

The Offensive King

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[0 : 00] Well, every society and culture has certain social rules that you don't break. And if you do, it causes people offence. For example, who loves it when people jump the queue you're in?

I mean, it's a no-no, isn't it? Or if those who receive things don't say thank you. Or for me, it's when I pull over to let another car pass, and they pass and don't wave.

Yeah. But of course, we can sometimes break this social rule and cause offence, can't we? So I remember one time, it was quite some time ago, I think it was my wife's 25th birthday, and my wife loves ballet.

We were living in Sydney at the time, and so I thought I'd splash out and buy a pass to three ballet shows at the Sydney Opera House. Yeah, not bad. I was pretty pleased with myself.

Until I went. And I found it so boring, I fell asleep accidentally. And what made it worse was, apparently, I started to snore.

[1 : 03] And so I broke the social rule that says you're to keep quiet and pay attention, both for the sake of those around you, and out of respect for the performers. And needless to say, the lady next to me was not impressed.

I think I heard the words, rude git, under her breath. And that was just Michelle. No, no, it wasn't. It was the other lady. But Michelle did refuse to take me for the other two shows, and rightly so.

Today, we see Jesus break some, not so much social rules, but religious rules. Although, in his day, the two were intertwined. And yet, by doing so, he doesn't show himself to be a rude git, but a good king who gives us rest from religion.

You see, two weeks ago, as Annette was saying, Mark announced that Jesus is God's promised king, who proclaims the good news of the kingdom, that it's here. And then last week, Mark gave us some evidence for Jesus being God's king by showing us he has God's authority, authority to teach his own words, to cast out impure spirits, to heal diseases, and to forgive sins, all for our good.

And this week, Mark shows us that Jesus is this good king, who, yes, breaks religious rules, but to show that he came to give us rest from religion. But he does cause some offence, so much so that by the end of our passage, we read that then the Pharisees went out and began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus.

[2 : 32] Now, we need to remember, the Pharisees were the religious leaders, the Herodians were supporters of King Herod, hence Herodians, and they were actually enemies. But here are the Pharisees going to their enemies to help them kill Jesus.

And so the question is, what on earth does Jesus do that causes such offence? Well, firstly, he eats with sinners. Point one, verse 13 and 14.

He's again by the lake, a crowd comes to him, he teaches, and then he sees Levi, son of Alpheus, sitting at his tax collector's booth. Follow me, Jesus told him.

Levi got up and followed him. Here is a sinner or a tax collector who was an outcast. I mean, anyone love paying taxes here? No?

Yeah? No one? They were outcasts in society. But what really made them outcasts was actually that they worked for the Roman government, who was the enemy. And they actually charged you more so they could keep some for themselves.

[3 : 39] And so they were shunned by their society. In fact, any Jew who became a tax collector was excommunicated from their synagogue and stripped of their Jewish civil rights. They became an outcast.

But Jesus caused this outcast, Levi, to follow him, to join him, which is actually a great act of grace towards him.

You know, to include Levi, who was so excluded. And plus, remember, Jesus was a pop star teacher. Verse 13, a large crowd had come to hear him teach. And so for this outcast, Levi, to be called by this rock star teacher really was an act of grace by Jesus.

It was a gracious call. And Levi gets it because after he responds to Jesus by following him, in the next verse he throws a dinner to honor him, which is a little reminder for us, I think, whom Jesus has graciously called, that we're to follow and honor him in our lives too.

But the focus for Mark here is the offense that it causes in verse 15 and 16. So Jesus is having dinner at Levi's house because Levi is honoring him.

[4 : 50] And there's many tax collectors and sinners there. In verse 16, when the teacher of the law, who were Pharisees, saw him eating with sinners and tax collectors, they asked his disciples, why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?

Do you see their question, which shows their offense? You see, for these Pharisees, the religious rule, their religious rule, was that you had to keep your distance from people like this to keep yourself pure.

Why? Well, because they thought it would help them earn their way into God's kingdom, help make them righteous. And that's what religion is, actually.

Doing good deeds, following religious rules, and repeating religious rituals over and over again, or to make yourself acceptable to God now and earn your way to heaven later.

All the religions of the world are about this, except Christianity. Even the world thinks like this. I've conducted lots of non-Christian funerals, and almost always they talk about how the loved one who's passed is in heaven because they were a good person or did good things, and occasionally went to church at Christmas and Easter.

[6 : 14] In fact, even that's why some people want to bring their child to get baptized, because it's a religious ritual that will get them in to God's kingdom.

But it doesn't. Now, don't get me wrong, these are all good things, and we are having baptisms later today, and it's good to be a nice person and so on, but they don't get us into God's kingdom, because they'll never make us good enough.

It's not like a ledger. People think it's a ledger where you've got bad deeds on one side, and you try and do good deeds to cancel out the bad deeds. The problem is, God is perfect, and so his standard is perfection.

And no matter how many good deeds we do, we'll never get back to perfection. As I've said here before, is anyone perfect? Any of you perfect? Of course not. No one is.

And so no matter how hard we try, no matter how many good deeds we do, no matter how many religious rituals we perform, we'll never be perfect, will we?

[7 : 19] As we'll sing later, not the labors of my hands can fulfill your law's demands. It just doesn't work. We may not be tax collectors, but we are all sinners.

And being good won't cancel that out. But the good news is, Jesus came for sinners, like Levi, like us. Verse 17. 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. Jesus has not come to call the righteous because, well, there are none. And those who think they are like the Pharisees, well, they won't listen to Jesus anyway.

That's a bit like some of us blokes who, even when we get sick, think we don't need a doctor. Or is that just me? Is there some other guys out there? I don't know. I think I saw a wife elbow her husband then, but anyway. But as a doctor tends to those who know they're sick, so Jesus came to tend to those who know they're sinners.

And he's the doctor or sin specialist we all need. For as you know, it's by his death that he pays for our sins so that we don't have to. Instead, he can forgive us and secure a place for us in God's kingdom.

[8 : 33] And therefore, give us rest from that bad religion. Rest from trying to earn our way into his kingdom. Yes, we're still to do good things, even religious things.

But not out of desperation to get in, but out of thankfulness to Jesus who gets us in. Christianity is not about following a religion to earn your way. It's about following a person who gives us the way if we respond to his gracious call, as Levi did.

And so I guess the first application is he gives us rest from bad religion if we respond to his gracious call. And so have you, by believing and following him. And for us who have, then it becomes, are we continuing to believe and follow him?

And even like Levi, honoring him in our lives. Jesus breaks the religious rule of the Pharisees to show he's the king who's come to cause sinners and to give us rest from bad religion.

But next, he breaks the religious rule of fasting to show that he gives rest even from the old religion that was good at the time. Point two, verse 18.

[9 : 47] Now, John's 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?

Now, in Jesus' day, fasting had become a weekly ritual, twice a week actually, Monday and Thursdays. So tomorrow, everyone, no food? Now, unless you were trying to do it to earn your way like the Pharisees did, fasting in and of itself is not a bad thing.

Even John the Baptist's disciples, we're told, are doing it. Now, it wasn't to lose weight as we might fast. It was to show grief.

And here, it was grief over the nation's sin that had led them initially to being exiled. And even when they come back, now under Roman occupation.

It's a way of saying sorry to God that God might forgive them and save them from the Romans and establish his kingdom again, just like in David and Solomon's time.

[10 : 51] And so when people see Jesus' disciples presumably eating, because that's how they know they're not fasting, it seems they're offended because they question Jesus about it. And Jesus says, look, fasting's not necessarily wrong, it's just inappropriate for the moment.

So verse 19 and 20, he says, How can the guests, the disciples, of the bridegroom, Jesus, 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 and mourn. You see, if you go to a wedding, there's usually feasting and rejoicing, isn't there?

Not fasting and mourning. And if someone did turn up, dressed all in black, and weeping like it was a funeral, as one mother-in-law did at her daughter's wedding, actually, it would not be very appropriate, would it?

Well, Jesus is saying he is the groom, and the disciples are the guests, and so it's inappropriate for them to fast and mourn while he's with them. When he's being taken to the cross, that time will be a time for fasting and mourning, but not now.

[12 : 01] But he's actually saying more than that. You see, in the Old Testament, God himself likens himself to a bridegroom. So Isaiah 62, verse 5, at the top there, he says that as a bridegroom rejoices over his people, so your God will rejoice over you.

And God will do that, as the rest of the passage says, when he comes to save them as their saviour and bring them into his kingdom. It will be a new era, a new time of restoration.

They'll be called his holy people again, a city no longer deserted. It's time of restoring. And so by calling himself the bridegroom, Jesus is actually hinting at the fact that he is God, the Son.

Come to save and bring in God's kingdom. Come to bring this new time of restoration. As he said just two weeks ago, remember? The time has come.

The new era is here. It's time to come into God's kingdom again. And so fasting and mourning over the nation's sin to bring in this new time is no longer appropriate because with Jesus, it has arrived.

[13 : 15] What's more, this new time of restoration will come with a new covenant, which gives us rest from the old religion of Judaism with its old covenant, which is a good thing because who wants to keep sacrificing animals?

Not me. And if we have rest from the old covenant, then we're not to try and patch parts of the old onto the new, which is what Jesus goes on to talk about.

He says 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. Now, I've not shrunk anything in the wash before myself, partly because Michelle does most of the washing.

Though I have one time when she was away managed to turn a white t-shirt pink because I forgot to separate whites and coloreds. But I understand that sometimes new clothes can shrink in the wash.

[14:22] And so it would be inappropriate to sew a new patch on an old garment. Otherwise, the new will shrink and pull away from the old. Likewise, it's inappropriate to pour new wine into old wineskins.

Wine gives off CO₂ as it ferments. And the old wineskins have already been stretched to the limit from the original wine put in. So if you put in new wine, which will ferment even more, they'll burst. Jesus is saying you cannot patch the old religion with its old covenant rituals onto the new era of God's kingdom with its new covenant. Even though God gave that old covenant, which was good at the time.

It's like when someone gets married, they begin a new stage of life, don't they? And so they cannot bring their old single ways, which may have been good at the time, into their new stage of married life.

You see, Jesus has given us rest from the old religion of Judaism with its old covenant rituals. And so do we try and still sometimes patch the old onto the new?

[15:32] Now, I don't think we do that here, but I know some churches do. Like the old food laws, the Seventh-day Adventists are not allowed to eat bacon.

Why? Because Israel was not allowed to eat it under the old covenant in Judaism. But that's to patch the old onto the new, you see. Now, at the time, this would have been pretty offensive to the people back then.

I mean, who do you think Jesus was calling? An old wineskin, right? But if the Jews had understood who Jesus really was, they wouldn't have been offended, but rejoice. Yet they're so caught up with their religious rituals, in this case fasting, that they miss Jesus as God's son.

Despite the amazing miracles he's been doing, like last week. A miracle that only God could really do. And I think we can make the same mistake.

We may not be tempted to patch some old ways onto the new, but do we focus so much on our new rituals that we miss who they point to? Like communion, which we're having today.

[16:40] Communion is a good thing. Jesus gave it to us. But I have had people in the past say to me, they only want to come to church when there is communion, because that's what's most important.

But does communion make the church? Or is it Jesus and his death, which communion points to, make the church? Do we focus so much on our good new rituals that we miss who they point to? Well, the third and final cause of offense is allowing his disciples to work on the Sabbath. Point three, verse 23. And so it's on a Sabbath, Jesus is going through the grain fields and his disciples begin to pick some heads of grain.

And the Pharisees say, look, why are they doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath? And as we heard in our first reading, one of the Ten Commandments said the Sabbath, which was a Saturday, was to be a day of rest, not work.

But God's law in Exodus and Deuteronomy is about resting from regular weekday work. In order to remember how God had created them to enjoy life with him and each other.

[17:57] And to even get a glimpse of it in this imperfect world. It's why in our first reading, the Sabbath law is based on God's rest at creation.

When God finished creating, he then rested in order to enjoy life with his creation. Life with God and one another in a perfect world with perfect bodies as his perfect image bearers.

In fact, that last sentence on that reading, it's hard to know if the Sabbath day is still talking about the seventh day or the weekly seventh day.

It's actually hard to work out because it's combined. The Sabbath law pointed to that creation rest on the seventh day. And so the disciples didn't really break God's law because they weren't doing their regular weekday work.

But they're actually doing what God created them to do, to enjoy life with God, that is Jesus. Rather, they broke one of the Pharisees' extra 39 Sabbath laws.

[19:11] That included no picking heads of grain. And by adding those 39 Sabbath laws, people had to keep thinking, Oh now, can I do this? Or is it breaking one of these things? Or can I do that?

And so the Pharisees made it so that people actually had to work hard to make sure they didn't work. You see how topsy-turvy it is? The Pharisees had turned a day of rest into a day of work, which was a burden.

I like some Jews who used to live in a downstairs apartment to my in-laws some many years ago, back when they were in the UK. And these Jews were really nice people. But on the Sabbath, they would walk upstairs at night, knock on my in-laws' door and ask my in-laws to come downstairs and turn on all the lights for them in their apartment.

Because one of the 39 laws of the Pharisees said, No kindling a fire, which was equated to no turning on lights.

And if my in-laws weren't home, they'd have to sit in darkness. And so you see, this day of rest became a burden for them. And the in-laws, actually. But rather than pointing out how bad these extra laws were, Jesus points out the intention of God's law and his identity as the one who can rightly apply that law.

[20 : 33] Verse 25 to 26. He talks about an incident in 1 Samuel 27 with David and his companions when they break the law of consecrated bread, so to speak.

And David could break that law about consecrated bread for two reasons. First, he was God's anointed king, wasn't he?

And so he had the right to determine how this bread law at the temple applied. And second, it was for people's good. It says that his companions were hungry and in need.

And so it was for their good. And so here is Jesus with his men, his disciples. And he is the anointed king. And so he has every right to determine how this Sabbath law is applied.

And it was for his disciples' good as well, that they could enjoy life with him. And so Jesus summarizes these two reasons in verse 27 and 28.

[21 : 36] He says, The Sabbath was made for man, mankind, and for their good, not man, for the Sabbath. And then he concludes from the whole incident, So the Son of Man is Lord, even of the Sabbath.

You see, he is the king. And so he can determine how God's law is rightly applied. And it was for people's good anyway. And so they haven't actually broken God's law.

In fact, as Lord of the Sabbath, Jesus not only determines how to apply God's law, he also fulfills God's law. And so he's able to give us that creation rest that the Sabbath law pointed to.

He's able to give us life with God and each other now, and a perfect world with perfect bodies as his perfect image bearers later.

And to prove it, he gives us a glimpse of it in the last scene. 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 on the Sabbath.

[22 : 46] And Jesus said to the man with the shriveled hand, stand up in front of everyone. And so it's still the Sabbath. It's still the same issue. It's still the same offense. There's no new question from the Pharisees.

They're just watching to accuse Jesus because they're so hard-hearted. And so Jesus says in verse 4, which is lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do evil, to save and give life or to kill?

But of course they remained silent. But then Jesus shows that he is the one who can do the ultimate good and give and save life, who could actually give that creation rest that God had intended way back in Genesis.

For he says to the man in verse 5, stretch out your hand, and he stretched it out, and his hand was completely restored. And by doing so, he shows his law to the Sabbath who fulfills that law, and he's able to give us that creation rest that the law pointed to.

He's able to give life with God and each other now. He's able to give life in a perfect world with a perfectly restored body, including a restored hand later.

[24 : 00] And so the question, the third application question for us is, do we know this rest? This rest of life with God now by believing in Jesus with the guarantee of life to the full and the new creation later?

Do we know that? And for us who do, then do we make time to enjoy it? No, time to enjoy that creation rest with God and each other that he's given us now.

Jesus fulfills the Sabbath law, so there's no more Sabbath. And so we can enjoy life with God and each other, not just on Sunday, but any day.

Whether it's quiet time with God during the day, or catching up with one another one-to-one, or Bible study, or for a meal on another day. We can enjoy that creation rest of life with God and each other on any day.

The question is, do we keep making time for it? Well, let me finish falling asleep and snoring at a ballet performance. Yeah, it did make me a rude git, I confess.

[25 : 07] But breaking these religious rules and rituals actually shows us that Jesus is the good king who came to give us rest from religion. Rest from the bad religion that seeks to earn our way into God's kingdom.

Rest even from the old religion with all its rituals. Rest from the old religion that seeks to earn our way into God's kingdom. That religious Sabbath law pointed to.

And so why wouldn't you believe in Jesus? But why wouldn't we, like Levi, continue to follow and honour him? Let's pray we would. Let's pray.

Our gracious Father, we thank you for this reminder this morning of the fact that Jesus is a good king who gives us rest from religion.

And so help us to keep responding to his gracious call to us by following him and honouring him in our lives. We ask in his name. Amen.