

March 30, 2025

JESUS AND HIS ADVERSARIES

Mark 2:13-3:6

(4 of 22 in a series through Mark 1-9)

Something that the gospel of Mark makes quite clear to us in the verses we're looking at this morning (Mark 2:13-3:6) is that Jesus will have adversaries. He comes into a world of sinners, a world full of people who oppose their Creator, and instead of worshiping him, they rebel against him. The text we're looking at this morning provides for us four different snapshots in Jesus' ministry. In the first, he calls a tax collector to follow him, and then gathers at the man's house, only to have the scribes of the Pharisees challenge him. Then, in the second, he is challenged over why he doesn't have his disciples fast when John's disciples and the Pharisees' disciples do. Third, we have a further attack by the Pharisees when his disciples are caught plucking heads of grain on their journey on the sabbath. And, finally, Jesus initiates a confrontation as he heals on the sabbath day, and the Pharisees begin to plot a way to kill him. In each case, what holds these four episodes together is a showdown with those who oppose Jesus. But what happens in each—and this shouldn't be surprising to us—is that each encounter only further reveals who Jesus is and what he's come to do, which is Mark's focus.

There's one other element that ties these four episodes together, and that's the asking of questions. In the first three episodes, it's Jesus' adversaries that are asking questions of Jesus, and each question carries this idea that from their vantagepoint Jesus is doing something wrong—either personally or allowing his disciples to fall into that. But in the last one, as I've already noted, it's not just Jesus that is initiating the showdown this time, but it's Jesus who poses the questions. So, I want to follow that format, looking at the first three episodes and showing what it reveals about Jesus and what he's come to do. And then, I want to do something similar with the last episode, but I also want to highlight that this last episode reveals not only something about Jesus but also about us. With that, let's dive into this first scene where we see that Jesus comes to call sinners to himself.

Jesus calls sinners to himself

The first thing that takes place in our text is Jesus' calling of Levi, whom we know as Matthew. Mark had already included the calling of Peter, Andrew, James, and John, but Levi is isolated here because of who he is and who he represents. Levi was a tax collector, and a tax collector in the first century under Roman rule was a hated position. You were seen as a traitor to your people. For a basis of comparison, imagine finding a Nazi sympathizer and spy for Nazi Germany during the years of World War II. That's who a tax collector was during the first century. It would be hard to think of someone more despised in the culture. Let me explain why.

Rome collected many taxes themselves, directly, but taxes on transported goods were contracted out to locals who would collect the tax from his own countrymen. Then, if that weren't bad enough, he'd collect above and beyond what was owed to Rome and line his own pockets with

that money.¹ It was such a reviled profession that if a Jew chose to do this, he was disqualified as a judge or witness in court, expelled from the synagogue, and a disgrace to his family.² Now, with that in mind, it is one of these tax collectors, named Levi, whom the Lord chose to be one of his disciples.

Now, that looks bad, but Jesus' controversial actions didn't stop there. Mark tells us that after calling Levi to follow him, he gathered at his house with many other tax collectors and sinners. Now, that's an odd phrase, isn't it? We know what is meant by "many other tax collectors." We've just described that despised class of people. But what about "sinners"? I mean, we're all sinners. Yes, but this label would have been for a group of people in Israel who gave no care to try to uphold God's law. They would have checked "non-religious" on the census form. They were a rebellious and sinful group of people. And Jesus is at Levi's house, eating with this group. And the scribes of the Pharisees saw it and were deeply troubled. Let me further explain why.

The Pharisees were a group who supposedly sought to ensure that everyone practiced the strict adherence to God's law, outlined in Genesis through Deuteronomy. I say "supposedly" because Jesus will repeatedly expose their hypocrisy. Nevertheless, what these men supposedly did was to seek to teach and apply God's law to others. If you said, "I want to be careful to obey the Sabbath command not to work on Saturday," they happily prescribed in detail what was allowed and not allowed, even taking prohibitions, for example, that would have only applied to priests extending them to everyone. They would have been known in this time as a people who were zealously in pursuit of holy adherence to God's law. And so, unsurprisingly, you can imagine that they're upset with this scene of Jesus calling a tax collector to be one of his disciples and then gathering at that tax collector's house with other tax collectors and sinners there. Deeply offended by his actions, Mark tells us that they asked Jesus' disciples, "Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?" (v. 16). And Jesus heard it.

Now, if we're anticipating Jesus' response to be sheepishly backing away from his actions, embarrassed by what he's done, then we've not been paying attention. He is the righteous one who always does righteously, and this time is no exception. Therefore, Jesus responds, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners" (v. 17).

Jesus' response makes sense. Obviously, people who are healthy don't go see a doctor but those who are sick. Well, similarly, he's come to bring salvation to a people mired in sin, and so he notes that he didn't come to call the righteous but sinners.

Now, of course, we would be quick to respond, "But everyone is a sinner, right?" Yes, they are. But this is part of the point. The scribes and Pharisees were just as in need of salvation as the tax

¹ James Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 82.

² *Ibid.*, 83.

collectors and sinners. They just didn't see it that way. And as long as they saw themselves as righteous, they'd remain blinded to their need for Jesus. And the same thing is true for us. Until you see your need for a savior because of your sin, which enslaves you, you'll never come to Christ. You must see your need for him.

But there's another glorious message here as well, and it's that Jesus receives sinners. He didn't come to save people who have their act together. He came to save sinners like you and me. He doesn't demand of us that we get our lives cleaned up before coming to him. He just commands us to come in repentance and faith. Therefore, let us not merely rejoice that Jesus saves sinners this morning, let's make sure that we're among those who happily come to him as we are, willing to turn from our sin, and find forgiveness at the hands of the one who saves sinners. That's the first point we see about ourselves: Jesus saves sinners. Second, we see that Jesus comes to usher in the new age to replace the old.

Jesus ushers in the new age to replace the old

The next confrontation and questioning takes place in verses 18-22. We're told in verse 18 that John's disciples and the Pharisees' disciples were fasting at one point, but Jesus' disciples weren't, and so some people come and ask him why they're not fasting. Again, it seems like a fair question. But Jesus' answer is interesting. He says, "Can the wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them? 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" (vv. 19-20).

Now, what is Jesus talking about? Well, the Bible labels the world under sin as the old age. In other words, once Adam sinned in the beginning, the world became a dark and evil place, and the days since then as evil days. Everyone is born sinful. Death takes all of us. Satan and his demons wreak havoc on the lives of many. There are even things like famine, tornadoes, and earthquakes. I don't have to convince you of the terrible nature of things in this world.

But there was a promise that one day this age would give way to an age to come. God would bring his promised king, the Messiah, who would bring in a new age, an entirely new condition. Isaiah 25 pictures this age as a great wedding feast. Death is swallowed up never to affect anyone again. Our tears are wiped from our eyes. We're eating meat with the perfect amount of fat in it and well-aged wine. It couldn't be better, and this age would come with the arrival of God's promised king who would reign over this new age.

Well, what Jesus is saying with his answer here is that the promised king has come. The age of that great wedding feast has arrived—again, not completely. In fact, Jesus hints at this noting that there's a time when the bridegroom (Jesus, God's king) will be taken away. He'll die and ascend back to the Father's right hand. Then, his disciples can fast. But we can't act like we're still waiting for God's king to arrive. He's come, brought in the new age, that overlaps with the old so that we can tell people God's king is Jesus, experience forgiveness of sins, and through salvation be assured that death for the believer will only lead to life and one day the resurrection of our

bodies themselves. And in light of this reality that Jesus has brought, everything must change, even certain religious practices that characterized the time before Jesus' coming. Note how Jesus shows this.

He says, "No one sews a piece of unshrunk 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 one 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" (vv. 21-22).

Let's first explain his illustration and then note what it means. First, if you get a hold in an old garment and put a new patch on it that is simply big enough for that hole, you've made a mistake. The reason why is because that new material will eventually shrink, and as it does, it'll pull at the old garment and make the hole even bigger. Similarly, when you put new wine into wineskins, the wine ferments and expands. And if the wineskins are fresh, they're able to expand with the wine, and all is well. However, if you put wine still needing to ferment into old wineskins that have already stretched to their capacity and are dried, when the wine expands, the wineskins will burst.

Okay, so now that we see that, what is Jesus' point? Jesus' point is that the religious structures and practices of the day that anticipated the coming of the bridegroom must change in light of the fact that he's come. To keep these practices as is would be like using old wineskins to carry your new wine. The OT structures and practices are no longer sufficient because they all longed for the coming of the bridegroom. But now that he has come, everything has changed. We don't sacrifice bulls and goats anymore because Jesus, the Lamb of God, has come and been sacrificed. We don't build and worship in a temple anymore because the true temple (Jesus, Immanuel) has come and dwelt among us. We don't have priests intercede on our behalf anymore because our great high priest is interceding for us at the Father's right hand. Jesus has changed everything because the OT promises find their fulfillment in him. Imagine a couple of kids who waited every day for dad to arrive from a long trip by sitting on the front porch with eager anticipation. Then, dad comes home, they hug him, but then allow him to go inside as they go back to the front porch with eager anticipation as before. That would be silly. Your practice must change because he's here. That's Jesus' point.

And this means that even fasting has changed. Fasting seemed to have a basic function of mourning and longing for God to bring his Messiah and make things right. Well, he's come. Now, yes, we may still fast to long and mourn for the Lord to complete his work of redemption in the resurrection, but we can no longer fast as if Jesus hasn't already come, accomplished our salvation, guaranteed our resurrection, and brought these glorious realities of the age to come into this age already. He has, and so even when we mourn, we mourn with hope. Our king has come and ushered in the new age to one day replace the old. Jesus is telling them that he's God's promised Messiah, the king, the bridegroom. But Jesus doesn't stop there. He also notes that he is the fulfillment of the Sabbath.

Jesus fulfills the Sabbath

The next confrontation happens as Jesus and his disciples are passing through some grainfields. As they disciples pass through, they're plucking some heads of grain and eating them. This isn't a big deal, right? Well, among the Pharisees it was. They knew God had commanded no work to be done on the Sabbath, and therefore they took it upon themselves to define what qualified as work. And they deemed that plucking heads of grain was the equivalent of harvesting one's crop, therefore work and a violation of the Sabbath command. Therefore, they say to Jesus about his disciples, "Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?" (v. 24).

Now, Jesus answers this in a masterful fashion. First, he points out that their understanding of the law cannot account for an event that actually occurred in the Old Testament that God was pleased with. He says, "Have you never read what David did, when he was in need and was hungry, he and those who were with him: how he entered the house of God, in the time of Abiathar the high priest, and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but he priests to eat, and also gave it to those who were with him?" (vv. 25-26).

Now, when Jesus says, "Have you not read?" this is a dig at them. Of course they'd read it. They probably had it memorized. But it is a fair question because what Jesus is exposing is that they've interpreted the law in such a way that they can't even account for why it was okay for David to do this. They should have read that story and said to themselves, "You know, when we're making all these rules about what is acceptable and unacceptable, we may actually be missing something here because we would have condemned David's actions while God doesn't." But they were running roughshod over the text in order to uphold their manmade traditions and interpretations.

Second, Jesus simply declares to them the nature of the Sabbath by saying, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath" (v. 27). That is, God never gave the Sabbath command so that you might actually need to starve to death in order to uphold it. He made it as a day to care for his people. He made it as a day on which they could rest since they would labor the other six days. It was a day made to minister to people, not enslave them. The Pharisees had misunderstood the whole point of the Sabbath. They'd missed the intent of God's law.

But it's not just that Jesus exposed their ignorance of God's law; he also makes a huge statement about himself. He adds, "So the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath" (v. 28). Now, to say he's the Lord of the Sabbath not only means that he is able to dictate what may and may not occur on the Sabbath. It also means that the Sabbath exists to serve him. He is its Lord. In other words, the Sabbath's purpose was to be like a shadow that was pointing to the substance that is found only in Jesus. He is the fulfillment of the Sabbath. The Sabbath was a day of rest, but it never gave full and true rest. That is found only in Jesus, which is why Jesus steps onto the scene saying, "Come to me all who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Matt 11:28).

You see, the Sabbath pointed to a day when you could rest in absolute peace, being right with God, reconciled to him, and under his care, protection, and reign. But that was never truly

experienced in Israel's history. It's why even after they came into the promised land and were said to have rest, David was still talking about the need to enter God's rest years later in Psalm 95.

In fact, if you read about God's people in the promised land, they were constantly in trouble, constantly sinning, and constantly facing God's judgment. The rest of being free from sin, death, and condemnation so that they were right with God seemed always out of reach. And yet, that's what Jesus brings. He's the fulfillment of what the Sabbath was pointing us to. When we rest from our works of trying to do enough to get right with God and place our faith in Christ, we are reconciled to our God, right with him, and under his care, protection, and reign as his beloved children. That rest is found in Jesus alone, the substance that the shadows of the Sabbath always pointed to. That's what Jesus is saying about himself. True rest is found only in Jesus, the Lord of the Sabbath. And, finally, we see that Jesus exposes our sinful hearts.

Jesus exposes our sinful hearts

In the last scene, Jesus enters the synagogue and sees a man with a withered hand. Now, obviously we're anticipating that Jesus will heal him—and so were the Pharisees. But they weren't anticipating it as something to celebrate but as a reason to accuse him of wrong. Once again, they thought that healing on the Sabbath violated the Sabbath law. They wouldn't even allow a broken bone to be set on the Sabbath. It had to wait.

Now, Jesus knows this, and so he chooses this moment as an opportunity to expose just how wicked their hearts were. Mark tells us that Jesus said to the man with the withered hand, "Come here" (3:3). Then he asked the Pharisees, "Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to kill?" And they were silent (3:4). He's the one asking questions because he's going to reveal who they are. Okay, but why would they be silent? This is an easy answer. Do good and save life would be better on the Sabbath than doing harm or killing. Well, the reason they wouldn't answer is because it would expose their wicked hearts at that moment. You see, as Jesus was about to do good and heal, they were looking for a way to harm and even kill Jesus. And Jesus asks this question of them to expose what he already knows about them. In fact, Mark will end this section, noting in verse 6, that they went out and tried to figure out how to destroy Jesus.

But back to the story. After Jesus calls the man with the withered hand over to himself, Mark tells us, "And he looked around at them with anger, grieved at the hardness of their heart, and said to the man, 'Stretch out your hand.' And he stretched it out, and his hand was restored" (3:5). Again, Jesus does good, and his adversaries are exposed as wicked.

Now, why note this, and why is it helpful for us? Here's why. Until our wickedness is exposed, we're hopeless. We'll die, thinking we're just fine, until we face our Lord in judgement. But if our sin is exposed, we can go back to point one and remember that Jesus receives sinners who come to him in repentance and faith. And if you feel your heart exposed right now, don't fear, just come. Come to Jesus. Come to the one who lived, died, and was raised for sinners. Come to the one who will one day put an end to death itself at the great wedding feast. Come to the one who

fulfills every type and shadow that existed in the OT. Come to the one who receives sinners who come to him in faith. Come to him. And let's show as God's people that we have indeed come to him (and come to him again) as we come to the table this morning. Amen.