

The King of the Kingdom

Mark: The Gospel of the Kingdom

Mark 2:18-3:6

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Randy Lovelace

We turn this morning to the second chapter of Mark as we continue to walk together through this Gospel. And one of the things that Mark likes to do is, he likes to do things in sections, in vignettes, if you will. This morning is no different. What we have here is Mark putting together three successive situations where we see Jesus performing and doing things according to his authority, and he's being questioned, he's being challenged. And his response is one that is altogether true to who he is and what he's come to do, but is also very controversial for the Pharisees who are bringing these things to his attention. On one level it would be very easy to see this passage and to see these three vignettes, and see them as in some way what Jesus is doing is teaching about the nature of the law of God and the grace of the gospel and how they compare and so forth, and that would be one way of viewing the passage. But really what this passage is about is less about law and gospel, but more about the one who is bringing the gospel, the one who is the gospel, and their response to him.

That is to say that on many different levels, many of these three situations that we find Jesus in and the Pharisees who are objecting—in one way it doesn't make sense, because it's not like all the Pharisees were just looking for any opportunity to catch people. It's the fact that who Jesus was that it made it so controversial. The Pharisees. . . I want to say again, it's very easy, and particularly over the last hundred or so years and within the evangelical church, to sort of throw stones at the Pharisees. But as I've said before, I think it bears repeating, that the Pharisees were an incredibly important group of religious leaders. They were respectable people. They weren't bad people. They didn't have a malicious intent—although by the end of this vignette we see that they begin to be very angry with Jesus. They were trying to do what they believed was right, and that is to live an obedient and godly life. The problem was their obedience and the pursuit of their obedience blinded them to Jesus. How is that possible? How could it be that our obedience could blind us to trusting Christ?

And so Mark is inviting us to yet again ask the question: What will you do with this Jesus? What will you do with this “King of the Kingdom” Let’s look together at Mark 2:18-3:6.

¹⁸ 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?” ¹⁹ 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. ²⁰ The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast in that day. ²¹ 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. ²² 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.”

²³ One Sabbath he was going through the grainfields, and as they made their way, his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. ²⁴ And the Pharisees were saying to him, “Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?” ²⁵ 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: ²⁶ 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?” ²⁷ And he said to them, “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. ²⁸ So the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath.”

^{3:1} Again he entered the synagogue, and a man was there with a withered hand. ² And they watched Jesus, to see whether he would heal him on the Sabbath, so that they might accuse him. ³ And he said to the man with the withered hand, “Come here.” ⁴ And he said to them, “Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to kill?” But they were silent. ⁵ And he looked around at them with anger, grieved at their hardness of heart, and said to the man, “Stretch out your hand.” He stretched it out, and his hand was restored. ⁶ The Pharisees went out and immediately held counsel with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him. [ESV]

This is the word of the Lord. (Thanks be to God.) Please pray with me. Now we ask, O Lord, that you would open our minds and our hearts and our understanding to see Jesus the King bringing his kingdom. Help us to understand what he is doing. Help us to understand how and in what way it impacts us, even this very hour. And help us to respond to Jesus in a way that delights you, because he is the King. Help us, we pray. Help the teacher. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

This series of situations that Mark gives us here are a fantastic way of seeing some great themes that are being brought out, that will then be unpacked throughout the rest of the Gospel. And you'll see in your outline this morning that I've laid these out in these three areas: One, **The Bridegroom Has Arrived; The Lord of the Sabbath; and The Kingdom of Restoration.** And as we've said before, the Gospel of Mark moves at a much quicker pace than all the other Gospels. And in fact, we get very quickly this morning to the very heart of the offense that Jesus was causing on the part of the Pharisees. And we see the sharp contrast. We've seen it building, but we see the sharp contrast between the response of his disciples and the response of the Pharisees. But we also see yet again how Jesus uses these situations. Instead of declaring that 'I am God,' he is using it to clearly show by his actions that he is God. This is important, and this is what upsets the Pharisees.

Now it would be OK to wonder, did the Pharisees not have anything better to do than to follow around to obscure grain fields to watch what people were doing on the Sabbath? As one writer

said this: On one hand it is quite right to respond, really? This is what they were doing? Except when you realize what happens when someone who has been living in relative anonymity and that person becomes the president of United States. Suddenly everything in their life is torn apart. It's looked at. It's under the microscope. All the long lenses are out for that person. Look at the royal family of Britain. What you see is that they clearly cannot go anywhere or do anything without someone paying attention. Why? Is it because what they are doing is unusual? No. Is it because these reporters have nothing better to do? No. It's because of who they are. So it's correct in saying the Pharisees were not out every Sabbath just looking in every grain field or in every synagogue waiting for something wrong to happen, therefore they could call them down and discipline them. No, it was the fact that Jesus was who he says he is, and that is, he's come as the Lord. He's already declared that. He is doing something that only God can do. He forgives sins, and he's healing. In other words, he's gaining a following, and he's teaching. And we've heard that when he teaches it gains attention. And so they are concerned, they are worried, that this person is a revolutionary. So together with doing miraculous deeds, together with teaching and gaining a following, Jesus is trouble for them.

But what's interesting is how Jesus responds, and we will see. But it's important to notice he doesn't get out the long knives. He simply responds, often with questions. He uses their own vocabulary, their own sayings of the culture, to bring the light to their hardheartedness. But it's also an opportunity for us to see that Jesus is coming at this very differently. And as we go through it's important for you to understand as the reader, and as we look at this together as a congregation, that Jesus is thinking with the end in mind. He is coming at them and responding to them as the one who is getting ready to go to the cross. They are coming to him as one who is breaking all that which is past, all that which has been established, all the laws. *What are you doing?* Jesus is coming at it going, Don't you see, I've come to fulfill. I'm not breaking the law. I'm not casting dispersion on the law of God. No, I've come as one who has fulfilled it. Two entirely different perspectives. And Mark is inviting us to have the perspective of Jesus. He's come as the one who will die on our behalf.

So let's look together: **The Bridegroom Has Arrived.** In these first few verses we see that the central issue was that Jesus's disciples were not fasting as John's disciples or as the Pharisees fast. The problem immediately becomes, you see, the way in which the Pharisees order their lives. Because according to Old Testament law you were only called to fast in one of two situations: either the Day of Atonement, which we read about in Leviticus 16; or if you were in dire need or in deep trouble, and so you were to fast and to call out to God and cry out for mercy. And so what's interesting is that the Pharisees said, oh no, to make sure that you are walking in the right way, they set all these other kinds of fasts. In fact they ritually fasted twice a week—not called for by the law, but rather they had written additional laws that would stipulate all parts of life. So they have the law of God and they have this other law, equally applied, and it was oppressive to people.

And so they come to him immediately and say why aren't they fasting? And Jesus responds with perhaps one of the oldest Old Testament themes which [would] have been very familiar to them, because the Pharisees were tired of being under the oppression of Rome. They were

wanting Israel to be returned again. They believed that Israel was still in exile, needing to be returned to a great nation. And so they remember that the prophets of the Old Testament used one theme to talk about the Messiah who would come to return Israel out of exile and to salvation, and that one was referred to as the bridegroom. That bridegroom imagery is used in Hosea, in Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel. And that bridegroom was seen as God himself, would be the Messiah. And here Jesus, immediately—though he doesn't say 'I am God,' he uses that name. "“Can the wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them?””

And what he's just done, he's just dropped a really big brick right in the middle of their argument. They were asking about fasting. Now Jesus is talking about what he's come to do and who he is and how it calls for a very different response. It's this. Jesus is saying that because I'm calling myself the bridegroom, that God has come. That his kingdom of salvation, and of return out of exile into salvation, has arrived. God has broken in and I am here. Therefore, what I've come to inaugurate is like a wedding day, and I'm the bridegroom. And here's the question. Do you show up to a wedding in the same attire as you would a funeral? What he's simply saying is you are calling for fasting, which means you're doing something to ask for repentance because you're waiting for the Lord to bring forgiveness, you're waiting for the Lord to bring salvation, because that's what Leviticus 16 is all about: The Day of Atonement. You are fasting and calling for fast, because you think you're in trouble. I'm here to say I am the fulfillment of the Day of Atonement. I am the Atonement. I have come to bring salvation. You ought not to be going around with your face all ashen and down and going without food. No, the opposite. You want to be celebrating like a wedding day. A wedding day is characterized by joy, singing, and dancing. Imagine that. They've just said why aren't your disciples fasting? And he says why aren't you dancing? Why aren't you dancing?

Now, a brief aside. Why aren't we dancing every Sunday? Now, I know we're Presbyterians, but think about it. What is worship? Worship is learning how to dance and praise the Lord of salvation. This is a day not marked by repentance, but a day marked by salvation. They're concerned about the law. Jesus is concerned about the wedding day. They're concerned about their obedience and why aren't you obeying. Jesus says... Jesus is essentially saying I've come as the obedience. I'm the bridegroom. I'm the Lord. [The disciples'] response is completely in line with what I've come to do. He's calling for joy, not desperation. He's calling for welcoming him, not for fasting. You can begin to get a taste of how the Pharisees are beginning to get very angry with Jesus. It's important to note it's not that Jesus didn't care about the law. He cared very much about the law of God. It's eternal, it's holy, it's righteous. Jesus here is not breaking the law, he's just refusing to go along with their interpretation of it. And he's calling them to a completely new interpretation of the situation because of who he is.

But he moves on, or rather they move on after him to the next vignette where we see **The Lord of the Sabbath**. Oh, one final thing before I move on. These metaphors of wineskins and old wineskins and the way he talks about the new garment piece being on the old garment—these are metaphors that are to draw our attention to what Jesus is bringing. He's like a new set of clothes and really great new wine. And the reason why you can't put it on old things, it's because of its greatness, of its beauty, of its value. It will fill up whatever old clothing is there

and burst the seams. It will pour out new wine; it will be so much it will break the old wineskins. In other words, what Jesus is about to do and what he's pointing to as the bridegroom is greater than anything they've ever seen. He's not a patch and he's not a refill. Jesus is not a refill to our empty cups. Jesus is not a patch for this sin or that sin. He's not a Band-Aid. He's the Lord of salvation who is bringing something entirely new.

And so he moves, then, to even something more fine point—this whole problem of the Sabbath and its observance. Verse 23. One Sabbath he was going through the grainfields, and as they made their way his disciples had begun to pluck heads of grain. And they said wait a second, why are you doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath? And Jesus refers all the way back to this obscure passage, which on one reading it seems that Jesus has it wrong, because Abiathar was not quite yet the high priest when David ate the show bread and gave it to his followers, his friends who were with him. But that's almost like getting too deep down in the weeds. What Jesus is trying to do with this illustration—and they're questioning him about the observance of the Sabbath—is this. He's saying do you remember David? David did something which the law said he shouldn't do, and that is to eat bread which only the high priest could eat, and yet God did not judge him for that. I and my disciples on the Sabbath—I'm not eating, but my disciples are (so they are holding Jesus to account). And he's saying, I, the Lord, I'm not judging them. They are not breaking the law. But you're trying to sit in the seat of God; you're trying to judge them.

And then Jesus makes this proclamation. And he says, “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.’” See, by all of their laws and by all of the extra laws that went with the law, what they've now done is they've made observing the Sabbath a burden. They have to do this, got to do this, got to do it in this way. And so they come at him with that framework. And Jesus says wait a second. The Sabbath was given for man to enjoy, not as a burden, but to free us.

But more than that, he then says he's the Son of Man, as the Lord even of the Sabbath. Now as we go on in the book of Mark, we'll learn more about the Son of Man observance, or rather this title. But the key here, he's using it in service to the Lord of the Sabbath. So he's saying he's fully man, but he's also the Lord in that one phrase, and it's a very loaded phrase. And Jesus is saying wait a second. If God did not judge David, but you're judging us, you're putting yourself in the place of God. I'm saying to you I'm the Son of Man, I'm the lord of Sabbath, and I am not bringing punishment, rather, I'm allowing them to do it. What is the Lord saying about the law that the Pharisees misunderstand? It's this. You see, they respond to Jesus's coming and Jesus's teaching with an overly strict interpretation of the law. And that leads them to believe in their own righteousness, [and] it causes them to be blind to the great righteousness of the mercy and grace of God. And what that does is this: they then believe that the law actually prohibits mercy. But the law, Jesus is saying, was never meant to prevent mercy. Do you see what he's saying? David was not allowed to eat the showbread. But they were hungry. David was on the run from Saul. If he didn't eat, he would die. If they didn't have the food, they couldn't run, they couldn't fight. And so the Lord in his mercy demonstrates that the law is never a prevention or prohibition against mercy, but rather mercy is greater than the law. And in this way Jesus is

saying, don't you see as the Lord of the Sabbath, I'm telling you this is mercy, and the law does not prevent mercy.

So not only is he claiming to be the God-man, the Lord of the Sabbath, the Son of Man, he's just indicted them in saying you don't see the need for mercy and grace. And that's what oftentimes self-righteousness does. If we're trying to obey enough to be acceptable to God, we will find forgiveness very hard to accept. We will find mercy a very difficult concept. And if we have a hard time accepting grace and mercy because we're trying to pull ourselves up by our bootstraps, to be obedient enough, to be good enough, to be righteous enough, then we will very much have a hard time extending it to others. The horizontal decisions have everything to do with our vertical decisions. If you have a hard time receiving forgiveness and grace from Jesus himself, we will find it all the more difficult to extend it to others. They are demonstrating it here. And Jesus is saying I've come as a lord of the Sabbath to bring mercy and grace. You're setting yourselves up as God. And he's trying to call them out, and he wants to call us out.

Please let me explain, and hear this. That the law of God is eternal, it is full of righteousness and truth. But the law is never the way to God. It only exposes our need for the Lord. And when the Lord comes, by his grace and mercy—as Jesus does through the cross and resurrection—that enables us, through the work of the Holy Spirit, to desire to walk in obedience as a response to love, not as a means of gaining love. Because we can't. But Jesus did. That's the beauty of the gospel. That's what the Lord of the Sabbath, that is what the King of the Kingdom is demonstrating. The law was never meant to prohibit or to block mercy. Jesus is inviting them and inviting us.

What role do we play? How are you doing with receiving the grace and mercy of the Lord to you? And how are you extending it to others? The Lord of the Sabbath has come. The Son of Man, the bridegroom. And our cups are full to overflowing. Our sins have been covered, as we have sung this morning, by the blood of Christ. So our forgiveness is never in short supply; it is full. It doesn't mean it's easy to extend forgiveness to others. It is hard work. But know this. We have Christ, who is in our midst. He is more than enough. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. So I ask you. Do you know that you are forgiven? Do you know that you can be forgiven this morning? Are you one who's trying to prove yourself to God, to be obedient enough. My friend, I want to tell you, I can't get on that treadmill, and neither can you. You'll never stop running, and you'll never reach your destination. The Lord calls us to rest in the work of the bridegroom, the Lord of the Sabbath.

But let me show you what he does. This bridegroom, this Lord of the Sabbath, brings **The Kingdom of Restoration**. [Mark] says, "Again he entered the synagogue and a man was there with a withered hand. And they watched Jesus, to see whether he would heal him on the Sabbath, so that they might accuse him." You see, his questions to them have not helped. They're ready to indict him; they're ready to accuse him. They are not yet ready to choose mercy. They only see things through the lens of the law. But he looked at them—and here it's one of the few passages where it talks about the anger of Jesus. The other is when Jesus looked at the tomb of Lazarus and it said he wept. That's actually a word not like we understand

weeping, as in sadness. He's weeping in anger, because he sees the problem of sin and the consequences of death. Here he is angry. What he's angry at is he's angry at how hardhearted sin makes us. And he grieved at their hardheartedness, and he said, "Stretch out your hand." And when Jesus says wait a second, is it not lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm? To save a life or to kill?—it's meant to be a rhetorical question whose answer is obvious.

This reminds me of this famous passage in Jeremiah where it likens human beings to two kinds of trees. The one tree is planted in the desert. And it actually says of that tree, its roots are not very deep. It's not plugged in the living water. And it says it does not recognize prosperity when it comes. They are not rooted. They don't see the roots being in the King of the kingdom, the King of Restoration, the Lord of the Sabbath, the bridegroom. And they do not recognize prosperity when it comes, that is, that prosperity is Jesus with healing in his wings, the Lord who brings salvation. They are hardhearted; they do not see it. But yet he calls them out in this action. He says, "Stretch out your hand."

So here's the thing. Even though Jesus is saying, even though he's not asking them what are you going to do about me? Won't you come to me? The mere fact that he's performing the miracle, knowing what's going on in their hearts, is an invitation: Do you not see what I have come to do? I've come to bring restoration and salvation. And you're worried about whether I am allowed to show mercy. Now imagine that, that the law of God and our obedience and our self-righteousness becomes such an identity for who we are that we spurn mercy. Do you see how human the Pharisees are? If we read this passage correctly, we don't just stand far off and go yeah, those guys are fools. But it's calling us with a magnifying glass for our own hearts, with a mirror before us, and asking do we rejoice at mercy? Do we rejoice at grace and love? Or do we think of it as in arithmetic: You give me a dollar; I give you a dollar. It becomes an exchange. I do for you; you do for me. He's calling us not to, of course, judge the Pharisees, but rather to see how easy our own obedience, our own righteousness, our own trusting in ourselves, can become such a blind spot for us, that we fail to see that the Lord wants to do far more in us. He wants to make us new. He wants to make us his own. He wants to bring the kingdom to bear, which Jesus is going to do.

And we see this. They respond, and they're angry, and now they're plotting how they will destroy him. Jesus knows what's in their hearts. He knows what's coming. And he recognizes that as he calls himself the bridegroom, as he calls himself the Lord of the Sabbath, as he's demonstrating the mercy of God on the Sabbath, he recognizes that they are about to plot to take his life—but that's precisely what he knows he's come to do. He's come to give himself on the cross, his righteousness for our sin, that we might have eternal life. They, the Pharisees, didn't see the king coming. They didn't believe it was possible, and certainly not in this way. They spurned the mercy, they spurned the grace, and only could see the law.

As PD and I were meeting this week we were reminded of this. If you've seen the film or if you've read the book or done both: *The Lord of The Rings*. The final one, *The Return of the King*, by J.R.R. Tolkien. There is Denethor, who is the Steward of Gondor. He's left in place, until the king returns, as a steward to watch over the kingdom. And he's making sure that everything is

prepared and is trying to keep things in order and waiting for the king to come back. But the problem is that he confused that he is a ward and therefore [does not have] overriding authority. And what he begins to do is he gets too entrapped in his position. He underestimates the threat that's coming against Gondor. He fails to see what's going on in his own heart. And when he hears that the king has returned to Gondor, he does not believe it. He's not willing to relinquish authority. The Pharisees are much the same. They're stewards, they're shepherds of the people of Israel, called to guard the law of God and to shepherd the people and to teach them how they ought to live. But that very law which they were called to uphold is also the same law that proclaims the Son of Man, the bridegroom, the Lord of the Sabbath, will come again. And when he does, he will be the King returned. But they were not willing to give up their authority. Their own obedience blinded them to the fact that the King had returned. And so they failed to see the restoration, the healing, the claims to authority, and dignity of Jesus. And so they plot to take his life.

So I finish with this question. When the King returns—and as we now look back, Jesus came, and he will return again, his word tells us. But he is the King who is enthroned. He has authority, dignity, sovereignty. And he brings healing, grace and mercy and love, authority and love, dignity and sovereignty, and mercy and grace. And when he comes the question is for us: Are we ready to receive the King? Now some of you profess Christ as your Lord and Savior. The hard part for those of you who have walked with the Lord—recognize that we want the Lord to have just enough of our house, but not these other parts. Where are you unwilling to give over the authority to the King, where he can bring restoration, mercy, and grace? If you are not a believer this morning the question is: Are you willing to give up your authority—that you think you have—for the one who has all authority in heaven and on earth, and who is the Savior, who came to die for you in his grace and love, that you might have life. We all come at the Lord from very different places, but the response is called to be rejoicing and receiving. Is that your response this day? I call you, friends, that we might rejoice in the King of the Kingdom.

Let's pray. Father, we ask that you would now enable us to see the Lord Jesus for who he is. He is the Lord; He is the King. We pray, O Lord, that you would help us to see his dignity, his authority, his sovereignty, his beauty, his mercy, grace, and love. Help us, by your word and your Spirit, to look in our own hearts, to confess our own hardheartedness, to confess that we do not like to give up our own authority. But you are the Lord, and when you come you bring restoration, and we can trust you because you are good. We thank you, Lord, that Jesus Christ came and died for us, and was raised to life on the third day victorious over sin and death, and he is now seated at your right hand, and you have promised that he will come again. Lord, may this day be a day of rejoicing and also longing preparation for Christ's return. Help us to rejoice and to sing. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.