

Lake Cities Community Church
Series: On Your Mark
Pastor Craig Schill
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“Tax Collectors and Sinners!”

Mark 2:13-3:6

We continue in the book of Mark this morning – please turn to Mark chapter two – we will be taking a larger chunk today, from verse 13 to chapter 3 and verse six. Last week we looked at the story of the paralytic who was lowered through the roof and was offered God’s forgiveness. That is the first of five short stories in a row - we will look at the other four stories this morning. One thing that all five stories have in common is increasing conflict with religious authorities. What I would like to do is to (1) get the big picture by looking at the four questions – four challenges asked by the religious leaders to Jesus and then his response to them. We will do that briefly - and then (2) go back and look at each story in a little more detail and try to understand Mark’s point in stringing these stories together.

So turn to the first story, which is in verses 13-17. The conflict begins when Jesus calls Levi (Matthew) who is a tax-collector. Tax collectors in those days were an unsavory lot and the text tells us many of them became Christ-followers. So Jesus attends a party with them, eating and drinking and the Pharisees ask, “Why is he eating and drinking with tax-collectors and sinners. (2:16)” A truly spiritual person would not get their hands dirty in such a way - but Jesus responds, “It is not those who are healthy who need a physician, but those who are sick. I did not come to call the righteous but sinners. (2:17)” And of course this may have been said with some sarcasm, because the Pharisees were just as spiritually sick, but they just didn’t know it. The issue is an issue of association.

The second story is in verses 18-22 and the topic is fasting. The Old Testament has very little requirements for fasting, but the Pharisees had created many extra laws on the topic, and the Pharisees and John the Baptist's disciples ask, "Why do your disciples not fast? (2:18)" If you want to be taken seriously as a religious leader – you must fast. But Jesus says, "While the bride groom is with them, the attendants can't fast can they? (2:19)" Fasting was a time of sobermindedness and long-faces, but Jesus said, "While I am here – fasting would be as inappropriate as a mourner at a wedding. Note that Jesus is not against fasting – he says, "There will be time for fasting later, when I am taken from you. (2:20)" But I believe he is arguing that the coming of the Kingdom of God is associated with joy.

The third and fourth stories are both about the Sabbath. Keeping the Sabbath was, of course, one of the ten-commandments; but like fasting, the Pharisees had added law upon law to where you could hardly do anything without violating the Sabbath Day. So, the disciples are picking grain in a field and the Pharisees ask, "Why are your disciples doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath? (2:24)" Actually what they were doing was lawful, but Jesus doesn't argue that, he responds by giving an example of David who was literally starving and was able to eat the bread of the temple - which was against the law – but the law was set aside because the big picture, "The Sabbath was made for man and not man for the Sabbath. (2:27)"

Then, later that day, Jesus encounters a man with a withered limb in the Synagogue. Probably this met was "planted" by the Pharisees as we read, "They were watching him to see if He would heal him on the Sabbath. (3:2)" Jesus heals the man and says to them, "Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save a life or to kill? (3:4)" The Pharisees look foolish once more, and have no answer for Christ and they begin to plot to kill him.

Well what is the point of these four stories? A story about an association with sinners, a story about fasting, and two stories about the Sabbath. What do we learn from the increasing conflict with the religious authorities? Remember Mark is not lecturing, like Paul sometimes does: “Do this, don’t do that.” Rather he is trying to *show us something*. I think the key to unlocking this can be learned from the blue-theologian Cookie Monster. Do you remember Cookie monster from Sesame Street? He had a song that went like this: *“One of these things is not like the other – one of these things doesn’t belong.”*

Jesus is saying – let me give you two options so you can see which one doesn’t belong in the Kingdom of God. One is the way of God – the other the way of man. One is the way of relationships and the other is the way of religion. What doesn’t belong?

(1) Does Jesus want his people to be lovingly engaged with lost people? To have them over to their houses and eat and drink with them? Or does he want his followers to say “members only” this is a private club – and you people are not welcome here. No! That doesn’t belong – that is not kingdom living.

(2) Does Jesus want his followers to be forced to follow rules what would require them to be sad and dreary even when they should be celebrating over a blessing? Or should they have the freedom to rejoice when the bridegroom is here? Of course – forced misery doesn’t belong –that is not kingdom living.

(3) Third, does Jesus want kingdom living to be quick to lend a hand to do good to someone in need – to feed the hungry or help the injured – even on the Sabbath? Or is the church closed for business because of man-made rules? We will minister to you on *our schedule*. No - that doesn’t belong – that is not kingdom living.

Jesus tells us that Kingdom Living – the way a citizen of the Kingdom of God lives - is something new – new wine, and new garment – verses 21-22. **No one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise the wine will burst the skins, and the wine is lost and the skins as well; but one puts new wine into fresh wineskins.** The coming of the Kingdom of God is a new paradigm – a new way of living.

Application

And so if that is what Kingdom living should look like – is that what our Christian faith looks like today? Is that what my faith looks like?

One question for us to consider from this passage is this: **Do you have meaningful relationships with non-Christians?** Why or why not? Would you, like Jesus, ever be accused of eating with tax collectors and sinners? Do you even know any? How well do you engage the lost world around you? This was of vital importance to Jesus as he demonstrated Kingdom living to you and I. It is so very important for us to show love and care to those who feel the most ostracized by the church.

Unfortunately we (the American Church) have a very poor track record of loving the sinful world around us in the way Christ loved his. Mostly we in America side with the Pharisees and say: “Those people – stay away from them – don’t go there!” In his book, Sinners in the Hands of an Angry Church, Dean Merrill documents how tax-collectors and sinners of our generation see the church as angry and judgmental. He writes, “We have mounted major endeavors to turn the United States back to God. We have preached, prodded, and protested...exhorted...signed petitions...written scathing letters...flooded telephone switchboards...made threats to political candidates...Meanwhile, is the country becoming

more righteous? Are the streets less violent? Is drug use declining? The answers are painfully obvious.” Philip Yancey in his book What’s so Amazing about Grace made this observation on how Christians are perceived by the lost: “I had caught a good whiff of the aroma given off by some Christians, and it was not a pleasant smell...” Eugene Peterson observed the often adversarial relationships between Christians and non-Christians and made the point: “You can’t shout a person into holiness.” C.S. Lewis saw how Christians struggled in the political process to make the country more holy, and said: “He who converts his neighbor has performed the most practical Christian-political act of all” And that won’t happen through shouting - but through loving and caring and spending time with people!

Jesus’ engagement with the tax-collectors and sinners of his day was scandalous, and it is just the type of scandal we need in the church! I like how Joe Aldrich put it, “Can we be any less radical than Jesus Christ? Christ said his lifestyle wouldn’t fit into old wineskins and therefore the prescribed, pharisaic, religious, pious, poker-faced platform was ruled out. Christ was characterized by a holy worldliness. That is the model for the believer. But it’s risky, its out with the wolves.” (p. 49-50).

In closing let me share what I am doing, with God’s help, to try to live out these Kingdom principles. I’m not saying I’m doing it right but I want you to know that, as your pastor, I am trying – and if I can try, you can too. As a pastor it could be easy for me to be isolated around only Christians. So, I intentionally have gotten involved in the Rowlett Chamber of Commerce. I have met many good Christians there, and others who do not know the Lord. This year I took my commitment to a higher level and I joined Leadership Rowlett, where I am building much closer relationships with 10 other leaders in Rowlett – people from the hospital, high school, city, police and other places. We spent three days together at Sky

Ranch in team-building, and we meet once a month we spend a day together learning about the City and in March we will be eating and drinking together for 3 days in Austin – at the State Capital. All this takes time, money and energy. Time I could spend here at the church, preparing messages, or meeting with people. But, I believe strongly that each of us must take intentional steps to be involved in loving constructive ways with regular people around us - to pray and look for opportunities to share God's love to each person. In the past month, from these connections, I have had two people call me and ask about our church, and I've had several spiritually significant conversations. And I hope you will pray for me and take steps of faith with me, to reach out to those who don't yet know Jesus Christ.

Each of us should be doing something intentional to share the love of God with the world around us. That is what Jesus did. That is kingdom living.