

Mark 2:13-28: Opposition and Sabbath Controversy

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In Mark 2:1-12, four men in Capernaum lowered a paralytic down to Jesus to be healed. To their amazement Jesus said, "Son your sins are forgiven". It would be like you going to the doctor when you are sick and the doctor said your sins were forgiven. Of course Jesus took care of the paralytic's spiritual need of forgiveness before He healed the guy's physical need. Now in Mark 2:13-28 we read that the religious leaders were appalled that Jesus would have anything to do with sinners. Their criticism is like someone going to the doctor and he says "As soon as you get well I'll treat you". They were supposed to be helping people, but instead they were just separating themselves from the needy people. The religious leaders Jesus had the most trouble with, was the Pharisees. The name Pharisee came from a Hebrew word meaning Separatist, and they were well named because they separated themselves from sinners and could only be in the presence of supposedly righteous people. Therefore, when Jesus called sinners to follow Him and even dined with them it was outrageous and caused a scandal amongst the religious establishment.

Because of His unique teaching and His miracles, Jesus' fame was spreading amongst the people, but now Mark will show the opposition to Jesus from the religious leaders rising just as rapidly. Disputes will break out, and Jesus will purposefully confront the religious establishment.

Mark 2:13-17 "I came to call the sinners"

Jesus left Capernaum and was walking around the Sea of Galilee when a large crowd came out to Him, so He began teaching them. As He was walking with the crowd He saw a scumbag tax collector whom everybody despised, but Jesus called out to him to "Follow Me!", and he did. The tax collector was so excited that he hosted Jesus at his house to eat and invited many other tax collectors and known sinners to be there as well. Now it's one thing to preach to sinners, but it's quite another to befriend them and hang out with them; so when the Pharisees saw that Jesus was eating and drinking with scumbags, they objected and condemned Him. The tax collector was named Levi, also better known as Matthew who would become one of the 12 Apostles and write the Gospel of Matthew. Jesus' call to Levi is great news to us admitted sinners because it means our past sins, and even a bad reputation is not a barrier to a personal relationship with Jesus. In a way, Levi made a greater sacrifice in leaving his profession than Peter and the fishermen. They could still fish, but Levi was done with his profession.

The Pharisees' objection brings up that question I asked earlier, "Does a doctor wait for sick people to get well before he helps them?" We see a stark contrast between Jesus and the Pharisees, because Jesus seeks sinners out, calls them, and ministers to them while they are sick spiritually. Then as Levi exhibited, their lives are changed. The Pharisees were a part of an institutional religion that taught that we have to obey the Law and be good in order to be acceptable by God, but Jesus presented Himself as God's search for sinners. Therefore, Jesus answered the Pharisees objection with a wise statement, "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." Clearly biblical Christianity differs from all other religions, because all religions are man's search for God, but Christianity presents itself as God's search for humans. The Pharisees would look for the Messiah among priests, but He was among sinners.

Mark 2:18-22, Questions Asked and Answered

In this section the Pharisees come and ask Jesus why He and His disciples were not super religious like them. They observed many religious traditions like regular fasting and washing ceremonies that Jesus did not observe. In this passage they ask specifically about fasting, "Why don't your disciples fast?"

Fasting was not required by the Mosaic Law except on the Day of Atonement, but the Pharisees fasted regularly and made a big show of it. Jesus even addressed this in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 6:16-18 saying that the Pharisees were hypocrites who fasted in order to be seen by men. Jesus told His disciples that if they wanted to fast they should do it in private so they would be seen only by God who would judge the sincerity of their heart. In Mark 2:18-22, Jesus gave them

three answers to their question about fasting: 1. The Kingdom of God is not a funeral wake but it is like a wedding party with celebration and not mourning, 2. Jesus then used the illustration of the “old garment” (the Old Covenant) is inflexible so you don’t put an un-shrunk new patch on an old garment. If you do a worse tear will result, 3. Old wineskins (their traditions) are already stretched to the limit and will burst if you put new wine that’s still fermenting in them. Jesus’ point is that the New Covenant of grace is incompatible with the Old Covenant of law. Jesus did not come to reform the old system, but He came to transform it. The Pharisees’ religious traditions are incompatible with the grace that Jesus is offering.

Mark 2:23—3:6, The Sabbath Controversy

After the religious leaders criticize and confront Jesus regarding His religious practices and associations, Jesus revealed that they were hypocrites and their traditions and legalism were incompatible to the New Covenant of Grace. The author, Mark will now give an excellent example of this principle with a Sabbath confrontation between Jesus and the Pharisees. In Exodus 20:10, Moses gave the fourth commandment that on the seventh day of the week “you shall not do any work”. This is a simple command given by God to help His people. We all need one day a week of rest in which we take our focus off of our vocation and put it on more important things like God and family. Everyone needs a time to lay aside their feverish pursuit of success and preoccupation with self. The religious leaders of Israel had taken that command to great lengths to define work in 39 different categories with multiple subsets in each category. It took a knowledgeable lawyer then to define what you could and could not do on the day of rest. In their religious fervor they began worshipping the law instead of the Lord who gave it to them. The Pharisees had become the RELIGIOUS POLICE, and they had volumes of rules, interpretations and legalism that bound Israel up into an impossible bureaucracy that no one could keep.

Deuteronomy 23:25 allowed the poor to “glean” in grain fields, which meant that farmers typically left a corner of their field unharvested so the poor could walk by and pick some grain to eat. However, the legalistic Pharisees were teaching that it was work that couldn’t be done on the Sabbath. While walking through the fields on the Sabbath, Jesus and His disciples were gleaning some grain because they were hungry, but the Pharisees took strong exception to this being done on the Sabbath. Jesus gave them four excellent answers to their challenge: 1. The Davidic precedent that human need is a higher obligation. God never intended ritual and tradition to stand in the way of mercy and goodness. 2. God created the Sabbath for the well being of humans, and it was never meant to be a burden. “The Sabbath was made for man and not man for the Sabbath”, 3. Religious tradition (that they made up) is superseded by Christ who is the Lord of the Sabbath. Jesus wrote the law they were distorting, 4. The Sabbath is a time to do good.

A short explanation is that God gave the fourth commandment to be obeyed in the spirit of the law and not the letter. Jesus established His Lordship over the Sabbath and taught that it was to be used spiritually and not legalistically. As the Lord of the Sabbath, Jesus wrote it, defines it, and interprets it. The religious leaders tried to enforce the letter of the law with no attention to mercy, grace, or human need.

Conclusion

In these stories in Mark, we see two incompatible religious outlooks. The outlook of the religious Pharisees leads to death while the outlook of Jesus leads to life. In the story of the conversion of Levi, we see the gospel of Jesus welcoming all who seek, but the Pharisees’ religion keeps sinners away. In the story of the Pharisees’ demand that Jesus’ disciples fast, we see that religious external exercise in pretending to mourn just breeds hypocrisy. In the story of the Sabbath controversy when the Pharisees accused Jesus of working on the Sabbath, we see the Pharisees legalistic approach gave no mercy or grace, but Jesus had a spiritual perspective that put human need above tradition, and Jesus valued the spirit of the law above the letter of the law. The climax of Jesus’ confrontation with the Pharisees came in Mark 3:1-6 in the synagogue where Jesus boldly told a man with a withered hand to come to Him. The Pharisees stared hard at Him with eyes demanding that Jesus not work on the Sabbath by healing the guy. Before He healed the withered hand, Jesus looked right at the Pharisees and said, “Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save a life or to kill?” Then Jesus healed the man in front of the Pharisees. The full meaning of what Jesus said is understood by verse 6 where we read that on that Sabbath day the Pharisees went out and planned how they might kill Jesus. Jesus graciously and mercifully gave life to all who came to Him, but the Pharisees legalistic religion based on salvation by keeping the law, brought death.

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