responded by saying that he was healing them of their sickness—that is to say, bringing them to repentance for their sins. When he was asked why he was eating at all—that is to say, why he was not fasting—he answered with the three parables that we are seeking to interpret.

If you remember what the prophets said, they mentioned that what Israel needed to do to get mercy from God was to take care of people in need, rather than to fast. We see from the context of Mark 2 that Yeshua was taking care of people in need, rather than fasting. Not only was he preaching to the lost in verses 13-17, but in verses 1-10 he was forgiving sins, in verses 11-12 he was healing the sick, and in verses 23-28 he was feeding the hungry. Yeshua was doing what the prophets said to do, whereas the Pharisees were doing what the prophets said not to do. This is all going to play into the parables that Yeshua told in verses 18-22.

So, with all of the context that we have now established, let's read those parables again, and see if we can make better sense of them.

The Parable of the Wineskins: A Better Interpretation

Mark 2:18-22

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?" And Jesus [Yeshua] 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. The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast in that day. 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. 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."

Remember that Yeshua is talking to the Pharisees, who treated their brothers with contempt. They wanted God's mercy, but they did not want to have mercy on their brothers. Instead, they tried to get God's mercy through fasting, even though the prophets had already made it clear that this was not what God wanted. So, when the Pharisees ask Yeshua about fasting, we understand what the ritual meant to them, and also, what the ritual meant to the prophets, to Yeshua, and to God. We also know Yeshua does not approve of the Pharisees' fasts based on his other teachings, so how does he use these parables to explain his disapproval? Well, he starts out by speaking about fasting with a bridegroom—that is to say, fasting at a wedding. To fast at a wedding would be highly inappropriate behavior. A wedding is a time of celebration, and if one were to fast and mourn at a wedding, it would destroy the celebration. So, the Pharisees' fasting in pursuit of God's mercy is like fasting at a wedding; it is inappropriate, accomplishes nothing, and makes everything worse.

Notice how, when we interpret verse 19 this way, verse 20 now makes sense. If the bridegroom is not a metaphor for Yeshua, but is just a bridegroom, then verse 20 is not saying anything about whether Yeshua is on earth or not, but it is simply saying that there is an appropriate time and place to fast. You don't fast while the bridegroom is at his wedding; you celebrate while the bridegroom is at his wedding, and you fast after he leaves. In the same way, if you're being punished for sin, you don't fast; you repent of your sins, and you only fast after your sins, the source of your punishment, have been removed. Verse 20 is not saying anything about fasting when Yeshua is on earth as opposed to when he is in heaven, nor is it saying that the disciples are ever going to engage in Pharisaic traditions. It is simply comparing what the Pharisees are doing to fasting at a wedding; it is telling them that their fasting traditions are inappropriate and destructive.

So, then, how does the parable of the wedding connect to the other two parables? Well, as we mentioned, fasting at a wedding would be inappropriate, and it would destroy the celebration. In the same way, applying the wrong patch to a garment would destroy that garment, and putting new wine in the wrong containers would destroy the containers and waste the wine. All three of these parables have the same message: there is an appropriate way to do things, and also an inappropriate way that will cause destruction. All three parables are telling the Pharisees that their fasting is inappropriate. They are facing the consequences of their sins, and they are responding with fasting rather than true repentance. The result of this inappropriate behavior is going to be destruction.

So, we can see how this interpretation addresses the Pharisees' question about fasting. The Pharisees were in a bad situation: the nation of Israel was being punished for their sins. The Pharisees wanted God to have mercy on them and remove their punishment. In pursuit of God's mercy, they were fasting twice a week, but they were not showing mercy to their brothers. They were not repenting of their sins, nor

were they helping others to repent of their sins. What they were doing was not the solution to the nation's problems. As long as they were focused on ritual fasting instead of true repentance, the nation's problems were only going to get worse. It was like they were pouring new wine into old wineskins. Their ways were going to end in disaster. In contrast, Yeshua was having mercy on his brothers. He was teaching people to repent of their sins and turn back to God. In fact, this is what he was doing when he was eating with sinners right before he was asked the question about fasting. Throughout Mark chapter 2, Yeshua was addressing the root of the nation's problems; he was forgiving sins (2:5), healing the sick (2:11-12), preaching to the lost (2:13-17), and feeding the hungry (2:23). He was not trying to appear righteous by fasting, but instead he was truly being righteous; he was caring for those in need and ministering to sinners. He was doing what God desired. This is why, in Matthew's account of these events, Yeshua says this:

Matthew 9:13

[“Go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.’ For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.”](#)

The Pharisees were providing God with ‘sacrifice’ in the form of their fasting, but Yeshua was providing mercy, which is what God really wants. What he was doing was like pouring new wine into new wineskins. That is to say, he was doing the appropriate thing.

A Note on Luke 5:39

We mentioned earlier that in Luke's account of this parable, it ends with Yeshua saying this:

Luke 5:39

[And no one after drinking old wine desires new, for he says, ‘The old is good.’](#)

We might wonder how this verse fits with the interpretation that we have come to in this teaching. Isn't this a case of contrasting something new with something old? Doesn't that suggest that Yeshua's point is not to talk about behavior that is appropriate or inappropriate, but to say that new things are better than old things?

Well, first of all, this verse shows exactly why Yeshua is *not* saying that something new is superior to something old. Again, as we mentioned before, wine is not an appropriate metaphor to illustrate that point, and this verse shows exactly why: old wine is definitively better than new wine. So, this verse does not lend any support to the popular interpretation; in fact, it flatly contradicts it.

With that aside, this verse can easily fit into our interpretation if we consider it to be a fourth parable. The first parable is talking about ruining a wedding with fasting, the second is talking about ruining a piece of clothing with a new patch, the third is talking about ruining old wineskins with new wine, and this one in Luke 5:39 is talking about ruining a person's wine drinking with an inferior product. The point of all of these parables is that the Pharisees were ruining the nation of Israel by focusing on fasting instead of obeying God and having mercy on others. This is why Yeshua was not offering God his fasting, but was instead doing the good things that God desired.

As one other quick note, we want to point out that fasting itself is not a bad thing. Yeshua himself fasted for forty days (Matthew 4:1-2), and the apostles fasted on several occasions (Acts 13:2-3; 14:23). However, fasting is not a substitute for treating other people the way God commands us to. Fasting also

does not atone for our sins. That is not the proper use of fasting, and that is Yeshua's point. It is not that fasting is wrong; it is that fasting cannot replace repentance and mercy.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the parables in Mark 2 are not metaphors about Yeshua replacing Judaism or the Old Testament, but rather they are making the point that problems cannot be solved with inappropriate solutions. The Pharisees' fasts made them look pious and godly, but they did nothing to truly get God's attention and move him to have mercy on them.

As long as the Pharisees were more focused on fasting than on true repentance and compassion, they would continue to bring destruction upon themselves. In the same way, putting new wine into old wineskins would destroy the wineskins and fasting at a wedding would ruin the wedding. Yeshua, just like the prophets before him, was showing them a better way to get God's attention. The reason his disciples were not fasting is because they were instead doing what God desires: they were addressing the sin that was at the root of the nation's problems. They were having mercy on their brothers, not exalting themselves over their brothers. This was the solution that God was looking for, and this is what Yeshua's parables in Mark 2 were meant to teach.

We pray you have been blessed by this teaching.

Remember, continue to test everything. Shalom!

For more on this and other teachings, please visit us at www.testeverything.net

Shalom, and may Yahweh bless you in walking in the whole Word of God.

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