

Trinity Baptist Church
Sunday 10th January 2020
Andy Banks - Mark 2:18 – 3:6 - Jesus' New Era Of Grace

We're resuming our series in Mark's Gospel as we fix our eyes on Jesus. A reminder, through this series, we're asking ourselves the question Jesus asked, "Who do you say I am?" What was Jesus really like? What did he stand for and against? And how do you respond to who he is? Today's passage is slightly longer: 2:18 – 3:6.

[Read 2:18 – 3:6]

2:18 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?'

19 Jesus answered, 'How can the guests of the bridegroom fast while he is with them? They cannot, so long as they have him with them. 20 But the time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them, and on that day they will fast.'

21 '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. 22 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.'

23 One Sabbath Jesus was going through the cornfields, and as his disciples walked along, they began to pick some ears of corn. 24 The Pharisees said to him, 'Look, why are they doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath?'

25 He answered, 'Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need? 26 In the days of Abiathar the high priest, he entered the house of God and ate the consecrated bread, which is lawful only for priests to eat. And he also gave some to his companions.'

27 Then he said to them, 'The Sabbath was made for people, not people for the Sabbath. 28 So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath.'

3:1 Another time Jesus went into the synagogue, and a man with a shrivelled hand was there. 2 Some of them were looking for a reason to accuse Jesus, so they watched him closely to see if he would heal him on the Sabbath. 3 Jesus said to the man with the shrivelled hand, 'Stand up in front of everyone.'

4 Then Jesus asked them, 'Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?' But they remained silent.

5 He looked around at them in anger and, deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts, said to the man, 'Stretch out your hand.' He stretched it out, and his hand was completely restored. 6 Then the Pharisees went out and began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus.

[Pray]

It is an interesting observation, that, in general, the more outwardly religious a person was, the less they liked Jesus. The Pharisees were revered for their dedication to God's Law, and yet they failed to recognise when God sent his Son as their promised Messiah. And so, they persecuted him. Mark portrays in these three incidents an increasing jeopardy for Jesus. There is an implied challenge in the question about why Jesus' disciples did not ritually fast like the Pharisees and John the Baptist's disciples. That challenge is, of course, really aimed at Jesus, since he would be assumed to be directing their actions. Then, in the second incident, there is a clear *accusation* by the Pharisees that Jesus' disciples were breaking the Sabbath Law – again aimed at *Jesus*. Lastly, in the third incident, there is a hostile audience who have already pre-decided Jesus' guilt and are looking for evidence to prove their verdict. And it ends with the first mention of a clear plot to kill Jesus.

So, why was this? How did Jesus' actions so rile them that they wanted him dead? If you drill down into it, it was a desire to cling on to power. Their power depended upon their assumed authority to interpret God's Law. But Jesus

challenged their rules, and therefore their authority, because they were twisting *God's* rules. Their rules had the appearance of strictly adhering to God's Law, but in reality they shut out life from people, which was the opposite of the purpose of God's Law. Jesus alone could definitively interpret the purpose of God's Law, because he *is* God. So, what can we learn from each of these incidents about his and his Father's priorities, which should be our priorities too?

1) The question about fasting:

Firstly, let's look at the question about fasting. The background is that the Pharisees ritually fasted frequently, including every Monday and Thursday – and presumably John's disciples did similarly. Fasting, in the *Old Testament*, was often a sign of mourning for one's sin or one's adverse circumstances, and an indication of a person's seriousness in seeking God's mercy. Only one fast was *prescribed* in the Law – the Day of Atonement (which this clearly wasn't, or Jesus would have observed it). But God often acted favourably in response to fasting, if it was accompanied by repentant hearts.

Jesus, too, assumed fasting to be a normal part of a disciple's life. In Matthew 6:16, he taught his disciples, "*When you fast ...*", not "*If you fast ...*" Hence, the early church also fasted regularly. So, why did Jesus here suggest that it was inappropriate for his disciples to fast? Was he reminding the people that the Pharisees' fast was a *voluntary* one that should not be imposed upon other people as a measure of their piety? Possibly! And that is a principle that some Christians would do well to take to heart.

But more than that, Jesus was trying to open their eyes to recognise who *he* is. For, in alluding to himself as "the Bridegroom," he was claiming for himself a title that belonged to God. Isaiah 54:5: "For your Maker is your *husband*"; and Jeremiah 31:32, speaking of the New Covenant that the Messiah would bring: "It will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a *husband* to them,' declares the LORD." By describing himself as the Bridegroom, Jesus was trying to make them understand that he is God, now come among them. And so, the *New Covenant* had begun. That was not a time for fasting in mourning – it was a time for celebration! When he was taken from them – by his death on a cross – that would be the time for fasting and mourning! But not now!

The New Covenant required *new* religious practices. Jesus didn't come to patch up an old, tired covenant, like a new patch on an old garment, because humans had reeked that covenant by their unfaithfulness. Patching it up would only make that damage worse. A brand *new* Covenant was needed! Nor could that New Covenant be contained in the old practices, like new wine in old wineskins – it was too dynamic and those practices had become too hard and inflexible. *New* practices were needed to accommodate the *life* that this New Covenant would bring. Those are the key lessons from this first incident: Jesus, the Bridegroom, has ushered in a new era, and that new era requires new rules that permit its life to abound!

2) Picking ears of corn on the Sabbath

So, what about the incident with the disciples plucking ears of corn? What are we to learn from that? Again, we need to understand the background. They weren't stealing, since the Law permitted the poor to glean with their hands from another's field (Deuteronomy 23:25). Rather, the Pharisees' complaint is about *Sabbath* violation, which was very serious indeed. For, alongside circumcision, the Law itself, and the temple, the Sabbath was seen as one of Israel's greatest gifts from God – one of the things that made them distinctively *God's* people. And God, in his Law, commanded death for those who failed to keep the Sabbath (Exodus 31:14). Only a life-threatening emergency superseded the regulations surrounding the Sabbath.

Now, the key principle is that no-one was to *work* on the Sabbath. And, in the *Pharisees'* eyes, the disciples' actions constituted reaping, which was *work*. Actually, again, they had managed to break the spirit of the Law in an attempt to keep the letter of it. For the Sabbath concept included a Sabbath year, every 7 years, in which the land was left

unploughed and unharvested *so that* the poor and needy could glean its wild produce (Exodus 23:11). If that was appropriate for the Sabbath *year*, then it was appropriate for the Sabbath *day*.

But Jesus didn't engage the Pharisees in an argument over a point of Law. Rather he pointed them towards the *grace* with which even the *Old Covenant* operated, let alone the New Covenant! The high priest in David's day technically broke God's Law – by offering the Holy Bread that only priests could eat – in order to meet their need. Love is more important to God than legalism.

Likewise, the Sabbath was made *for people*, not people for the Sabbath. It is a gift. We stop work so we can enjoy God's rest and recharge our batteries as we appreciate his life. It wasn't ever meant to be a straitjacket to control our lives. Yet, like the Pharisees, too often the Church has made it so. Jesus wants us to keep the Sabbath, by *slowing down to enjoy* him and the world he gave us, because that is *good for our wellbeing!* The Sabbath was made for people, not people for the Sabbath. Yet, Jesus had an even greater message to share: "the Son of Man (that is Jesus) is Lord even of the Sabbath." This is another thinly-veiled claim to be God, since God alone is Lord of the Sabbath as its Creator.

3) Healing on the sabbath

And so, the scene is set for the most explosive incident of all – the healing of the man with the shrivelled hand. Again, what is at stake is the interpretation of "work." The Pharisees regarded healing as work and so, barring life and death situations, did not permit it on the Sabbath. Jesus' standpoint is very different: to not do *good* when it is in one's power to *do good* is to do *evil*; to not *heal* when one *can* heal is to *kill*.

There is an irony, here, in that the Pharisees plotted, because of his kindness, literally to *kill him!* Their actions are very sinister and calculated. They cared nothing about this paralysed man's suffering. He was simply a pawn in their power game to ensnare Jesus. But to Jesus, this man mattered, and the Pharisees needed to know that. Indeed, we should note Jesus' emotions – he was *angry* and *deeply distressed* at their hypocrisy and hardness of heart! So, he openly confronted their godlessness, as he asked the man to stand in front of them all and healed him. And seeing such compassion, the Pharisees were overwhelmed with emotion, and moved in their hearts ... to kill the one who displayed it! This man who disrupted and challenged their way of doing things was not to be tolerated.

So, what should we learn from this incident? Firstly, Jesus is the true life-giver. Secondly, we are called to emulate him by bringing freedom not restriction, doing good not ignoring need. We are just as capable as the Pharisees of creating our own rules that people must follow – rules which shut out life, and thus stand opposed to God's Laws. But we are called to follow Jesus' example of offering grace and love to others. This is the most important aspect of the Law. So, we need to guard against any temptation to focus on the minutiae of the rules, and so miss the big overarching priorities of God for his people, which are love and mercy and grace. I pray that *these* qualities will increasingly characterise our family at Trinity. I hope you do too.

[Pray]