

Christian Rhythms of Life

Devotional Reading: Ecclesiastes 2:20–25

Background Scripture: Jeremiah 31:12–13; Mark 2:18–28; 6:30–32;
John 2:1–11

Mark 2:18–28

¹⁸ 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?”

¹⁹ Jesus answered, “How can the guests of the bridegroom fast while he is with them? They cannot, so long as they have him with them. ²⁰ But the time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them, and on that day they will fast.

²¹ “No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment. Otherwise, the new piece will pull away from the old, making the tear worse. ²² And no one pours new wine into old wineskins. Otherwise, the wine will burst the skins, and both the wine and the wineskins

will be ruined. No, they pour new wine into new wineskins.”

²³ One Sabbath Jesus was going through the grainfields, and as his disciples walked along, they began to pick some heads of grain. ²⁴ The Pharisees said to him, “Look, why are they doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath?”

²⁵ He answered, “Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need? ²⁶ In the days of Abiathar the high priest, he entered the house of God and ate the consecrated bread, which is lawful only for priests to eat. And he also gave some to his companions.”

²⁷ Then he said to them, “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. ²⁸ So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath.”

Key Text

He said to them, “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath.” —Mark 2:27–28

Social Teachings of the Church

Unit 3: Fulfilling Our Obligations to God and Society

Lessons 9–13

Lesson Aims

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Summarize the significance of the Sabbath for a first-century audience.
2. Explain the diversity of Christian practices for fasting and Sabbath-keeping in light of the ministry of Jesus.
3. Make a plan to balance fasting and feasting, working and resting.

Lesson Outline

Introduction

- A. Challenging Cherished Customs
- B. Lesson Context: Fasting
- C. Lesson Context: Sabbath

I. Question of Fasting (Mark 2:18–22)

- A. Differing Practices (v. 18)
- B. Fasting and Presence (vv. 19–20)
- C. New and Old (vv. 21–22)

New Pot Needed?

II. Question of Sabbath (Mark 2:23–28)

- A. Accusation (vv. 23–24)
- B. Accommodation (vv. 25–26)
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Conclusion

- A. Centering Customs on Christ
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

Introduction

A. Challenging Cherished Customs

Every culture has customs that are widely practiced and deeply respected. In the United States, for instance, many people enjoy flying the flag and watching fireworks displays on the Fourth of July. At Thanksgiving dinner, people anticipate eating dishes like turkey and mashed potatoes. A sudden shift in traditional expectations comes as a shock. For example, suggesting a quiet evening indoors for Independence Day feels strange. Likewise, anyone invited to a Thanksgiving meal might feel confused if they receive only rice and beans. As with all traditions, the details matter.

Jesus challenged people to rethink old customs in light of the new things God was doing. Some people interpreted his teachings as contentious or controversial. Our text today highlights two specific traditions: fasting and the Sabbath.

B. Lesson Context: Fasting

In the Old Testament, God required only one formalized day of fasting (abstaining from food) for all of Israel. He called it the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16:29–31; 23:26–32). Yearly, everyone in Israel was to observe the Day of Atonement on the tenth day of the seventh month (in late September or early October). On this day, the high priest sacrificed collectively for all the nation's sins. His priestly act cleansed the people from impurity. The community participated through confession, prayer, and fasting.

Fasting was also associated with situations of grief, anxiety, or remorse. It was used in worship and preparation to draw near to God and to seek revelation, discernment, or help in overcoming temptation. Moses fasted for 40 days when he met God on Mount Sinai and received the Ten Commandments (Exodus 34:28). Soldiers fasted before entering battle (Judges 20:26; 1 Samuel 7:6), the nation fasted at Saul's death (31:12–13), and parents fasted in distress over the illness of a child (2 Samuel 12:16). All Israel fasted in repentance when they recommitted to God's covenant ways and heard the Mosaic law read aloud in Jerusalem after exile (Nehemiah 9:1).

We see continued evidence of fasting as a spiritual discipline in the New Testament. The prophetess Anna used fasting as a part of her perpetual worship in the temple (Luke 2:36–37). Jesus fasted for 40 days and 40 nights when the Spirit drove him into the wilderness after his baptism (Matthew 4:2). The Pharisees were known for fasting twice weekly (Luke 18:12). Looking ahead to the practices of the early church, we see the apostles utilizing fasting in worship, for discernment, and when appointing elders (Acts 13:2; 14:23).

The passages of Matthew 9:14–17 and Luke 5:33–39 are parallels to today’s text on fasting.

C. Lesson Context: Sabbath

Sabbath observance began after Israel escaped from slavery under Pharaoh in Egypt. The Law of Moses formalized the Sabbath as a commemoration of God’s rest after creation (Exodus 20:8–11; see lesson 10). As a liberated community, Israel learned a new pattern of healthy living, rewriting their mindset after being enslaved (Deuteronomy 5:15). Unlike other cultures of their time, God required his people to balance labor and toil with rest to reflect on his sovereignty. Their weekly rhythm required abstaining from work on the seventh day of every week. Obedience indicated reliance on God’s provision rather than human effort and achievement. Adherence to the imperative of Sabbath rest was a regular reminder of their dependence upon God.

As with fasting, observance of the Sabbath was formalized in various ways over time by different Jewish religious sects. A Jewish document called the Mishnah reflects the Pharisees’ views and traditions over centuries. It was compiled in the AD 200s and lists 39 prohibited categories of labor. As with fasting, the long-term result was a religious practice that was divorced from the attitude of one’s heart. What began as a careful attempt to define “work” became a weapon used against anyone who stepped over strictly marked boundaries. Well-intentioned efforts to prevent anyone from accidentally breaking the Sabbath commandment became an exercise in legalism.

Matthew 12:1–8 and Luke 6:1–5 are parallel passages to today’s lesson text on the Sabbath.

I. Question of Fasting

(Mark 2:18–22)

A. Differing Practices (v. 18)

18. 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?”

Our passage lands within a series of accounts depicting conflicts between Jesus’ actions and Jewish religious tradition (Mark 1:21–3:6). These narratives point to a shift in faith and practice with the arrival of God’s kingdom (1:15).

People inevitably compared Jesus and *John* the Baptist. They were contemporaries, and each established himself as a prominent Jewish rabbi with devoted *disciples*. Their ministries, which shared a common goal of calling Israel back to faithfulness, overlapped in time and message (Matthew 3:1–2; Mark 1:9–11, 15). Therefore, it is unsurprising that questions over observable differences between their habits arose. The Pharisees’ religious practices were well-known, and apparent differences from those of Jesus prompted the question we see here.

The Pharisees consistently meet Jesus’ messages with pushback and interrogation. First, they take issue with Jesus declaring forgiveness of sins, then his choice to dine with tax collectors and sinners (Mark 2:1–17). Now, the tension builds further as the controversy moves to fasting practices.

What Do You Think?

Do you look to the leadership, insight, and modeling of various religious teachers?

Digging Deeper

How might noting variations in faith and practice between Christian leaders enhance our depth of insight and understanding?

B. Fasting and Presence (vv. 19–20)

19. Jesus answered, “How can the guests of the bridegroom fast while he is with them?”

Discern what is best
at a given time.



Visual for Lesson 12. At the conclusion of the lesson, point to the visual and ask, “How will you discern between fasting, feasting, working, and rest?”

They cannot, so long as they have him with them.”

Jesus responds with a parable framed as a question. First-century Jews observed the wedding as an extended feast that could last for days. The groom’s family hosted the wedding at their home. Guests gathered ahead of the bride. They waited at the groom’s house while the *bridegroom* went to receive the bride. The groom then escorted the bride from her home to his home, where the assembled *guests* shared in a communal celebration. Thus, the groom’s arrival signaled the start of the wedding feast, a time of unity and joy. Jesus’ narrative implies that there is a time and place for fasting, but this is neither!

Jesus’ use of the bridal metaphor elicits recollection of prophetic Scriptures. Jeremiah spoke of Judah’s exile as an end to the joyous sound of a bride and groom’s voices (Jeremiah 7:34; 16:9; 25:10). He then promised restoration of the nation and joy in glorious praise (33:11). Isaiah compared God to a groom who rejoices over his bride, Israel (Isaiah 62:5). Considering these familiar images, Jesus continues preaching that the kingdom of God is at hand (Mark 1:15).

20. “But the time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them, and on that day they will fast.”

Jesus takes the imagery into unexpected territory. No one anticipates a groom to be *taken* away from the wedding party. Although no cus-

tom corresponds to this description, 1 Maccabees 9:37–41 (a non-biblical text) records a violent episode of it happening. Naturally, feasting ceases if the groom is taken from the celebration. Joy turns to mourning, which appropriately expresses itself in fasting.

Jesus’ veiled warning probably baffles hearers. But it also prepares them for future events. His cryptic speech foreshadows his crucifixion (Mark 8:31; 9:31; 10:33–34).

C. New and Old (vv. 21–22)

21. “No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment. Otherwise, the new piece will pull away from the old, making the tear worse.”

The conversation continues without a break, but Jesus moves to a second parable, utilizing new imagery. His example expands the subject from fasting to everything related to the kingdom of God. God’s kingdom requires and implements a new paradigm.

If someone patched a torn *old* cloak with new, *unshrunk cloth*, it would tear when drying out after getting wet. In the same way, old religious practices will not hold up to new ways of doing things. Jesus’ teaching indicates a necessary separation between the old and new.

22. “And no one pours new wine into old wineskins. Otherwise, the wine will burst the skins, and both the wine and the wineskins will be ruined. No, they pour new wine into new wineskins.”

To drive the point home, Jesus launches directly into a third parable. The term translated *wineskins* refers to bags made from leather that store wine while it ferments. When new, such bags are flexible and stretchy. Off-gassing occurs during the fermentation process. As gas builds up, it puts pressure on the bags. New bags expand with the process. Old bags, however, are stiff and brittle. If new wine ferments in them, both wine and bag are ruined.

Jesus is warning all who will listen that the new is incompatible with the old. His ministry inaugurates the new. God’s promises are being fulfilled, and new ways of doing things are in play. Jesus

clarifies the establishment of a new way, a new covenant, and the arrival of God's kingdom.

What Do You Think?

What is your first reaction to new concepts, traditions, and ideas?

Digging Deeper

What is it about newness that makes you excited or causes you to push back?

New Pot Needed?

We have two citrus trees in our backyard. They occupy stately pots, and their leaves give off a most glorious fragrance. The growth of these trees is a great mystery to us. Some years, they yield bountiful lemons and limes. Others, none.

A few winters ago, we thought both trees died from frostbite. We considered adding them to the compost heap but noticed a small green shoot emerging from one stem. Instead of scrapping them, we fed and watered them. Fast-forward to the following summer, and both trees were tall, voluminous, and required replanting. Their old pots were no longer sufficient; they'd outgrown them.

Following Jesus requires new ways of thinking, seeing, and approaching daily life for spiritual growth. "The old" still has value if properly used (Romans 15:4; 1 Corinthians 10:1–11), but ultimately, the old has fulfilled its purpose and gives way to "the new" (Hebrews 7:18). Are there things you've outgrown or need to discard to move into fruitful maturity? —N. V.

II. Question of Sabbath

(Mark 2:23–28)

A. Accusation (vv. 23–24)

23. One Sabbath Jesus was going through the grainfields, and as his disciples walked along, they began to pick some heads of grain.

This verse signals a scene and subject change. Jesus and his followers are traveling through farmland. The *grain* here refers to cereal crops like wheat and barley. This day, the grain is ripe and ready for consumption.

According to the Law of Moses, the poor are allowed to help themselves to unharvested grain in a neighbor's fields (Deuteronomy 23:25). This law is part of the broader way in which God requires the Israelites to act with hospitality and generosity toward one another (Leviticus 23:22). Therefore, the distinctive feature of this passage is that the action is happening on the *Sabbath*.

24. The Pharisees said to him, "Look, why are they doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath?"

Jesus' critics among *the Pharisees* jump on what they see, quickly concluding that the Law of Moses forbids the disciples' actions (Exodus 20:8–11). In their minds, the disciples were working in three ways: harvesting, threshing, and winnowing. Harvesting refers to the act of picking the grain. Threshing involves separating the grain from the hull. Winnowing is where the hulls blow away, leaving only the grain. Preparation for eating requires all three.

The Pharisees' objection is grounded in their approach to the law. In effect, they want to "build a fence" around the law by adding interpretations that, if followed, protect the faithful from ever coming near a violation (see Lesson Context: Sabbath regarding the Mishnah). We might think the disciples' efforts could hardly be called "work." For the Pharisees, however, the nature of the action matters more than the amount of effort it requires. To the Pharisees, God commanded work to cease on *the Sabbath*, and Jesus' disciples were working.

What Do You Think?

Do you think the Pharisees were "out to get" Jesus and his disciples? Explain.

Digging Deeper

Compare the Pharisees' question in Mark 2:24 with other passages reacting to Jesus' teaching and actions (examples: Mark 2:6–12; 3:1–6; 3:22; 6:2–3).

B. Accommodation (vv. 25–26)

25. He answered, "Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need?"

Jesus answers his opponents with an analogy from Israel's history (1 Samuel 21:1–6). As religious leaders, the Pharisees are familiar with this story. Before ruling, young David served in King Saul's court. But Saul, jealous of David's success and popularity, wanted to kill his young rival. So David fled with several of his supporters. After a tiring journey of several miles, David and his fellow fugitives were famished and exhausted.

26. In the days of Abiathar the high priest, he entered the house of God and ate the consecrated bread, which is lawful only for priests to eat. And he also gave some to his companions.

David went into the tabernacle, Israel's portable tent of meeting, looking for food. The purpose of the tabernacle (*the house of God*) was worship and sacrifice. Typically, food was present at these sacrifices, and a portion of it was set aside for the priesthood to eat (examples: Leviticus 7:1–21). The priest at Nob informed David there was no "ordinary bread" there (1 Samuel 21:4). The only available food was *consecrated bread*. Only priests were allowed to eat this bread (Leviticus 24:5–9). On this occasion, however, *the high priest* violated the rule and gave David the bread. The priest did this to meet a genuine need as it was explained to him by David (although David was not being truthful; 1 Samuel 21:2).

A small problem arises in this text with the name *Abiathar*. According to 1 Samuel 21:1, the name of the man who helped David was Ahimelek. Abiathar was his son, the only priest to escape the violent consequences of helping David (22:20). Abiathar joined David's entourage and eventually served in the tabernacle as high priest with Zadok (2 Samuel 8:17; 15:24–29). So when Jesus refers to *the days of Abiathar*, he is pointing to a general time frame. Referring to Abiathar as *the high priest* recognizes the office he eventually took and for which he was best known.

At this point we may ask ourselves, "What is the relationship between the alleged violation of the Sabbath and David's violation?" Each incident involves godly men doing something presumably forbidden to meet a valid need. The Pharisees' reliance upon tradition has blinded

them to the true character of Scripture (Matthew 23:13–36).

C. Account (vv. 27–28)

27. Then he said to them, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath."

Jesus responds again with a whole new paradigm. He says the purpose of the law is to bless humankind. God gave his law to enhance people's lives. Where its usage is misinterpreted and misapplied, the result is undue burden (Matthew 23:4; Luke 11:46). God desires good for his people, but Jesus' opponents have lost sight of the introduction to the law: "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery" (Exodus 20:2). God, who gives Israel freedom, does not intend his law to enslave and burden. The Pharisees have a decision to make: which will be their priority—human need or ritual formality?

What Do You Think?

What is more important, upholding the letter of a law or the spirit of a law?

Digging Deeper

In what circumstance would you disregard or disobey a rule for something you deem more important than that rule?

28. "So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath."

Jesus' declaration is the climax of the exchange. He refers to himself as *the Son of man*, a self-designation that occurs more than 80 times across all four Gospels (examples: Matthew 8:20; Mark 10:45; Luke 11:30; John 1:51). This designation generally means "one who belongs to the category 'man,'" as in a human. The book of Ezekiel uses it dozens of times to delineate between a man used as the mouthpiece of God and God himself (examples: Ezekiel 2:1; 3:17; 33:2). However, Jesus uses it differently. His use connects him with power and authority, assuming he is the king of God's kingdom. He is the one who rules and reigns. The term resembles the figure in Daniel 7:13–14, called "one like a son of man." This one receives authority from God to rule the

world forever, served by all people, nations, and languages (7:14).

With this title, Jesus claims the authority to apply God's law. Jesus is saying, in effect, that he is the one who defines Sabbath adherence, not the Pharisees. In so doing, he strips away the trappings of religiosity and tradition and replaces them with sovereignty. Ultimately, God decides how his law applies, and Jesus says that role belongs to him. The Sabbath and its practice are subject to Jesus' supreme authority.

Tunnel Vision?

I recently encountered a problem with my bicycle: when it was in third gear, the chain would periodically slip as if it were about to come off. The second and fourth gears were fine, but not the third. So I went online to diagnose the problem and decide what to do. Unfortunately, I misinterpreted something, and then ordered the wrong part and tool with which to fix it.

After several failed attempts at repair, I decided to consult the experts at the bicycle company. I found their contact information printed on a sticker on the bike itself. They told me what I needed; I ordered it, it came, and I installed it quickly.

I was guilty of tunnel vision. Tunnel vision is a metaphor for focusing on one thing to the exclusion of all other things. I was so focused on adhering to specific details that I knew were "right" that it took total failure to get me to go to the experts. The information I needed was right under my nose, printed on a silver sticker on the seat tube. We're all guilty of tunnel vision at one time or another. We think we know best. Do your prayers presume you already know the right answer and want God to agree with your conclusions? —R. L. N.

Conclusion

A. Centering Customs on Christ

Christians around the globe hold differing viewpoints on the practices of fasting and Sabbath-keeping. Their practices reflect tradition, doctrinal convictions, and/or personal choice.

Today's lesson gives a reason for this variety:

Jesus, unlike the Pharisees, did not present set rules about fasting or the Sabbath. Instead, he pointed to their intent and his authority and presence. He taught new ways of living in God's kingdom, focusing on freedom and well-being rather than strict adherence to rules and regulations (compare Colossians 2:16). Jesus calls us to center our spiritual practices on him as the source of life. God designed humans to follow cycles of work, rest, feasting, and fasting. Jesus, as our Lord, invites us to trust him on this. His way offers rest from burdens, not additional weight (Matthew 11:28–30; 1 John 5:3). Life with Jesus presents opportunities for both celebration and mourning, with Scripture guiding us in what is appropriate at any given time (Romans 12:15; 1 Corinthians 5:2; 2 Corinthians 7:11). If our spiritual disciplines strengthen our dependence on Jesus, then they are beneficial, regardless of the specifics (Romans 14:22; 1 Corinthians 8:8).

Ultimately, the goal is not to find the perfect formula for any rhythm of life but to thrive in our relationship with Jesus. May he be the heartbeat, center, origin, and director of all we do.

B. Prayer

Heavenly Father, may we depend on you in every act of devotion and every rhythm of life. Whether we are feasting in joy or fasting in sadness, working or resting, may we keep our eyes fixed on you, our Lord and king. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Christ is Lord over the rhythms of our lives.

How to Say It

Abiathar	Ah-bye-uh-thar.
Ahimelek	A-him-uh-leck.
Isalah	Eye-zay-uh.
Jeremiah	Jair-uh-my-uh.
Maccabees	Mack-uh-bees.
Pharisees	Fair-ih-seez.
Sinal	Sigh-nye or Sigh-nay-eye.
tabernacle	tah-burr-nah-kul.
Zadok	Zay-dok.