

Mark 2:18-22. ¹⁸Now 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?" ¹⁹Jesus answered, "How can the guests of the bridegroom fast while he is with them? They cannot, so long as they have him with them. ²⁰But 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. If he does, the new piece will pull away from the old, making the tear worse. ²²And no one pours new wine into old wineskins. If he does, the wine will burst the skins, and both the wine and the wineskins will be ruined. No, he pours new wine into new wineskins."

Celebrate Christ's Faithful Love

1. Gladly gather around the bridegroom.

2. His love makes everything new.

Well, it less than a week away. How are you going to celebrate? How are you going to demonstrate your love this Valentine's Day? Maybe you will be sending out cards this week, or making phone calls to family or friends. If you have kids there might be the expectation that you would help them address cards to their classmates or think of some other special thing you might do. Maybe in anticipation of Valentine's Day you are planning a night out with the Mrs., or you have planned that you will make him his favorite meal and spend the evening at home just the two of you. Maybe you will pick up a card or some flowers or some chocolates sometimes this week. Whether you pay much attention to it or not the 14th of February, this coming Saturday, is a day that has been marked as a day to celebrate love.

In our lesson for today, Jesus too speaks of a celebration of love. As he is sharing the gospel with sinners, as he spends time with his disciples and those who were listening to his teachings, listening to him share the good news of salvation, this was a time of celebration. It was a time to celebrate God's love for undeserving sinners, so much so that Jesus uses the picture of wedding banquet. Throughout Scripture our LORD uses this powerful picture of a bride and a groom to illustrate how much he loves us. This is a deep connection. This is a powerful love that Christ has for us. He loves us as his own dearly beloved, and he would go to remarkable lengths to demonstrate that love for his Church. His love for us is steadfast and it is faithful. And that love of Christ brings us such great joy that you would be hard pressed to think of an example that better illustrates the joy and love that we have in Christ than a wedding reception or wedding banquet. This is the type of joy and love that Jesus repeatedly pictures when he describes people gathering around the good news of salvation.

The context here in the gospel of Mark certainly paints such a picture of joy and love and celebration. This was a time of salvation celebration as Levi, the tax collector, had

been invited to follow Jesus. As Jesus walked along teaching a large crowd of people, he passed by the tax collection booth where Levi was stationed and he invited Levi, son of Alphaeus, to be his disciple. ***“Follow me,”*** Jesus told him, and Levi got up and followed him. The gospel writer eludes to the sudden rush of joy and thankfulness that Levi has for this message of salvation as the scene immediately jumps to Levi’s house where Levi had prepared a meal for Jesus and had invited other *sinner*s to come and dine with him and the Savior. Levi and the rest gladly gathered around the one who brought them the joy of the gospel. This was a time of celebration, for this was the one who brought to them the message of God’s undeserved love. This was a time of celebration for the Savior in his faithful love had called unfaithful people to himself and made them his very own. Levi’s life would be forever changed for the better. His life was filled with joy because of his connection to Christ, and it was not just Levi who benefited from this gospel but many sinners who had lived in guilt and despair, ostracized by the community, shamed, and despised were now enjoying the presence of their loving Savior.

This was a thrilling celebration of love and joy that rivaled the joy of a wedding banquet. You can imagine those people gathered in Levi’s house. You can imagine the joy that they felt knowing that their sins were forgiven; that their Savior was in their presence; that they were at peace with God. This was a celebration of God’s faithful love in Christ Jesus and it was punctuated by a meal that brought them closer together.

I hope that sounds familiar. Gathered here today there is great joy in knowing that our sins are forgiven, there is great joy in being in our Savior’s presence and knowing that we are at peace with God. This is a celebration of God’s faithful love in Christ Jesus, capped off by a meal that brings us closer together. This is a celebration of God’s faithful love.

Unfortunately that isn’t always how we view a public worship service, is it? Sometimes we come and it is just a matter of going through the motions. We are here; we fulfill what we might feel is our obligation; we follow the Sunday ritual, we follow the customs, we put in our time, we place our offering in the plate, and when it is all over we get up and we go home. I did my duty. I supported my church. I paid homage to God and now I will talk to a few friends and be on my way. There should be more to it, and I think we know that. But do we always carry that out?

Think of the husband who mindlessly buys a Valentine’s card or flowers or a box of chocolates and hands it over to his wife on February 14 simply because that what he is supposed to do. There should be more to it. This is your bride. This is the one who loves you with whom you share a deep connection. This is not to be a simple exercise of obligation, but this is to be an expression and a celebration of love.

So it was with Jesus and those gathered around him. This was a celebration of God’s faithful love. At Levi’s house there was this genuine joy and thankfulness expressed in teaching and listening, time spent together getting to know one the Savior and that joy was punctuated by a meal that expressed their fellowship and love.

However, the Pharisees and those they influenced, were bothered by this expression of love and joy. Jesus was dining with sinners while they were trying to go about their ritual. They were fasting. God had only commanded his Old Testament people that they

needed to fast once a year, but the Pharisees had in their minds, “improved upon” this command by fasting twice a week. To them this was how holy people acted. To them, this is what you were supposed to do if you wanted to be Godly and pious. This only gave the impression of piety, but their hearts were in the wrong place.

They were so wrapped up in their exercise of piety that they tried to tear Jesus down for not following their lead. The Pharisees were fasting, John’s disciples were fasting, why was it that Jesus and his disciples weren’t? What seems like a real conundrum for Jesus upon further examination turns out to be a horrible unfortunate gaffe. It was a callous and thoughtless comment that would expose the Pharisees and their followers for their pride that was so terribly misplaced and blinding. John’s disciples were fasting because John had recently been thrown into prison; their fasting came from a genuine, heartfelt, sorrow. The Pharisees on the other hand were trying to earn God’s love by empty rituals and they were upset that others were failing to comply to their rules.

And so Jesus responds to this rather offensive complaint with patient instruction. 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.*** Remember how I told you that God had instructed his Old Testament people to fast only on one day of the year; that day was the Great Day of Atonement. On that day God had prescribed for his people a series of rituals and observances that were designed to point them to the coming Messiah who would sacrifice himself to take away the sins of the people. In his faithful love God would make his people clean. Sinners who be saved and made righteous not through their close observance to rituals, but because of God’s selfless, self sacrificing love which makes us sinners new, and holy, and pleasing to God. That great Day of Atonement would be fulfilled in Christ Jesus. He would be the atoning sacrifice for the sins of the world. He would be the scapegoat on which our sin and guilt was laid. A time would come when Jesus would be taken from his disciples and Jesus knew this. He knew that he had come to suffer and die. This would be a day of sorrow for his disciples, but it was something that needed to come about because this was part of God’s loving plan to save us sinners. Jesus would lay down his life for you and for me. What tremendous love that he would do this for us!

In his love God wanted the hearts of the Pharisees. He sent his Son to carry out his saving work for all people. He sent his Son to share the good news of this full and free salvation, but the Pharisees were not interested. They were more interested in doing their own thing. The Pharisees were taking those rituals and observances and they were trying to make them do what they were never intended to do. In the process they were ruining the ritual and destroying the message that the ritual was intended to convey. And that was the point of Jesus next few illustrations. ²¹ ***“No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment. If he does, the new piece will pull away from the old, making the tear worse. ²² And no one pours new wine into old wineskins. If he does, the wine will burst the skins, and both the wine and the wineskins will be ruined. No, he pours new wine into new wineskins.”*** This patching together of their own ideas with biblical rituals and

commands just wouldn't work. It would lead to their ruin and it would lead to false teaching and a ruining of God's precious truths.

Do not be influenced by such ideas. God wants more than cold and thoughtless attachment of obedience. He wants our hearts. He desires a deep and intimate connection with us. He has this tremendous love for us, even though we don't deserve it. Even though we are unfaithful sinners God continues to be faithful. Christ is the bridegroom who is fully committed to his Church, to his bride. He loves his Church with an everlasting love that does not fail. He gives her peace and joy and fills her heart with thankfulness. And so in his great love he invites us to come willingly, gladly, to his wedding banquet, where he speaks tenderly to us through word and sacrament. Here he offers us the finest of spiritual food, and here his love makes us new. His example of love is not just something that we tack on to our lives as something that we must emulate, but his love changes us inside and out. If we were to follow Jesus example of love, if that was the path to heaven, if we were to add his model to the rest of the laws of Scripture and have that be our path to heaven that would wreck us. There would be no way that we could reach that goal.

The gospel of Jesus isn't like all the other work righteous religions of this world. It isn't some rehashing of new truths poured into some old rituals. No, the good news of Jesus is so wonderfully unique and refreshing. In his undeserved love in Christ, God doesn't just patch things up, but he gives us a new garment. He makes us a new creation. The old has gone, the new has come. God's faithful love in Christ renews us and changes us, and that affects every aspect of our lives.

Yesterday, a School of Stewardship was held at Redwood Falls, and there we discussed how the love of Jesus has a profound effect on our lives. Our Savior lived for us and died for us. He emptied himself of the honor and glory that was due to him and he came to this world to save us. He humbled himself so that we would be rescued from sin and hell and instead we would be blessed with the joys and riches of heaven. He came to this earth so that we might know his love now and be with him forever in heaven. And knowing this gospel our lives are whole lives forever changed for the better. Like Levi we gladly follow our Lord and we put our trust in him. Because of Christ Jesus our lives are filled with joy and purpose and our natural response will not be of obligation but of joy. Like Levi we thankfully give of our time and our money and our talents so that we can gather together with other sinners around this good news of Jesus and rejoice in our Savior's presence. We will give of our time and ourselves and our treasures not because of some forced obligation, but because of the love of Jesus changes us and we want to share that love with each other and the world.

By the grace of God our lives are a celebration of the love of God in Christ Jesus. His love makes us into a new creation. He fills us up with his gospel and then one day he will bring us to the eternal wedding banquet of heaven where we will live with him in that full and glorious celebration for all time. Thanks be to God for his undeserved and faithful love in Jesus Christ. Amen.