

Mark 2:13-3:6

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[0:00] So here we are in Mark's chapter 2 and 3, and there's an abrupt shift in the mood since we last came to the gospel in chapter 1, isn't there?

There's this shift in the mood. In chapter 1, Jesus exploded on the scene like an up-and-coming celebrity, drawing huge crowds, amazing people with his miracles and with his authoritative teaching.

So in chapter 1, we saw Jesus' rising popularity, but chapter 2, we're introduced to rising opposition against Jesus.

Rising opposition, especially from the most religious people in Jesus' Jewish culture. Isn't that surprising? And also surprising is the fact that it seems almost like Jesus is deliberately drawing out that opposition.

His behavior in chapter 2 and 3 is deliberately provocative. Declaring a man's sins forgiven, eating with sinners, failing to fast, ignoring Sabbath laws.

[1:04] He's doing and saying things in public that are drawing the wrong kind of attention to his ministry. So our passage today includes four scenes. Four scenes structured around four questions and answers.

And if you open your Bibles with me now to Mark chapter 2, if you have that open in front of you, and you look at verse 16 of chapter 2, you see those questions beginning. The first question comes there in verse 16.

Why does Jesus eat with tax collectors and sinners? And Jesus answers, Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.

And then the second question is in verse 18. Why do John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast? And Jesus answers, Can the wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them?

The third question is in verse 24. Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath? And how does Jesus respond? Have you never read what David did?

[2:11] And then he ends by saying, So the Son of Man is Lord, even of the Sabbath. And then finally, finally in chapter 3, Jesus turns the tables on the Pharisees, and now it's him asking the fourth question.

Is it lawful, Jesus asks, on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to kill? And what's the religious leader's response? They were silent, Mark tells us.

No answer given. They were silent. So four questions. Three questions and answers, which Jesus answers and gives definitive statements about who he is and why he's come, his identity and his mission.

And then a fourth question, from Jesus, which receives this stony silence and leads to our dramatic final verse. Chapter 3, verse 6. The Pharisees went out and immediately held counsel with the Herodians against him.

How to destroy him. Now our passage today features Mark's first reference to this group, this group that's known as the Pharisees. And they appear for the first time in 2.16, asking that first criticizing question.

[3:20] So who are they? What do you know about the Pharisees? Well, I want you to picture devout Jews, very devout men, whose driving motivation was to fulfill God's command from Leviticus 19, be holy because I, the Lord your God, am holy.

The word Pharisee literally means separated ones, holy ones, set apart. And their strategy, what's their strategy for preventing sin? Their strategy is to add extra rules as a buffer that protects people from getting anywhere close to temptation.

So as an analogy, imagine you can't swim. And rather than taking swimming lessons or wearing a life jacket, St. John's has built a wall around the beach with no door.

So you can't get anywhere near the water. So now good news, you're never going to drown. But neither will you ever enjoy the joy of the surf on your feet or the sand or ever get a chance to learn to swim, will you?

Well, it's these men, the Pharisees, who form an unholy alliance with this other group called the Herodians. And it's the most unlikely tag team because the Pharisees are pious, conservative, nationalistic, and the Herodians are worldly, progressive, and pro-Roman.

[4 : 49] What could possibly make anyone hate Jesus enough to throw away their scruples and team up with somebody like that and seek his death? Well, the answer comes in his responses to those three questions.

And his question to them. The answer is in Jesus' own provocative words and actions declaring who he is and what he's come to do. So that's where we need to look. We need to turn our attention now to look closer at this remarkable Jesus under two headings.

First of all, Jesus, the friend of sinners. And secondly, Jesus, the enemy of the self-righteous. So first of all, Jesus, the friend of sinners.

And we're introduced to Jesus' most unlikely disciple in 2.14. Have a look at 2.14. And as Jesus passed by, he saw Levi, the son of Alphaeus, sitting at the tax booth.

And he said to him, follow me. And he rose and followed him. So Levi's also called Matthew in the Gospels. He's a tax collector.

[5 : 55] And in the ancient Roman world, businessmen would bid on tax-collecting contracts from the occupying Romans. So let's say you paid \$100,000 for the annual contract.

Okay. And if you can collect \$200,000 in taxes, then you turn a tidy profit, right? But if you can extort and bully your way to collecting \$500,000, well, now you're really, really getting somewhere. Now you're a rich man. So you see how the system was set up for corruption. Tax collectors were hated by their Jewish neighbors for two reasons. For their extortion and their collusion with the Roman Empire.

So a modern equivalent here in Vancouver might be a landlord who doubles the rent on a low-income family during the housing crisis. Imagine Jesus calling a man like that, like Levi, to be his disciple.

And yet he does. And Levi not only follows Jesus immediately, but he also throws a big party so that all his morally outcast friends can meet Jesus too.

[7 : 05] And now we find Jesus, shockingly, welcoming that invitation and happily reclining at table with folks who are even damaging his religious reputation. And that's what leads to our first question in verse 16.

Why does Jesus eat with tax collectors and sinners? And how does he respond? Remember verse 17. He heard it. He said to them, those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick.

I came not to call the righteous, but sinners. Jesus sees in Levi, this corrupt government official, not somebody who must be shunned or judged, but a sin-sick, ordinary man, longing for compassion and forgiveness, just like any one of us.

Here's an illustration from one commentator on this passage. So, more than 500 years ago, there's this massive block of marble in the city of Florence, but it contained imperfections.

The sculptor Donatello saw it and he refused to work with it. Yet one day, another sculptor saw that marble and instead of seeing the flaws, he saw beauty and he saw potential.

[8 : 22] He worked on it for two years straight and the result was unveiled as what sculpture? David. And what was the name of that sculptor?

Michelangelo. Michelangelo's David. Here's a quote. Christ saw in the flawed life of Levi the tax collector the man who would be Matthew, the gospel writer.

He still sees men and women with his consummate artist's eye today. The scripture says, for we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works.

Ephesians 2.10. He sees in us what no one else sees. Jesus is the friend of sinners like you and me. He looks at you and he doesn't see your flaws.

He doesn't just see your sin. He came to bring new life. He came to say, your sins are forgiven. He came declaring, the time is fulfilled, the kingdom of God is at hand, repent and believe in the

gospel.

[9 : 24] And boy, this is good news. This is good news that ought to fill us with great joy. And that's why Jesus and his disciples don't fast in verses 18 to 22.

So Jesus says in those verses, his arrival brings actually a lavish wedding banquet. You don't count carbs at a wedding feast, do you?

Of course, even more shocking is Jesus' reference to himself as the bridegroom. And I know for you and I, it sounds kind of strange, but to Jesus' Jewish audience, the bridegroom is Yahweh, the Lord God himself.

You can see Isaiah 62, verse 5. And Jesus says, now that bridegroom, Yahweh, is here. He's with his bride. He's in the room.

He's come to do something so powerful, so bursting with life and joy that it requires whole new categories. In other words, it requires new wineskins. Verse 22.

[10 : 31] So one time, we made kombucha at home. We bottled it, and it began to ferment and expand. And one day, we heard from the kitchen, bang!

Right? The bottle, the top of the bottle had exploded and there was kombucha everywhere. Jesus and the kingdom of God came to fulfill all that was promised in the Old Testament.

But he came in such an expansive and joyful way. It's champagne for the soul. Jesus, the friend of sinners, Jesus, the bridegroom, came to bring hope and joy for all of us who are longing for meaning and belonging.

And so he gathers new friends around himself, a ragtag family of sinners saved by grace, reclining at table in his presence. This is what it means to be the church.

So have you received this gift? Do you call Jesus friend? Do you know that he's calling you friend? And now the really pointy question.

[11 : 39] Are we a community which shares Jesus' love for sinners? that welcomes and blesses and shares Christ with those who don't have it all figured out?

Is this a place where people like that will feel welcome? That we forgive as we are forgiven? Because Jesus is the friend of sinners. And that's our first point.

But secondly, we discover here in Mark 2 and 3 that Jesus is the enemy of the self-righteous. So let's have a closer look at what that means. Jesus, the enemy of the self-righteous.

So for devout Jews like the Pharisees, there's only two categories that really matter. Clean and unclean. And there's God's law which helps you to be clean.

But there's also all these extra traditions added to the law as a buffer, remember, to protect you from ever becoming unclean. And tragically, in their pursuit of holiness, it had this insidious side effect which was this arrogant self-righteousness.

[12 : 51] And elsewhere, Jesus tells a parable about a Pharisee who prays proudly, God, I thank you I'm not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector.

I fast twice a week, I give tithes of all that I get. The tragedy is that in striving to keep all of those extra traditions and rules, the Pharisees have actually missed the heart of God's law which we summarized already in our communion service.

First of all, that we love the Lord our God with all our heart and soul and mind and strength. And second, we love our neighbor as ourselves. And failure to share God's heart for the lost is exactly what leads to this self-righteous sickness.

And this is why Jesus' mission statement in chapter 2, verse 17 is also a warning for us. Those who are well have no need of a physician but those who are sick.

I came not to call the righteous but sinners. It's a warning. Here's Tim Keller describing that warning. When Jesus says he's not coming for the righteous, he does not mean that some people don't need him.

[14 : 01] The clue to what Jesus does mean is his reference to himself as a physician. You go to the doctor only when you have a health problem that you can't deal with yourself. When you feel you can't get better through self-management.

So what do you want from a doctor? Not just advice but intervention. You don't want a doctor to simply say, yeah, you sure are sick. You want some medicine, some treatment. Jesus calls people righteous who are in the same position spiritually spiritually as those who won't go to a doctor.

Righteous people believe they can heal themselves, make themselves right with God by being good or moral. They don't feel the need for a sole physician, someone who intervenes and does

what they can't do themselves.

Jesus is teaching that he has come to call sinners those who know they're morally and spiritually unable to save themselves. themselves. And that's all of us. Now, it's possible to be self-righteous whether you're religious or not.

And the warning sign of self-righteousness is that you spend a lot of time comparing yourself to people around you, caring what other people think about you. Am I liking and reposting the right content on social media?

[15:16] Am I endorsing the right causes? Am I denouncing the wrong movements? Seen with the right people, not seen, avoiding the wrong people. You know, the sprinter Harold Abrams in the movie Chariots of Fire, he said, I have ten seconds to justify my existence.

And those of you who are students, you might be feeling, even some of you who are preparing to graduate, like I have one year, one exam maybe even, to justify my existence.

It's absolutely exhausting, isn't it? Cultivating and maintaining my self-righteous image is simply exhausting, which is exactly why Jesus follows up his warning against self-righteousness with the beautiful words in verse 28.

Look at verse 28. So the Son of Man is Lord, even of the Sabbath. What's he talking about? Well, the Old Testament Sabbath was a gift from God, given at Israel's rescue from slavery, as a reminder that God's the creator of everything.

And Israel can rest one day in seven, knowing that Yahweh would provide for them continually. There were certain activities that were forbidden on the Sabbath to honor the day of rest, but the Pharisees had added at least 39 more rules to prevent breaking Sabbath laws.

[16:41] And these rules had not only become a great burden, but also prevented Israel from actually loving their neighbors. That's what you see in chapter 3, verses 1 to 6. So when Jesus says, I am the Lord of the Sabbath, he's not just saying, oh, you don't need to follow those extra traditions anymore.

This is what he's saying. He's saying, I am the source of that deep Sabbath rest that's promised. And I am the eternal end which the Sabbath points towards.

Let me say that again. Jesus is saying, I'm the source of Sabbath rest and I'm the end to which Sabbath rest is pointing eternally. So again, in our communion liturgy, in a few moments, we'll be saying, we'll be hearing Jesus say to us, come to me, all who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest.

Jesus is the source of that rest. And a few generations ago, we thought that all the new technologies that were coming would make our work week shorter and our leisure time unending, right?

Do you remember that? You can watch the Jetsons on YouTube if you want to see what I mean. What would we do with all that free time? But all of us, students, employees, are working harder than ever.

[18:02] And even retirement isn't really that restful, is it? That's what I hear anyway. But God is the God of eternal rest. He looked at his creation and he said, it is very good.

And then he rested. He didn't rest because he was tired, he rested because it was finished. And now this Jesus, the Lord of the Sabbath, is the one who went to the cross for your sake.

He hung there for sinners like Levi and you and me. And on that cross, Jesus said, it is finished so that we can rest in his righteousness.

We can rest in his righteousness. There's no need to keep striving for self-righteousness, always looking over your shoulder, wondering if people are going to finally figure out you're just as fallen as everyone else.

There is rest from the treadmill. And Jesus is the enemy of self-righteousness, yes, but he's ever and always the friend of sinners. You simply come to him in humility and he's waiting.

[19:12] So as we conclude, friends, we've heard the Lord Jesus speaking to us from the Gospel of Mark this morning. His words, which are deliberately provocative because he loves us enough to speak the truth in love.

And he warns us of all the dangers of all the different types of self-righteousness which prevent us from ever being able to truly rest. And yet, Jesus is the friend of sinners.

And he invites you to follow him in repentance and faith just like Levi did. Whether for the first time or once again after a season maybe of pursuing your own self-righteousness to come back to him.

And he's building his church, this church, which is God's family of sinners saved by grace. So come.
Come and find healing and rest from the Lord of the Sabbath.
Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.