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MINISTRIES

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Garments and Wineskins

In Mark chapter 2, Jesus, whose Hebrew name is *Yeshua*, is asked 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?”

Yeshua does not answer this question directly, but instead responds with 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.”

What did Yeshua mean by these parables? How do they answer the question that he was asked? Why were these other religious Jews fasting, but not Yeshua or his disciples?

Usually, these parables are explained in the following way. 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 either Yeshua or his teachings, while the old garment and the old wineskins are interpreted as metaphors for the old religious standards. 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

At first glance, this explanation for these parables seems like an adequate one. However, upon closer examination, this interpretation encounters several major problems. The first problem arises as a result of the “bridegroom” in the first parable being interpreted as a metaphor for the Messiah. It is natural to suppose that Yeshua is metaphorically referring to himself as the “bridegroom” here, because there are other Scriptures that refer to him as a bridegroom. Here are a few of them:

John 3:27-30

John [the Baptist] answered, “A person cannot receive even one thing unless it is given him from heaven. You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, ‘I am not the Christ, but I have been sent before him.’ The one who has the bride is the **bridegroom**. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice. Therefore this joy of mine is now complete. **He must increase**, but I must decrease.”

Revelation 19:7-8

Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of **the Lamb** has come, and **his Bride** has made herself ready; it was granted her to clothe herself with fine linen, bright and pure”— for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints.

Ephesians 5:22-27

Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. **For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church**, his body, and is himself its Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands. Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish.

So, we have a number of examples of Yeshua being depicted as a bridegroom. However, there are two problems with interpreting the “bridegroom” of Mark 2 as a metaphor for Yeshua. The first problem is

that, in the Scriptures we just cited that call Yeshua the bridegroom, the church is called the bride. However, in this parable, if the bridegroom is a reference to Yeshua, then the wedding guests would be a reference to his disciples. Since his disciples are part of the church, one would think they would be called the bride, not the wedding guests. The second problem is that verse 20 says:

Mark 2:20

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

Why would Yeshua say that the disciples are going to fast like the Pharisees after he is gone? If the Pharisees' doctrines were incompatible with Yeshua's doctrines, why would they suddenly become compatible after Yeshua's ascension?

Another major problem comes from applying the term "new wine" in verse 22 to Yeshua or his teachings. This would be a strange metaphor for Yeshua to use, because new wine is considered inferior to old wine. Wine becomes more desirable and more expensive as it ages. 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 is why the apostles were mocked in Acts 2:13 with the phrase, "they are full of new wine." (NKJV) New wine is cheaper, and easier to obtain in large quantities.

Most significantly, new wine is called inferior in this very parable. Luke chapter 5 has a parallel account of this same parable, but Luke's account has an extra line at the end:

Luke 5:39

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

If Yeshua is saying that his teachings are superior to the Pharisees' teachings, it seems very strange that he would call himself or his teachings "new wine;" if anything, he should be calling his teachings "old wine" to show that they are better.

We can see that the conventional, metaphorical interpretations of these parables have some serious holes in them. Saying that the bridegroom or the new wine are referring to Yeshua doesn't seem to add up when the entirety of the parable is considered. But if these interpretations are insufficient, then what is the correct interpretation? Why are Yeshua's disciples not fasting like the disciples of John or the Pharisees?

To answer this, let's first take a closer look at what this fasting of the Pharisees was all about. The Scriptures do not explicitly say what was involved in this fasting, but we may be able to use other historical and Scriptural sources to infer some things about it.

The first thing to notice about this fasting is that it is being performed as a group; this was not a case of an individual choosing to fast and pray for his own personal reasons, but of a group fasting together at

the same time, presumably for reasons that would affect the entire group. 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 of grieving over disasters that had befallen Israel, including the destruction of Solomon's temple. They are likely the four days mentioned in Zechariah chapter 8:

Zechariah 8:14-19

For thus says the LORD [YHWH] of hosts: "As I purposed to bring disaster to you when your fathers provoked me to wrath, and I did not relent, says the LORD [YHWH] of hosts, so again have I purposed in these days to bring good to Jerusalem and to the house of Judah; fear not. These are the things that you shall do: Speak the truth to one another; render in your gates judgments that are true and make for peace; do not devise evil in your hearts against one another, and love no false oath, for all these things I hate, declares the LORD [YHWH]."

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 shall be to the house of Judah seasons of joy and gladness and cheerful feasts. Therefore love truth and peace.

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. Again, in the parallel account in Luke 5, it says that these fasts 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 a tradition of fasting 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)

It seems likely that Yeshua was being asked about this Monday and Thursday fasting that we see in these other sources. Additionally, it is likely that these fasts involved more than just abstaining from 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, that they were days of mourning and sorrow, and that they involved abstaining both from food and from other kinds of pleasures. But what was their purpose? Why were these fasts instituted, and what were they meant to accomplish?

It's hard to say for sure why this fasting was being done, but 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 an invading army, specifically the army of Rome. This was not necessarily the reason for the fast that the Pharisees were performing, but it was a condition that rabbis in later times used to justify public fasting days. Whatever the specific reason was, it 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 12:15-23

And 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. And the servants of David were afraid to tell him that the child was dead, for they said, "Behold, while the child was yet alive, we spoke to him, and he did not listen to us. How then can we say to him the child is dead? He may do himself some harm." But when David saw that his servants were whispering together, David understood that the child was dead. And David said to his servants, "Is the child dead?" They said, "He is dead." 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.

While we don't know exactly why the Pharisees and John's disciples were fasting, we know that they were doing it because 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. What is interesting about this is that the Scriptures frequently explain why Israel suffered as a nation at various times throughout history. Whether the problem was drought, or pestilence or sword, the prophets consistently told Israel that these disasters were brought on by the nation's sins.

Jeremiah 7:5-15

For if you truly amend your ways and your deeds, if you truly execute justice one with another, if you do not oppress the sojourner, the fatherless, or the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not go after other gods to your own harm, then I will let you dwell in this place, in the land that I gave of old to your fathers forever. Behold, you trust in deceptive words to no avail. Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, make offerings to Baal, and go after other gods that you have not known, and then come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say, 'We are delivered!'—only to go on doing all these abominations? Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your eyes? Behold, I myself have seen it, declares the LORD [YHWH]. Go now to my place that was in Shiloh, where I made my name dwell at first, and see what I did to it because of the evil of my people Israel. And now, because you have done all these things, declares the LORD [YHWH], and when I spoke to you persistently you did not listen, and when I called you, you did not answer, therefore I will do to the house that is called by my name, and in which you trust, and to the place that I gave to you and to your fathers, as I did to Shiloh. And I will cast you out of my sight, as I cast out all your kinsmen, all the offspring of Ephraim.

Here, Jeremiah explains that the temple was destroyed because of Israel's sins. Zechariah has a similar explanation for the desolation of the land of Israel. Zechariah also criticizes the idea of using fasting to try to fix this problem.

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 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.”

Again, it is the people’s sins, specifically their lack of compassion for the poor, that caused this desolation. Zechariah was telling them that their fasts were ineffective, and that they should instead be repenting from their evil ways. We see these same themes again in the words of Isaiah:

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 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 remove the afflictions that their sins had caused.

Yeshua’s words about fasting in Matthew 6 and Luke 18 very much echo the words of these prophets; Yeshua said that the Pharisees were fasting so that men would see their “righteousness” and be impressed, instead of fasting as a part of repentance and changing their behavior. As Zechariah would say, they were not fasting “to God.” If they wanted to get God’s attention, then they should have been turning their hearts back toward God, serving him and loving their fellow men. Instead, they were continuing to sin; to do the very things that brought their calamities upon them.

As we return to the parables in Mark chapter 2, we now have some more information 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 Yeshua viewed this fasting the same way that the prophets did, as being insufficient to replace true repentance, and 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 more piece of context that will help us interpret these parables, and that is the verses that describe what happened right before Yeshua is asked about fasting.

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; later, in verse 18, he is asked why he is eating at all, because this is all happening on a public fast day. Yeshua answers the first question by saying that he was calling the sinners in order to heal them of their sickness—that is to say, to bring them to repentance for their sins. He answers the second question with the three parables that we are seeking to interpret. Let’s read those parables again, and see if we can make sense of them in the light of everything else that we’ve read.

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.”

When Yeshua speaks of the bridegroom and the wedding guests, he is not using a metaphor at all; he is talking about appropriate and inappropriate behavior. A wedding is a time of celebration; fasting at a wedding is inappropriate, because if one were to fast and mourn at a wedding, it would destroy the celebration. This theme of inappropriate action that leads to destruction carries over into the parables about garments and wineskins. Applying the wrong patch to a garment will destroy the garment, and putting new wine in the wrong containers will destroy the containers and waste the wine. In the same way, trying to solve national problems by fasting alone is a wasted effort, and as long as fasting is the focus instead of repentance, the problems are going to get worse.

While the Pharisees were fasting to try to get God’s attention and move him to have mercy on them, Yeshua was instead addressing the root of the problem; Yeshua was, on that very day, having compassion on a group of tax collectors and sinners, and bringing them to repentance. 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.”

Yeshua was providing mercy, while the Pharisees were providing only sacrifice in the form of their fasting. God desires the mercy, not the sacrifice. As it says in Psalm 18:

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.

And, as Yeshua himself says in Matthew 5:

Matthew 5:7

Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.

So, these parables in Mark 2 are not metaphors about Yeshua replacing Judaism or the Old Testament, but rather they are simply 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 that putting new wine in old wineskins would destroy the wineskins, or that 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.

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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