

# Heart-sick

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Preacher: Rev. Aaron Roberts

[ 0 : 00 ] Well, good evening, everybody. Alistair Stern preached a great sermon last week. And the image that really sticks in my mind from that sermon is the picture of Jesus in the home of Levi.

Levi was the tax collector, you remember, the ancient version of the World War II Jewish kind of Nazi conspirator. And let me remind you of that little passage just sort of in the middle of chapter two there.

And as he passed by, that's Jesus, he saw Levi sitting at the tax booth and he said to him, follow me. And he rose and followed him. And as he reclined at the table in his house, many tax collectors and sinners were reclining with Jesus and his disciples, for there were many who followed him.

And Alistair had this great line about something like a welcome to the undeserving friends at the table. Something like that, right? Undeserving friends at the table with Jesus, I think.

And it's this dinner table scene. It's this, and that scene, that picture is a picture of the church. That we have all been welcomed to the table with the king of the universe, not on our own merits, not because we're interesting or cool or fun, but by grace alone.

[ 1 : 16 ] That we have been welcomed by Jesus, who knows us, our guilt, our shame, and welcomes us anyway. And it's this scandalously joyful feast.

And by using this picture of salvation, I think Mark is saying something to us. And he's saying, what God has for us is better than we can imagine.

It's beautiful. It's incredible. It's joyful. It's joyful. One of the other things that popped out for me last week was this, you know, the really compelling story of the, you know, there was the paralytic man, and they couldn't get him inside the house, so his mates, like, pulled off the tiles off the roof and lowered him down, right?

And what does Christ say to him? He says, your sins are forgiven, which is unusual, you know, which is not what you'd expect. And I think one of the things this tells us is that we are worse than we think.

You know, our big problem is a heart problem. You know, our hearts naturally resist God, and that's what sin is. So there's two pictures, right?

[ 2 : 25 ] God's grace is more amazing than we can imagine. It's a feast, and we are worse than we think. And I wanted to remind you of those because these ideas are carried forward into these next episodes in Jesus' ministry.

For example, verses 18 forward, right? Christ rebuffs this accusation about fasting by saying that life with him is a wedding banquet, a feast, a celebration.

Again, a picture of this, the radical welcome and joy that comes with following Christ. But it's contrasted with radical rejection. So Christ's welcome and authority has been kind of ratcheting itself up over the last chapter, right?

There's grace that extends to lepers. It extends to the scum of the earth tax collectors. It's this party. It's beautiful. It's awesome. But on a similar trajectory, but in the opposite direction.

So you've got this thing going like this. God's grace is so great. On a similar trajectory, but in the opposite direction is the attitude of the Pharisees and some of the people around him. Instead of wanting to be with Jesus, they question his commitment to his faith.

[ 3 : 35 ] You don't fast. You don't respect the Sabbath. You hang out with scum. And they ultimately decide they want to kill him, which is the opposite of hospitality, right?

You know, that's the opposite of what Christ has on offer. So Jesus, at the end of today's reading, says, you know, this all happens because of the hardness of their hearts.

And of course, the great tragedy is that Jesus can change hearts, but they're not interested.

So we have these two threads running through our passage, right? The life-giving welcome of Jesus, which is better than you can think, and the hardness of people's hearts, which is worse than you can imagine.

So, folks, let's get into it. We've got three short stories here. Scene 1, Mark 2, 18 to 22. It's probably really helpful to have your Bibles open. Mark 2, 18 to 22. So John's disciples and the Pharisees' disciples are fasting.

[ 4 : 44 ] I don't know why John's disciples are fasting. But anyway, they're fasting. Now, in the Old Testament, there was only one prescribed fast, and that was for the Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur, right?

So that's a pretty serious day. Now, over the years, the Pharisees and the religious leaders, they added more fasts to the calendar. And at this point in history, they were fasting twice a week. So from once a year for the Day of Atonement, twice a week, Tuesdays and Thursdays.

And the fasting was about mourning the sin of Israel. So some people came to Jesus and were like, folks, where's your fasting? You know, where's your fasting, disciples? You don't seem to be taking your religious observances very seriously.

And Jesus responded with three mini parables. The first one, verse 19. Can wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them? As long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast.

It's his first response. And we've talked about this a bit already. It's his rich picture of a feast, a banquet. I officiated a few weddings over the last six months. Loved it.

[ 5 : 53 ] Loved officiating the weddings. But really loved the reception afterwards. Because my job was done and I could just enjoy my friends.

Now imagine going to a reception and the emcee stands up and says, folks, there's going to be no food here. No dancing. Don't talk to each other.

Just arrange your seats away from the person beside you. All looking outwards. And I want you to use these next few hours as a time of introspection and reflection.

It'd be cheap. Like it's the cheap option, right? I mean, that's the kind of like, that's the rhetorical question that Jesus is throwing out.

You know, he's saying, fast. Do you fast at a wedding? No, of course not. No, you celebrate. It's a joyous occasion. And back in the days, it was the reception afterwards was enormous.

[ 6 : 57 ] It wasn't like, you know, we go to a place, a restaurant, or somebody rents out a hall and they put on a buffet. And it's great, right? Back in the days, they did it big, man. Like the people getting married didn't get to go to a honeymoon.

They had to host a party for a week in their house, you know. So Jesus is saying, we are not fasting now because something amazing has happened that is worth celebrating.

And this is the gist. At the center of the celebration is a person, a bridegroom. The bridegroom is here, so we're not mourning. Jesus is equating himself to the bridegroom.

He's saying, I am this bridegroom. And you see that little phrase, with them. The bridegroom is with them. That's mentioned four times. With them. The Messiah is here. It's an old picture of Messiah kind of imagery here.

Is here. What you've been waiting for is here. It's huge. It's awesome. No, we're not going to fast. Does this mean Jesus is against fasting?

[ 8 : 01 ] No. I mean, the next verse he says, listen, you can fast later when a bridegroom is gone. Which is the first reference to the crucifixion, I think. Does this mean Christians shouldn't be sad?

Is that what you think I'm saying? You know, being with Jesus is just, you know, all bubbles and giggles and stuff? No, I'm not saying that either. Jesus is not saying that.

Christ's presence in our life doesn't drive back all of our problems. You know, there's still suffering. Drudgery, you know.

We know that. We can be rightfully sad about the pain that comes with life. But as well as being sad about that stuff, we can have this continuous thread of joy in our life.

The joy that comes with knowing that Christ is with us. Christ is with us in the face of our pain and death and misery.

[ 9 : 03 ] The tenor of our life. Celebration. Because we're at the table with Jesus. And we don't deserve to be. And I want you to burn that image into your hearts as you think about what it means to be a Christian.

What it means to follow Jesus. Because that is a central biblical picture to describe what it means to be with God. A couple of very quick examples. There's millions, but a couple of quick ones.

Exodus 24. God confirms his covenant with his people. Moses and the elders go up the mountain. And it says this. They beheld God and ate and drank.

They dined with God. Example two. The sacrament ordained by Jesus. The thing that we do to signify his presence with us.

It's a meal. The picture used in Revelations to describe our life with Christ when he returns. It's called a heavenly banquet. So burn that idea into your hearts, okay?

[10:04] All right. I've spent quite a bit of time on that. Because it's a key biblical idea. So Jesus gets complaints about his mates not fasting. Him not fasting. He says, no, we're not going to fast now.

It's a time. It's not a time to mourn. It's a time to celebrate. Because I am here. And then two very quick parables, verses 21 and 22. He says, you don't put unshrunk cloth on old pants.

Because the patch will shrink when you wash it. It's going to ruin everything. You don't put new wine into old wineskins. Because new wine is still fermenting. Old wineskins don't have any give in them.

The bag's going to explode. It's going to be all over the show. Don't do it. You can try and get very technical with these parables. But I think at its simplest level it is saying something new and amazing has happened.

And get on board. Get on board fully. Join this celebration. You know, you can try and make me an appendage to what you've got going already.

[11:00] It's not going to fly. It's not going to work. And we see this struggle later in the New Testament. In like Galatians, for example. Where folks are saved by faith and their belief in Jesus.

And people called Judaizers, right? Come in and they go, mate, we love it. The faith in Jesus died for your sins. It's great. But you know what you also need to do? You need to do these other things. You know.

Get these other things happening. And that's, you know, that's the good stuff, right? Okay. Okay. We'll move on. I'll come back at the end and summarize all this, all right?

Move on. Moving on. Scene 2, verses 23 to 28. Again, a question, an accusation directed towards Jesus and his followers. This time about the Sabbath. So they're on their way somewhere.

And they start plucking the head of grain, heads of grain to snack on in a field. And the Pharisees are all up. It's like, oh, you know, this is forbidden on the Sabbath.

[11:59] You can't do this. All right. A little bit of background here. Taking one day off from work, taking a Sabbath day in the Old Testament, it's a big idea, right? It's a big deal. It's big for God's people.

It's perhaps the central observance of God's people back in the days in terms of, you know, like demonstrating their loyalty to God. So Jewish folks took it really seriously for good reason, right? God invented the Sabbath. God took a Sabbath. So everyone got a day off on the Sabbath. Rich people, slaves, animals.

Working animals got a day off on the Sabbath. And Christians at various times have taken it very seriously. If you've watched Chariots of Fire, there's, you know, it's a big deal in the movie. Has anyone seen Chariots of Fire or is that like really old?

Okay, you know the movie, right? So Eric Liddell, he's this famous Scottish runner and he has a bit of a nightmare because his signature race is on a Sunday. And you know the scene, right?

[13:00] Prince of Wales comes and says and tries to lean on him with the whole king and country thing. Like, come on, mate. You've got to run the race for goodness sake, right? And Eric says, God made countries, God made kings and the rules by which they govern.

And those rules say that the Sabbath is his and I for one intend to keep it that way. So a serious business, the Sabbath. Now in the fourth commandment of the ten commandments, that's when it talks about the Sabbath, doesn't actually define what it means to not work.

So at the time of the writing of this gospel, there was lots of rules hadn't been added by the Pharisees, about 600, in an attempt to define work. So you couldn't plow a field. Makes sense, I guess.

It's reasonable. But you also couldn't sew more than one stitch. Nor could you glean, even like a little head of grain, unless you were starving.

You couldn't relocate a shoulder if it had become dislocated on the Sabbath. You had to wait for the next day. So they added all these rules, right? And in trying to define the Sabbath, the Pharisees had gone farther than God, I think, intended, right?

[14:09] So this gift of the Sabbath, this day of, this picture of our future with God, had become a burden. And Jesus says that to the Pharisees.

He says the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. Now, I don't know how the Pharisees caught these guys eating the grain. I don't know if they had this little Pharisee entourage, like, kind of hurriedly chasing along the disciples all the time, making sure they didn't do anything naughty.

But, I mean, it's just very sad. It's just a really sad story, right? Like, in the hardness of their hearts, and this is the worst than you think it is, kind of, par, right?

In the hardness of our hearts, you know, we can become so committed to the technique of being God's people that we can miss God.

And I think this is a particular danger for churches that are liturgical like us, you know. We can, we can, we can be in church, and we can say these beautiful words, which are intended to help form us and shape us and think about God and give words for our proper responses to God.

[15:20] And yet we can do this with hearts of stone, because these things can't just change us by themselves, you know. So the Pharisees kept the Sabbath, but I think, ironically, didn't get the promised, you know, rest that it's supposed to give you.

Anyway, Christ responds to their accusations by talking about King David, and it's a bit cheeky. He says, so, you know, have you not read what David did? Have you read the Bible? So have you read the Bible, that really famous guy, that really famous story?

Have you read that? So he's quoting Samuel, and aren't you glad we spent about 12 years in Samuel recently? Because now you understand him. And Jesus is basically saying, yeah, you know, like, David did this.

He ate, you know, he did a similar thing. He ate the consecrated bread. If David can do it, I can do it. Now, do you see what he's saying here? He's not, he doesn't ever deny that the Sabbath is a good thing that should be observed.

He doesn't say it's a bad thing. Of course he's not saying that. Don't hear me saying that. Christ's argument hinges on who David is, and therefore who he is. David could do it. Why? Because he was the king.

[16:28] He was the rightful king of Israel at that point, on the run, right? And identifying himself with David, Christ is saying, I am the king. I have authority to override this practice.

And in reality, he never actually broke the Sabbath. He broke the tradition built up around him. And so that no one was in any doubt what he was saying.

He kind of smacks them in the face with verse 28, you know. The son of man is Lord even of the Sabbath. Summary here.

After accusing Jesus of disregarding religious observance, the Sabbath, he responds in two ways. One, I am the king to which this observance is all about. It's subject to me. And two, you guys have ruined it anyway.

That's what I think he's saying. And I am correct. Okay. Chapter 3, verses 1 to 6. Jesus heads to a local synagogue again.

[17:29] And it's the Sabbath again. And the Pharisees are watching, hoping he's going to heal someone on the Sabbath. This is how perverted it's become, right? They're hoping he heals someone so they can get him.

And Sabbath, Jesus knows this. So he invites the accusation, right, by calling up this guy with a withered hand. The word withered there, it's a death word. Death has entered this guy's life. So he forces the situation.

And in this very dramatic scene, he says to the man with a withered hand, he goes, stand up. And then he says to the Pharisees, trying to get them to see how ridiculous their stance is, in verse 4, he says, So what's the right thing to do on the Sabbath now?

Good things or bad? Saving lives or killing? It's meant to be cuttingly ironic. Because after he heals this guy, and then after healing this guy, the Pharisees plot with the local government guys to kill Jesus.

And the irony is, they despise Jesus for doing good on the Sabbath. And yet, they think it's okay to conspire to kill him on that same day.

[ 18 : 45 ] Jesus has come to bring life. He brought life to that man. Whereas they brought death. So this question, he asks them, he says, you know, what's the right thing to do on the Sabbath?

What's the right thing, guys? And he wants them to see how far their hearts have moved from God's intent for that wonderful day.

And of course, they were silent. And do you not find the whole thing very sad that this all happened in the synagogue, right in the temple?

It is really sad that it is possible to be a member of the church and have a heart of stone and miss Jesus. And I think the warning about what a hard heart leads to really pops out here.

So I want to finish with just some thoughts on hard hearts and what Jesus does to them. Okay, so we have these three stories, right?

[ 19 : 50 ] Each one tells us what a hard heart does, which is the definition of sin, a resistance to God. Okay, so what does the first story tell us about what sin does? You know, the disciples going about their business when, according to others, they were supposed to be fasting and sad.

And Jesus tells them that life with him is a celebration. And the religious leaders, they can't understand that joy. And you know how I said the Pharisees added these new rules to the fasting thing?

Well, these Jews, at that time, these Pharisees, they belonged to this religious kind of like renewal movement, trying to get people sort of serious about their faith, you know.

And it became very regimented and it was quite hardcore. And their intent was to try and speed up the Messiah's coming. And ironically, the Messiah was there and they, you know, they missed him. So sin not only robs us of our joy, but sin, in this case here, our sinful hearts, hard hearts, look to what we can do for security.

[ 20 : 55 ] So these guys found a lot of security in this. That's why they're so serious about their new rules. And what Jesus had on offer was forgiveness, right?

Something we receive, not something we do. But they couldn't get it. That's the first thing that sin does to our hearts. What a hard heart does. How it impacts our lives.

Second story. What a hard heart does. Well, these guys are picking grain on the Sabbath. The Pharisees are agog, you know. And, you know, the Sabbath was this great gift to humanity, this incredible gift.

And what does sin do? It results in people loving God's gifts more than God. And what a great tragedy that is. That's another consequence of a hard heart.

And the last story. What does that tell us about hard hearts and about sin? Well, in the healing of the man with a withered hand, we see the compassionate authority of Jesus. Compare that to the Pharisees, right?

[ 21 : 55 ] They didn't seem to care about this man at all. And I think in this story, their inhumanity is exposed. And like the previous story, they care more about religious observance than the suffering of people.

I think this is another consequence of sin. So how does Jesus respond to hard hearts? How does Jesus respond to sin? Two ways, really quickly. There is judgment or there is forgiveness.

Now we see the forgiveness, this incredible forgiveness in Christ welcoming Levi, the tax collector, the scum of the earth. Right? It's beautiful, right? And we see the judgment in his attitude towards the Pharisees in the end.

It says, Jesus says, it's very interesting here. He said he was angry and grieved. Angry and sad. And this is a great insight into the heart of God, I think.

When God judges, it is not this unemotional decree. There is a grief that comes with that. Now how do we avoid this judgment? How do we change our hearts?

[ 23 : 00 ] How do we be more humane? How do we be more into justice? How do we find joy? How do we not? How do we avoid the temptation of putting our security in things we do?

External religious exercises, which are wonderful. But how do we do that? We be with Jesus. We just be with Jesus.

We receive his forgiveness. And we believe. Folks, does your heart need renewing? Well, come to Jesus.

Come to Jesus. And it's all come to Jesus now in prayer. Donna, come and pray for us. Come and pray for us. Come and pray for us. Come and pray for us.