

Mark 2:13-22

We will be building today from what we have learned the past few weeks, so for those who have either forgotten, or need a quick refresher, here is what we have been learning from Mark.

In the first week we saw how Jesus coming marked the end of the exile and the arrival of the Messiah. In the second week, we looked at the power of the preached Word and the effect that it brings. And Last week, we saw how Jesus cleansing of the Leper and healing of the paralytic demonstrated that the new had come and that the old was passing away.

I review this because it is important to remember the flow of the narrative to see the connections that exist between each story and parable.

And we will be picking up where we left of last week in the discussion of the power of the Gospel to cleanse the unclean and how this clarifies Jesus message, *"The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe in the Gospel."*

The primary point of these stories is to expose how self-righteousness blinds us and causes us to miss the coming of the kingdom and how we should be preparing for the wedding feast by fasting for our bridegrooms return.

It may seem odd that Mark would began talking about the calling of Levi right after this amazing story of a paralytic being forgiven of his sins and being healed. But we must notice the occupation of Levi to realize what Jesus is doing and why Mark includes it in his account.

Verse 14 tells us that Levi was sitting at the tax booth, which indicates that he was a tax collector. Today, we may all have our own opinions about the IRS and tax rates, but our distaste for taxes (whether right or wrong), does not compare to the way the Jews viewed tax collectors.

Thinking of the occupation of defense attorney, politician, or insert your most disliked occupation, are bad professions, but your aversion to them would be difficult to rival the Jews aversion to the tax collectors. And this is true for a number of reasons.

First, the Jews were being ruled by a foreign power. Given the history of Israel and their understanding of the Old Testament promises, this was a disgrace to them. The existence of zealots and other revolutionary sects at this time demonstrates how the Jews were annoyed at the occupation of the Romans. The Jews felt they were being oppressed and the tax collectors helped them in their oppression.

Second, to make matters worse, the tax collectors typical took much more money than the actual tax called for. So the tax collectors would become rich, taking their brothers and sisters' money and giving a portion to Rome.

Instead of being popularly viewed like corrupt politicians today, these men were seen more like spies from a foreign country. They were intentionally trying to undercut the prosperity of the Jews and hurt

their worship of God. As a result, any tax collector was regarded as an outcast. He could not testify in court, he was excommunicated from the synagogue, and the man's entire family would be disgraced.

The Jews had good reason for being suspicious of tax collectors, yet, we find Jesus calling Levi to himself. Talk about the power of the Gospel! This man, who had presumably been living a selfish life outside of the people, finds himself renewed in Jesus! Jesus calls this man to follow him, and that call effectively moves Levi's heart to leave behind his former life and follow Jesus.

But leaving behind his former life does not necessarily look like what one may think. Instead of Jesus taking Levi and meeting with the religious leaders, Jesus reclines at a table (No, that is not a typo in the ESV, but it is an older expression that reads more literally to the text).

The text tells us that a number of the "sinners" and tax collectors were following him, and so Jesus decided to eat with them. These men, though they were social outcasts, recognized their need for cleansing. Instead of simply preaching the message (which we see him doing in verse 13), he also takes time to get to know and love these sinners. But this was scandalous! Eating with a member of a class lower meant that you would drop in your social status. And the Pharisees reasoned that if this Jesus was sent from God, that he certainly would not be stooping down to eat with this sinful tax collectors.

Because they did not follow of the Pharisaical laws, they saw them as ritually unclean. According to the Pharisee's, Jesus was becoming unclean in his fellowship with the tax collectors. This was the Pharisee's interpretation, and was not stated explicitly in the Old Testament, but they could not discern between the two.

Throughout its history, the church has had similar problems. But this should not be surprising, for how often do we develop laws and regulations in our hearts that are outside of Scripture and become intent on placing them on others in an effort to glorify ourselves?

Being part of a confessional church, we understand the importance of having authority over us, but we cannot make our confessional standards on par with Scripture. We should love and cherish them, but only because we believe they reflect the purity of the Gospel.

But we see in the Pharisee's a tendency that we are so prone to make. They were not humbly concerned with the purity of the Gospel, but they were selfishly concerned with being part of the "righteous" party.

They were right in their belief! That tax collectors were sinning in the way they treated their brothers and sisters. The Pharisees would have a right to criticize their behavior and see them as a dubious group, but instead of separating from this group, Jesus goes to them.

A tendency that the Reformed tradition has unfortunately become known for is its seclusion and even Pharisaical devotion to the doctrine of the Church. Let us make sure that in our community, we do not make agreement with the Reformed confessions synonymous with love of the Gospel. Let our understanding of the Reformed faith cause us to grow in humility, not in pride.

We find motivation for this rooted in Jesus explanation as to why he is eating with these people. They have listened to his teaching and recognize his authority. While the Pharisee's saw where these people fell short and wanted nothing to do with them, Jesus recognized their need and ministered to them. These "sinners" knew they were sinners, much more than could be said of the Pharisees.

This is why Jesus responded, *"Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners."*

Those who recognized their need were the "unclean" ones. They realized that they had fallen short and needed the Gospel to change their hearts. Through Jesus teaching (again we see the primacy of the Word!), these men realized that they fell short. But they followed Jesus because they realized that they needed to be cleansed of their sin.

The Pharisees on the other hand searched for righteousness outside of Christ. They looked to their ceremonial cleanliness, their circumcision, their ethnic heritage, and the purity of their doctrine as ways of being undefiled. But we should not completely dismiss the thought process of the Pharisees. For as we see in verses 18-22, they are eagerly awaiting and expecting the kingdom.

They believe that through their righteous observance of the Law, they will bring the coming of the kingdom, and end the exile. Given Israel's history of rebellion against God, we should be sympathetic to the Pharisees! They wanted to protect Israel from falling into sin and bringing a curse on Israel! These were good intentions!

But appealing to good intentions is often a veiled attempt to excuse our self-righteous attitudes. The Pharisees did not seek the glory of God in their zeal for the Law, they sought their own glorification. They wanted Jesus to submit to their rules and regulations. Seeing themselves as righteous they had deceived themselves, and made God out to be a liar. And as a result, they missed the one who would restore Israel.

The point Jesus is making is that people cannot expect to be healed if they do not acknowledge their need for healing. Someone cannot be healed of an illness until they see a doctor. An addict cannot overcome their condition until they admit that they are broken. And in the same way, if you do not realize your own sin, you will not be able to experience the power of the Gospel. (As Dr. Phil says, **You cant change what you don't acknowledge 😊**)

As a result, Jesus dines with these men and allows them to draw near to him. And instead of recognizing their need for forgiveness and Jesus power to forgive, the Pharisee's continue to fast for the coming of the kingdom.

So while Jesus and the tax collectors and "sinners" are feasting, the Pharisees and John's disciples are fasting. Their reasons for fasting may have been different, for John's disciples may have been fasting since John was in prison.

But it is rather clear based on Jewish commentaries and writings that their fast was for the coming of the Messiah. They would typically fast 2 days a week to show their longing and expectation of the Messiah.

So they ask Jesus why he is not doing the same thing. For not only is he eating with sinners, but he is also not looking for the coming of the Messiah.

Jesus responds saying, *“Can the wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them? As long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast.”* This response is puzzling and provocative.

The Pharisees would have acknowledged that you don't fast at a wedding. For a wedding was a festive time. It would have been inappropriate and insulting if the members of the wedding party would have fasted. So the Pharisees agree with Jesus statement, but they don't immediately understand how it applies.

And this is because the Old Testament never speaks about the Messiah coming as the bridegroom. We read in Isaiah 62:3-5: *“You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the Lord, and a royal diadem in the hand of your God. You shall no more be termed Forsaken, and your land shall no more be termed Desolate, but you shall be called My Delight Is In Her and your land Married; For the Lord delights in you and your land shall be married. For as a young man married a young woman, so shall your sons marry you, and as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you.”*

In the marriage relationship between YHWH and Israel, YHWH was seen as the bridegroom. For Jesus to respond that HE was the bridegroom would not be entirely clear. They would have assumed that there was no way that Jesus could have been making such a claim.

But this is precisely what Jesus was saying. Jesus is YHWH, the bridegroom that has come to court Israel. Because He was present, the sinners, tax collectors, and Jesus disciples could not help but feast! For the exile was coming to an end! (never knew that!)

And the humble could see that the Jesus was the Messiah, but the proud Pharisees were blinded by their self-righteousness.

But Jesus also said, *“The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast in that day.”*

This is the tension between what we have presently in Christ and what we still look forward to. And we now live in this time when we do not have the bridegroom...YET we do have him! So what does this mean for us?

It means that we celebrate what we have in Christ now. Because Christ presently reigns with the Father and in our hearts, our hearts celebrate and feast on the blessings that Christ has given us in His Word. But because we still long for the day of Christ final return, we also fast. We fast looking forward to the day that Christ returns to make all things new. Realizing that the wedding has been started, we await

our bridegroom to take us into Him, to bring the wedding to consummation. (I like the multiple applications within the sermon)

But Jesus response continues, *“No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old garment. If he does, the patch tears away from it, the new form the old, and a worse tear is made.”*

So what is Jesus trying to communicate? Why this parable and how does it clarify why Jesus is not fasting?

Remember, Jesus had recently healed a leper and a paralytic and called Levi, a tax collector, to follow him. And on top of all of that, Jesus was keeping company with the “sinners” and feasting! So Jesus responds by pointing out the distinction between the way things used to be, and the way that they were going to be.

In the Old Testament, these structures and forms were acceptable. They fit well together. But just as it would be inappropriate for a new patch to be put on an old garment or for new wine be put into old wineskins, so it was with the new age. Then, things were beginning to change, and the role that the Old Testament religious establishment had taken would soon be passing away.

Because Jesus kingdom was bringing a new era in God’s plan of salvation, it would have been inappropriate to bring the New Testament message with the Old Testament religious establishment. They simply did not fit together, just like putting a new patch on an old garment. The fabric is different, the strength of the fibers is different, and before long, the patch breaks.

The parable of the wine gives similar explanation. Wineskins were typically made of leather that was soft and pliable, but after constant use they become more brittle. As a result, they were more liable to burst under the pressure of fermentation (which only occurs with new wine). So in order to safely store wine, it would be most appropriate to place it in new wine skins.

In a similar manner, the Old Testament structures were fading away because Jesus was the bridegroom that had come to marry Israel. The tragic part of this story is that a number of Israel missed the point of the Gospel. They rejected the Messiah and were still fasting and not perceiving the incredible events that were unfolding before their eyes.

As a result of Jesus coming, fasting in the manner of the Pharisees is no longer acceptable to God. Looking for a Redeemer other than Christ is blasphemous. But the fasting which is characterized by faith in Christ continues after his ascension. Fasting for the person of Christ to return is appropriate because at this time he has been taken into heaven, but we do not fast in expectation without knowing WHO we are fasting for. Jesus person is both a sign that the old has been radically altered, and a pledge that the reality described by the parables (of the garment and the new wine) will be experienced in the appropriate time.

But longing for Christ to come takes humility to recognize that we need his coming. If we seek the coming of Christ for our own self-righteous reasons or to glorify ourselves, we will be acting no different than the Pharisees. And like the Pharisees, we will not be partaking in the Gospel.

As we conclude, let us think back to the image of Christ and his eating with sinners. Which party are you?

Are you the Pharisees, self-righteously observing religious rituals without remembering the true object of your worship? Do you find yourself more wedded to religious traditions and circumstances of worship? If we were to be honest, all of us in this room can take even the Scriptures and twist them for our own self-righteous edification. Let our attitude be different than that of the Pharisees though!

Recognize your fallenness and frailness. Understand that you are separated from the people of God, isolated in yourself. In our sin, we should recognize that there is no hope in ourselves and therefore turn to Christ. This means no longer using our religious traditions to puff up and seclude ourselves or boast of our superiority, but we find our identity and hope in Jesus Christ.

I want to be clear, this does not mean that there are not standards of Biblical worship! Jesus was not saying that he can be worshipped however you desire. What this passage allows us to see however, is that our religious rituals can blind us to our sin and the power of the Gospel to transform our hearts. This passage is commanding us to reject everything we glory in that puffs up and recognizing our emptiness, be humbled in Christ.

For brothers and sisters, we have an amazing invitation in Christ. Recall the cleansing of the leper, in like manner Jesus communion with the sinners did not lower his "social status" but instead raised us with him.

And our invitation is not simply to a meal, it is a wedding feast, where we are not simply the guests, we are the bride! As we cling to Christ, we will participate in that feast, and in that day we will fast no longer! But as Jesus said, we fast after his leaving us. But our fasting is characterized by our hope not only in the feast, but in our consummation of our marriage to Christ.

So what should we do and believe? First, recognize your sinful condition apart from Christ. Then repent of your sin, and believe in the Gospel. Believe in the sufficiency of Christ and fast for the coming of Christ, as we eagerly await our wedding feast with him.