

A WEDDING CELEBRATION

A Meditation on Mark 2:18-20

Erma Bombeck tells how she was sitting in church one Sunday when a little girl turned around and began to smile at the people behind her. She was just smiling, without talking or being disruptive. When her mother noticed, she whispered, “Stop that grinning—you’re in church,” gave her a swat, and then said, “That’s better!” Erma concluded that some people come to church looking like they had just read the will of their rich aunt and learned that she had given everything to her pet hamster. This is all backwards.

We read in Mark’s gospel: “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?” (Mk. 2:18). It’s possible that this question was posed as Jesus and His disciples were reclining at the table at Levi’s house (see Mk. 2:15-17). Perhaps some were jealous, because Jesus and His disciples were enjoying themselves a little too much (Jesus was known for enjoying a party, Matt. 11:19). Evidently, John’s disciples and the Pharisees’ disciples were observing a fast. The Scriptures commanded fasting only once a year (on the Day of Atonement, which was a national day of repentance and forgiveness, Lev. 16). But by Jesus’ time, the Pharisees had decreed that godly people should fast twice a week—every Monday and Thursday. Keep in mind that while the spiritual discipline of fasting is not a regular habit for the average Christian today, in the first century it was one of the three pillars of Judaism along with prayer and almsgiving. To the Jews fasting was not an irrelevant or peripheral issue.

Jesus responded to their query, ““Can the wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them? As long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast”” (vs. 19). Fasting is equated with sorrow. Matthew’s parallel account makes this clear: “Can the wedding guests *mourn* as long as the bridegroom is with them?” (Matt. 9:15). Fasting and sadness go together, while feasting and gladness go together. And Jesus came to bring gladness, not sadness into our lives with the coming of His presence.

In the picture Jesus paints for us, He is the groom, and His disciples are the guests invited to a wedding banquet. To better appreciate this picture, it will help to consider its Jewish setting: “A wedding celebration in a Jewish village normally lasted seven days for a virgin bride or three days for a re-married widow. Friends and guests had no responsibility but to enjoy the festivities. There was an abundance of food and wine, as well as song, dance, and fun both in the house and on the street. Even rabbis were expected to desist from Torah instruction and join the celebration with their students. ‘The guests of the bridegroom’... pictures the gathering of the wedding party, waiting impatiently to eat. Any thought of fasting at such a moment is out of the question!” (James Edwards, *Mark*, p. 89).

Jesus goes on to say, ““The days will come when the bride-groom is taken away from them, and then they will fast in that day”” (Mk. 2:20). It’s shocking that the bridegroom is “taken away” from the guests. Normally, in Jewish culture, it is the guests who leave the bride and groom to begin their new life together. Also, notice that the groom doesn’t just leave, but is forcefully taken away and removed from his own wedding celebration. Jesus is hinting at His coming crucifixion, which He later speaks about plainly (Mk. 8:31, 9:31, 10:33-34). In that day they will fast and mourn. But their sorrow will turn into joy when they see the groom again, and no one will be able to take their joy from them (Jn. 16:20, 22).

John the Baptist had already announced that Jesus was the bridegroom. He said, “You yourselves can testify that I said, ‘I am not the Christ but am sent ahead of him.’ The bride belongs to the bride-groom. The friend who attends the bridegroom waits and listens for him, and is full of joy when he hears the bridegroom’s voice. That joy is mine, and it is now complete” (Jn. 3:28-29, NIV).

As Christians, the analogy of a wedding feast is even more profound, because we are not merely the invited guests of the groom, we are the bride of Christ. This metaphor of God as the husband and His people as His bride began in the Old Testament. “For your Maker is your husband, the LORD of hosts is his name” (Isa. 54:5). By referring to Himself as the bridegroom, Jesus was not identifying Himself with a prophecy concerning the coming Messiah, but with the person of God Almighty, who has come for His bride. This is cause for celebration, and should fill our churches with exuberant joy.

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