

# Making All Things New

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One of the most stirring things that God ever says appears in Revelation 21:5, where He declares, “Behold, I make all things new.” In many ways, this is a stirring promise. Who of us doesn’t like new things? More seriously, as Christians, we anticipate the time when our bodies will be renewed to eternal life.

However, there are some implications here that we don’t give as much thought to. When God makes all things new, He makes *all* things new. He restores them to the place where He, as the Creator, knows they ought to be. This can be a problem for us if we prefer things just the way they are.

Indeed, it was a problem for the Pharisees when they encountered Jesus, who was God made flesh. When Jesus tried to renew their spiritual understanding, they resisted ferociously. Of course, as much as we decry the Pharisees’ conduct, it’s easy for us to fall into the trap of being like them, of being more concerned with our familiar ways of thinking than with Jesus. This morning, then, let’s consider three stories that illustrate both the positive and the unfortunate consequences of Jesus making all things new.

## Tradition

All of these stories appear in Mark 2-3, and as I consider them together, it looks to me like Mark intends for us to consider them as a unit. The first story illustrates Jesus’ renewal of tradition, and it begins with **A QUESTION ABOUT FASTING**. Let’s read from Mark 2:18. This question provides us with a convenient opportunity to discuss the issue of fasting in general, which is one that Christians often wonder about. Nowhere in Scripture, neither in the Old nor the New Testament, are God’s people ever commanded to fast. However, fasting was often practiced by God’s people under both covenants.

By the time of Christ, fasting had become an important part of the Pharisaical display of piety. The Pharisee in Jesus’ parable in Luke 18 fasted twice a week in order to establish his own righteousness. In Matthew 6, Jesus condemns the hypocrites among the Pharisees who sought to impress men by making sure that everybody knew they were fasting. In Luke 7, Jesus describes John as one who came neither eating nor drinking, probably a reference to fasting, and apparently John taught his disciples to fast.

Fasting, then, was a part of Jewish religious culture, and the Pharisees thought they could score points on Jesus by indicating that His disciples didn’t follow the trend and fast themselves.

For disciples of Jesus today, the question of fasting is one of individual conscience. We’re never told that we must fast, but it is still true that Christians both in the first century and today have benefited from fasting. Nonetheless, there are still plenty of reasons why we might consider fasting and choose not to. For instance, I myself am hypoglycemic, and I have more than enough issues with blood sugar on days when I eat three meals that the last thing I need to do is stop eating! Fasting for me wouldn’t be spiritually useful, because my brain stops working when my blood sugar drops, and it might even be dangerous. This is not an area in which there are hard-and-fast rules. Instead, each one of us should consider what is best for us.

Jesus replies to the Pharisees’ question with an illustration about **THE BRIDEGROOM**. It appears in Mark 2:19-20. As Jesus often does, He here compares His ministry to a wedding feast. Jesus is the bridegroom, and His disciples are the friends of the bridegroom. Wedding feasts were an important part of Jewish culture, and they would often last for days. They were a time for feasting and celebration, and it would have been inappropriate, if not outright insulting, for a friend of the bridegroom to fast during the feast. After the bridegroom had gone on his way, then there would be plenty of time for fasting. In the same way, Jesus implies, His disciples would have plenty of time to fast later, but not while He was around.

With this simple little story, Jesus gives us a primer on how to deal with human tradition. As we’ve already observed, the fasting of the Pharisees was a tradition they came up with themselves. There’s nothing innately wrong with that, nor is there anything necessarily wrong with any other human tradition. In the Joliet church, we have all kinds of human traditions that we don’t even think of as traditions. For instance, on Sunday mornings, we traditionally hold Bible classes before our worship assembly. I’d imagine the church here has been doing that for decades, and it’s a perfectly legitimate use of our liberty in Christ.

However, when we consider our traditions, we must be careful to apply the same analysis that Jesus does. Notice that Jesus never condemns the Pharisees for fasting. Instead, He argues that the circumstances of His ministry make it inappropriate for His disciples to fast.

In the same way, friends, we must ask whether our traditions are expedient as well as customary. God's word is eternal, but our human traditions, which are founded only on our human wisdom, may well cease to be useful. If that's the case, we need to replace our traditional practice with one that is more suitable.

For instance, a few years back, we in the Joliet church examined our traditional practice of Sunday-evening services and decided that the time had come to end that tradition. With the large number of members here who live half an hour or more from the building, it didn't make sense to continue it. There's not a thing wrong with churches that continue to meet on Sunday evenings, any more than there was anything wrong with the Pharisees fasting. It just wasn't the right choice for us anymore.

Jesus explores the subject further with a brief discussion of **CLOTH AND WINESKINS**. Let's read from Mark 2:21-22. Because we rarely patch cloth, and we never store wine in wineskins, this might not make a whole lot of sense to us. Here's the deal: Cloth shrinks when you wash it, so if you patch a hole in an old garment with brand-new cloth, the old clothing is going to stay the same size, but the patch will shrink. As it shrinks, because it's stitched into the old clothing, it's going to try to take that old clothing with it, with the result that the patch will tear an even bigger hole in the mended garment. Likewise, old wineskins have already had must fermented in them, and the fermentation process expels gases, so the gases have stretched the old skins out. If you put new must in the old skins, must that hasn't fermented yet, it's going to stretch out those old skins even more. They don't have any give left, so they're just going to blow up.

However, as we interpret this illustration, we have to be careful. Jesus here is not talking about traditions that directly contradict God's word. We'll get to those problems in a couple of sections. Instead, he's talking about traditions that have passed the point of usefulness and are interfering with the effectiveness of the gospel. For instance, if Jesus' disciples had fasted—which would not have been inherently wrong—it would still have been inappropriate while Jesus was with them. The tradition was no longer optimal.

In the same way, friends, we must be wary today of clinging too long to tradition. When we're making decisions about our individual spiritual lives, or about the church, it's easy to see the challenges that come with change. However, it's less easy for us to see the problems that come with not changing. We're used to our traditions; we're comfortable with them, but that very comfort often keeps us from seeing that a practice that used to be effective no longer is. Change can be painful, but it is often necessary if we want to be the best disciples we can be and the best church that we can be. When our inclination is to dig in our heels against change, we must make sure that we're resisting because it's a bad idea, not because it's new.

### **Traditional Readings**

The next interaction between Jesus and the Pharisees exposes some of the dangers with thoughtless adherence to traditional readings of Scripture. This particular story begins with **ANOTHER QUESTION**. It appears in Mark 2:23-24. Once again, the Pharisees are trying to use the disciples of Jesus to discredit Him. Interestingly enough, the accusation once again has to do with eating. Jesus and His disciples are marching through a grainfield on the Sabbath, and as the disciples are walking, they pluck heads of grain and eat them. This is not some kind of concerted effort to harvest the grainfield. It's just something to do while you walk.

The Pharisees, however, see this and start jumping up and down and pointing. Their accusation this time is not that the disciples are violating tradition, but that they are violating the Law of Moses itself by working on the Sabbath. To me, it is not obvious that the disciples are working at all. They're certainly investing much more energy in walking than they are in grain-plucking. However, the Pharisees had a massive list of thou-shalts and thou-shalt-nots for the Sabbath, and this probably violated one of them.

The lesson here is plain. Just because we say something is right and cite a Scripture in support doesn't necessarily mean that we're right. All of us are aware that people make bad arguments from the Bible all the time. If I cherry-pick the right passages and read them the right way, I can probably use the Bible to prove just about anything. Of course, I wouldn't deliberately set out to use the Bible to mislead, and I don't think anybody else here would either, but if we sincerely believe in and advance a mistaken interpretation of Scripture, the results are equally bad. Unless we want to end up like the Pharisees, we must be careful!

The way that Jesus responds to the Pharisees' accusation, though, is fascinating. He doesn't directly argue with them about whether picking grain on the Sabbath is working. He knows that a direct contradiction would just produce a meaningless round of is-not-is-too, like the way my children argue.

Instead, he implicitly accepts that picking grain *is* working, but turns to **A BIBLICAL EXAMPLE** to work out what that means. He does this in Mark 2:25-26. The story to which the Lord refers is not one of the headliners of the Old Testament. Instead, it's just a little snippet in the beginning of 1 Samuel 21 that we would probably pay no attention to if Jesus hadn't cited it. Let's go there now: 1 Samuel 21:1-6.

Basically, David has just fled for his life from the presence of Saul. He wasn't planning to go on a journey, so he's on the run with nothing more than the clothes on his back. He makes his way to Nob, which is where the tabernacle is currently located. There, he asks Ahimelech the priest for food, but Ahimelech doesn't have anything but the bread that he had recently taken from the table of the showbread in the tabernacle, where it had been presented to the Lord.

Interestingly enough, just like plucking grain on the Sabbath is a gray area, eating the old showbread is a gray area. I was not able to find a single passage in the Old Testament that revealed what should be done with the showbread. Nonetheless, just like Jesus accepted the Pharisees' hardline reading about the Sabbath, He adopts a hardline reading here. He flat-out says it wasn't lawful for David and his companions to eat the showbread, even though back in 1 Samuel 21, David argues that the old showbread had become common.

This is really clever of Jesus. The Pharisees can't argue with His restrictive reading of what should be done with the showbread, because if they do, they open the door for Him to argue that they're being inconsistent. They have to accept it. They have to agree that David shouldn't have eaten the showbread, and yet David did. David was neither accused of sin for this nor punished for it, so clearly God has approved of what the Pharisees would have called sin.

Jesus' explanation is one of necessity. David was allowed to do what he otherwise could not do because he was hungry and in need. It was either eat or starve. In the same way, Jesus' disciples would be allowed to pick grain and eat as they were walking because they were hungry.

There are a couple of applications for this. The first is that we should follow Jesus' approach to understanding the word. We should always use Scripture to interpret Scripture. Some Scriptural interpretations sound reasonable by themselves, but once we start examining them in the light shed by different passages, those interpretations don't hold up. A valid Scriptural position isn't only plausible on its face. It is also consistent with the Scriptural truth taught in other places.

Second, this passage teaches that general Scriptural rules may be modified by immediate human need. For instance, we know that generally speaking, we ought to assemble with the saints on Sunday morning. However, if we're on our way to services and we see somebody broken down by the side of the road, we should stop and help them. Yes, the assembly is important, but people are more important.

Likewise, we know that our church building is not a homeless shelter, and we have no authority to spend the Lord's money on works of general benevolence. However, if, God forbid, a massive tornado were to sweep through Joliet, and our bunker of a church building were one of the few structures left standing, it would be appropriate for us to open the doors and let people from the community seek shelter inside rather than demanding that they sleep outside amid the ruins. Their need would override the general rule.

Jesus concludes His answer with a double-barrelled explanation of **HOW TO READ THE BIBLE**. Read with me from Mark 2:27-28. Here, we're really looking at two different ideas. The first is Jesus' reminder that the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. In other words, it's not the day that's important. It's the people.

This is both important and easy to forget. From time to time, I've been known to joke about how wonderful the church would be if it didn't have people in it, and there's a sense in which that's true. We take God's perfect plan and mess it up with our laziness, foolishness, and sometimes downright evil. However, it is also true that without people, the church wouldn't even exist. God's plan for the church is for us, not in spite of us. We should always remember, then, to read the Bible in a way that leaves room for human beings. It was, after all, written by One who is mindful of our frame, who knows us better than we know ourselves.

Second, though, even after advancing all these well-reasoned arguments, Jesus asserts His authority. What He says about the Sabbath goes because He is Lord of the Sabbath, and implicitly Lord of everything else too. We also need to keep this in mind as we read. It's important for us to reason with the word, to ask

“Why?”, to explore the logical underpinnings of God’s commandments. However, we cannot demand an explanation before we obey. Even if we don’t get it, God’s commandments are still God’s commandments. He has the right to tell us what to do and expect us to do it. Obedience is always the bottom line.

### **Tradition or Jesus?**

The third and final story we’ll consider this morning concerns the choice between tradition and Jesus. This story begins with **A TRAP** laid by the Pharisees. Mark explains in Mark 3:1-2. Of all the traps ever laid by mankind, this might be one of the silliest. Basically, the Pharisees are saying to each other, “Let’s see if we can get Him to use His miraculous power on the Sabbath so that we can use our traditions to prove that He isn’t really from God.” In other words, they thought their traditions had more weight than a miracle. Jesus could not have asked for a better setup to expose their hypocrisy, but they do it to themselves.

This is an illustration of a category I mentioned earlier—human traditions that directly contradict the will of God. In Jesus’ day, the conflict was tradition v. miracle. In our day, it’s tradition v. Bible. There are thousands of churches out there that do things every Sunday that the Bible does not allow—because those practices are their tradition. That to me, friends, is the essence of Pharisaism. The Pharisees’ big problem wasn’t that they were legalists. It was that they set their own traditions up as binding on everybody and clung to those traditions, even in the face of supernatural evidence that they were wrong. Other churches do this, and we could very well end up doing it too. We must constantly evaluate our practices against the word.

Jesus replies to the Pharisees with **A QUESTION**. Consider with me Mark 3:3-4. Once again, let’s evaluate the logic underlying Jesus’ words here. It’s not like Jesus is asking this question because He doesn’t know the answer and is looking for understanding. Instead, He’s asking the Pharisees to evaluate the consistency of their traditions. The answer to His question is certainly “Yes”. As Jesus points out elsewhere, the Pharisees were perfectly willing to rescue a child or even a farm animal from a ditch on the Sabbath, despite all the hard work involved in hauling them out. However, they were perfectly willing to say that a man who needed healing shouldn’t be healed on the Sabbath. They were inconsistent.

Today, we should always be vigilant for inconsistencies in the way that others read Scripture, and indeed in the way that we read it ourselves. Let me give you one example. Many other churches will use instruments of music to worship in their assemblies, and they also ask their members to tithe, or give 10 percent of their income. In both of these things, they turn for authority to the Law of Moses, under which the Israelites undeniably did use musical instruments and tithe.

However, this appeal to Moses for authority is inconsistent. None of these churches offer animal sacrifices in their assemblies, as the Israelites did under the Law. None of them use priests and Levites to officiate in their services, although that was certainly the practice in Old-Testament times. They are inconsistent in their use of the Law. They appeal to it when it appears to justify something they want to do, but they ignore it the rest of the time. Really, their judgment becomes the standard, not God’s word.

Of course, this can easily be us too. We can easily read the Scripture with a desired outcome in mind and sketch in the readings needed to reach that outcome. Then, we can close our minds to the other interpretive problems created by our slanted readings. That might satisfy us, but it won’t satisfy God. Instead, we have to make sure that we read the word consistently, always asking, “But what about this?”

The Pharisees’ trap, though, leads to **TWO OUTCOMES**. Mark explains in Mark 3:5-6. The Pharisees recognize that Jesus will catch them out no matter how they answer His question, so they don’t answer. This disgusts Jesus, who goes ahead and heals the man anyway. Unsurprisingly, this doesn’t change any minds either. Now the Pharisees are angry that Jesus dared to heal, so they plot to destroy Him.

Really, the story hasn’t changed much today. Jesus is Lord. He lays down the law, and He expects us to obey Him. We have two choices. We can come to Jesus, or we can stay where we are. Maybe we love human traditions like the Pharisees did. Maybe we just love sin. It doesn’t matter. If we come to Jesus, we will find healing like the man with the withered hand did. However, if we put anything else first, no matter what it may be, we set ourselves up as His enemies, and that’s a fight that can have only one outcome. Before the Lord’s Supper, let’s think about this. We call Jesus Lord, but is that how we live? Let’s ask as we partake.