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## **“A Superior Savior” Mark 2:18-22**

### **Introduction**

The theme of this section of Mark's gospel could well be called “collisions.” If you have ever been in a collision in your life, you know that it can be alarming, jolting, and unnerving. Collisions are not something that we seek after, except maybe if you enter a demolition derby or go ride the bumper cars at your favorite amusement park.

The collisions I am talking about though are not between vehicles but between Jesus and a group of religious leaders known as the Pharisees. What is remarkable about these collisions is to watch how Jesus responds to each one. His responses are life-changing. It really is a pleasure to see the winsomeness and strength Jesus demonstrates in these collisions. This is the beauty of the gospels. Those who take seriously the challenge of reading the gospels will be drawn to Jesus, the Messiah. The more we watch him and the more others see Him respond to crisis, the more radically right our lives will become. In these collisions, we see something life-giving, hope-giving, grace-giving in Christ.

The first collision Mark records between Jesus and the religious leaders was when he healed a paralyzed man—not only physically but also spiritually. Jesus claims authority to forgive sin, which makes Him God, and the Pharisees strenuously object to this. I

The second collision happens when Jesus calls Levi, one of the worst kinds of sinners, to be his devoted follower. Levi responds to Jesus' call of salvation and he invites all kinds of social and spiritual outcasts to a huge banquet and he invites Jesus to eat with these money-grabbing, people-hating, fornicating extortioners. This sent the assiduously religious and tradition-keeping Pharisees into orbit as they asked Jesus' disciples, “Why does He eat with tax-collectors and sinners?”

So as Jesus leaves the feasting with sinners, he and the Pharisees collide again: this time over fasting. Here's how it unfolds: *“Now John's disciples and the Pharisees were fasting. And people came and said to him, “Why do John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?” And Jesus said to them, “Can the wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them? 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 in that day. No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old garment. If he does, the patch tears away from it, the new from the old, and a worse tear is made. And no one puts new wine into old wineskins. If he does, the wine will burst the skins—and the wine is destroyed, and so are the skins. But new wine is for fresh wineskins.” ” (Mark 2:18–22)*

This collision is over the exclusivity of the gospel—how that it can't be mixed with any other religious system and make one right with God.

With this collision, Jesus shows what He has come to earth to do—to give His life a ransom for many, to call sinners to repentance by grace through faith in His death and resurrection—is the absolute, unique, distinctive exclusive way to be right with God. The gospel that God is a just, holy Creator and Ruler over all things who has given us a law that we have all violated and therefore we deserve eternal separation from the loving God who made us—the gospel that God's own Son came and lived a perfect life and then died for the penalty of sin that should be executed against us so that all who turn from their sin and trust His completed work on the cross will be saved—this gospel is incompatible with, can't not be blended with any other religion in the world—ever!!!!

Jesus is establishing in the collision that there is no such thing as mixing true Christianity with Buddhism, Hinduism, Animism, Roman Catholicism, Mormonism, liberal Christ-denying Christianity, any cult or with the teaching of Jehovah Witnesses. Specifically here he is teaching that you can't mix Christianity with apostate Judaism which was what the Pharisees stood for in the first century or that exists today! Christianity has no common ground religiously or spiritually with any other religion, even Judaism back then or Judaism today. There are some today who insist that there is such thing as Christian Judaism. That's wrong. And this passage teaches that.

Christianity is unique, matchless, and exclusive. Now, that doesn't play well in terms of a pluralistic, relativistic, inclusivist society that tolerates everything except what they think is intolerant. The prevailing worldview today esteems and values diversity, individuality, syncretism,, and universality. But this worldview is antithetical to biblical Christianity which we learn here is exclusive and unmixable.

The emphasis today is to try to bring all the religions together under one big tent. “We will make room for Jesus”--that's what the Mormons, the Jehovah Witness, liberal Christianity, and other religions say. Strangely, even some people think that Judaism and Christianity can be melted together in some big religious stew. But if you understand this collision, you will see how Jesus is far superior to established religion. I want us to see that biblical Christianity doesn't mix with other religious systems.

Any religion that rejects the Christ of the Bible is utterly false. That is why there is no such thing as Christian Judaism, or Islamic Christianity, a Hindu Christian Buddhist Christianity, or atheistic Christianity. Today, let's learn, celebrate, highlight and respond in worship to this truth: Salvation, available through Jesus Christ, is the only way a man or woman can be right with God.

You cannot mix biblical Christianity with any other religious system. Jesus' mission is what makes this truth so clear. And this passage presents four stunning truths to substantiate this claim.

### **1. Jesus came to call sinners, not the self-righteous to repentance (2:17)**

Jesus' message as summarized in Mark 1:14-15 is “repent and believe in the gospel!” In the second collision he said, “I came not to call the righteous (the self-righteous) to repentance but sinners!” Self-righteous Judaism really didn't see their need of a spiritual savior, just a political savior. But Jesus declared that all men are sinners. That is who He came to call to salvation—those who saw the hopelessness of their sin.

Every worldview has a view of human beings. The question is: are human beings basically good or evil? If they are evil, how bad is the flaw?

Judaism gave this answer: Man is basically not good, but he can become good by keeping the OT law and then God will accept Him—especially those who precisely follow the religious traditions of the system regarding ceremonial issues—like the Pharisees.

Today, atheism answers the question of man's goodness or badness by saying, “People can be either good or bad; humans are flawed, but it can be corrected.”

Pantheism (God is all) responds, “Man is internally good but may be caught in an outward illusion; the problem or flaw is the illusion.”

Pan-en-theism (all reality is in God) says that humans are both good and bad; the flaw is part of the growth process.

Poly-theism (many gods, i.e. hinduism) say that man can be either good or evil, and no flaw exists.

Monotheism (such as Judaism and Islam and others) say that man was originally good, but now is bent; this flaw is serious but with some or a little help from God, that can be overcome by man.

But Jesus and His Word, the Bible says, “Man was originally good, but now is fatally bad; Only God can fix what has happened!

Do you see why true Christianity can't be mixed with other religious systems? Because it has a different answer to who man is and what is man's problem! Jesus says here, "I haven't come to save those who think they can help themselves. I have come to help those who are sinners and know it and understand that there is no solution except God for sin."

## **2. Christ came to bring gladness, not sadness (v.18-20)**

*"Now John's disciples and the Pharisees were fasting. And people came and said to him, 'Why do John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?'" (v. 18)*

Now, moving to our text today, we see a second major truth that speaks of the exclusivity of Christ. Two groups now combine loosely to accuse Jesus of wrongdoing. First, you have some disciples of John the Baptist who had not yet transferred their allegiance to Jesus Christ. Matthew indicates they are the main players—the ones who actually voice their opposition. By this time, John is in prison or may even be dead. John's followers were mostly from the south, and Jesus had spent most of his time in the north of Israel so a good many of John's followers had never met Jesus and didn't know yet that He was the Messiah that John had said was coming. As late as Acts 19, years later, there are still disciples of John that had not heard of Jesus or transferred their faith fully to Him. Remember that there was really only one or two times in John's ministry where he met Jesus and pointed people to Him specifically.

The second group are called Pharisees—a group that had been around for 200 years about the time of this collision. They had originally formed to oppose the tendency of Jews to accommodate their lifestyles more to the Greco-Roman ideals, which stood decidedly opposed to the Torah or the Law. Among the religious factions of that day, there were more Pharisees than all the others combined. They wanted to uphold the Law of God and keep traditions. People viewed them as occupying the seat of Moses. And yet, they overvalued tradition and undervalued the intent of the law itself. By the time of Jesus, their original fervor for the law had calcified into a formalism at multiple points regarding practice and observance and it had become a religion almost totally of externals with no emphasis on the heart.

These two groups were fasting, not eating any food on that day—while Jesus had just left a big banquet of feasting. Now, fasting was one of the three main pillars of Judaism in Jesus' day—the other two were alms-giving and prayer. In Jesus' famous sermon on the mount he addresses all three of these specifically (see Matthew 6:2, 5, 16).

Fasting was big business. And yet in the OT, there was only one day a year that God required fasting—the day of atonement (Leviticus 16:29, 31; 23:27-32;

Numbers 29:7). After the exile, the Jews began to observe four other annual feasts—not at God's command but just to remember certain events. A book called the Mishnah was later written that was sort of a compilation of commentary on the Jewish law as well as a record of traditions that they developed. Fasting was becoming more a part of Judaism and so a whole booklet or tract was devoted to the subject of fasting in the Mishnah. Oh, and there were other fasts recorded in the OT, some purely voluntary and other mandated—but none based on the OT law.

But by the time this happened the Pharisees elevated fasting as part of their self-righteous religion. They fasted twice a week—Monday and Thursday from sundown to sunset. And when they fasted, they messed up their hair, didn't take a shower and made sure everyone knew that they were doing this good deed.

John's disciples were also fasting. John was an ascetic living in the wilderness and those who followed him were fasting in anticipation of the coming of Messiah. They may have been fasting as well knowing their beloved leader was in prison or fasting because they were mourning his death.

So some people to Jesus and ask, “Why do John's disciples and the followers of the Pharisees fast, but your disciples don't?” In other words, “Um, Jesus, why are you having such a good time here with these sinners when all the really godly people we think are super spiritual are fasting? I mean, Jesus, if you really want to be taken seriously here, you better pay attention to protocol here—to the established religious practices here. You and your disciples should be whitening your faces, putting ashes on your head, wearing your ripped clothes, not washing up, and looking pretty sad. I mean, don't you know the two cardinal rules of religion: 1) You don't fellowship with sinners and 2) You don't look like you are having fun.

You know those two traditions are still around today. The humorist Erma Bombeck tells how she was sitting in church one Sunday when a small child turned around and began to smile at the people behind her. She was just smiling, not making a sound. When her mother noticed, she said in a stage whisper, “Stop that grinning—you're in church,” gave her a swat, and 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!<sup>1</sup>

Notice Jesus answer. Not only had he come to call sinners to repentance and not the self righteous. But he had come to bring gladness to men's hearts, not sadness. Jesus makes this point by countering their question with questions—a common response in rabbinical disputes:

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<sup>1</sup>Hughes, R. K. (1989). *Mark : Jesus, servant and savior*. Preaching the Word (77). Westchester, Ill.: Crossway Books.

*And Jesus said to them, "Can the wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them? [Implied answer in the Greek, "of course not."] 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 in that day. " (Mark 2:19–20)*

Jesus said, "Folks, what do you do at a wedding?" Do you rejoice, eat, and celebrate or do you mourn and fast?" You feast, celebrate and laugh, right? We do today and they did it back then—they just did more of it back then. Our wedding traditions involve a ceremony where vows are exchanged, then there is a reception with a festive, happy atmosphere that lasts maybe at most a few hours and then the bride and groom head off to their honeymoon, right.

Same then with a different and much bigger variation in Jesus' day. On the wedding day, the groom would leave his home with an entourage and go to the bride's home. He would then take her to his home and all her attendants and family followed. They would have the ceremony and then there would be a reception for seven days at the grooms house. The friends of the groom were responsible for the arrangements and were expected to do everything to make the occasion a smashing success. The friends and other guests there had no responsibilities other than to enjoy the week. One commentator writes, "In a hard wrought life the wedding week was the happiest week in a man's life." There was an abundance of food, wine, dance, song—fun both in the house and on the surrounding streets. Even the rabbis were expected to close their school and join the celebration with their students—which means there was no fasting that week. Their guests were exempted from all fasting through a rabbinical ruling which said, "All in attendance on the bridegroom are relieved of all religious observances which would lessen their joy."

So "as long as the bridegroom is with them, they cannot fast." Now, those that heard these words didn't immediately interpret this like the first readers of Mark's gospel and we do today. We think, "Ah, Christ here is speaking of himself as the bridegroom because we all know that we, the church, is His bride (Ephesians 5:32; Revelation 19:7; 21:9). Christ later tells a parable about ten virgins who are waiting for the coming of the bridegroom (Matthew 25). But in the OT there is no distinct connection between the coming Messiah being a bridegroom. It is true that God is pictured as the Husband who is married to Israel, His bride (Isaiah 5:1; 54:5-6; 62:4-5; Ezekiel 16:6-8; Hosea 2:19). So this is not a strictly Messianic reference but rather a veiled one. People then would have to put a number of pieces together to understand here that Jesus is claiming to be God and that He is the bridegroom in this parable. We, who read of John speaking of Christ being the bridegroom (John 3:29), who know that Jesus performed His first miracle at a wedding feast (John 2:1-11), and who look back at seeing how Christ often used parables such as inviting guests to a marriage have the advantage of seeing clearly that Christ is speaking of Himself here.

But the main point Jesus is making is that He came to bring true joy—like that which is present at a wedding. He didn't come to bring sadness. And he is saying, “If you knew who I was, you would understand that I have come to call sinners to repentance. And when sinners come to God in repentant faith there is great joy in the presence of God and among the angels. But you guys are completely out of touch with my purposes—with what God is doing through me—reconciling the world to Himself—gathering His bride. Your religious system is bankrupt. You are so focused on externals which emphasize sadness that you don't recognize Me. You don't get it, do you! I'm the way to true joy!”

Jesus continued, “The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them and then they will fast in that day.” Now, we read this and we understand that Jesus is talking, again in veiled terms, of his death, when his disciples will mourn, even though it is for a little while. The word “taken away” speaks of an abrupt and dismaying end to this wedding bliss, because in Jesus' day the bride and groom didn't leave. The celebration was in their house so they stayed and the guests left. But here the bridegroom is “taken away” word that pictures a violent removal that causes great sorrow. So, this is the gathering of another storm cloud that speaks of trouble coming to Christ. First John is arrested. He is in this series of conflicts and now he speaks of the groom being forcibly removed.

But again to those there on this day in Galilee, they probably missed the significance of this reference, this hint to Christ's death. They weren't in yet on the “secret” as later Christians who read this story were—that Jesus was going to die. He didn't proclaim that till much later.

Yet, Jesus is alluding to one of his favorite OT books: Isaiah which speaks often of the Messiah as suffering Servant. Jesus has in mind Isaiah 53:8, “*By oppression and judgment he was taken away; and as for his generation, who considered that he was cut off out of the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people?*” (Isaiah 53:8). Jesus quotes Isaiah 53 several times and Mark records a few of these:

*“He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not.”* (Isaiah 53:3) cf. “*And he said to them, “Elijah does come first to restore all things. And how is it written of the Son of Man that he should suffer many things and be treated with contempt?”*” (Mark 9:12)

*“He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth.”* (Isaiah 53:7) cf. “*And Pilate again asked him, “Have you no answer to make? See how many charges they bring against you.” But Jesus made no further answer, so that Pilate was amazed.*” (Mark 15:4–5)

Jesus came to bring gladness through the proclamation of the gospel, grace, repentance, a transformed heart, and a new covenant that emphasizes a vibrant, living relationship with our Sovereign Creator God. That is the exact opposite of the sadness and heavy burdens that the Pharisees were pressing upon the people—an external, ceremonial, self-righteous religious worldview. They assumed that true religion was a joyless, solemn affair—which most religions still assume today. Christ is proclaiming that salvation in His name is the way to true joy, not to irksome responsibility.

Those who acknowledge Christ as their Lord and Savior should be full of gladness! If it be true that “God *with* us” (Immanuel) spells joy for believers, should not “God *within* us” (the situation on and after Pentecost) awaken in every child of God joy unspeakable and full of glory?<sup>2</sup>

After fasting likely but then eating with Jesus, the disciples in Emmaus “*worshipped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy,*” (Luke 24:52)

Jesus told his disciples, “*These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.*” (John 15:11)

“*But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness,*” (Galatians 5:22)

“*Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory,*” (1 Peter 1:8)

### **3. Christ came to introduce the new, not to patch up the old. (vv. 21-22)**

Jesus continues to respond with a pair of short parables that teach us that Christ came to introduce the new, not to patch up the old. He came to call sinners, not the self-righteous. He came to bring joy not sadness. He came to introduce the new, not to patch up the old religious system.

“*No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old garment. If he does, the patch tears away from it, the new from the old, and a worse tear is made. And no one puts new wine into old wineskins. If he does, the wine will burst the skins—and the wine is destroyed, and so are the skins. But new wine is for fresh wineskins.*” (Mark 2:21–22)

What's Jesus conveying? It is a well-known fact that if you try to take a new piece of unshrunk fabric and simply try to patch up a hole in your clothing that eventually when the new fabric gets wet and dries it is going to shrink. We might

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<sup>2</sup>Hendriksen, W., & Kistemaker, S. J. (1953-2001). *Vol. 10: New Testament commentary : Exposition of the Gospel According to Mark*. New Testament Commentary (101). Grand Rapids: Baker Book House.

not understand that today because the fad is now that when you have a hole in your jeans or shirt you just wear it like that. I mean, you get the impression, in fact, that the more holes or jeans you have in the fabric, the better. It is more cool or whatever. But it used to be that when you got a hole in your jeans and you were living on a tight income, your mom would put a patch over it after shrinking the new fabric and so on. Old school sailors who tried to patch holes with new sail cloth often knew that wouldn't last very long out on the water.

And then less well-known to us is how they used to process wine. They would pour the new wine usually in new, fresh wineskins, let the dregs settle, and then pour that wine into different wineskin, and let the dregs settle there and repeat process several times until there were no dregs left and then the wine would be ready for consumption.

Well, in ancient times wine was kept in goatskins. New skins were soft and pliable and would stretch when wine that had not yet completed fermentation was put in them. However, old wineskins that had been stretched would become brittle and, being no longer pliable, were thus unable to stretch. The gas from the fermenting wine burst them open, destroying both wine and wineskins. So you never put new wine in old wineskins because it would ruin both.

The new patch and the new wine refers to Jesus' new type of ministry and preaching. It speaks of grace as compared to the Mosaic law and the added layers of tradition of apostate Judaism that were old garments and wineskins ready to be set aside. And the main point is the finality that the old will not coexist with the old. The new is pulling away from the old, and if you try to mix the two you will destroy the old. They are incompatible.

Jesus was saying, "Look you Pharisees and preservers of the apostate Judaism, if you are hoping for some kind of compromise, forget it. The gospel I preach is not interested in keeping the best of your religious traditions and adding it to the best I have to offer. That will never work.

Oh, no as Peter and John preached, "*And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.*" " (Acts 4:12). That pretty much exposes the folly of a patchwork religion, of syncretism—of taking the best from two or more religions and making a better product.

The twin parables (and there is a third in Luke 5:39) here teach the incompatibility of the old (scribal Judaism) and the new (Christianity). Judaism is the old garment and wineskin, Christianity is the new one. The old wasn't evil or wrong but its time had passed, purpose complete. It took quite a while (a few decades) (many years) for this lesson to fully sink in—even among the Twelve (see Acts, Galatians, etc).

This teaching anticipates Paul's treatment that Christianity is not an extension of Judaism. Judaism cannot contain it. Jewish laws are not binding upon Christians. Paul took up this topic with enthusiasm in Galatians. The old order was regulated by rules, the new is regulate by relationships. Jesus did not come to reform Judaism. He came to introduce something new: the church. Sadly there are those today who will try to convince people that the way to God is by observing the OT law. They deceive some who have even professed Christ at one time. But salvation is not through Christ mixed with old Judaism. "The law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ." (John 1:17)

The Christian life is not a mixing of the old and the new; rather, it is a fulfillment of the old in the new. There are two ways to destroy a thing: you can smash it, or you can permit it to fulfill itself. An acorn, for example, can be smashed with a hammer, or it can be planted and allowed to grow into an oak. In both instances, the destruction of the acorn is accomplished; but in the second instance, the acorn is destroyed by being fulfilled.

Jesus fulfilled the prophecies, types, and demands of the Law of Moses. The Law was ended at Calvary when the perfect sacrifice was once offered for the sins of the world (Heb. 8–10).<sup>3</sup> Why cherish the shadows when the reality has come (Hebrews 10:1ff) Christ is the fulfillment of the promise (2 Cor. 1:20).

Jesus came to usher in the new, not to unite with the old. The Mosaic economy was decaying, getting old, and ready to vanish away (Heb. 8:13). Jesus would establish a New Covenant in His blood (Luke 22:19–20). The Law would be written on human hearts, not on stones (2 Cor. 3:1–3; Heb. 10:15–18); and the indwelling Holy Spirit would enable God's people to fulfill the righteousness of the Law (Rom. 8:1–4).

#### **4. Christ came to meet the needs of people, not to protect religious tradition. (vv.21-22)**

That brings us to this last point. Christ came to meet the heart needs of people, not to protect a religious system. You say, "Wait a minute. Didn't Jesus honor Judaism and a religious system? Sure, he goes to the synagogue, but not like the Pharisees did. Sure he taught like them, he he taught as one whose authority surpassed theirs. Sure he respected the Torah, but he also broke some of their most cherished religious traditions and he subordinated the OT law to Himself so that people said we have never seen anyone like Him!

With these parables of the patch and the wine, Jesus is teaching us all that it is unacceptable spiritually speaking to just make room for Jesus somewhere in our religious systems of lifestyles. Following Jesus isn't a manner of just patching up

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<sup>3</sup>Wiersbe, W. W. (1996). *The Bible exposition commentary* (Mk 2:13). Wheaton, Ill.: Victor Books.

your life with a bit of religious good works or ceremony. It is about turning in your filthy tattered rags of self-righteousness and wrongly motivated good works for a new robe of Christ's righteousness. It is saying, "*I will greatly rejoice in the LORD; my soul shall exult in my God, for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation; he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself like a priest with a beautiful headdress, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.*" (Isaiah 61:10)

Becoming a Christian isn't just pouring some truths about Jesus into your pre-fabricated beverage container. It is about becoming an entirely new receptacle for the expanding fermentation of Jesus and the gospel in your life.

Friends, don't think you can add Jesus to your religion. You can't, it's a total replacement. The whole system has to go. Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth and the life, no man comes to the Father but by Me. There's no salvation in any other name," [Acts 4:12](#), than the name of Christ. Christianity is not compatible with Judaism, it's not even compatible with false forms of Christianity, to say nothing of all the religions that are non-Christian. The religion of the Pharisees and the scribes, the religion of the disciples of John, that was old skin, couldn't contain the gospel. But rather than believe, rather than receive, many keep their dead, brittle, tattered, old wineskins and the refuse the gospel.

Finally, I just want to point out that these illustrations of Jesus show the fallacy of all the movements alive today that would seek to bring Jews and Christians together for some dialogue and common ground. The movement to bring Mormonism and Christianity together is anti-gospel. The continual attempts to show how Protestants or Evangelicals and Catholics really need to bury the hatchet and come together is fallacious. Jesus teaches that no mixture of false belief systems with the truth is possible. In fact, true biblical Christianity will never be compatible with any other false system or religion period—be in Jewish, Orthodox, Catholic, Cultic, Eastern, or whatever. Get it out of our heads. Kill the thought! If you ever add anything to Word of God alone that proclaims salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone to the glory of God alone, you have another gospel—which is really not a gospel! Let all such attempts be accursed! Let God be true and every man a liar!

Don't be satisfied with anything less than true faith in Christ alone, my friend. No other belief system, no other religion, no other tradition, will save you! None! Oh that you would . . . .

**respond** to Christ's call to repent and believe the gospel  
**experience** true joy in Christ's life-giving truth  
be a **new creation** in Christ today  
have your true **need met**, not hold on to your religious traditions.