

## Mark 2: New Wineskins by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle

### Prayer of Illumination

Lord God, we believe. Help our unbelief. Amen.

### Background

"The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." Thus begins the Gospel according to Mark.

"Gospel" or "Good News" comes from the word *euangellion* in Greek. This was a common word used for happy announcements in society, whether they be military victory, the birth of a child, the birth of a king, or weddings. Good news.

In Mark, Jesus is the King of kings who brings the *euangellion*, the gospel, the good news of salvation to the entire world.

For most of church history, Mark has played second or even third fiddle to the gospels according to Matthew and Luke. St. Augustine called Mark "Matthew's footslave." It was not until the last 200 years or so in church history that Mark has arisen in prominence in gospel scholarship. The vast majority of Bible scholars now hold that Mark is the oldest of all of the gospels. We've learned that both Matthew and Luke heavily drew upon Mark as a source for their gospels. And Mark's style and structure is now seen as more nuanced than has been previously assumed over the centuries. Mark is now considered, not so much a footslave, but as the backbone of Matthew and Luke, but also our understanding of Jesus. ...The last will be first.

The high point of Mark comes at the mid-point of the gospel where Peter answers Jesus' question: "Who do you say that I am?" In a dramatic moment, Peter being Peter, unflinchingly declares, and he nailed it, "You are the Messiah."

Mark's style of writing has been called "kitchen Greek," because he utilizes the popular spoken dialect of the day. And unlike Matthew, Mark wrote to a predominantly non-Jewish audience. Mark doesn't have the time to talk about Jesus' birth—he fast forwarded that—that's why we don't read the gospel of Mark during Christmas time. And so he jumps right into the adult years of Jesus and the beginning of His ministry, and in Mark, Jesus is a man of action. He's a man of authority and power who expresses strong emotions and confidently leads the way—ever healing the sick, casting out demons, performing miracles over nature, preaching and teaching with authority, and engaging in escalating disputes with the religious establishment. That is what Jesus is up to in Mark.

And then crowds. Crowds are following Jesus everywhere in the gospel according to Mark. It's no exaggeration to say that it's a lot like the Beatles in the movie *Hard Day's Night*. They're chasing him around everywhere.

Now another unique thing about Mark is that Christ is very cryptic, very mysterious in the book of Mark—and Jesus often times tells people not to tell others who He is.

Shhh—let’s keep this secret of me being the Messiah “hush hush” and “on the down low.”

Now, in addition to the secrets in Mark, there are questions, lots of questions. Jesus is asking questions all the time in the gospel according to Mark, and the disciples can never figure out what Jesus is getting at. They’re scratching their heads the whole time. And this is good because it gives us modern day disciples—like the Twelve—the realization that, you know what, we miss it a lot of times—and it’s OK. Jesus is still going to work with us, He’s still going to walk with us, through our failings and our moments of greatness.

So, throughout the book, Mark is teasing, concealing, and revealing hints and clues all along the way about Christ—and what he does is slowly unveil the mystery of the Messiah, and it culminates most powerfully when the Roman centurion at the crucifixion declares, “Surely this man was the Son of God.”

Mark concludes his gospel in a very unusual manner, it’s open-ended. We’re only told that Christ has risen from the dead—the risen Christ doesn’t appear in the gospel as He does in the other three gospels. And so our job is to take the baton from Mark and finish the story by telling the good news, of not only Christ’s crucifixion, but of His resurrection.

So let’s hear now, a very intriguing, cryptic passage from Mark, Chapter 2, verses 18-22.

**Scripture: Mark 2:18-22 (NRSV)**

Now John’s disciples and the Pharisees were fasting; and people came and said to Jesus, “Why do John’s disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?” Jesus said to them, “The wedding guests cannot fast while the bridegroom is with them, can they? 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 on that day.

“No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old cloak; otherwise, the patch pulls away from it, the new from the old, and a worse tear is made. And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise, the wine will burst the skins, and the wine is lost, and so are the skins; but one puts new wine into fresh wineskins.”

***The grass withers and the flower fades,  
but the Word of God endures forever.***

## SERMON – Mark 2: New Wineskins

One of my absolute favorite science fair projects that our kids have done was my son Luke's experiment several years ago when he was in elementary school. And he wanted to measure how high Mentos can make Coke shoot into the air. So I've got a little slow-motion video of it for you to fully appreciate the sheer force of the eruption.

- Play "Coke bottle exploding from Mentos candy" video.

Pretty cool, huh? I want to be a scientist when I grow up.

The Messiah in the world is a lot like Mentos in Coca Cola. Jesus' presence is dynamic, eruptive, and sometimes disruptive. The new wine of Jesus has a way of rupturing the old wineskins of human rituals, ruts, and rule books. Jesus wouldn't, Jesus couldn't fit the mold of the Messiah that the people were expecting Him to fill. Jesus is not only out of the box, he's unorthodox.

Now the disciples of both the Pharisees and the disciples of John the Baptist just didn't know what to make of Jesus and His disciples. Jesus was always going against the grain of societal conventions and He was always going against the flow of the religious establishment of the day.

And so the Pharisees and John the Baptist's followers, they were very spiritual. They were extremely disciplined in their faith, they were very pious, they fasted not only on the Day of Atonement that all good practicing Jews would fast upon, but they fasted every Monday and Thursday, every single week without fail. But not Jesus and his disciples. They went from one dinner party to the next. They hung out with an unsavory crowd—with tax collectors and with sinners. And so Jesus was a force to be reckoned with and he couldn't be confined or constricted or contained by the old order or the cherished systems or expectations of the day. And so, throughout the gospel of Mark, there is a push and a pull going on between the old and the new and Jesus decided that it was time to shake the proverbial can of soda, and there was an explosion that was about to take place.

Now in the Hebrew Scriptures God is spoken of as the groom and Israel as God's bride. So to answer the question about fasting, Jesus did something very revolutionary—he spoke of himself, not God, as the groom, and his disciples were the wedding party—they were the groomsmen and the bridesmaids. And so He said, my followers aren't fasting because this is not the season of fasting, it's a season of feasting.

You see, there was a Rabbinic Rule of Thumb for wedding receptions: All in attendance of the bridegroom, said the Rabbis, are relieved of all religious observances which would lessen their joy—and fasting is one of those. So if the disciples wouldn't fast at an actual wedding banquet, why would they fast when the bridegroom Jesus was in their midst? In other words, now is the time to party. Don't be a party pooper.

Now in the first part of our Scripture, Jesus is telling us that we need to be able to discern the seasons that we find ourselves in. There are seasons of fasting where we repent, where we abstain, where you mourn the loss of a loved one, or exile, or the destruction of the temple, or to avert judgment. But this, Jesus was saying, was not a time or a season for fasting. This was a season for feasting.

Feasting was rooted in something entirely different, it's in celebration, it's in festival, it's in parties. Enjoy the moment, Jesus is saying, look ahead, look forward—don't look back on the past of your regrets. Renewal is here, restoration, new life, living hope is here now in Me. God has fulfilled our promises and our longings in the coming Messiah! Let the good times roll!

You see it's easy to think that we're most spiritual in our lives when we're denying ourselves, when we're sacrificing, and generally having a miserable time and making everyone else around us miserable. We feel smug about our self-denial and our very long "TO DON'T LISTS."

Jesus is saying life is so much more than a "don't do this, can't do that" existence. The new wine that Jesus gives is more about what you do do, rather than what you don't do.

Jesus is saying it is spiritual to rejoice, to give thanks, to receive the free gift of abundant life. In other words, live it up, church. You see if Jesus and his disciples fasted right now, it would be like them sewing a new patch on an old cloak or pouring new wine into old wineskins. It's an inappropriate mixing of the old and the new. It's not fitting, it's not going to work, it's gonna make a big mess. You would lose both the new wine and the old wineskin if you think and act that way.

Now, in this very cryptic passage, Jesus seems to be talking about the eventual parting of ways between Judaism and the followers of Jesus. But I think that the passage goes even deeper, and I think that Jesus is asking us today, will we be open to the new things God is doing? Jesus challenges us today, not just folks back then, but today. Now is the time to break the fast, says Jesus. Drink deep of My cup of my salvation! Don't die of spiritual thirst—when the cup of Christ's new wine is filled to the brim and it's right in front of you! Don't love your forms more than you love Jesus. They're not the same thing. But right when we think we've got Jesus pegged—he cryptically says something else. He says but there will be a time of fasting in the future—when the bridegroom is taken away from the party. Jesus is alluding to His impending death and His crucifixion. Jesus knew the season that He was in, that this was kind of a spiritual August. It was summertime, but He knew that winter was coming. But the good news is that He came back from the grave. He is with us now. Life has returned. We can rejoice evermore.

I think what Jesus is saying in this very unusual passage is that we need to know what time it is in our lives.

- We need to know whether it is a time to fast ... or if it's a time to feast.
- We need to know if it's a time to work ... or if it's a time to worship.
- We need to know if it's a time to be grieve ... or if it's a time to be glad.
- We need to know if it's a time for ritual ... or if it's a time for revolution.
- If it's a time for tradition ... or if it's a time for transformation.

You see, wisdom understands the time, wisdom understands the timing, and wisdom understands how to appropriately take action for such a time as this.

For example, think about the upcoming season of Lent. Lent is a time of repentance and fasting—but that's not the whole story. Every Sunday in Lent is a reprieve from the fasting. Sunday is a time for feasting and festival in the midst of fasting in the season of Lent The fasting stops and the feast

starts on the Lord's Day because of the resurrection. Lent is not only a season of solemnity, but it's a season of celebration—even before Easter.

Some people who have gotten married in the season of Lent, purposely choose to get married on Sunday, so everyone could celebrate at the wedding reception. You've got to know what season you're in, Jesus is saying.

Wisdom is also courageous enough to discern, not only what season it is, but when the time is ripe for a radical change—to go for it, even if you might experience some heat or get criticism or misunderstanding for doing it.

Even if you have to give up something that you're quite accustomed to or that you've grown to love over the years, to be willing to give that up if it's going to further the kingdom.

The Ancient of Days is perpetually doing a new thing—yet we human beings, I think a lot of times, approach this newness with fear and trepidation. We're scared by something that's new because we don't know what it is. We're creatures of habit, we like our creature comforts. But Jesus doesn't care about that. He beckons us. He says to us: be a new, living new wineskin in your life.

Be a flexible container for My new wine. Keep an open, and adventurous, and curious, and child-like, and discerning mind. Weenagers, tweenagers, teenagers, middle-agers, keenagers, I don't care what age you are, pray for flexibility in your thinking, pray for a plasticity of faith that expands with the fermentation of Christ's new wine. Regularly practice the spiritual discipline of play to keep in touch with your inner child of God. Have the attitude, have the mindset of Christ—and think outside the bottle. Shake off your religious and rust and your religious rut. Stop playing it safe spiritually. Be open to improvising in your faith, rather than only reciting your faith by rote.

Now there are sins of vice, we know about those, but there are sins of virtue. Sins of virtue are fasting when you're supposed to be feasting. Sins of virtue are sitting out when you're supposed to be jumping in, or judging when you're supposed to be jubilating—that's a no-no. It's a sin to keep nice and clean and safe and pristine, when you're supposed to be out in the wild, getting some dirt under your fingernails.

You see it's fear, it's fear that causes us to see the new as merely the loss of the old. But courage, but faith, trust that Christ's new wine will slake our spiritual thirst and that Christ's new cloak is gonna clothe our spiritual raggedness.

So, don't try to jam Jesus into your musty modes of thinking and your worn out ways of working. Don't love your forms more than Jesus, they're not one and the same. Surrender control and give it to God. Let God accomplish God's work in God's own way and in God's own timing in you. Rid yourself of a static, stiff, stuck, and settled spirituality. Let the Savior save you from the same old, same old.

See Immanuel, we're not just Reformed--past tense, we are Reforming Christians, present tense. We're Reformed and being Reformed by the Holy Spirit. You see this is important. Jesus isn't talking about some willy-nilly, boundary-less existence here. Wineskins are still needed! OK? You still need

containers to hold and transport the new wine. But be an open vessel, uncork yourself, be ready to be filled by the Holy Spirit and then poured out for His service.

There are still boundaries, just new boundaries, new duties, new practices that are fitting to the new thing that God is doing in our midst for such a time as this. Now not all changes are good changes—it takes a discerning palate to decide what's a tasteful change and what are just sour grapes or grapes of wrath.

Jesus, in the gospel according to John, turned the water into what? Wine. Jesus used, He fulfilled, and transformed the water of the law to bring about something new and different—His new wine of the gospel. Paul describes it this way in 2 Corinthians when he says this:

So if anyone is in Christ, they are a new creation, everything old has passed away, see, everything has become new!

And so Immanuel, my prayer for you is this:

May God give you, may God give us, wisdom as we discern what to cherish ... and what to chuck. When to hold to the old, and when to sew the new. What to mend ... and what to mend or just end.

I know it's morning here, but can I propose a toast Immanuel? May the new wine of Christ ferment in us and stretch us and expand us. May we become better with age—like fine wine, as we joyfully savor and share Jesus' new wine, not just amongst ourselves, but with the world! Cheers! Here here!

**Amen.**

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