

# There is no in-between

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Mark 2:13-22 - Littlebourne 2nd May 2021

Parallel passages: Matthew 9:9-17, Luke 5:27-38

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Conflict is brewing in Capernaum - the religious leaders have been getting interested in Jesus and are getting bolder in their opposition to Jesus and his methods.

Last week, the religious leaders, in verse 6, questioned Jesus, but in their thoughts. This week, they will take their complaints to Jesus' disciples and next week we'll see that they question Jesus directly.

Jesus, who we saw last week annoyed the Pharisees by claiming the authority to forgive sins, now angers the Pharisees further, by continuing to associate with those considered unclean. He's still in and around Capernaum, still teaching and preaching to lots of people.

## v13-14

*He went out again beside the sea, and all the crowd was coming to him, and he was teaching them. 14 And as he passed by, he saw Levi the son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, "Follow me." And he rose and followed him.*

In Roman occupied Judea, a tax collector was a non-person to most Jews. When a Jew became a tax collector, they were in effect declared unclean, not unlike the leper we saw two weeks ago. They could not attend the synagogue and would be shunned by fellow Jews. Even to associate with a tax collector was enough to get you into trouble with the religious leadership.

One aspect of the disdain for tax collectors of the time was that they were seen as collaborators with the occupying Roman forces. And as well as that, they often became wealthy from their taxation - they bid for their right to tax, competing on how much they would pledge to provide to the state and then anything they collected on top of that was theirs to keep. It was a job naturally suited to those that would be able to fleece people most effectively, so tax collectors were seen as crafty, dishonest individuals.

Tax booths were set up on highways, bridges, canals or at the lakeside to tax fishing. We don't read exactly where Levi's tax booth was, but it's possible he was taxing trade and fishing at the shores of the sea of Galilee where Jesus was teaching or maybe he was stationed on the major highway passing through Capernaum that connected Damascus to Tyre.

Tax collectors were not just unclean in the way that the leper was unclean. The belief was that sickness was related to sin, and it was therefore at least in part the sick persons fault they were sick. There's some wiggle room there though. But the tax collector has deliberately, knowingly, made himself unclean in the eyes of those around him. There's no ambiguity in the cause of his status as outcast - it's his fault for taking the job.

So when Jesus goes up to Levi and says "Follow me", he's again radically subverting the expectations of those around Him. For Jesus, as a rabbi or religious teacher, to ask Levi to follow him and become a disciple, would have been very unexpected.

We know Levi also as the disciple Matthew - Luke and Mark refer to him as Levi when he's called, Matthew's gospel refers to him as Matthew at this point in the story. Why the two different names, is not clear. Maybe he wanted a fresh start with a new name after he left his position as a tax collector? Whatever the reason, the next time we read of him in Mark he's referred to as Matthew in the list of disciples.

We're not privy to the extent to which Levi knew of Jesus at this point - maybe his tax booth was within earshot of Jesus' teaching? Maybe in Capernaum you couldn't get away from the news about Jesus. Maybe Levi wanted to know more about Jesus, but because of his position, he dare not approach. But Jesus comes to him and Levi's immediate response is to drop everything and follow Jesus.

In Luke's account of this, it says (Luke 5:28):

■ *and Levi got up, left everything and followed him.*

Levi would not be able to go back to tax collecting - he left that behind. When Jesus called fishermen, they could return to the lake if they decided it wasn't for them. The fish would still be there. But Levi, if he wanted to return, would find his booth occupied and his taxing authority revoked. And he wouldn't just be accepted back into society either.

In becoming a tax collector, Levi likely chose material wealth over his family, his friends, his religion. Now he is leaving the source of his material wealth behind as well. What's he left with?

With Jesus, no one is beyond hope - the people of Capernaum may have given up on Levi, but Jesus doesn't.

## v15

*And as he reclined at table in his house, many tax collectors and sinners were reclining with Jesus and his disciples, for there were many who followed him.*

Now we've seen both people seeking Jesus and Jesus seeking people - the paralytic and his friends last week sought out Jesus and this week Jesus seeks out sinners, Levi in particular. Jesus doesn't isolate from sinners. And he doesn't just associate with them merely by happenstance - it's not just the crowds of people that wouldn't leave him alone, or those that sought him out - but he sought out sinners to be with them and spends his time with them.

And Jesus doesn't just associate with people in a standoffish way - he eats with these people, and not secretly. Eating with people was seen as a sign of genuine friendship and hospitality - when we get to chapter 14 and we see the betrayal of Jesus by one of those who is there eating with Jesus - dipping bread into the same dish as Jesus - this detail emphasises the personal nature of the betrayal. So too here, the eating with sinners shows real closeness to them and personal involvement with them.

This takes place at Levi's house. His wealth hasn't just vanished, but Levi doesn't seem to be holding on to his now finite resources - he is using them for Jesus and others, in hospitality. His material abundance is now re-purposed.

## v16

*And the scribes of the Pharisees, when they saw that he was eating with sinners and tax collectors, said to his disciples, "Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?"*

Teachers of the law and Pharisees were those that followed a tradition of piety and strict adherence to Mosaic law (and beyond). To associate with those who were not as strict as themselves was to be avoided and even within the group of the Pharisees there were degrees of competition in how much they could isolate themselves from sinful influences.

One group, known as the 'blind and bleeding' Pharisees would not leave the house without a blindfold on. They were so afraid that what they saw outside would lead to sin, be it lust or covetousness, that they would walk around in darkness risking injury.

Implicit in their question is the idea that these religious leaders view themselves differently from those they deem to be sinners. And by extension, they are asking why Jesus is associating with these sinners and making himself unclean and possibly sinful in the process.

In fact, we know Jesus as the Friend of sinners - a term they used as one of derision, as we can read in Matthew 11:18-19

*18 For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon.' 19 The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Look at him! A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!' Yet wisdom is justified by her deeds."*

How does Jesus respond to the Pharisees?

## v17

*And when Jesus heard it, he said to them, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners."*

Jesus is making clear that those he is with are in need of his help. But he's also pointing out that the religious leaders don't want his help either.

Jesus cleverly doesn't say that the Pharisees are the well ones - they would assume that. They believe themselves to be well, which is a symptom of their sickness.

Remember at the beginning of Mark, we saw John the Baptist talk of Jesus and said, chapter 1 verse 7:

*"After me comes the one more powerful than I, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie."*

John, a Levite, a prophet, an outwardly holy man, compares himself to Jesus and sees that he is unworthy to even do what at that time was the work of a slave. The religious leaders compare themselves not to the standard of perfection seen in Jesus, but to other people, ordinary sinful people. They set their standards far lower, so they fail to see themselves as sinners too.

The Pharisees do not realise that they are sick, with sin. Sickness doesn't always manifest in outward symptoms - the Pharisees thought their actions were the reason they were not sinful, but sin is a matter of the heart and we are all infected.

The Pharisees fail to see that sin is an inward matter. What we do, how we act, our outward observance of morality is important, but it's our hearts that make us clean or unclean. We should take sin seriously, like the Pharisees did, but papering over our sinful nature isn't the solution.

Jesus, in Matthew 23, says this:

25 “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. 26 You blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and the plate, that the outside also may be clean.

27 “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people's bones and all uncleanness. 28 So you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.

If you're unwell, pretending that you aren't or making yourself look well is not a viable solution. If the leper from chapter 1 had responded to his leprosy with a thick layer of makeup, he would still be a leper, needing to be healed. Sin needs to be cured - you can't just will yourself clean, or act like you're not sick.

The sinners who sat with Jesus probably at least recognised they were sinners - they were not deluding themselves. We need to recognise our sin, that we are in need of a saviour and this will disabuse us of the sort of self-righteousness that the Pharisees embodied.

Those who believe they are well avoid the sick. Only once we realise that we are sick too, will be able to really reach the sick and lead them to the only person who really is well - the physician Jesus Christ.

## v18

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?”

Under Mosaic law, the only time fasting was any kind of requirement was yearly on the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16:29-31). The Pharisees however fasted far more often. In Luke 18 Jesus tells a parable that includes a Pharisee that fasts twice a week, presumably representative of their practice.

Now it's not the case that fasting is a bad thing of itself - Jesus fasted for 40 days in the wilderness for example. Plenty of times in scripture we read of people fasting as part of repentance or in seeking God's guidance. But fasting itself is a tool - to be used for good or ill.

For good, it is a way to set aside the things of the world, making space for us to focus on what God wants, to seek God's glory. We're not told what John's disciples were fasting for, maybe for this good reason, we don't know.

For bad, it is used by the Pharisees as a method of outward holiness - a way to show off, feel good about themselves, to seek their own glory.

Jesus was not interested in dead rituals. He would not conform to their view of religious life. There is nothing wrong with fasting itself, but when it becomes a ritual that is devoid of benefit, it's pointless and leads to self-righteousness. Ritual can very easily take the place of God as the focus of worship.

Good fasting acknowledges proper spiritual priorities - we put the right things (prayer, spiritual things), before physical needs. Fasting does not impress God or persuade God. It is good only in so far as it is used to seek God.

Jesus replies with an example they would all understand:

## v19

*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."*

You don't fast at a wedding - you feast. It's a celebration.

Weddings were different in those days. In our culture, the married couple pretty swiftly go off and spend time away from everyone on honeymoon. In Jesus' day, the wedding feast that followed the marriage ceremony would go on for a solid week and the married couple would spend time with everyone they knew, feasting and being treated like royalty.

Jesus describes himself as the bridegroom. In the old testament, God is the groom and his people are described as his bride. In the new testament, the bridegroom is the Son of God, God himself and his bride is the church.

The passages about the marriage of God to his people often occur in messianic passages. Those listening who knew the scriptures might have made the connection.

If fasting, in its right usage, is to seek God, why would the Jesus' disciples fast when God is right there eating with them?

## v20

*The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast in that day.*

This is the first time in Mark's gospel that we foresee Jesus' death. There is a sort of gradual unveiling of Jesus' ultimate purpose in coming to earth, as through Mark, we'll see Jesus telling his disciples bit by bit more and more about his coming death and its purpose. What we learn from seeing so early in Mark's gospel that Jesus is cognisant of his coming death is that his death was plan A, it was no accident. His resurrection was not fixing a mission gone wrong, it was continuing a mission gone right.

And when later in Mark we read about the death of Jesus, Jesus taken away from his disciples, there was grieving certainly and possibly fasting - not fasting for outward show, not a regular weekly fast out of ritual - but out of a genuine mourning and despair.

But, remember when Jesus meets two of his followers on the road to Emmaus - they talk together about the what had happened and how their hope was lost. They invite Jesus in to stay, not yet recognising him. Then (Luke 24:30):

*When he was at table with them, he took the bread and blessed and broke it and gave it to them.*

This is their house, their bread, but he gives it to them, makes sure they eat. He breaks their fast, in so doing revealing himself to them. A few verses later he appears to the eleven disciples and after showing them his hands and feet, making sure they know he's really there, not a ghost but a real physical person (verse 41):

*And while they still disbelieved for joy and were marvelling, he said to them, "Have you anything here to eat?"*

The disciples may well have fasted in that day - but thankfully not for long.

## **v21**

*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.*

There was no synthetic fibre in the first century - the fabrics people used would shrink when washed.

Jesus doesn't explain this parable himself, but we know it's a continuation of the answer to the question in verse 18. A question we might rephrase "Why are we religious people and your disciples acting differently?"

The Pharisees were all about the outer forms of worship. They thought that what you did would be the deciding factor when it came to your relationship with God. The gospel of Jesus Christ says the opposite, that what matters is what is going on in the heart, the heart that only God can change. Two irreconcilable positions.

Jesus makes clear that you can't mix and match these two systems. You can't trust in your own self, be self-righteous for some things and then patch up the gaps with a bit of Jesus.

Similarly, you can't accept Jesus, but expect to hold on to your own high opinion of yourself.

Jesus did not come to preach a new and improved Judaism. He was not there to reupholster their worn out religion. Jesus came to fulfil the Law and deliver His people from man-made rules and rituals. He came bringing the good news of forgiveness and new life.

Just like in Matthew 13 (verse 45):

*“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls, 46 who, on finding one pearl of great value, went and sold all that he had and bought it.*

When we find the gospel, like this great pearl, we are called to leave everything, just like Levi did, to give up everything in exchange.

## v22

*“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.”*

Wineskins were made of animal hides, sewn together to form a container that would hold liquid. New wineskins would be flexible and would stretch to accommodate the still fermenting new wine that they were used for. But over time, the wineskin would become brittle and inflexible - were new wine then to be sealed in it, it could not expand to accommodate the fermentation, but would burst.

This analogy similarly tells us that you can't mix and match these two systems. You can't be reliant on your own good works and on Christ simultaneously. "No man can serve two masters." You can't have it both ways.

You can't pour the new wine of the gospel into the worn out religion of the Pharisees, or any other religious system for that matter. They are incompatible. Galatians 5 verse 4:

*You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law;*

If you're seeking at all to be justified by what you do, you are severed from Christ. The gospel of grace is a total replacement for whatever else you placed your trust in - there is no in between.

No one comes to the Father, except through Jesus Christ. Acts 4 verse 12

*And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.*

No other person, no other religion, nothing outside of Christianity, nothing beyond Jesus Christ is able to reconcile us to God.

Now Luke's parallel account of this has an extra element, let's look at Luke 5 verse 39 - just as Jesus has told us of the wineskins, Jesus adds this:

*And no one after drinking old wine desires new, for he says, 'The old is good.'*

Jesus says that it's very easy for people to hang on to their familiar religion, their traditions. The rituals and rules of the Pharisees were so ingrained, that when they saw Jesus' new way of doing things, they rejected it out of hand. Their reference point was their own practices, they compared those they met against that. And they rejected Jesus because of it.

So to wrap up, we've seen Levi, the outcast sinner, rejected by all, but called by Christ. We've seen Jesus meeting with sinners. We've seen those who deem themselves righteous reject the only really righteous one. We've seen that when we follow Jesus, we are joining a system of salvation totally different from any other and incompatible with all others.

When Jesus calls, 'Follow me', do we prefer instead to stick with what we have? Are we willing to lose everything, whether earthly possessions or high opinions of ourselves, in order to follow him?

One thing that is not possible is to accept Jesus, but remain unchanged.

He did not come to pour the new wine of His Spirit into hearts that were trying to please God by keeping the rules and traditions of men. Jesus came to give new life to lost sinners.

It's so easy to labour under the impression that what we do outwardly, our actions, have some bearing on our salvation or our relationship with God. Now I don't want to give the impression that what you do is not important - far from it - but I want to make clear that your status with God is not dependent on you, and especially not on your actions.

Who, if they are clothed with Christ's very own righteousness, accredited to them solely by Christ's death and resurrection can make themselves more holy? Or who, if they are, as the Bible describes it, 'in Christ', can come closer to God? They are already brought as close as possible.