



mark: chapter 2

back home

After traveling around healing and exorcising, Jesus returns to his hometown of Capernaum. So, we've made a big loop, and we are back where Jesus' ministry started. Apparently we are at his home, and the huge crowd.

unroofing

The crowd is so big that in order to get someone to Jesus to heal him, they have to climb on top of the roof, remove part of the roof, and lower him down.

In the Greek the man's friends literally "unroof the roof."

Of note in this scene is that it's the man's friends who bring him to Jesus. This is the model of the apostolic life: we bring our friends to Jesus.

blasphemy

The man's friends obviously bring the paralyzed man to be healed. But, Jesus uses the opportunity to forgive his sins. Again, this is the explicit job of the Temple and the Jewish Priesthood. You

can't just go around forgiving people's sins without arousing the ire of the authorities. They accuse him of blasphemy for the first time. It's interesting that the scribes are described as "sitting" amidst this thick crowd. This is the first of five controversy stories in Mark.

rise

Jesus uses this opportunity to say while forgiving sins might be pretty big, wouldn't it be bigger if he healed the man of his paralysis? So, that's what he does as an answer to the objection of the religious authorities. Notice the language of resurrection here: rise. This same Greek word is used to describe Jesus' resurrection and the raising of Jairus' daughter who had died.

paralysis

This story is obviously a story about healing, but it also could be about a bit more than that. It could very well be a commentary of the spiritual paralysis of the religious institutions of Jesus' Day

CHAP 2

P2

AND Mark's day. Perhaps even our own day?

Paralysis/lameness was considered by the Hebrew Bible and contemporary Qumran community as making one impure.

another disciple

Jesus apparently likes picking up his disciples by the Sea of Galilee. He gets another one, but this time he's a tax collector, and not a fisherman. This one, Levi, is not mentioned by this name in Mark's list of the disciples. It might be Matthew though, who is named. Matthew is included in Mark's list, and Matthew is named as the tax collector in Matthew's Gospel.

Tax collectors worked for the Empire, and so also for the Emperor. Judea was an occupied country, and for the pleasure of being occupied, they had to pay taxes! Tax collectors were not paid a salary by the Empire though, and this they added a surcharge on the taxes they exacted. Oftentimes they would use their position as workers-of-the-Empire to really fleece the people. Thus, they were abhorred as a class of people.

hanging with the wrong crowd

Jesus goes to Levi's house, and is surrounded by other tax collectors and "sinners." Apparently Jesus was specifically intriguing to them, and Jesus had no problem eating with them. For the religious establishment this was a scandal. As Archbishop Desmond Tutu says, "God has a soft spot for sinners."

This is a widely attested feature of Jesus' ministry: he fellowshiped with, and was followed by, people who were considered "sinners" not because of some occasional sin, but because of a lifestyle that was outrightly identified as that of a "sinner." In all of these accounts we find no exhortations to repent. We find this in Mark, Matthew, Luke, and Q.

It appears to be a hallmark of a new community that Jesus is calling together: a community of sinners who are beloved of God. Unfortunately this aspect of the kingdom was as lost on the Early Church as it is in the modern church.

What would it look like for a Christian community to faithfully reflect this priority of Jesus? How could we/you do this?

CHAP 2

P3

fasting

All the other religious folk were fasting, but not Jesus and his disciples. This seemed like a weak point in Jesus' leadership and message, and the authorities tried to take advantage of it. Jesus makes the argument that his presence demanded celebration, not abstinence from food.

bridegroom

Jesus uses a conventional metaphor for our relationship with God: that of a married couple, where the people of God are the bride, and God/Jesus is the groom. This metaphor is present throughout the writings of the prophets, especially when they call idolatry - the pursuit of other gods - as adultery. The New Testament picks up this theme, but instead of focusing on infidelity, uses the marriage metaphor as a device to show the radical nature of God's love for us. We aren't God's slaves, we are God's spouse.

new wineskins

Even as he uses old metaphors, Jesus says that something new is going on with his arrival and ministry. This new thing echoes the "new thing" of Isaiah

43:19 (I am doing a new thing, do you not perceive it?). The structure which holds this new wine must also be new - which is obviously another attack on the religious establishment of Jesus' and Mark's day.

Matthew adds to this scene by saying that "both the old and the new (wine) are preserved," as a way of saying that the old ways are ALSO preserved. Mark seems to have no interest in preserving the old.

Luke adds, "No one after drinking all the wine desires the new," which seems to mean that people who get enamored but the old ways won't be excited for the new ways.

The tension between the "old" and the "new" is present in every religion/culture. How do we know which "old" practices and beliefs to retain and which "new" ones deserve our attention? Certainly not everything old is bad, nor everything new, good.

sabbath

"Sabbath" literally means "seventh" and refers to the seventh day of creation when God rested, and upon which God commanded all of God's people to rest

CHAP 2

P4

in the fourth commandment. In the ancient world the religious establishment had created lots of rules and regulations defining what “rest” looked like on the sabbath, and what would count as a violation of that commandment.

One sabbath day the disciples are picking grain, which would have been regarded as an obvious transgression of the commandment to rest. The religious leaders again see this as a sign of spiritual weakness in Jesus, and they call him out on his apparent hypocrisy.

(Deuteronomy says that you’re allowed to go into your neighbor’s field and pick his grain, but you can’t take a sickle. In other words you can take a little to feed yourself, but anything more is stealing.)

Jesus confounds them by recalling a story from 1 Samuel where David and his soldiers entered the Temple precincts and ate the bread (the “showbread”) that was set aside (consecrated) for the clergy.

Interestingly, he doesn’t seem to offer an exact reason for how picking grain on the sabbath ISN’T breaking the fourth commandment. He seems to indicate that there was some other time that a law was broken for a good reason, and

so this law being bent isn’t that big of a deal.

made for man

Jesus does say that the sabbath law is “made for man” and not the other way around. It’s an interesting way to look at all of the divine commandments. They aren’t arbitrarily made to make life more complicated for us, but rather they are made for us, to make life more full, more Holy, more meaningful. In the case of the sabbath, it keeps us from just working and working and working, and forgetting what it is that we are working for. Rest is built into the spiritual life. It’s not a suggestion, but a commandment. But, does plucking a few heads of grain keep us from resting? Of course not. Does healing someone on the sabbath violate the intention of the commandment? Of course not.

Q

A source that Matthew and Luke used for their gospels which apparently Mark was not privy to. Modern biblical scholarship says that Matthew and Luke not only had their own source material, but they also used Mark and Q. Q appears to be a lost document composed of minimal narrative material and mostly comprised of the sayings of Jesus - similar to the Gospel of Thomas.

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