

## Bible Study notes from 6-12-24.

### *THE GOSPEL OF MARK* *Mark 2:13—3:35*

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Those who stereotype Jesus as meek and mild have not read the Gospel of Mark with their eyes open. He is far more than a gentle shepherd, holding lambs and touching children. Jesus is the eye of a storm, the center of controversy, a man so dangerous to the Jewish religious leaders that they plot to murder Him.

In lesson 1 we saw that hostility toward Jesus began to flare when He healed the paralytic in Capernaum (2:1-12). From that point on, the scribes and Pharisees followed Him wherever He went, waiting for some slip of the tongue or outward error as grounds to accuse Him. They were like “truth squads” in political campaigns who trail candidates everywhere, looking for reasons to discredit them. The Jewish religious leaders set out to get Him because He advocated a new law, one that put people and their needs ahead of inhuman rules.

Jesus did not intend to antagonize the scribes and Pharisees. He did not begin each day by saying to Himself, “What can I do this morning to upset the religious establishment?” Everything that Jesus said and did seem to tick them off.

The opening scene in our lesson has Jesus’ walking along the shore of the Sea of Galilee at Capernaum in the midst of a great crowd of people. Mark wrote, “... *all the multitude resorted unto Him.*” This was why Jesus chose Capernaum in Galilee as the headquarters for His ministry. Located on the highway from Damascus to the Mediterranean Sea, this city was an important center of commerce. Here Jesus could mingle with all kinds of people, and wherever people were, He was attracted to them.

But part of the problem centered around the people who were drawn to Jesus. Here we see Him selecting Levi, a tax collector, to be His disciple (2:14). This made no sense at all to the Pharisees because tax collectors were despised, and not without cause. The common people never knew how much they really owed because the tax collectors squeezed out all they could and kept any amount over and above what the law required. To choose Levi as a disciple was like a mayor selecting the meanest man in town for city council.

That was not all. Jesus associated with riffraff, going so far as to eat with them (2:15). To the Pharisees it was unthinkable for Jesus to eat and drink with such bad charac-

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ters as the “publicans and sinners.” Jesus was socializing in this scene with persons who were both spiritual and society rejects. And in doing so, Jesus became entangled in His second controversy with the religious establishment. As we read these words in Mark, the inclusiveness of Jesus is obvious. Yet, our own tendency to divide people into categories of “good” and “bad” is sometimes as blatant as the Pharisees.

Next, we see the scribes and Pharisees trying one of the oldest tricks of dirty politics: guilt by association. When they accused Him of eating with bad characters, He reminded them that sinners needed His help, *“They that are well have no need of the physician, but they that are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance” (2:17).*

Undoubtedly, “righteous” people, like the Pharisees, did not think there were convincing reasons for spending time with Jesus. Jesus simply outsmarted them with His reply and the scribes and Pharisees were left in the awkward position of sounding like the American Medical Association criticizing a doctor for making too many house calls!

Not only did Jesus associate with publicans and sinners, He continually violated certain long-standing religious customs. Fasting is singled out in Mark 2:18-20 as we see Jesus involved in His third controversy. Fasting, was, and is, a legitimate spiritual discipline. Many Jews practiced it as preparation for the long-awaited Kingdom of God. John’s disciples fasted, the Pharisees were quick to point out, so, why did not Jesus and His followers fast (2:18)?

Once again, the Pharisees demonstrated their spiritual blindness by deliberately trying to cause dissension between the followers of John and those of Jesus. They fasted to parade how holy they were, but Jesus put fasting in perspective because God’s New Order that already begun with His coming; this was a time for celebration, not self-denial. It called for dressing up and feasting as if you were going to a wedding, not for wearing sackcloth and long faces.

According to the law, wedding guests were exempt from the regular requirements of fasting. This incident is a healthy reminder to believers that joy is an acceptable human emotion, and laughter is characteristic of Kingdom people. Unfortunately, joy is not one of the marks of faith usually attributed to Christ’s followers by the secular world. Wouldn’t it be grand if we could sometimes think of the church the way one child did? She said, “Church is the place where God goes when He wants to have a good time.”

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In Chapter 2:20 Jesus hints at His eventual death, ***“But the days will come, when the bridegroom shall be taken away from them, and then shall they fast in those days.”*** This was a statement Mark’s first century readers were sure to understand. But here too, Jesus is separating His message and ministry from Judaism and what it had become. Jesus had not come to patch up an old religion. His message was fresh and vibrant.

He makes this clear in his comparisons about garments and wineskins (2:21-22). New cloth that has never been shrunk will tear away from old cloth when a patched-up garment is washed. And new wineskins are soft and flexible and can accommodate new wine as it ferments and releases gases that cause pressure. On the other hand, old, stiff wineskins burst under pressure of fermenting new wine. The fermenting new wine of Jesus Christ cannot be contained in worn-out, stiff, rigid containers. We are to be uncompromising yet flexible Christians who are always open to fresh truths from the Lord.

Jesus now moved out into the countryside, and the Pharisees nailed His disciples for another technical violation: picking corn on the Sabbath. The disciples were hungry and what would be an innocent and harmless act any other day of the week provoked the fourth controversy, because they were accused of breaking the Sabbath.

There are some thirty-nine categories of work that are prohibited on the Sabbath and four of these are reaping/harvesting, threshing/beating, winnowing/sifting, and preparing meals. Mark says they began ***“to pluck the ears of corn” (2:23)***, but Luke’s account of the same incident adds that ***“they did eat, preparing a meal, rubbing them in their hands” (6:1)***. In other words, they were technically guilty of reaping and threshing, winnowing/sifting, and preparing a meal. We can visualize the Pharisees, popping up from among the corn stalks, pointing their fingers at the disciples, and yelling, “Gotcha!”

But Jesus let the air out of their balloons as quickly as they had blown them up. He reminded them of their own tradition—how David had eaten bread when he was hungry that had been reserved for priestly consumption (1 Sam. 21:3-6). And Jesus reminded the scribes that David ate the bread for the most basic of reasons; he and his companions were hungry. “These are,” Jesus is saying, “exceptions to the rule!” Also, the spirit of the law must be considered. If rules make human life better, they are to be kept. If not, they are to be rejected. We are not to make an end out of a means: the Sabbath is made for human beings, not human beings for the Sabbath (2:27).

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If Jesus had stopped there, He would have won the argument and the grumpy Pharisees would have pouted away licking their wounds to wait for another chance to attack Him. His final words on the subject, provided fuel for the fire His enemies were building: ***“Therefore the Son of Man is Lord also of the Sabbath” (2:28)***. Jesus had done it again. Just as He had earlier claimed authority to forgive sins, here He assumed the right and power to redefine the Sabbath. It was as if He were saying “Let us not be silly about this day and how it is to be observed. Let us celebrate it in the right way and for the right reasons. Take My word for it.”

Our misuse of the Sabbath—for believers, it would be the misuse of Sunday—is usually a different problem than the one the Pharisees had. We often slip up in the opposite direction and still miss Jesus’ point. Jesus is saying that the day set aside for God is a time for personal renewal and spiritual regeneration. He is saying that “the Sabbath was made for man” does not license us to observe it in the frantic, pleasure-obsessed way many of us attack Sunday. We may dutifully attend church, but then fill the day with so many recreational and work activities that our energy is depleted, and our spirits drained. It is no longer a day of rest and renewal. Jesus invites us to reserve the Sabbath for spiritual restoration, not catering to self-denial or self-indulgence.

When Jesus refuted the Jewish religious leaders, He only strengthened their opposition. The following Sabbath He did what was customary for Him—He entered again into the synagogue (3:1) even though by then it was risky. Present that day was a man with a withered hand and a group of Pharisees. We do not know whether the man was a trap set for Jesus by the Pharisees or not. But the words in the second verse seem to imply that he was, “And they watched Him, whether he would heal him on the Sabbath day; that they might accuse Him.”

It was a tricky and dangerous situation for Jesus. It would have been easy for Him to simply postpone the healing. After all, there was no emergency, and to heal the man in the presence of the Pharisees was to risk a showdown. It was “high noon” in the synagogue.

Jesus made a bold move by asking the man to come out of the crowd and step forward. And as He had done before, Jesus challenged His opponents with the spirit of their own tradition. He asked, in so many words, “Which is more important? To observe empty customs, or to help this poor man?”

The silent response of the Pharisees was like poison gas hanging in the air. The King James Version of the Bible says, ***“they held their peace” (3:4)***. Jesus stared at them

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*“with anger, being grieved for the hardness of their hearts” (3:5).* This must have been quite a stare! He was outraged at their unfeeling stubbornness and foolishness. Their only response to His soul-piercing questions, *“Is it lawful to do good on the Sabbath days or to do evil? To save life or to kill?”* was silence. Their religion was a lifeless form with no heart.

Jesus asked the man to extend his hand, and in an instant *“his hand was restored whole as the other.”* The moment of truth had arrived. It was a dramatic moment that exposed the moral bankruptcy of the Pharisees and moved Jesus one step closer to Golgotha. Mark tells us (3:6) that the Pharisees went out and made a deal with the Herodians—the despised enemies—as how best to get rid of the traveling rabbi who dared confront them. In our language we would say they “put out a contract” on Jesus.

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As the plotters planned to kill Jesus, He left the synagogue and went to the shore of the Sea of Galilee. He probably felt the need for a retreat with His disciples so He could renew Himself spiritually. But Mark indicates that the retreat was not to be. A great number of people followed Him, coming literally from every corner of Palestine. The pressure of the crowds was so strong that Jesus had a small boat ready in case He needed to escape being crushed (3:9).

Obviously, Jesus had great popular appeal. This popularity both impressed and worried the Pharisees. But Jesus Himself did not take it very seriously. Mark’s earliest readers who read his Gospel after the crucifixion had happened, knew that the crowds mentioned here did not save Jesus from the cross. Neither their size nor their strength indicated commitment. Most people were there to get help—for healing, for exorcisms, for words of comfort. But they did not know who Jesus really was, only that He responded to their needs.

Once again, the ones who recognized the Lordship of Jesus were the “unclean spirits” who *“fell down before Him, and cried, saying, Thou art the Son of God” (3:11)*, but He forbade them to tell anyone else. The crowds in Roman-occupied Palestine were waiting for a kingly, nationalistic Messiah who would lead them to freedom and political power. But Jesus’ Messiahship was different. He served and loved people who had no clear idea of His divinity.

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Mark's Gospel reminds us that Jesus could have instigated a political revolution. His speech was compelling, and verbally overwhelmed His opponents. He was a healer, an imposing and inviting man who attracted huge crowds.

Moving from the seaside to a mountain, Jesus completed His selection of twelve disciples (the group is listed in Chapters 3:16-19). Jesus' choices were puzzling because the men He picked were quite average. He chose four common fishermen (Peter, James, John, and Andrew), a tax-collector (Levi, also called Matthew), and a fanatic nationalist (supported of independence), a Zealot (Simon the Canaanite). Such persons could hardly be described as spiritual heavy weights. The rest were not anything to brag about either.

They were an unlikely and diverse group with not very much in common except their loyalty to Jesus. He risked a lot in bringing together these twelve ordinary men—each with his own agenda and concept of how a Messiah should behave.

And discipleship had its own agenda. Being a disciple of Jesus would mean more than just hanging on and having one's needs met—it would mean commitment, obedience, and loyalty. And those would be great challenges to meet because Jesus was getting deeper into trouble every day. He had already been branded a heretic/a religious outcast, a sinner, and a loose-living meddler.

Jesus' time away from the crowds was brief, and His return home, probably Capernaum, drove Him immediately into the same crowd of humanity He had left. Mark reports that He had no opportunity even to eat (3:20) because of the pressure of His work. The response of Jesus' friends reported next is curious. They said, "***He is beside Himself***" (3:21). They thought Him insane and out of His minds.

Why His friends had such an extreme reaction, we do not know for sure. Possibly it was because He did not take time out of His busy schedule even to eat. Maybe it was out of concern for His well-being, the way we sometimes insist that a loved one is working too hard. Or Jesus' friends and family may have been worried about His and their reputation. After all, what did the neighbors think?

We can understand their reaction when we consider our attitudes toward those whose behavior seems unusual to us. In the comfort of our twenty-first century Christian society, we often criticize the things that do not seem normal to us. We tend to feel that anyone who worships, reads the Bible, or acts differently from us, is out of his or her mind. But Jesus had an inclusive message—a gospel of love and concern—and this was not "normal" to the religious leaders of His day.

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Jesus and those who closely follow Him march to the tune of a different Drummer. His will was centered in God's will, and according to the usual standards of behavior, He seemed unbalanced, even to His friends and family.

Following closely after the accusation of His friends that He was not in His right mind, Jesus was confronted with another blow—His fifth controversy involving the source of His power. A delegation of scribes that had traveled all the way from Jerusalem to see what was going on accused Jesus of practicing black magic, ***“He hath Beelzebub, and by the prince of the devils casteth He out devils” (3:22).***

They charged Jesus with being demon-possessed and said that His power came from the devil. With flawless logic Jesus refuted their accusations. He pointed out that Satan would not harm himself, ***“How can Satan cast out Satan ...if Satan rise up against himself, and be divided he cannot stand, but hath an end” (3:23-26).***

At this encounter, Jesus raised an issue that has troubled many believers since Mark recorded it. In 3:28-29 Jesus says that ***“All sins shall be forgiven unto the sons of men, and blasphemies wherewith soever they shall blaspheme: but he that shall blaspheme against the Holy Ghost hath never forgiveness, but is in danger of eternal damnation.”***

These words have been known to trouble His followers because, on the surface, Jesus sounds out of character. He seems to be saying that God's forgiveness has limits. The Good News is that no one is outside God's Grace, but these words declare there is an unforgivable sin.

But a closer look reveals the subtle scornfulness of this statement. Forgiveness depends upon our ability to repent. Resistance to the Spirit of God, such as the scribes demonstrated, hinders forgiveness. Jesus is not saying God refuses to forgive, but that some people are unable to accept forgiveness. They are closed to it simply because they are incapable of seeing their need for forgiveness. The unforgivable sin is the one for which we have no willingness to repent. To experience forgiveness we must be open to it.

Almost as troubling is the final scene of Chapter three. Here Jesus appears to be indifferent toward His own family. They come looking for Him, and when Jesus learns of their presence, He seems to ignore them (3:31-35). Instead of rushing to them for a happy and sentimental reunion, He uses the occasion to make a point. And His point has to do with the nature of true kinship.

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Brotherhood and sisterhood, He says, are based on common obedience to God. As close as we may be to our parents and blood relatives, the quality of kinship Jesus calls for is more intimate. To be brothers and sisters in Christ is to go beyond natural biological relationships.

Mark's earliest readers would have easily understood this thinking. Not only were they persecuted by the world, but they were also frequently rejected by their families. For them, the Christian community was often their primary family. Common obedience to Christ was the single most important bond they shared.

Occasionally, believers today experience first-hand what Jesus meant. For example, one young couple was riding on an airplane, bouncing around because of air turbulence, and making not-entirely funny jokes about meeting their Maker. This caused them to speculate what would happen if both died while their children were small. They had brothers, sisters, and other blood relatives who could adopt their children and provide them with physical and parental support.

But as they thought through this hypothetical situation, the couple decided not to depend on their "natural" family connections. They wanted their children to be brought up in the church, to be nurtured in their own faith, and to have the daily experience of a Christian home life. Their "natural family," they concluded, was less able to meet these needs than certain families in their congregation who were their "brothers and sisters in Christ."

Shortly thereafter, they made appropriate legal arrangements with a family in their church fellowship. The tie that binds, says Jesus, goes beyond blood relationships. It is a shared commitment to a common Lord.

From Lessons 1 and 2 we see that Mark pulls no punches as he records the story of Jesus. He reminds his readers and us of the head-on collisions Jesus had with the religious establishment, and he writes down many of the tough sayings Jesus uttered.

Jesus ministered to the crowds who came for help, but His hope was invested in the small band of unlikely disciples He had chosen. Jesus' presence brought comfort and compassion to many, and at the same time provoked controversy and crisis with others. His ministry was like a storm blowing across the Palestine, a storm that forever changed the lives of all who either loved or despised Him.

And Jesus continues to confront and challenge us today whenever we invite Him along on our walk-through life. We may follow Him or not, but once He enters our



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experience, like the people of Palestine, we can no longer ignore His presence, and we can never be the same again.

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