



**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?"<sup>19</sup> And Jesus 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.<sup>20</sup> The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast in that day.<sup>21</sup> 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.<sup>22</sup> 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."*

Some things just naturally go together. Like Mom and apple pie, corned beef and cabbage, burgers and French fries. You think of one, you think of the other: they're a natural pair. On the other hand, there are certain things that everyone recognizes do not belong together. Loud jokes at a funeral, gasoline and cigarettes, oil and water. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out that the one thing is not compatible with the other.

Wouldn't it be nice if all the choices in life were that easy to make? Unfortunately, it's not always so clear to people which things belong together and which things don't. For example, marriage and commitment belong together, but a sky high divorce rates indicate that many couples haven't learned that. Drinking and driving obviously do not belong together either, but DUI and accident statistics show a lot of people haven't figured that out yet. In the sphere of Christianity, you'd be surprised how many people can't tell the difference between the Gospel of Jesus Christ and legalism. Legalism is the idea that you've got to put on a certain front and keep certain outward rules in order to please God and get to heaven. This idea has been around for a long time—in Jesus' day, it was the Pharisees who had a corner on the legalism market. But as our Lord points out in this morning's text, the good news of free forgiveness through Christ and legalism cannot possibly go together. And as Christians, it's essential that you be able to tell the difference between them! The theme we'll be considering today is:

## **Unnatural Pairs**

- I. Drummed-up sorrow doesn't belong with Christian joy
- II. Pharisaic legalism doesn't belong with Gospel freedom

In the Jewish religion, fasting—that is, going without food—was originally meant as a sign of sorrow over sin and repentance. The law of Moses had required a fast for one day out of the year, the Day of Atonement. And that was a natural pair. The Day of Atonement was a day when all Israel would gather together and repent of their sins before God and ask for forgiveness. It makes sense that in their sorrow over sin they would forego eating food to focus on their debt to God. But over the centuries, the self-righteous Jews had gradually imposed more and more days of fasting. By Jesus' time, orthodox Jews had mandated a fast twice every week, on Mondays and Thursdays. For most of them, fasting had nothing to do with sincere repentance. It had turned into simply another way to look good in the eyes of others.

It reminds me of the popular practice among Christians to give something up for Lent. The season of Lent is a forty day period to commemorate the forty days that Jesus spent in the wilderness. When Jesus was out there being tempted by the Devil, he fasted—forty days and forty nights without food. Lent is a season of repentance, and so traditionally, Christians would likewise fast for the forty days as a tool to remind them of their debt before God. You would feel the hunger pangs and be reminded of your sinful state and of what Christ went through for you. It was a fine preparation for Good Friday and Easter. However, over the centuries, the forty day fast became too burdensome for most people, and eventually it just devolved into the practice today of giving up one particular food or habit for lent and then avoiding eating red meat on Good Friday. And while some people might do these things as a sign of their repentant hearts, for many people it's become superstition and a way to look like a good Christian in the eyes of others.

If you ever practice fasting, whether for lent or before communion, that can be a very healthy practice. But let it be out of a repentant heart and not for any other reason. After all, Jesus warned His disciples, ***“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.”*** (Matthew 6:16)

Getting back to our text, we find at the outset that the disciples of the Pharisees and the disciples of John the Baptist had been fasting. If you've ever dieted or given up a certain food or drink, you know how irritating it can be when you're surrounded by people eating the very thing that you cannot eat. Well, Jesus and His disciples had just come from a big dinner at the house of Simon, and this evidently rubbed the people the wrong way. They said to Jesus, ***“Why do John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?”*** In other words, “Look at us! We're acting sad and going without food! Why don't your disciples do the same?!” And Jesus answers with the illustration of a wedding celebration. He asked them, ***“Can the wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them?”***

That's one food practice that hasn't changed over the centuries! Think about the last wedding you were at. How many sad faces did you see? How many members of the party were so depressed that they refused to eat anything at the reception? Probably very few. A wedding is a time of joy, a time when people put aside their troubles and celebrate with the bride and groom. Sadness and a wedding—that's an unnatural pair!

In the Bible, God often uses this picture of a wedding feast to depict the joy of our salvation. And in these illustrations Jesus is the Bridegroom. As Christians, you and I are guests at God's feast of salvation. We are members of the bridal party, invited to share freely in the joy of our Lord. And so what confuses me is how many believers there are who go around with sad faces all the time! They act as if being a Christian is some kind of huge burden to bear. They seem to think that if they don't work their face into a constant frown, people will think they're not as pious and devout as they should be.

On the one hand, sorrow—on the other, joy. That's an unnatural pair—two things that just don't go together, at least not for us. Drummed up sorrow doesn't belong with Christian joy! Jesus said, ***“As long as they have the bridegroom with them they cannot fast.”*** For Jesus' disciples to mourn and fast while Jesus was still with them wouldn't have made any sense. Worse, it would have given a wrong

impression—the impression that Jesus was not the Savior of the world, like He said He was. The proper time to mourn would soon come on Good Friday, the day when He would give up His life on the cross. But not even that sorrow would last! It would be completely overshadowed by the triumphant victory of His resurrection on Easter Sunday. Jesus told His disciples, **“Most assuredly, I say to you that you...will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will be turned into joy.”** (John 16:20)

Likewise, there is a proper place for sorrow in the life of a Christian. Paul said, **“Godly sorrow produces repentance to salvation, [and it’s] not to be regretted.”** (2 Corinthians 7:10) When you look at the cross, and you see the suffering that your sin inflicted on Jesus; it naturally makes you sad and repentant. But how can you stop there, at the cross? Jesus didn’t! He rose from grave and proclaimed victory over your sin, over death and over the devil. The Bible promises that His victory is your victory, as Paul writes, **“There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.”** (Rom. 8:1)

Easter was half a year ago by now. But if you’re a Christian, then the Easter joy is for today, and tomorrow, and for every day of your life! Think about it—what sorrow is there left in your life that Christ hasn’t already conquered with the empty tomb? Do the sins of your past trouble you? Well then I’d invite you to look up Romans 4:25 where it says that **“Christ was raised for our justification.”** And that literally is saying that when Christ was raised, God declared you to be “not guilty” of any sin! Maybe you’re worried about the things of this life—money, bills, job security. Well then I’d encourage you to look up Ephesians 1:20-22, where Paul writes that Christ was raised to the heavenly places and is seated in a position of authority in heaven to rule over all things on your behalf. Maybe you are saddened by the thought of death—either your coming death or the death of a loved one? Well then you can look up John 14:19, where Jesus declares that **“because [He] lives, you also will live.”** There’s no reason for sorrow, our sorrow has turned to joy in Christ.

Drummed-up sorrow just does not belong in the presence of the Savior. Jesus explained that to those fasting Pharisees. But He went on to probe a deeper problem they had. It wasn’t just that they were pretending to be sad, the deeper problem was their legalism. You see, they knew that Jesus a skilled teacher, but they thought He ought to bring His new teachings into line with their old teachings. Theirs was a religion of do’s and don’ts: do fast on Mondays and Thursdays, don’t have anything to do with Gentiles; do wear certain kinds of clothes, don’t eat certain kinds of food. It was a religion that said, “If you look good on the outside, then you are good inside.” That’s legalism.

So on the one hand we have the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ, on the other hand, the law-oriented religion of the Pharisees. That’s an unnatural pair if there ever was one! Pharisaic legalism does not belong with Gospel freedom.

To illustrate, Jesus said, **“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 does He mean by that? You can’t sew a little patch of Gospel on a robe made out of Law and expect to wear it into heaven. You can’t force the sweet wine of God’s grace into the cracked old wineskin of the Law, and think you can drink eternal life from it. Really, you just can’t believe in Jesus as your Savior and also think that God will accept you because

you're a good person. Those two ideas can't coexist. Both heaven and hell will contain a lot of people who did a lot of good deeds during their lifetimes. The difference is: the ones in heaven did them *because* they knew they were saved by Jesus, the ones in hell did them in order to try to save themselves. That's exactly the difference between the Gospel and legalism. The two definitely do not belong together! The Bible says plainly, ***"By the works of the Law no flesh shall be justified."*** (Romans 3:20)

We were talking about this at length in this past Wednesday's Bible Class, which by the way, if you weren't in attendance I would strongly encourage you to go to our church's YouTube page and watch it. Because this distinction between Law and Gospel, between God's grace and legalism, it's the most important piece of knowledge that you can have. You can think of the difference like this: have you ever seen a plumbline before? That's a tool that involves a heavy metal weight tied to a string. If you hang a plumbline from the top of a wall, eventually gravity will cause it to hang still in one place, and based on that you can tell you whether or not the wall is crooked. Which if you're building a house is good information to have. But the plumbline can't actually fix the wall, it can only show you how crooked the wall is. And God's Law is like a plumb line: it can show you your sins, it can show you how crooked you've been, but it can't save you from them. For that, you need the pure Gospel. The Gospel is the Good News in Scripture that Jesus Christ has kept the Law perfectly in your place. And it's the Good News that His death pays for all the times you've broken God's Will. And that is truly good news.

So what about all those Old Testament rules and regulations? We did say that the Law of Moses required one fast a year on the Day of Atonement. Did you know that the Day of Atonement was last Sunday? Did you fast for 24 hours? Probably not, and neither did I. Why is it that you and I aren't required to worship on Saturday, or to sacrifice animals, or to observe Old Testament holidays like the Day of Atonement? It's because all of those things were designed to point God's Old Testament people toward the coming Savior. Once Jesus arrived, they became unnecessary! As Jesus said, ***"New wine must be put into new wineskins."*** God has done away with the Old Covenant and given us, in Christ, His New Deal of the Gospel. It's a covenant of Christian freedom, where our good actions aren't directed by a bunch of rules and regulations but by love for our Savior whose done it all for us.

This is the Gospel freedom we enjoy, and this is one place where the old Pharisaic legalism is completely unnatural. The Apostle Paul said, ***"For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery."*** (Galatians 5:1) Don't let anyone tell you that you've got to worship on Saturday, or skip meat on Fridays, or chalk up a certain number of good deeds in order to get to heaven. If you have a Spirit-worked faith in Jesus as your Savior from sin, then you've already got everything you need to get you into heaven. As for good works—they're the fruits of that faith. They'll come, just as naturally as apples grow on apple trees—no legalistic demands necessary.

Christian joy and Gospel freedom. These are two things that belong together in our lives as believers. God grant us the wisdom to distinguish them from the things that don't belong there and live in the joy of our Savior all our days! Amen.

***"And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."*** (Philippians 4:7) Amen.