

The Perils of Self-Righteousness

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[0 : 00] We have been going through the Gospel of Mark. We have seen that the Gospel of Mark opens up with the baptism of Jesus, and he is driven into the wilderness, and then Jesus comes back on the scene, and in verse 14 and 15 of chapter 1, it says this, Now that after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the Gospel of God and saying, the time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is at hand.

Repent and believe in the Gospel. That repent and believe in the Gospel, the Gospel of God, we saw, I think it would be week 1 or week 2, that the Gospel isn't just a get-out-of-jail-free card. It's not just a means by which we avoid hell. The Gospel, the good news of God, is actually Jesus himself. That Jesus, the person and work of Jesus Christ, his life, his death, and his resurrection, that is good news.

And what Mark is doing throughout the Gospel is he is leading us on the way to the cross, and we get to see, progressively, just little bits more of who this Jesus really is. What he has come to do. Who he truly is. Where his authority lies. What his identity is. Last week we saw that a part of this good news and this identity of who Jesus is, is there's this forgiveness of sins.

[1 : 36] This deep authority to forgive sins. Jesus, he forgives this man's sins, who is a paralytic, and just to validate his authority, he tells the paralytic to get up, to take his mat, and go home.

But Jesus has authority to heal. That same authority is also to forgive sins. And that he also cleanses a leper, a leprous man, completely.

The leprosy is gone. We start to see that this Messiah figure is a cleanser. He is a forgiver of sins. And we're starting to see bits and pieces that, hold on a second, Jesus does the things that only God can do.

This morning, this afternoon, we continue on, and we're going to see another aspect of who this Messiah is, who Jesus is. The good news of God.

We're going to take a look at Mark chapter 2, starting in verse 18. And we're going to see that what Jesus does, what the gospel is, is it's complete freedom from self-justification.

[2 : 45] From trying to right our own wrongs. That in fact, what Jesus does on the cross is he justifies us. He makes us right with God.

No longer do we have to strive for any kind of work that would put us in right standing with God. And we're going to look at two interactions that Jesus has.

With very religiously pious people. Really stand-up people in their day. And in both of these accounts, Jesus, what he does is he deconstructs their false understanding of piety.

And I use that specifically because that is a buzzword in the past year, year and a half, two years. That is a thing that seems to come up, whether it be in the church or whether it be in just regular society.

Jesus, what he does is he deconstructs, but the right kind of deconstructing. And he does it from, he deconstructs a false understanding of piety. Showing the true way to salvation.

[3 : 52] So if you have a Bible, join with me. Mark chapter 2, starting in verse 18. Again, if you don't have a Bible at any time, you can get up. Grab a Bible by the glass doors at the back and follow along.

So here's the first scene. Jesus has disciples now. And the Pharisees and John the Baptist, he has disciples as well.

They come to Jesus and they say, hey, what's going on? We pious folk, we are the ones who are showing our piety. How are we doing that? By fasting.

I thought, Jesus, I thought you are this righteous man. Why aren't you fasting? Why aren't your disciples fasting? Take a look with me in verse 18. Halfway down.

Why do John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast? But your disciples do not fast. Jesus responds to them and says, can the wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them? [4 : 52] And we'll pause right there. Both John's disciples and the Pharisees, like I mentioned, are actually very pious people. We talk about the Pharisees as if they are the scum of the earth.

If you have been at church for a while, they get this bad rap. And to be honest, they fail to see Jesus and they are the antagonists in the story, for sure.

But one thing about the Pharisees is that they genuinely had a desire to please God. They did. An improper understanding of how to do that, but they had this desire to please God.

And the disciples of John likewise, they were following the ministry of John the Baptist. They were righteous people. They were held in esteem. Remember, John the Baptist, he is the forerunner of Jesus right in the beginning of Mark.

The prophecy says in verse 3, The voice of one crying in the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord, make his path straight. John and his disciples, by extension, they are all about seeing the Messiah come.

[6 : 00] They all want to see this Messiah come. The Pharisees, on the other hand, are just so smitten by the law as if the law, the Torah, the books of Moses, Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, that is precise adherence to the law.

That's what's going to get us saved. That's what's going to make us right with God. See, both of them recognize the need for God and to be made right with him.

But both of them are going about things a bit of the wrong way. How do we know this? Because of what they asked Jesus about his disciples. Why do John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?

Why aren't you doing the religious things? Why aren't you doing the very things that we know will make us righteous and pious people? Why aren't you practicing piety?

And the thing about Jesus is that he doesn't somehow say, listen, you got piety all wrong. Fasting, or you have fasting all wrong. You're not allowed to fast. Why would you cease from fasting?

[7 : 07] Jesus doesn't say that at all. He says, can the wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them? And here's the little bit. As long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast.

What's implied is one day they'll be able to fast. One day they'll be able to engage in a form of piety. But not right now. Now, the disciples of John, they are so concerned with religious acts, same too with the Pharisees, that they're failing to see the whole purpose of being righteous, of piety rather. They're failing to understand that for John's disciples, everything that they are doing is for the purpose of the coming of the Messiah. And he's come. And the Pharisees are looking intently into the law and into the books of Moses, finding ways to just please God with every last inch of their life.

And yet God is right before them. Sometimes we can be so preoccupied, and I say this to us, to me, with doing right things, with being a pious person, that we fail to see the end of why we're doing that.

It's like we're being pious for the sake of being pious. We're being righteous for the sake of being righteous. We're doing the religious acts for the sake of just doing the religious acts.

[8 : 32] And the danger here is that, like the Pharisees and John's disciples, our gaze so quickly turns from God to ourselves.

Jesus. Jesus. I mean, if you take a second, take a step back, how outrageous of a question is this? Hey, Jesus. Messiah. And of course they didn't quite understand who he was, but to ask Jesus, why do your disciples not practice religious life the way we do?

We are the religious ones. You see, what Jesus is doing here is he is deconstructing what true religion is about. Because true religion, we'll see, is not about doing the outward signs for the sake of doing them in and of themselves, but it's to draw closer to the Lord.

The end of religion, and I don't mean like the end of it, like it's going to die, but like the very end, the telos, or the purpose of religious life, is to know God and to be known by him.

[9 : 44] Not to just do religious things. You know, we have this problem in a more of a liturgical church, like an Anglican church, where we do things like read the Bible in the midst of the

congregation, or light candles.

We actually don't really like candles, but if that's a caricature, that helps in your mind. Lighting candles, or certain rituals, so to speak, that have a place that, at their best, can communicate truths to us, but we can do them in such a way that makes us feel really good about ourselves.

Or if they're not done, it's not a real church service. It is not a real church service unless there's candles, or unless I'm wearing a collar, or something to that effect. But you know, it works the same in just regular, evangelical, non-denominational churches as well.

Well, we have this tendency as people to do religious things, to gain God's approval, and then be really smug about it.

To do things to please Jesus, and really we're doing it to please ourselves. And we see this in the text. These folks are questioning Jesus, the very person that all of their piety is supposed to lead them to, and they're asking him, Hey, what gives?

[11:09] Why aren't you telling your people to be like us? Their gaze is not to God, it's to the self. Friends, where is our confidence?

Is our confidence in the Lord Jesus Christ? Or is it in doing the religious things? Or maybe, or maybe, you're just not good at doing religious things, and you're constantly in a bout of guilt for not doing the things that you think you ought to do.

And by the way, doing religious things, it's important. Coming to church is important. Partaking in communion is important. Praying is important. Reading your Bible is important. But those things, those things, can so easily become idols in and of themselves.

Things that take the place of Jesus. The very things that we put our hope in, our eternal hope. It's very, very easy to take our eyes off Jesus.

It's very easy to scoff at the Pharisees as a Pharisee yourself. In both cases here, a religious observance that seeks to make one self-righteous is the very cause of spiritual blindness.

[12:38] Jesus, like I mentioned, has no quarrels with the fasting. And he says, listen, essentially, the bridegroom is here. And you can't, you can't fast.

You can't do a, kind of a penitential, downcast thing when it's a time of celebration. Jesus, this is what he says. 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. I'll pause there. All of the Bible, all of prophecy, all of history is pointing to Jesus coming.

To the Messiah coming. That God would come and dwell amongst his people and save them from sin and evil and death. And to fast during that time, to be downcast or to withhold something from our lives, rather than celebrate the fact that God has fulfilled his promises and all the wrongs would be made right.

I try to find an illustration of this and it really is apples and oranges because there is no better news than this. But imagine it's Christmas time.

[13:54] Maybe you're the kid or maybe you're thinking about your own children. And there's just hype around Christmas time. Or maybe it's a birthday or something. But something where it's months out.

this child is just so excited and so pumped up for Christmas time. The excitement is just building, it's building, it's building anticipation. The night before, okay, it's the day of, and the parent says, no, it's chore time.

You have to do your chores. There is no opening gifts, there's no celebration, there's no Santa Claus, there's no nothing. You have to do chores. By the way, you also have to clean the bathroom. Scrub the toilet. Imagine, no, it's Christmas time. It's not the time for chores or cleaning the toilet.

It's time to celebrate. There's nothing wrong with chores.

There's nothing wrong, obviously, with cleaning the bathroom. But it's just not the time. It's not the place for it. And Jesus is saying, this is not the time to fast. This is the time to celebrate.

[14:57] All of creation, all of the scriptures, they have been waiting for this moment, and it's here. It's here. The good news is here.

Remember, the good news isn't just Jesus getting us out of hell. It is himself. And he is here. It's not the time to fast.

The Messiah has come. Everything has changed. Nothing will be the same again. How do we know this? Turn with me again in verse 21.

Jesus says this, No one sews a piece of untrunk 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.

[15:59] Something has changed. Jesus has arrived. All of the scriptures are pointing to this time and he's here. And it's going to be better, actually, than anyone could have ever thought.

The Messiah hasn't come just for the Jewish people, the nation of Israel. He's come for all mankind. You don't have to convert to Judaism.

You don't have to be of a specific ethnicity. He has come for all people from all ethnicities. The good news has arrived and we are not going back to an adherence to the law in the same type of way.

The law is good. It is, in many ways, it leads to human flourishing. King David in the Psalms constantly is talking about how good the law is. The law is a beautiful thing.

But the law can't save. It can't. Only God himself can save. We can't do enough pious acts to somehow make God look down and say, you know what?

[17:03] Sin, pious acts. Okay, I'll let him in. I'll let him in. We can't do enough. He wants perfection. So the law is good, but it can't save.

Only God can save. Only he can expunge, cleanse, forgive. We saw that last week. Only he can do that. Nothing is the same again.

You can't just say, and this actually plays out in the Acts of the Apostles. You can't just say to the non-Jewish people, hey, listen, you've got to keep the law.

You need to get circumcised. You need to go to temple all the time. Keep the fasts. You have to do all that. Oh, by the way, only then can you have faith in Jesus.

It doesn't work that way. That would be like sewing a new piece of cloth onto an old, shrunken garment. It just doesn't work. It's incompatible.

[17:59] It's like pouring wine into a wineskin that is old. The wine is going to ferment. The wineskin is going to burst. It's not compatible. Something new has come.

It's beautiful. It's wonderful. And Jesus here, he uses the imagery of a bridegroom. And what's kind of interesting in all of this is that in verse 19, Jesus says, can the wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them?

As long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast. In verse 20, the days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them. Then they will fast in that day. At a wedding, even in a wedding in Bible times, the bridegroom isn't taken away.

The bridegroom shows up, a wedding happens, festivities happen, and then all the other people go away. The bridegroom isn't taken away. It seems bizarre.

But Jesus here is alluding to the fact that he will be taken away. That he will die on the cross. That he will be killed, not for his own sins, but for the sins of everyone else, so that if we put our faith and hope in Christ, we actually become the bride of Christ.

[19:15] Scriptures continue on to talk about how Jesus goes away, he ascends into heaven, and he is making a place for us in his father's house. He will come back for his bride. And then the culmination of all of history, all of history, will be, and we looked at this in Revelations 19 last week, will be the marriage supper of the Lamb.

Where the bridegroom will come back for his bride, and we will be with him forever. It's a beautiful, beautiful picture. And like a bride and a bridegroom, infidelity isn't an option.

The mistresses have to go. You can't be married and have someone on the side. You can't sew a new piece of cloth onto an already shrunk garment.

And this isn't just to do with religious Jewish people that come to faith in Jesus and still try to balance this keeping the law and keeping Jesus. It affects us today.

What are the things in your life that you are adding Jesus to? Jesus plus whatever. Are you trusting in things apart from Jesus for salvation?

[20:36] For righteousness? For purity? Are you trusting in the work and labor of your own piety? The good deeds you might do?

The charity work? All really good things but you're putting your hope in that? That somehow that will justify you? Are you doing that? Are you putting new wine into an old wineskin?

It doesn't work. It's incompatible. Christ is calling us to fidelity. Complete abandonment for Him. And it is hard.

And in many ways it is impossible to do it perfectly in this life. But Jesus says this and I read it already but I'm going to come back to it throughout our time in Mark.

In verse 15 the time has come and the kingdom of God is at hand and this is what He says repent and believe in the gospel. And that repenting and that believing is a continual repenting and a continual believing.

[21 : 35] Continue to repent. Continue to believe. In who? In this thing that's going to get you out of jail? No, in a person. In Jesus Christ.

In Jesus Christ. We will mess up. The history of Israel is full of infidelity to God. And it's interesting that Jesus calls Himself the bridegroom when the only person in the Old Testament in all the imagery of the Old Testament when it talks about the bridegroom is God Himself.

That God Himself is the husband to Israel. That Jesus is God. And we will mess up because we are fallen people and we are growing and growing and growing but we stumble.

So the Christian life is repenting and believing. And that's not like repenting and believing to get re-saved. It's not like that at all.

It is saying I throw myself at your mercy once again. I need your help. Jesus, I believe.

[22 : 47] Help my unbelief. But that's not the only parable Jesus uses. He also talks about the Sabbath.

Or this isn't the only instance rather, not parable. But He also talks about the Sabbath. He's also questioned about the Sabbath. If you look with me in Mark chapter 2 starting verse 23 it says this, one Sabbath Jesus was going through the grain fields and as Him and His disciples as they made their way His disciples began to pluck heads of grain.

And the Pharisees were saying to Him look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath? It begins almost the exact same way.

Jesus is questioned, His disciples are questioned for what they are doing. And I just, it's a bit of an aside but I think it is a wonderful aside. In both cases, Jesus defends His disciples.

He doesn't say, hey listen, these guys are kind of right. You should probably answer for yourself. Jesus is the one who defends His own. He's the one who answers on their behalf.

[23 : 57] And this is what Jesus does for us. He defends us. when the enemy comes, when our own hearts come, when the world comes and condemns us, says you are not, you are not truly His.

You are a sinner. You are full of, you are hopeless. He defends us. It really is wonderful that we don't have to defend ourselves anymore.

And we, and He defends us not as somebody who is weak or somebody who is somehow equal to the ones, the powers that are accusing us.

No. We saw in chapter 1 Jesus casting out a demon and it's all the power of hell is cast aside by just the word of His tongue.

There's no power greater than Jesus and we can have confidence that if He will defend us, He will do it perfectly. This is a beautiful picture. When even your heart condemns you, He does not condemn you if you are in Him.

[25 : 07] These are promises, I'm telling you, maybe this isn't an aside, maybe this is like the real gusto bit, but hold on to those promises, white knuckled. Even when your own heart condemns you, hold on to the promises that if you are Christ, He will defend you to the end.

It's a beautiful truth. So it continues on. Jesus talking, defending His disciples. In verse 25, excuse me, Jesus said to them, Have you never read what David did when he was in need and was hungry, he and those with him?

How he entered the house of God in the time of Abiathar, the high priest, and he ate the bread of the presence which is not lawful for any but the priest to eat, and also gave it to those who were with him.

Jesus here is, He is quoting from 1 Samuel, where King Saul is on the run from Saul.

King, sorry, King David is on the run from Saul. And, and King David is this picture of Israel's greatest king, and how the Messiah would be, he would, he would be in the line of King David, the Messiah would.

[26 : 26] And Jesus, what He is doing is He is drawing their attention to the fact that the law isn't meant to bind us and put us in a straitjacket so that we can't move, we can't go left or right, we can't

do life, we're constantly fearful that we're going to mess up.

The Pharisees, like I mentioned, they had a great love of God and the law, but the problem is their desire to keep the law, because that's how they thought they'd be made right with God, it calcified. It ceased being a way to show their love for God, and instead, He said, there's a prohibition not to boil a kid in its mother's milk.

So let's build a fence around that, so people will never ever do that. So how are we going to do that? You can't eat milk with meat. You can't do it. Nowhere in the Bible does it say don't mix milk and meat, but the Pharisees, what they've done is they built a fence around the commandment, and they called the fence the commandment itself, the same authority.

So by the time Jesus comes, and especially afterwards, there's this intense built-up structure of what you can and could and couldn't do on the Sabbath.

[27 : 44] Like down to the minutiae, and even today, for Orthodox, religious Jewish people, the Sabbath is a day full of keeping rules.

And sure, you can keep the rules. I have family, some of you may know I come from a Jewish background, and I have family members that are deeply religious, and it is exhausting on the Sabbath to be with them.

You cross the street, you press the crosswalk button, all of a sudden you've broken the Sabbath. If it rained the night before and you walk through the field, it's like plowing, and that's breaking the Sabbath.

You can't plow. I'm not trying to be mean or just ripping on our religious Jewish friends, but just to say that if our goal is to keep the law, then what we'll end up doing is we will either give up completely or we'll live a life that does not look to God himself, but it will look to our own ingenuity. And this is what's happening here. See, what the disciples are doing, they're just plucking grain on a Sabbath day. They're going out for a walk. Maybe, to the Pharisees, they're breaking the prohibition to not travel on the Sabbath or to not reap on the Sabbath, but they're going for a walk.

[29 : 02] They're picking grain from a piece of wheat growing in the field. Interestingly, the only other bits that talk about plucking wheat from the field, it has to do with hospitality and charity towards widows, orphans, and foreigners.

It talks about at harvest time, don't plow the whole field. Don't harvest the whole field. Leave the edges so that the poor people can glean for themselves.

It's a picture of hospitality. It's interesting how the law has built into it these beautiful aspects of charity and love to the down and out. And the Pharisees, trying to keep the Sabbath, totally miss an opportunity to show charity and hospitality.

They are missing it. Instead of turning their gaze to God, they are turning their gaze on themselves, and they are a stumbling block.

In Matthew 23, Jesus has this whole series of woes to the Pharisees and the scribes. If you get a chance tonight, give it a read. It is scathing.

[30 : 12] But this is what he says in verse 23 of Matthew 23. So Matthew 23, 23. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, for you tithe mint and dill and cumin and have neglected the weightier matters of the law, justice, mercy, and faithfulness.

These you ought to have done without neglecting the others. Instead you, this says, sorry, you blind guides straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel.

They fail to see that the end of the law, the purpose of the law, the telos of the law is God himself, is the Messiah, is that God will once again dwell with his people and they will dwell with him.

Their sins will be no more. So much so in this picture, so I talked about the bridegroom and the end of history being this beautiful picture of Jesus, the bridegroom, with the bride forever.

But there's another picture in scripture that talks of heaven and eternity with God being the Sabbath rest of God. That the Sabbath was instituted by God not to be this intense, onerous day, but a day that is a gift, a day of rest, a day where we don't have to strive anymore and we can recognize that really we can work hard but in the end God gives us our bread.

[31 : 43] And that sweetness of that connection with God and rest in him, that is another picture of eternity. And Jesus, what does he say? How does he finish off chapter 2?

Look with me again in verse 27. The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath.

Jesus Christ is Lord of the Sabbath. The only Lord of the Sabbath in the Bible is God himself because he was the one who instituted it and created it.

And Jesus here is saying that he, in fact, is the Lord of the Sabbath. Again, another declaration that Jesus is God and we start to see an even bigger picture of who this Messiah really is.

That he, yes, he forgives sin and he cleanses the leprous man. Yes, he casts out demons and he heals the sick. But what does he, what else does he do?

[32 : 44] He saves us from our own self-righteousness. He, he brings us into complete union with him and helps us to enter his rest.

And these two things, whatever you might think, I would put to you that this is the deepest longing of the human heart. That all of our strivings, all the people in Canada and in Stittsville and in Ottawa, wherever it may be in Canada, we are striving for rest.

Not for a vacation, but for rest. That the striving after money, after fame, after belonging, it's exhausting.

And we want rest. And we want it. We still want these things. We still want belonging. We still want a connection and friendships. But we can't do it ourselves.

We can't. And if you're honest with yourself, if I'm honest with myself, I'm tired of it. I'm tired of it.

[33 : 51] I'm tired of trying to make things look right and feel right. And instead, gaze off of me and look to Christ.

Friends, the great, great truth of our section in Scripture today is that we don't have to strive for God's affection and his approval that in Christ Jesus we have it.

We repent and believe. We say, I can't keep living this way. And maybe you pray that prayer until your dying breath. You say it and then you thrust yourself at the foot of the cross.

I believe helped my unbelief. Let's stand and pray. Heavenly Father, we thank you so much for your goodness, your great love for us that we do not have to somehow reach a level of piety and righteousness in and of ourselves to be loved by you, to be called your bride, to enter your rest.

Instead, we just cast our gaze upon your Son and trust in the finished work that he has done on the cross of Calvary already. That if we are found in him, that we will be assured to have a seat at the marriage supper of the bridegroom when he has got his bride and that we will enter his rest forever and ever and ever where strivings cease, where we can exhale, and know sweet, sweet forgiveness and connection and union with him.

[35 : 45] Lord, open our eyes to the areas in our lives where we are striving, where we are more like Pharisees than we'd like to admit. Lord, help us to repent and believe.

We pray all of this in Christ's mighty name. Amen.