

## THE INCOMPARABLE GOSPEL

Mk. 2:18 And the disciples of John and of the Pharisees used to fast: and they come and say unto him, Why do the disciples of John and of the Pharisees fast, but thy disciples fast not? <sup>19</sup> And Jesus said unto them, Can the children of the bridechamber fast, while the bridegroom is with them? as long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast. <sup>20</sup> But the days will come, when the bridegroom shall be taken away from them, and then shall they fast in those days. <sup>21</sup> No man also seweth a piece of new cloth on an old garment: else the new piece that filled it up taketh away from the old, and the rent is made worse. <sup>22</sup> And no man putteth new wine into old bottles: else the new wine doth burst the bottles, and the wine is spilled, and the bottles will be marred: but new wine must be put into new bottles.

The theme behind our study is the absolute uniqueness of the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ ... and from this absolute uniqueness comes the necessity to guard it and proclaim it. This Gospel of Saving Grace is the only means by which God's justice has been satisfied. It is, therefore, altogether precious.

When we were studying theology in college there was a clearer line of distinction between what was known as 'evangelical' theology, - theology that was based upon the teachings of the Bible, - and 'liberal' or 'modernist' theology, which interpreted the Bible with flexibility and accommodation. The liberals and the modernists removed anything considered too harsh, and replaced it with a more comfortable interpretation. Through this means, religion became more focussed on the 'worshipper', rather than on God.

Gradually, religion has come to be more *inclusive*. That's to say, there is nothing wrong with what another person believes ... it is simply how they see it, and so it must be accepted. Religion is no longer to be defined by doctrines ... because doctrines divide. Instead religion is defined by how a person chooses to perceive it for themselves. For example, in this month's issue of the Church of Scotland's magazine, *Life and Work*, the Moderator of the General Assembly, Rev. Dr. John Chalmers, has written concerning bringing people into membership of the church, he cautions, "Don't insist on belief". Now, God's Word says, Jn. 3:16 For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life ... Jn. 1:12 But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name ... Acts 16:31 Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved ... Rom. 10:9 That if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved ... But no, this leading churchman advises us that if we want to get people into our churches, "Don't insist on belief".

He went on to highlight someone he greatly admires even though this person has "an intellectual rejection of the doctrines and dogmas" of the faith ...

In other words, they do not believe the Bible to be God's truth in order to be a Christian. If you like, they can be a believer, without believing! He writes, they can "love the liturgy, the ritual, the beautiful expression of Christian ideas, without accepting the doctrine" [<http://www.scotsman.com/news/john-chalmers-doctrine-getting-in-way-of-faith-1-3474850>] ... In other words, - again, - believe what you like. God will let you be a Christian anyway! Mind you, it is totally contradictory to the call to uphold the sound doctrine Paul wrote about in I Tim. 1:10, II Tim. 4:3, Titus 1:9, and Titus 2:1.

Anyhow, that doesn't bother these folk because, in an effort to satisfy as many as possible religion is being developed to become *inclusive* ... and that is why we have people of different faiths sharing "Thoughts for Today", and the like. There has been a surge in such nefarious and chamaleonic religionists.

However, as far as the teaching of the Bible is concerned, the Gospel is *exclusive*, because it excludes all attempts at achieving salvation through any other means, whether they be religions or philosophies. Biblical Christianity cannot *blend* into, – and accommodate, - any other religious system or belief. Salvation through Christ alone is absolutely unique, for He Himself emphasised, [Jn. 14:6 I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me.](#) There is no mingling, and there is no mixing with the Gospel for the Gospel is pure, perfect, matchless, and *exclusive*.

This needs to be stated very explicitly today because we are surrounded by the religious minions of all colours and creeds, denominations and beliefs of various shapes and sizes who exalt diversity of belief, which is a smokescreen for exalting individuality leaving it open for everyone to believe what they like, and that everything has equal merit. However, true Biblical Christianity is seriously at odds with such a premise! ... *It* teaches there is only one God, one Lord, one Saviour, one remedy for sin through Him, and one Bible that is God's inspired revelation ... That is the truth ... and God is the only Source of that truth!

Jesus has only recently commenced what would be known as His 3½ year public ministry and already He has attracted the hostility of the Pharisees and the religious leaders ... for they did not like what He was saying.

In Mk. 2:18-22 the group we regularly hone in on is the Pharisees. It was the religion of Judaism that was consistently incompatible with the Gospel of Christ. These religious leaders demonstrated most vociferously this as a fact.

Judaism had blinded their eyes so they would refuse to recognise Jesus, Jn. 1:10 He was in the world, and the world was made by him, and the world knew him not. <sup>11</sup> He came unto his own, and his own received him not.

Jesus has recently called Levi to be His disciple (v.14). Levi was a tax-collector ... the lowest of the low. No way would God's grace include a man like him! ... That's how the Pharisees believed, and they would not give any credence whatsoever to the notion Jesus was justified in calling this man. It was completely beyond the bounds of their understanding and tolerance. They wouldn't accept it! ... They didn't say anything openly, but that was what they believed (v.16).

... *That was what they believed* so, what Jesus did was *contrary to what they believed!* Jesus had carried out a flagrant breach of righteous separation! Therefore, they would have concluded, the religious view that Jesus was presenting was wrong, fatally flawed ... and they would have nothing to do with it, - they would not accept what Jesus would say from then on. ... Jesus was a 'marked man', and the Pharisees and Him were on opposite sides! In fact, it would come to the point where they would kill Him! In the early stages of Christ's ministry, they were the first to acknowledge the incompatibility between Judaism and the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Now, let's think about that again. In our own times, there is an overwhelming acceptance to receive all religions and philosophies. The so-called inter-church activities have graduated to include the inter-faith constituency. They coalesce and consolidate their opinions. It doesn't matter what they claimed to believe previously, they are all come together for the sake of unity and raise nothing that would offend the other. *However*, to them the Christianity of the Bible remains a 'pariah' because the Christianity of the Bible holds on to the old truths that have been faithfully passed down through the Church of Christ that believes God's Word. But that is no longer suitable to these people, because you cannot afford to believe anything too strongly in case it offends another.

Under this 'umbrella', other religions are afforded time and courtesy to give their opinions and are accepted as 'fellow-travellers on the same journey' ... but *not those* who earnestly believe that Jesus Christ is the only Saviour, and that the teachings of the Bible are the true teachings by which God's people are directed to conduct themselves. ... There is a huge divide!

This then means that the Christianity of the Bible becomes a threat ... and that is why open-air preachers are arrested for preaching the Gospel, Christian school teachers must withhold presenting their faith, Biblical creationism is not allowed to be taught in schools, bakers are told they must accommodate sexual perverts or face the courts, and B&B owners are condemned as guilty for upholding the honour of God's Word. ... What the Christian believes is increasingly at odds with the world! ... And similarly, when these Jewish leaders met Jesus on the northern shores of the Sea of Galilee, He was 'a world away' from the message they taught ... and He was a danger they had to eradicate! ... And that is why we ought not to be surprised if our message receives the same response, for the message of the Gospel is no Good News for the devil and his kind! He wants the Gospel silenced ... and that is why He put it into the minds of these Pharisees to remove the threat of Jesus.

Even today, it is sad, but here is one example of how the threat of Jesus continues to be managed in Judaism ... The 53<sup>rd</sup> chapter of Isaiah does not be read in synagogues. The usual excuse is that it has been hijacked and wrongly interpreted by the Christians. In the three-year annual cycle of reading through the Old Testament (Tanakh), chapter fifty-two is read followed immediately by chapter fifty-four. Such blindness is facilitated through stubborn self-imposed ignorance. It's sad! ... And these Pharisees who contended with Jesus were intent on denying everything He claimed. ... There is none so blind as those who do not want to see ... as those who *will* not see!

This same account is recorded in Mt. 9:14-17 and Lk. 5:33-39, and both these passages, - like Mk. 2:18-22, - set the incident within the context of Jesus declaring Himself to have the authority to forgive sin. This was completely contrary to the 'gospel' of the Pharisees who believed you had to work your way to salvation. So they could not help themselves inquiring of Jesus, [v.18 Why do the disciples of John and of the Pharisees fast, but thy disciples fast not?](#) ... Who do You think You are that You teach something so profoundly different from the rest of us?! ... This was not merely a question, this was a criticism! Jesus was violating their laws and traditions! ... But notice something else that is very significant. ...

It's not difficult to understand how the Pharisees hated Jesus so much ... but look at another group who are associated in this passage with the Pharisees. This group was the disciples of John the Baptist. Now John was Jesus' cousin. John was the man who declared in front of his own disciples and in front of all the people from near and far who came to the River Jordan *Jesus!*

He told them to repent of their sins and be baptised ... and when Jesus came along the riverbank, John was the man who declared Him to be the Lamb of God Who would take away the sin of the world (Jn. 1:29,36). ... John had even confessed to people how *he that cometh after me [i.e. Jesus] is mightier than I, whose shoes I am not worthy to bear (Mt. 3:11)*. ... *And yet* ... how sad that these disciples of John were associating with men so against Christ!

Now, notice what the Pharisees, - the enemy, - were doing ... Notice the subtleties of their plan. They were, - for this purpose, - aligning themselves with the disciples of John. ... On a number of occasions in the Gospels, they would consort with the Sadducees against Jesus. The Sadducees were heretics ... even by the standards of the Pharisees ... They were the wealthy class who influenced religion by holding the majority of the seventy seats in the Sanhedrin, they worked hard to keep in with the Romans, they didn't believe in a resurrection of the dead, nor in angels and demons ... They were a world apart from the disciples of John ... and yet, when it came to opposing Jesus, the Pharisees courted the disciples of John and had them on their side. ... The Pharisees 'stooped' to draw in the disciples of John the Baptist under their influence. These were much simpler folk ... who they lulled into standing alongside them against Jesus. ... How we need to watch our company!

But surely, the disciples of John the Baptist were followers of Christ? ... John the Baptist had clearly pointed his disciples to Jesus as the Lamb of the world, on that day when Jesus was baptised ... surely those disciples who had come from all over the country to the River Jordan to be baptised by John *shifted* to following Jesus? ... *No*, they didn't. Many of them continued to follow John.

Now, just for a moment, it is worthwhile to mention how a number of groups lived in similar wilderness communities to how John lived. There was a group, for example, down by the Dead Sea in a place called Qumran. ... They had withdrawn from society to seek out the most mystical elements of life. Similarly, there was another group called the Essenes ... and some commentators associate John the Baptist with the Essenes ... but I think it is more conjecture than fact. So, the point is ... there *were* other religious groups in the outlying areas similar to those who followed John the Baptist.

Something else too ... Often followers follow a man, rather than follow what he teaches. Many, - if not the majority, - of John's disciples would have followed him because of his eccentricities, his lifestyle ... yes, his message ...

but if you asked the disciples of John to sit and tell you what they actually believed and why, they would have found it difficult.

And that is how they did not automatically shift their allegiance from John the Baptist to the Messiah and begin to follow Him, but they kept on being disciples of John the Baptist. How can we say that? Well, turn to Acts 19:1, [And it came to pass, that, while Apollos was at Corinth, Paul having passed through the upper coasts came to Ephesus: and finding certain disciples,](#) <sup>2</sup> [He said unto them, Have ye received the Holy Ghost since ye believed? And they said unto him, We have not so much as heard whether there be any Holy Ghost.](#) <sup>3</sup> [And he said unto them, Unto what then were ye baptized? And they said, Unto John's baptism.](#) <sup>4</sup> [Then said Paul, John verily baptized with the baptism of repentance, saying unto the people, that they should believe on him which should come after him, that is, on Christ Jesus.](#) <sup>5</sup> [When they heard this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. ... Previously, they didn't even know of Jesus!](#)

So, the Pharisees had drawn the unsuspecting and, - dare-we-say slightly gullible, - disciples of John the Baptist into their fold *against* Jesus! The Pharisees were clever people, - they had the propensity to say one thing and mean something completely different to how you might take it. And the point is ... the disciples of John were on the wrong side because they shouldn't have taken sides with the Pharisees, but they did! They shouldn't have been counted along with the enemies of Christ, but they were ... no matter how innocent!

And so we come to these verses where these nice ordinary people are being used by the Pharisees to condemn Christ ... and, - something more, - the reason the Pharisees and the disciples of John asked Jesus why they fasted and Him and His disciples didn't, it was because they were still 'hanging on' to religious observances and empty traditions of men ... If you like, they had been lulled into thinking John's baptism made them into better Jews ... better Jews yet without the knowledge of Jesus, - it remained a religion without the relationship. They had only managed to take on board *some* of John the Baptist's teaching, and not it all, especially when it related to Jesus. There was nothing wrong with John the Baptist's teach ... but the whole truth of it hadn't completely penetrated the hearts and minds of these people yet.

It is like some sincere person telling you they belong to a particular denomination ... They are members of the church for they have been 'christened' or 'baptised', and they go along to the services and sing the

hymns and listen to what goes on, but they have no knowledge of Jesus as Saviour ... That was a similar category into which these disciples of John fell.

I would imagine they were more ‘innocent’ in their enquiry than the Pharisees, but nonetheless the devotion to their own religion of Judaism was very much to the fore ... spurred along by the devious Pharisees. Both John’s disciples and the Pharisees claimed to dutifully observe the religious traditions of men to do with fasting ... going without food. The disciples didn’t fast though! Why weren’t *they* fasting? v.18, *Why do the disciples of John and of the Pharisees fast, but thy disciples fast not?* It was a criticism, not an enquiry! John’s disciples and the Pharisees were fasting, but Jesus’ disciples weren’t, *why not?!*

Actually, there was only one fast required in the Old Testament. According to Lev. 16:29-31, *And this shall be a statute for ever unto you: that in the seventh month, on the tenth day of the month, ye shall afflict your souls, and do no work at all, whether it be one of your own country, or a stranger that sojourneth among you: <sup>30</sup> For on that day shall the priest make an atonement for you, to cleanse you, that ye may be clean from all your sins before the LORD. <sup>31</sup> It shall be a sabbath of rest unto you, and ye shall afflict [i.e. by fasting, anah] your souls, by a statute for ever. Fasting was required once a year on the Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur.*

However, there were many occasions in the Old Testament where people fasted voluntarily, and it was always connected with sorrow and heartache. Sometimes a fast would last a day, sometimes three days, or even seven. In fact, Moses fasted forty days, as did Jesus. The Pharisees had extended the concept of fasting to twice a week (Lk. 18:12), - Mondays and Thursdays. It wasn’t in the Scriptures ... but they had added it, to make themselves look good and ‘holier than thou’. Basically, it was hypocritical ... Paul described them as those who had the *desire to make a fair shew in the flesh* (Gal. 6:12). ... Their fasting was nothing to do with faithfulness to God ... it was exhibitionism! ... “Look at how good I am ... I am far better than you!”

And that was how they were judging Jesus! It is regrettable the disciples of John had ‘got caught up’ with these Pharisees, but that is the danger when you fall into the wrong company ...

That is why God’s faithful and saved people in churches today that compromise the Gospel should heed what Paul wrote, II Cor. 6:17 *come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you, <sup>18</sup> And will be a Father unto you, and ye shall be my sons and*

daughters, saith the Lord Almighty. ... God's people have no business with those who deny Him and His Word! ... John the Baptist's disciples should have stayed away from the Pharisees! The company you keep affects your progress in the Lord ... and the reason these disciples of John hadn't progressed was because they were still prone to keep company with Christ-deniers! Such associations stunt your growth!

We have gone far enough ... Let's stop here and consider the implications.

Where do I stand with the Lord? Do I stand firmly on His side, or am I prone to compromise ... or even share company with those who choose not to uphold His Word? Are there times when I even choose against God?! ... Do I know what I ought to do, but I don't do it? Even as a professing Christian, do I serve God or mammon ... or am I even trying to serve both?! God's Word says it is either one or the other for it cannot be both! [Josh. 24:15 choose you this day whom ye will serve](#) ... Christ *chose you*, believer. He stood apart for you, for the salvation of His people. He went to the cross because of His love for you ... and nothing held Him back from faithfully 'standing on your side' and carrying out the work to redeem your soul!

Where then do you stand with Him? He gave Himself for you ... Have you given all of yourself back to Him? Is He your Saviour *and* Lord? Fanny Crosby wrote, "Take the world, but give me Jesus. In His cross my trust shall be, Till, with clearer, brighter vision, Face to face my Lord I see." Amen.