

The Offensive King

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[0:00] Please do take a seat. Before I begin, how about I pray for us? Let's pray. Our gracious Heavenly Father, we do thank you for your word, the Bible.

We thank you that you continue to speak to us through it. We ask us now that you might give us minds to understand your word, and not only that, but also hearts to put into practice the things we ought.

We ask it for Jesus' sake. Amen. Well, every culture has its own rules and traditions. In Melbourne, for example, we have the tradition on Melbourne Cup Day to have a public holiday.

I like that tradition. That may explain we're a bit low on numbers today. There's other examples of traditions and social rules that we have in society as well. Like, for example, that when you're watching a theatre production or a concert, that you are to remain silent during the performance. Now, I took my wife, Michelle, one day to a concert, to a ballet concert, actually, performance. She loved ballet. It's her birthday. I bought some tickets to the ballet.

[1:09] Now, I must confess that I'm not focusing on ballet myself, not dancing. Can you imagine me in a tutu? No, don't actually. Not dancing, nor even watching, I must confess. So, as we sat there in the Sydney Opera House, I must confess that I fell asleep.

And what's worse, I started snoring. Now, I didn't mean to, really. I honestly didn't mean to. Nevertheless, when Michelle elbowed me and I startled awake, I looked across and there next to me was a lady with a look of great indignation on her face.

You see, I'd broken the social rule and caused her great offence. Needless to say, I'm not invited back, which I don't mind. But as we continue to mark the count of Jesus' life this morning, we'll see Jesus breaking some of his society's rules.

And in so doing, causing the religious leaders of that society great offence. So much so that the last verse of our reading, chapter 3, verse 6, If you turn to that, there we read this.

Mark, chapter 3, verse 6. The Pharisees went out, after being so offended by Jesus, the Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against Jesus on how to destroy him.

[2:32] Now, that's a pretty extreme reaction, isn't it? Particularly when you realise that the Herodians followed King Herod, who was, you know, for the Romans, and the Pharisees followed Judaism.

They were actually enemies. They never spoke to each other. But the Pharisees and the Herodians are so offended by Jesus that now they're conspiring together on how to kill him.

What on earth did Jesus do to offend them so greatly? Well, firstly, he ate with sinners. Point 1 on the outlines, verse 13. Chapter 2, verse 13.

Jesus went out again beside the sea. That's our marker to show a new unit. Went out beside the sea, and the whole crowd gathered around him. And he taught them. And as he was walking along, he saw Levi, son of Alphaeus, sitting at the tax booth.

And he said to him, follow me. And he got up and followed Jesus. Now, notice again here for a moment that Jesus draws a crowd. It's becoming a regular occurrence for Jesus.

[3:32] He's reached celebrity status, as it were. But notice also what he starts doing with the crowd. He starts teaching them. For that is why he has come, as we heard last week, to proclaim the kingdom and to call people into that kingdom, which is what he does to Levi.

Now, Levi is most likely the same person as Matthew, who wrote the Gospel of Matthew, because in Matthew's Gospel, where this event is recorded, Matthew uses his own name, Matthew, rather than Levi.

And so we suspect that it's just his second name, Levi Matthew, for example. And we're also told that he was a tax collector because he was sitting at a tax booth. Now, as many of you know, and

as we heard from the children's talk this morning, tax collectors were a hated breed. I mean, no one likes paying taxes to start with. But these tax collectors were also hated because they'd line their own pockets in the process of collecting taxes from the people. They'd ask for a bit more and keep some for themselves. And so they were actually seen as traitors because they had aligned themselves with the enemy, with the Roman Empire. [4 : 39] In fact, if a Jew became a tax collector, then they were actually kicked out of the synagogue. They were excommunicated from the synagogue and they were stripped of all their Jewish civil rights.

They became outcasts. But instead of avoiding or ignoring this traitor and cheat, what does Jesus do? He calls him to himself. And without delay, Levi follows, leaving, it seems, everything. He leaves the whole booth, presumably the books, the money, everything. Just like the fishermen's left everything, as we heard about last week. Now, this is not only shows us great authority on Jesus's behalf, but it also shows us great love and grace by Jesus. That he, this great celebrity, would call someone like Levi. And I think Levi knows this. He realizes the love and grace he's been shown because then in verse 15, there's a big dinner at his house in honor of Jesus.

See verse 15 over the page. As he sat, as Jesus sat at dinner in Levi's house, many tax collectors and sinners were also sitting with Jesus and his disciples, for there were many who followed him. [5 : 52] You see, Levi puts on this big dinner party and it is big because there are many people there, it says. Now, it would have cost Levi quite a bit of money to do this. And it's similar to another story we hear about another tax collector.

Do you remember the short tax collector, Zacchaeus? He does the same thing. He throws a big banquet in Jesus's honor. Now, why do they do this? I take it it's because they were so overwhelmed with gratitude that this great man, this doer of marvelous works and miracles, would call them the undeserving cheats and outcasts to be part of his people. But that's exactly what grace is, you see. Great generosity given to those who don't deserve it. And Levi, it seems, is so thankful for it. When Michelle's grandmother turned 90 years of age, she's living in England, and when she turned 90, out of all the gifts she received, the gift that she treasured the most was a card written and signed by the queen herself. Now, I don't know how many times I heard about that card. Lots. It was the most treasured thing. You see, out of the millions of people in Britain, the queen wrote her a card. And she was over the moon because of it. And I suspect there's something of that feeling here in Levi. Out of all the tens of thousands of people there would have been in Jerusalem, Jesus, of all people, the king, calls him a cheat and an outcast to follow him.

[7 : 27] It would have been a great moment of joy for Levi. And what's more, Jesus showed his love and grace by then eating at his house. You see, no Jew would be found eating with an outcast. Why? Because to eat someone was, sorry, to eat with someone was a sign of acceptance. It showed you thought God had accepted them.

But in the Pharisees' minds, these men were outcasts and sinners. God hadn't accepted them. And if God had not accepted them, then how can Jesus eat with them and so accept them? What is Jesus doing?

Indeed, this is the very question they ask in verse 16. Have a look there in verse 16. When the scribes of the Pharisees saw that Jesus was eating with the sinners and tax collectors, they said to his disciples, Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?

When Jesus heard this, he said to them, Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick do. I have come to call not the righteous, but sinners. You see, the Pharisees knew that the blessings of the kingdom belonged to those who are righteous, those who are good, not to sinners.

[8 : 34] Doesn't Jesus know this? Of course he does. But the thing is, there are no righteous. There are none who are completely good.

Rather, all people are sinners. Jesus also knows this, you see. He knows that all are spiritually sick and so all need forgiveness to be spiritually healed. That's why he has come, to call sinners and offer forgiveness. He has not come to call the righteous simply because there are none. Now this would have been a big slap in the face to the Pharisees because they thought they were pretty righteous.

I mean, after all, they followed God's law, did they not? They thought they were good enough. But Jesus is saying, I cannot call you, I cannot come to you unless you first see yourself as a sinner. Of course, they didn't see that. They think they were good enough to enter God's kingdom. And we see this kind of thinking in our own society, do we not? I've met people who think, you know, God will be okay with me.

[9 : 36] You know, when I meet him, I've lived a pretty good life. You know, I've not killed anyone. You know, I haven't done many bad things lately. People think in our society that they've lived a good enough life.

They're righteous enough to meet God. But Jesus is showing us here that there is no one righteous enough, not even one. And trying to keep God's law as the Pharisees did or trying to do good deeds in the world isn't going to make any of us right with God.

Rather, it's only Jesus who makes us right with God. Jesus, you see, by eating with these sinners was showing that we are sinners saved only by grace, not by good deeds or keeping the law.

Well, Jesus continues to break the rules and cause offense, this time by not fasting. Point to verse 18. 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?

Now, just a bit of background first before we continue. The Old Testament law did prescribe fasting but only once a year on the Day of Atonement. Yet, it seems that the Pharisees had turned the law into a weekly tradition or custom.

[10 : 49] In fact, the Pharisees fasted twice a week, Mondays and Thursdays and they encouraged people to do the same. Fasting, of course, in and of itself is not a bad thing to do.

In Jesus' day, it was a way of expressing grief over the death of a loved one or over sin. And here, most people seem to be fasting and so it's probably a sign of mourning over the nation's sin that has led them to being conquered.

And so when the people see Jesus' disciples presumably eating, not fasting, they ask Jesus, why? And Jesus answers with three little parables. The first one is in verse 19 and 20.

Jesus said to them, the wedding guests cannot fast while the bridegroom is with them, can they? 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 on that day.

When I married Michelle, it was a pretty good day, and there were actually a few tears in her mother's eye as she walked down the aisle. And I take it they were tears of joy, not of mourning.

[11 : 57] I hope. You see, although there are some tears at weddings, there's usually not mourning, is there? And at the reception, there is not fasting but feasting.

And rightly so, because that is what is appropriate for a wedding. You see, Jesus likens himself to a bridegroom at a wedding. And he says, just as it is inappropriate to fast and mourn at a wedding, so too is it inappropriate for my disciples to fast and mourn while I am with them.

It is a time for joy. When I'm gone though, says Jesus, when I die on the cross, then they will mourn on that day. But not now, not while I'm with them. And what's more, this bridegroom illustration isn't just a random illustration that Jesus plucked from the air.

Rather, I think he deliberately chooses this one because God calls himself or likens himself to a bridegroom in the Old Testament in Isaiah 62 where God comes to restore Israel and establish his new kingdom.

And so Jesus is again saying that he is God, the Son, who has come to bring in this new age where God will dwell with his people and establish his kingdom.

[13 : 09] The problem is, though, people are so preoccupied with the customs they've created that they don't see who Jesus is despite all the miracles he's doing. And they are so preoccupied with fasting to show that they are sorry for their sins that they don't see that Jesus has authority to forgive sins.

And that fasting for sin, in fact, is no longer necessary for Jesus, the forgiver of sins, is here. It's a new day. And this newness is also emphasized in verses 21 to 22.

Have a look there. No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old cloak, otherwise the patch pulls away from it. The new from the old and a worse tear is made.

And no one puts new wine into old wineskins, otherwise the wine will burst the skins and the wine is lost. And so are the skins. But one puts new wine into fresh wineskins.

Now I've never shrunk anything in the wash before. I have made a few white t-shirts go pink because I forgot to separate the colours. I learnt that very early on. But I understand that new clothes sometimes shrink when you first wash them.

[14 : 21] And so it would be inappropriate to sew a new patch that hasn't been shrunken yet onto an old cloak. Because when you put that in the wash, that new patch will shrink and pull away from the stitching.

And the tear will be worse this time. Likewise, it's inappropriate to pour new wine into old wineskins because new wine continues to ferment. And it would overstretch the old wineskins that have already been stretched and are likely to be brittle, so bursting them and losing the wine.

Now both these illustrations show that it's inappropriate for Jesus' disciples to fast at this time, just like the bridegroom illustration did. But these last two do more than that.

By speaking about new cloth and new wine and new wineskins, it signals that with Jesus there is a new day, a new era. Remember what Jesus said back in chapter 1 verse 15?

He said, the time is fulfilled. That is, the time has arrived. There is something new happening. And that new thing that is happening is God's kingdom coming near.

[15 : 26] And entry into that kingdom is no longer about following the religious customs as the Pharisees were doing, but it's about believing in the king of that kingdom, Jesus. You see, Jesus brought in a new time in history so much so that we actually changed the way we date our years.

Did you realise? Remember we stopped from going BC before Christ and now we've changed to AD and Odonomy which is the year of the Lord. We are in 2011 AD.

AD. And we changed it rightly so because with the coming of Jesus was the coming of a new age, new cloth, new wine, new wineskins. And this new age is not simply a rehash of the old.

It's not something you can sew onto the old or contain into the old age of Judaism. So, says Jesus, no, my disciples don't have to fast because I, the bridegroom, am here who brings in God's new kingdom and entry into this kingdom is not about following your religious customs, your old ways. It's about believing in me. Now, this would have been pretty offensive to the people. I mean, who do you think Jesus was calling old wineskins? Of course, if the Jews had understood who Jesus was, they would not have been offended but they would have rejoiced.

[16 : 43] Yet, they were so caught up with their religious customs again and their traditions that they didn't see who Jesus was. we can actually fall into the same mistake too, can't we?

We can be so caught up with our customs and traditions that we have that we forget that they were only ever meant to point us to Christ. Nothing more. And they can become so important to us that following them suddenly becomes what counts rather than following Jesus.

Now, communion can be like that. The tradition of communion is great. Lord's Supper is great. I mean, it was instituted by Jesus himself after all. But it can become more important than Jesus if we only come to church when there is communion rather than coming to church every week to be encouraged to follow Jesus.

Now, I'm not saying that's what happens here but do you see what I mean? That can happen. We can make our customs more important than Jesus himself as the Pharisees did. Well, Jesus appears to continue to cause offence.

This time though, by breaking their Sabbath rules, point three verse 23. One Sabbath he was going through the grain fields and as they made their way, his disciples began to pluck heads of grain.

[17 : 58] The Pharisees said to him, look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath to do? Jesus, you see, causes offence by allowing his disciples to pick grains on the Sabbath day.

In the Old Testament, it said that the Sabbath day, which is Saturday, was to be a day of rest, not work, as you know. But then the Pharisees added 39 different activities that you could not do on that day.

In other words, they ironically turned the Sabbath into a religious work. Instead of resting and relaxing, you now had to work hard to make sure you didn't work.

And they were so fixated on the law, rather than the principle behind the law, that when they saw the disciples picking a few heads of grain to chew on, you're doing work.

Unlawful, they said. My parents-in-law, when they were living in the UK, used to live next door to some Jews. These Jews were lovely people, but they would often knock on my in-law's door at night on the Sabbath day to ask them to come to their house so that they could switch the light switch on for them.

[19 : 11] Because if they did that, that would be doing work, and that would be unlawful. True story. It's so petty, isn't it? Of course, it originated from a good desire to please God, but the problem was that the law that helped them please God and care for others actually became more important than God and others.

And so Jesus says in verse 25, he said to them, have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need of food? He entered the house of God when Abiathar was the high priest and ate the bread of the presence, which is not lawful for any but the priest to eat, and he gave some to his companions.

Then he said to them, the Sabbath was made for humankind and not humankind for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is Lord, even of the Sabbath. Now we read here about what David did in 1 Samuel, and we heard about that this morning from our first reading.

His men went to the priests and asked for some bread. In fact, they ate the sacred bread because they were hungry. Now Jesus' point here is that even the great King David and the high priests of the Old Testament were not being as strict as you Pharisees are being.

Even David and the high priests knew God was concerned more for the good of people than the letter of the law. As Jesus says, the Sabbath was made for people to help people to serve them.

[20 : 40] People were never created to serve the law as the Pharisees were now doing. And so Jesus breaks their law and so doing claims to be Lord even of the Sabbath. That is, he claims to have authority over it.

He is the one who has authority to remind them what the Sabbath is all about and to tell them that they have been misinterpreting it, that they have made it into a religious work, a thing you did to earn favour with God.

But more than that, he also has authority to provide the ultimate Sabbath. You see, the Sabbath day was all about rest, you know, resting from work so that you could particularly rest with God. And by saying that he is the Lord of the Sabbath, Jesus says that he has authority to give ultimate rest, eternal rest with God, you see. Well, in chapter 3, verse 1, it's a different place but the same issue and we read there again, he entered the synagogue on a Sabbath and a man was there who had a withered hand.

They watched him to see whether he would cure him on the Sabbath so that they might accuse him. You see, by this stage, the Pharisees have been so offended by Jesus, they're now looking for an opportunity to accuse him.

[21 : 51] But again, Jesus reminds them about the intention of the Sabbath and exposes their misguided devotion to it. See verses 3-6, he said to the man who had the withered hand, come forward.

Then he said to them all, is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save life or to kill? But they were silent. He looked round at them with anger and he was grieved at their hardness of heart and said to the man, stretch out your hand.

He stretched it out and his hand was restored. And then the Pharisees went out, immediately conspired with the Herodians, against him, but how they might destroy Jesus. Now Jesus could have waited until the next day to heal this man.

He could have. But it seems that he deliberately calls the man out in front of them all and heals them on the Sabbath, causing them great offence. Now why does he do this?

I take it so that they might see just how much they've perverted God's law. As Jesus has already said, the Sabbath law was made for people, for their good.

[22 : 59] But they'd rather have their version of the Sabbath law upheld than see this man receive any good by being healed. And that's pretty perverted, isn't it?

To rather uphold your tradition, your custom, than to see a man healed. And what's more, they not only refuse to do good, but then they do evil by planning Jesus' death on the Sabbath.

And so they reject Jesus and therefore the very means of forgiveness and grace. In other words, their religion, their customs and traditions became a barrier to believing in Jesus and entering God's kingdom.

Well, when I fell asleep during the ballet, I broke the social rules for theatre. In so doing, I showed that I wasn't a huge fan of ballet. But I didn't mean to do it.

Yet here, it seems Jesus certainly by the end deliberately breaks their rules. Why? Well, so that he might show people who he is and what he has come to do.

[23 : 59] For he is the Lord, the bridegroom, who has come to graciously call sinners into his kingdom. Not by following religious works or doing good things, but by simply believing in him. And so the first question for us this morning is, have we accepted Jesus by believing in him?

Or do we still think we're good enough to meet God on that last day? You know, we're following the great Australian motto of, she'll be right, mate, on the last day. Or have we been coming to church for years and turned it into religion where we go through the rituals thinking that these things will make us right with God?

But living a good life or going through the rituals does not make us right with God. I think Jesus does. And so again, have you accepted Jesus as your king? He's the only way, you see, to be made right with God.

And for those of us who have, then how are we responding? Are we like Levi, overwhelmed by God's grace towards us who are undeserving?

Last Tuesday night was the parish prayer night, and so thank you for all those who were able to make it. I prayed with a great bunch of people and I was struck particularly by one prayer where the person prayed this.

[25 : 09] They prayed, we thank you so incredibly much for your grace towards us, that you would give your son to die for us so that we could come to you.

Now this person prayed that prayer with such sincerity and meaning that it was clear to me that they are still overwhelmed by God's grace to them.

And as I listened to that prayer, I thought, yep, I need to keep being overwhelmed by God's grace to. It is truly amazing. And if we are, then do we likewise seek to live out our gratitude for God's grace like Levi did?

I mean, of course, we cannot throw Jesus a big dinner party, but we can seek to please him, can't we? And that includes showing grace to others rather than insisting on our own religious customs and traditions.

You see, when you look down the outline to see the rules that Jesus broke, they don't seem all that offensive to us, do they? I mean, he ate with sinners, he didn't fast, he let his disciples do a little work on the Sabbath, and he healed a sick person on the Sabbath.

[26 : 16] They seem like good things to do, actually, don't they? They don't seem that offensive to us. But at the time, these rules and traditions were so important to those people.

And I wonder if in a thousand years time, if Jesus hasn't returned first, whether Christians will look back on us and see whether we had any traditions and customs that we insist on to the detriment of people's good.

Now, we are all creatures of habit, and I have my own little customs I like to do, but the point is we must never let them get in the way of loving people or letting people come to Christ.

Imagine a visitor, for example, comes in a little late and sits on those seats at the back of the church there that often have those reserve signs on them, but the church is full so they sit there. And then a regular comes over and tells them they cannot sit there because that's not our custom.

They're reserved, that's our tradition, and so they must move somewhere else. Now, is that showing grace like Jesus, or would that be insisting on our traditions like the Pharisees? Now, I'm sad to say that's actually happened here at this service.

[27 : 23] But I'm also happy to say that I've also seen people who have been incredibly gracious to others. I know, for example, that many here would prefer more hymns. I also know that many would prefer more choruses or songs.

And yet you all practice grace towards one another and just get on with worshipping God. That's terrific. I've also seen a lady who was knocked over by a child at morning tea who obviously had too much red cordial to drink, yet they graciously asked the child if they were okay and then politely asked them to slow down.

Now, that's grace. And I've seen parents who miss out on the service by taking their kids out so they don't distract others. That's grace. And it's very encouraging.

So thank you. Friends, Jesus came to show that religion does not make people right with God. Only he can. And in so doing, he showed that both he and people are more important than traditions and religious rules.

What's more, Jesus also came to show grace by calling sinners like us into his kingdom. People who don't deserve it. You see, in the end, Jesus is not the offensive king.

[28 : 34] He's the gracious king, is he not? May we ever be overwhelmed by his amazing grace to us and so always seek to show grace to others.

Let's pray. our gracious heavenly father, we do thank you for Jesus. We thank you that he died the death that we deserve, so that by believing in him, we could be forgiven and healed.

Lord, we thank you for this extraordinary grace towards us and we pray that you might help us to keep being overwhelmed by it and keep showing it towards others that we may honour you who gave your son for us.

We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen.