

Religion

Mark 2:18-28

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May 3, 2015

In the racks in the pews in front of you, you will see copies of the Bible. If you would pick one up and turn with me to page 837; page 837, halfway down the right-hand column you will see a paragraph of Mark chapter 2 beginning there at verse 13, and we're going to read from there to the end of the chapter. Before we do that, it is our custom to pause and pray and ask for God to help us, so would you bow your heads with me please?

Lord Jesus, we pray that You will open our ears to hear Your voice speaking to our hearts in the message of Holy Scripture. We pray for help to discern clearly the difference between empty religion and a real acquaintance with You, a relationship with You through Your Holy Spirit. And most of all we pray that You will come to us and take hold of our lives and draw us to You, perhaps draw us back to You after having wandered away or draw us to You for the very first time. All this we pray in Your precious name, amen.

Well let's have a look at Mark chapter 2 reading from verse 13:

He (that is, Jesus) went out again beside the sea, and all the crowd was coming to him, and he was teaching them. And as he 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.

And as he reclined at table in his house, many tax collectors and sinners were reclining with Jesus and his disciples, for there were many who followed him. And the scribes of the Pharisees, when they saw that he was eating with sinners and tax collectors, said to his disciples, 'Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?' And when Jesus 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.'

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?' And Jesus said to them, '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. 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 wine 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.'

One Sabbath he was going through the grain fields, and as they made their way, his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. And the Pharisees were saying to him, 'Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?' And he said to them, '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 the priests to eat, and also gave it to those who were with him?' And he said to them, 'The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath.'

The Barrier of Religion

Religion for some people today is frankly absurd. Belief in a deity is as ridiculous as belief in the flying spaghetti monster, according to Richard Dawkins. Or as Christopher Hitchens passionately proclaimed, "God is not great." Hitchens pointed to what he believed to be the inevitably barbarism and brutality of religion worldwide - "Religion is the cause of war and oppression. Religion is empty and backwards; the unwelcome vestige of an outmoded way of explaining the phenomena of our existence whose inflexibility really belongs in the Dark Ages, facilitating abuse, promoting shame. It has long since outlived its usefulness and ought to be dismissed altogether by right thinking people everywhere." Empty ritual, puritanical moralism, and fragrant hypocrisy - those are the marks of religion for many people. And so it's a huge barrier and stumbling block for following Jesus.

I. Nonconformity to Social Expectations

Well in the passage that we read together just a moment ago we have three episodes in which Jesus is confronted with religion and religious people. I want to examine them with you to help you see how in each case Jesus is the consummate non-conformist. In ways you might find surprising, He really does buck the religious trend. First of all, notice how Jesus does not conform to the social expectations of the religious. Look at verses 13 through 17 please. Jesus calls Levi, he is a tax collector, to become His disciple. The tax collectors were part of the apparatus established by the Roman Empire. They were independent contractors, operating what we might call a franchise. The tax booth that Levi

operated was located beside the road, presumably to extract fees and levies from traders as they passed by. In order to pay for his franchise, Levi was expected to add to the official tax amount that was required by the Romans an additional fee of his own to cover his costs and his profits. Levi, like many a tax collector I suppose, was not at all a beloved character in his community, not simply because he was extracting payments for tax owed; the truth is, he was held in general contempt as a collaborator who had sided with the hated Romans for personal gain. A loan shark running a protection racket on behalf of the enemy.

And Jesus calls this man to become His disciple. And so when He goes to Levi's home that night for dinner you can imagine the scandal. In those days, table fellowship, eating a meal with someone, had profound social significance. But if eating at Levi's home was bad, look at verse 15. Levi, it seems, has invited all his low-life friends over to meet Jesus too. And verse 16 shows us the kind of reaction that Jesus' actions met with among the religious. "The scribes of the Pharisees, when they saw that he was eating with sinners and tax collectors, said to his disciples, 'Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?'" Isn't that interesting? The religious, the moral hardliners, take great offense at Jesus who is not at all embarrassed to be found in table fellowship with the dregs of Jewish society. Jesus does not conform at all to the social expectations of the religious. He is unafraid to be with the unclean and the outsider and the moral failures. He doesn't conform to the social expectations of the religious.

II. Nonconformity to Ritual Expectation

But then secondly notice He doesn't conform to their ritual expectations either. You see that in verses 18 through 23, don't you? In those days there were two groups who were vying for the religious loyalties of the people. On the one hand there were the disciples of John the Baptist - we might call them the religious reformers. And then there were, on the other hand, the ultra-traditionalists, the disciples of the Pharisees - we would call them religious conservatives. And both of them, we are told, practiced fasting as part of their spiritual disciplines. But Jesus' disciples, do notice, Jesus' disciples don't fast and it stands out. Verse 18 - "People came and said to him, 'Why do John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?'" "You guys don't fit our ritual expectations. You don't look religious at all. We're confused! We thought to be religious, to be spiritual, to know God, meant to get the rituals right."

But Jesus doesn't conform to their ritual expectations. And if you look at verses 23 through 28 you will notice that there's a third scenario. This time the action takes place on the Sabbath. Jesus and His disciples are hungry, and as they make their way through the fields they pick some few ears of grain with which to stave off their hunger. And immediately a firestorm of legal complaint erupts around them. Verse 24, "Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the

Sabbath?" The Pharisees had added to the simple prohibition of work on the Sabbath Day multiple layers of expectations and case law that qualified what was and was not to be considered work so that the command of Scripture to rest on the Sabbath and to keep it holy had become a complex issue, full of fine distinctions and casuistry. Not only was Jesus a non-conformist when it came to social expectations and ritual expectations, He was a non-conformist when it came to the rules. Religion, you know, is full of rules, boundary markers, a way to show that you are in, that you belong, that you tow the line. And clearly Jesus didn't tow the line.

Isn't that provocative? Here are the religious, the morally exclusive, quick to denounce those whose lives do not conform, ritually exacting - seeking God by formal observance, rule makers for whom keeping the tradition, towing the line, was critically important. And Jesus confounds them utterly. He defies their categories altogether, doesn't He? If religion is inevitably judgmental and harsh, critical and severe, legalistic and denunciatory, if that's religion then whatever you think about some who have claimed to follow Him, you can't really call Jesus religious at all, can you? Certainly not by the evidence of these passages.

The Physician

But what do we make of that? There are three metaphors in the passage we've read together that I think really help us get to grips with a Jesus who defies religious expectations. I wonder if you can spot the three metaphors in the text. First of all in verse 17, do you see it? The metaphor of the physician. Then there's the metaphor, verses 19 through 20, of the bridegroom. And then thirdly, the cloth and the wineskins in 21 and 22. Those are the three metaphors.

Look at verse 17 first. The Pharisees are complaining about Jesus' moral and social non-conformity. He eats with bad people. What's going on? Look at Jesus' answer. "Those who are well have no need of a physician but those who are sick. I came to call not the righteous but sinners." I wonder if you're one of those people, we all know them don't we, for whom ignorance is bliss particularly when it comes to their health. I know we have plenty of physicians and doctors in the congregation. My suspicion is, you probably are among the worst! Avoidance, bury your head in the sand, hope the lump goes away, hope the aches and pains fade on their own. It's a dangerous strategy, isn't it? What is the one thing we really need in order to seek the help of a physician? Well it's got to be admitting that we're sick. This isn't going to go away on its own. We need help.

Now the Pharisees thought they were righteous. They were the picture of perfect spiritual help in their own estimation. But like a terminally sick man avoiding his disease they are living with a delusion and they would never turn to the only one who could really help them. And so in our passage we see Jesus surrounded instead by tax collectors and sinners, that is, dropouts and lowlifes. The Pharisees, for their part, sneered and looked down at them and at Jesus, but

unlike the Pharisees these moral failures knew there was no pretending. They knew they really needed help. They owned their sin and so they came to the great Physician who alone could deliver them. They came to Jesus.

Religious people tend not to think that they need help. They think their own moral attainments are good enough. They have little room for the radical deliverance that Jesus provides and Jesus says here in verse 17 actually He has little room for them. "He came not to call the righteous, but sinners." So it may be tonight you have been aiming at the wrong target, quixotically tilting at windmills. You've been rejecting Jesus along with those morally superior people who don't think they need a physician for their souls and all the while Jesus Himself wants nothing to do with that way of thinking either. In fact, it may be you know you don't meet the standards. It may be you know you fall short. And the solution isn't to pretend that sin isn't real; that's no way to deal with the disease of your soul. It is deadly and it will kill you and destroy you in the end. The solution is to join Levi and his friends and come and meet Jesus, the great Physician who is the only one who can deal with the deep cancer of your heart.

The Bridegroom

And then look at the second metaphor down in verses 19 and 20. It's the metaphor of the bridegroom. "How do you explain, Jesus, why you don't do religious rituals or teach your disciples to do them either? You do not conform." That was their question. Look at Jesus' answer. "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." Notice Jesus doesn't say that all religious ritual is bad. He doesn't dismiss fasting as evil or wrong, but the key to what is appropriate has nothing to do with expected religious patterns and everything to do with a relationship with Him. Fasting in those days was primarily an expression of mourning. But the presence of the bridegroom means the wedding is about to take place; it's a time for joy not of sorrow. Of course a time would come when they will crucify Jesus. The bridegroom would be taken away. Fasting would fit then, mourning would fit then - wouldn't it? The key though, the one thing that makes the difference, has to do with Jesus. Acts of worship in Jesus' thinking ought to be expressions of relationship with Him. When He was with the disciples physically it wasn't fitting that they should fast. When He was crucified, fasting fitting. But Jesus Himself, do you see, is the key.

Some of you think to be a Christian means to be locked into patterns of ritual behavior in the hopes that somehow by your performance of the right routine, the repetition of the right formula, God will bless you or accept you. But Jesus says that worship - things like prayer and singing and fasting - worship grows out of intimacy with Him, knowing Him, relating really and truly to Him. Jesus does not offer us a litany of rituals to be performed. He offers a living relationship with Himself to be prized. He is the bridegroom. It's a metaphor redolent of love and

tenderness and joy. Jesus isn't moved to love you if you say the right prayers or mouth the correct formula. He loves you because He's the bridegroom and He loves His people who trust Him and turn from their sins to Him alone to rescue them.

The Cloth and the Wineskins

And then the third metaphor - the cloth and the wineskins. Verses 21 and 22 - "No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old garment," Jesus says. "If he does, the patch tears away from it, the new from the old, and a worse tear is made. No one puts new wine 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." Later when Jesus picked the ears of grain and ate it on the Sabbath Day the Pharisees erupted in anger at His flagrant violation of their time-honored traditions. But here we're being told that Jesus never came to prop up the old institutions of empty legalism and formal religious conformity. To bring the good news of the forgiveness of sins, the message of verse 17, and the good news of joy in intimate loving fellowship with God, the message of verses 19 and 20, to bring good news like that and to force it into the old patterns of doing things is impossible. Unshrunk cloth sewn onto older garments will only make the tear worse as the new cloth begins to shrink with age. Unfermented wine in old, inflexible wineskins will burst the skins as the fermentation process begins. The good news of forgiveness and joy through faith in Jesus Christ is incompatible with the old, torn, threadbare religion of the Pharisees. It is destructive to the inflexible legalism that adds rules to God's law and requires ritual performance in order to acceptance before Him. Jesus is not a patch on your existing religious performance. We don't add Jesus to our best efforts. Jesus can't be contained inside the shriveled vessel of our self-righteousness. New wine is for fresh wineskins. He brings something completely new, not more mere religion. A new life - new connection and communion with God Himself.

Tim Keller repeats a story told by Dick Lucas; it may be familiar to you. Dick Lucas was the pastor of Saint Helen's Bishopsgate in Central London, not far from where I ministered some years ago. Lucas imagines a conversation between an early Christian and her neighbor in ancient Rome. "Ah," says the neighbor. "I hear you are religious. Great! Religion is a good thing. Where is your temple or holy place?" "We don't have a temple," replies the Christian. "Jesus is our temple." "No temple? But where do your priests do their work and perform their rituals?" "We don't have priests to mediate the presence of God," replies the Christian. "Jesus is our priest." "No priests? Where do you offer your sacrifices to acquire the favor of your God?" "We don't need a sacrifice," replies the Christian. "Jesus is our sacrifice." "What kind of religion is this?" sputters the pagan neighbor. And the answer of course is, "No kind of religion at all."

You need the great Physician to deal with your sin-sickness. You need the bridegroom to bring you joy - real, true, lasting love. You need the new wineskins

to contain the new wine of Jesus' grace and mercy. Religion has no room at all for a Christ, for a Jesus like that. The great question is, "Do you?" Let's pray together.

Our Father, we bow before You and we praise You for Jesus who is the great Physician. We pray, O Lord, that He would do surgery on our sin-sick souls even now. We thank You that He did not come to call the righteous but sinners and there is not one person in the room here this evening that does not qualify. Every one of us has fallen short of the glory of God and stands tonight in urgent need of His saving mercy. We thank You that Jesus is the bridegroom who loves His bride, the church, and gives Himself for her at the cross. We pray, O Lord, that we would come to know His loving embrace and that all our responses, our praises, our devotion, our prayers, our songs, our obedience would flow from the power of the touch of His love and mercy in our hearts. And we thank You that Jesus brings the new wine of the Gospel of grace. We pray that He would make us new vessels to contain it. We ask that He would do it for His great glory in our midst. In His name we pray, amen.

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