

Meeting Jesus in the Gospel of Mark

Session Six – Mark 2:13 – 3:6

Mark 2:13-14 - Once again Jesus went out beside the lake. A large crowd came to him, and he began to teach them. As he walked along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax collector's booth. "Follow me," Jesus told him, and Levi got up and followed him.

Tax Collector – or toll collector?

Levi is more familiar to us as Matthew, who is at his tax collection booth. Capernaum, the border town between the tetrarchies of Philip and Herod, was a tax and duties collection centre, and also housed a Roman garrison, to protect and enforce collection. The word used here is better translated “custom house.”

An Unpopular Fellow

Like Zacchaeus, Matthew would have been deeply resented by the citizenry of Capernaum, as being in “cahoots” with the oppressive Roman authorities – as well as costing them much needed money! Tax collectors were entitled to a “cut” of the collection, which often went well beyond the required rates, and so were regarded not only as collaborators but as thieves.

“Follow Me”

Levi's immediate following of Jesus is every bit as remarkable as that of the fishermen. And a bigger decision: you can go back to fishing, but not to an abandoned tax office. Even more remarkable is Jesus choosing such a deeply unpopular fellow as a disciple. Was it to prove to the populace that there is no one who is beyond salvation, and the call of the Kingdom?

A Question to Consider:

Levi (and the others) gave up a great deal to follow Jesus. What sacrifices have we made in our Christian walk? How do we demonstrate our commitment?

Mark 2:15-17 - While Jesus was having dinner at Levi's house, many tax collectors and sinners were eating with him and his disciples, for there were many who followed him. When the teachers of the law who were Pharisees saw him eating with the sinners and tax collectors, they asked his disciples: "Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?" On hearing this, Jesus said to them, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."

Whose House?

The NIV tells us that dinner is at Levi's house. But the text doesn't say that – this verse doesn't even mention Levi! What it literally says is, “And as **he** sat at table in **his** house, many tax collectors and sinners were sitting with Jesus and **his** disciples, for there were many who

followed **him**.” The “He, his, his, him” all refer to Jesus. The point of the verse is not the “proof of conversion” of the now generous Levi, but the vision of the Kingdom, where God hosts all who follow, regardless of background.

The Message

Later Jesus and his disciples were at home having supper with a collection of disreputable guests. Unlikely as it seems, more than a few of them had become followers. The religion scholars and Pharisees saw him keeping this kind of company and lit into his disciples: “What kind of example is this, acting cozy with the misfits?”

Who Needs a Doctor?

No physician waits for the ill to recover fully before consulting with them. As their physician, Jesus offers the remedy that vanquishes the illness of these so-called sinners. His goal in reaching out to the sick is to bring about healing and transformation in their lives. Instead of sorting people into classifications, holy and unholy, clean and unclean, righteous and sinner, Jesus gathers them under the wings of God’s grace and love.

A Question to Consider:

Jesus called people from all walks of life – and all levels of popularity! – to follow him. Not only that, he welcomed unsavoury sorts to share his table. To whom do we extend a welcome? How can our churches reflect the kind of welcome Jesus extended?

Mark 2:18-20 - Now John’s (the Baptist) disciples and the Pharisees were fasting. Some people came and asked Jesus, “How is it that John’s disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees are fasting, but yours are not?” Jesus answered, “How can the guests of the bridegroom fast while he is with them? They cannot, so long as they have him with them. But the time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them, and on that day they will fast.”

What sets you apart?

These two groups have set themselves apart from others by their restrictive practices. The Pharisee in Jesus’ parable in Luke, for example, gives thanks that he is not like the rest of men and boasts to God that he fasts twice a week (Luke 18:12). Following right after the celebration with the “tax collectors and sinners,” we see that the Kingdom of God, which has drawn near in Jesus’ preaching and merciful activity, is not a funeral wake but a wedding party. Churches should mirror that attitude of celebration!

A Time for Mourning

Jesus does say that there will be a time when mourning will be more fitting, when the bridegroom is “taken from them,” which is a reference to his passion and death. But even that

is not to be a permanent state. The joy of the resurrection will transform all grief and sorrow. Like the great sermon, “It’s Friday... but Sunday’s comin!”

Mark 2:21-22 - “No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment. Otherwise, the new piece will pull away from the old, making the tear worse. And no one pours new wine into old wineskins. Otherwise, the wine will burst the skins, and both the wine and the wineskins will be ruined. No, they pour new wine into new wineskins.”

“Old wineskins already stretched to their limits and now inflexible will burst when the new wine expands. The new that Jesus brings is incompatible with the old. He has not come to patch up an old system that does not match the revolutionary rule of God. He is not simply a reformer of the old, but one who will transform it...The old, exemplified by the condemnation and exclusion of sinners in the previous controversy and the practice of fasting in this debate, cannot contain the new. Both will be ruined if they are combined (NIV APPLICATION COMMENTARY)

A Question to Consider:

Jesus affirmed that life in the Kingdom is a life of celebration. Is this the church’s reputation? How do we recapture this idea? Should we?

Mark 2:23-27 – “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath.”

see the sermon of October 3, “Religion, Rules and Relationship”

Mark 3:1-2 - Another time Jesus went into the synagogue, and a man with a shriveled hand was there. Some of them were looking for a reason to accuse Jesus, so they watched him closely to see if he would heal him on the Sabbath.

A Change in Attitude

In the story of the healing of the paralytic, the religious officials were watching quietly, even keeping their thoughts to themselves. But through the series of events Mark details, the relationship has become more antagonistic. Now they are actively looking to accuse Jesus.

In the Synagogue on the Sabbath

Throughout the Gospels, Jesus is pictured as a faithful attender at Synagogue worship, particularly on the Sabbath. In the Book of Acts, the Early Church regularly met for worship in the Temple, until they were forced out; after that time, they gathered regularly for worship on the Sabbath, and among the Gentile believers, on Sundays, in celebration of the Resurrection.

Sabbath – Friday Sunset through Saturday sunset, or Sunday?

Worship in the early Church was divided between the traditional Jewish Sabbath and the increasingly common (at least among the Gentiles) Sunday worship time. The Apostle Paul addressed this, concluding that which day is less important than the gathering itself:

Romans 14:5-6

One person considers one day more sacred than another; another considers every day alike. Each of them should be fully convinced in their own mind. Whoever regards one day as special does so to the Lord.

“A Man with a Shriveled Hand was there.”

This specificity marks it as a special case. While a “shriveled” or “withered” hand would have been a great disability to a person in a society which relied upon manual labour, it was not an emergency, in the same way as a wound or a disease. Given the lack of immediate danger from this long-term condition, a healing was not regarded as immediately necessary, and could wait until the next day. But would Jesus wait?

Mark 3:3 - Jesus said to the man with the shriveled hand, “Stand up in front of everyone.”

There is no indication that the man had approached Jesus – Jesus himself seems to initiate the contact, and orders the man to stand, so that everyone will see what is about to happen. Jesus seems to be aware that a trap has been set, but in the interests of compassion, he is willing to walk right into it.

Mark 3:4-5 - Then Jesus asked them, “Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?” But they remained silent. He looked around at them in anger and, deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts, said to the man, “Stretch out your hand.” He stretched it out, and his hand was completely restored.

Who are they/them/their?

Who is Jesus asking what is lawful? At whom is Jesus angry (same word here as in 1:41)? Those who were looking to accuse him, or the “everyone” mentioned in the previous statement? Is he angry at those trying to set him up, or at the failure of anyone to speak compassionately on behalf of the man? Or is he angry that the Sabbath is so misunderstood?

“Which is lawful on the Sabbath?”

Keeping the Sabbath is one of the Ten Commandments. The seriousness with which it was regarded is seen in the early life of the Hebrew community:

Exodus 31:15 - For six days work is to be done, but the seventh day is a day of sabbath rest, holy to the Lord. Whoever does any work on the Sabbath day is to be put to death.

Numbers 15:32-33 - While the Israelites were in the wilderness, a man was found gathering wood on the Sabbath day. Those who found him gathering wood brought him to Moses and Aaron and the whole assembly, and they kept him in custody, because it was not clear what should be done to him. Then the Lord said to Moses, “The man must die. The whole assembly must stone him outside the camp.” So the assembly took him outside the camp and stoned him to death, as the Lord commanded Moses.

A Guarantee of Prosperity or Disaster

While keeping the Sabbath would bring blessing to the nation, failure to do so would bring destruction, and potentially threaten the whole nation:

Nehemiah 13:18 (regarding selling on the Sabbath) Didn’t your ancestors do the same things, so that our God brought all this calamity on us and on this city? Now you are stirring up more wrath against Israel by desecrating the Sabbath.

“Which is lawful on the Sabbath?”

When Jesus asks this question, he is not referencing an Old Testament passage, which does not list any Sabbath exceptions. The question is, what constitutes rest and what constitutes work? Are compassionate acts, particularly those which are necessary to preserve life, permissible? This was a hotly debated issue in the Judaism of Jesus’ day.

A Question to Consider:

The Sabbath was a critical point of Jewish life. While Jesus was critical of the negative legalism which encumbered it, he didn’t dispense with the idea. Do what degree do we observe the Sabbath? What can – or should – we do to recapture the idea of Sabbath?

Matthew 12:11 – The Sheep and the Pit

In the Matthew retelling, the following detail is added: ***“If any of you has a sheep and it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will you not take hold of it and lift it out? How much more valuable is a person than a sheep! Therefore it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath.”*** The Pharisees would have agreed with the sheep rule (“ox” in Luke 14), but the Essene community in Qumran would not!

Their stubborn hearts

What is a “stubborn heart?” The actual phrase is “their hardness of heart,” and is reminiscent of the reaction of the Pharaoh to the plagues – the refusal to change, to see things in a new way, to discern what is right, and to perceive the actions of God.

“A heart of stone”

Ezekiel 36:25-27 - I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.

And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.

Mark 3:6 - Then the Pharisees went out and began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus.

The Pharisees – The “Separated Ones”

The Pharisees were collections of lay factions unified by their concern for rigorous obedience to the law. They believed that only the worship and obedience of a holy people could preserve the land of Israel from judgment. Most Pharisees were not priests, but they sought to extend the concerns of ritual purity usually associated with priests in the temple into the lives of ordinary Jews outside the temple.

The Herodians

Most assume the Herodians were supporters of the Herodian rule. In Galilee, they would be partisans of Herod Antipas and consequently influential. Economically and religiously they were comparable to the Sadducees, who had been pro-Hasmonean (the ruling party in Israel who provided the priestly upper class). Their agenda was less motivated by religious fervor than a concern to maintain the social and political status quo. Anyone threatening the status quo – which Jesus certainly did! - would be regarded as dangerous.