

# Mark – The First Gospel

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*005 – When Beliefs Impede Truth – Mark 2:13-28*

All outlines, audio recording of discussions, and works referenced may be accessed and viewed at <http://markthefirstgospel.blogspot.com/> .

## First Thoughts

The overarching thought I had while reading this week's text was this:

When we, Christians, read gospel texts we tend to identify with the disciples because we are followers of Christ. We are conditioned to read the descriptions of opponents of Jesus (scribes and Pharisees in today's text) as really not applying to us. We do this even though intellectually we understand that we do also need to take those admonitions to heart.

The problem is that when the gospels were lived and when they were written down, Christians were the marginalized and oppressed population. They were the outsiders, the law-breakers, the poor, the immigrants, the non-citizens, etc.

As Western Christians, and especially as Christians in America, Christianity is definitely not marginalized or oppressed, in spite of what some groups might claim about "Christian persecution in America." American Christianity is very much in a position of power and privilege. It gets to define the parameters for public discourse, both civil and religious. Therefore, when reading gospel texts I believe it is imperative that we do consciously place ourselves into the shoes of the critics of Jesus. Today's text offers ample opportunities to do so and in doing so the parallels between the scribes and Pharisees and Christianity become more than uncomfortable.

We will examine three-and-a-half episodes. Why the "half"? Because the very first episode, the calling of Levi, is a prologue to the banquet story that follows immediately. The middle story is about fasting. The third story is about Sabbath observance.

With these rapid-fire episodes there is no good place to divide them for the sake of our discussions. For instance we break this session between two consecutive Sabbath conflict stories. I am forced to make arbitrary cut-off points so that we have sufficient material but not too much for each session.

We are looking at the middle three of five conflict stories (2:1-3:6). It was noted last time that these are in a chiasmic form. The fasting story contains the crux of interpretation. It should also be noted that the severity of conflict between Jesus and tradition/religion increases through the five. These are not chronological accounts, but arranged by Mark to drive home his particular approach to the gospel.

# Levi and the Banquet

## Jesus Calls Levi

13 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. (ESV)

1. Jesus tries to get away from the crowds (again)
  - a. Jesus experienced "ministry success" with the healing of the paralytic (2:12)
  - b. Now Jesus tries to get away by going to the sea (another metaphor for *wilderness*)
  - c. But the crowds won't leave him along (and recall, crowds are not a good thing)
  - d. He teaches them – point of Jesus is to proclaim the gospel
    - i. There is no exorcism or healing here
2. Jesus goes to the sea (of Galilee)
  - a. Recalls the calling of Simon, etc. (1:16-20)
3. Levi – who is this?
  - a. Son of Alphaeus
  - b. Brother of James, the son of Alphaeus? (3:18)
  - c. Same as Matthew? (Matthew 9:9) – traditionally accepted as fact
    - i. But Mark never equates the two
    - ii. In Mark's calling of the twelve account (3:13-19) Matthew is listed, but no Levi, and there is no mention of a tax-collector
  - d. Reminder: factual considerations were less important than the message the author is trying to communicate
    - i. Thus even though Matthew = Levi factually (via other Synoptics) for Mark he probably intends his audience to see them as distinct
    - ii. More historical fiction than historical fact
  - e. The point may be that Mark wants his readers to see that Jesus called many more disciples than just the ones who were appointed as the Twelve
4. Levi – tax collector
  - a. A lucrative profession – may have directly purchased contract from Romans, or a subcontractor for a chief tax collector (e.g., Zacchaeus)
  - b. Most locally collected taxes stayed locally – thus they benefited local population
  - c. But they were allowed to set their own rates beyond that required by Rome
  - d. They had the backing of Roman power to enforce their rates
  - e. Despised as collaborators and traitors
  - f. Shunned and excluded from synagogue
  - g. Any contact with one transmitted uncleanness
  - h. Levi may have collected trade taxes, or he may have been one that collected fish taxes
  - i. If fish taxes, think about how his relationship might have been with Simon, Andrew, James, and John...
  - j. How might the modern Christian church deal with "traitors" to a nation?

... Levi is a collaborator. A true freedom- fighter would have nothing to do with such a weasel, except perhaps to murder him as an enemy of the revolution.<sup>1</sup>

5. Jesus calls Levi anyway
  - a. There is no mention of confession of sins, of wrongdoing, of guilt
  - b. There is no explicit mention of repentance<sup>2</sup>
  - c. Levi follows immediately
    - i. This is another example of the Markan view of “repentance”
    - ii. Whereas fishermen could have returned to their trade, once Levi leaves his post there is no return – someone else will take over his contract
    - iii. For Levi to follow Jesus is a far riskier venture
  - d. Jesus does not first require confession or repentance from a disciple. He only requires that he or she follow.

Jesus continues to exercise his authority to forgive sins by calling Levi the tax collector to be his follower... Jesus not only comes to forgive sin. He also goes so far as to identify himself with sinners and picks the most reprehensible of the lot, those who enriched themselves at the expense of their fellow Jews in the service of the Roman occupation.<sup>3</sup>

6. For Christians in Rome that may have held occupations or positions that afforded them some level of privilege and prestige, Levi’s example is given as encouragement and exhortation

## The Banquet

*15 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. 16 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?” 17 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.” (ESV)*

1. In whose house did this take place?
  - a. Luke 5:29 records that it is at Levi’s house
  - b. But both Mark and Matthew leave it ambiguous (“his house” and “the house”)
  - c. Language in Mark implies it was in Jesus’ house<sup>4</sup>
    - i. Once more, it’s not about historical fact but about the message Mark wants to convey
  - d. The message is far stronger and more pointed if the banquet is seen to have occurred in Jesus’ house, because he is the host (c.f., parables of the kingdom banquet where God is the host)
2. Middle Eastern banquets
  - a. Are not private affairs – all in the village/town are allowed to attend<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Reading Mark: 2:13-14.*

<sup>2</sup> *Feasting: Mark, location 2665.*

<sup>3</sup> *Feasting: Mark, location 2532.*

<sup>4</sup> *NICNT: Mark, 2:17.*

<sup>5</sup> Bailey, Kenneth E. *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes*, p. 246, footnote 15.

- b. In other words, Jesus invites *everyone*
  - c. The scandal: that Jesus allows the “sinners” to recline at the table with him
  - d. Table fellowship means acceptance by the host and of one another around the table
3. The scribes and Pharisees (or “scribes of Pharisees”)
- a. We must set aside the “Christian traditions” regarding this Jewish group
  - b. They were not malicious or evil, and certainly not intentionally

It is an unfair slur to portray all Pharisees as hypocrites and to account for their opposition to Jesus on the basis of bad character, as has regrettably happened in much Christian tradition. The Gospels give us the language of heated religious conflict and show us only one side of the conflict. The true pathos of the conflict between Jesus and Pharisees is recognized only when one understands that theirs was a case of deeply religious and sincere people, not just hypocrites, who (from a Christian standpoint) were unable to recognize and submit to the new message of God's gracious salvation apart from observance of religious law.<sup>6</sup>

- c. They were sincere in wanting to do God’s will and see God’s purposes flourish
- d. They were very concerned about righteousness and holiness – in fact they believed holiness (exemplified through their ritual purity and distinctions of clean vs. unclean) was the most important virtue

To go and sit down at that table and to enter into fellowship with this group would violate their idea of “holiness.” For them, Bible and tradition drew clear boundaries around who and what was “pure” and “ritually clean.” Holiness was performed out of love and respect for God, using proscribed sets of rituals that were carefully passed down through tradition. The “righteous” remembered the grace that God extended to them. In return, they performed the rituals and abided by the major divine laws for conduct and behavior.<sup>7</sup>

- e. They did not want to be influenced and contaminated by “sinners” – thus they took steps to isolate themselves from unnecessary contact with “sinners”

The term is technical in this context for a class of people who were regarded by the Pharisees as inferior because they showed no interest in the scribal tradition.<sup>8</sup>

- f. They studied the scriptures diligently and sincerely believed they had the best interpretations
- g. They believed that if everyone would just follow the scriptures as they understood it, the world would be a better place and the Messiah would appear
- h. In other words, today’s Christians bear many similarities to the Pharisees

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<sup>6</sup> UBC: Mark, 2:16 note.

<sup>7</sup> Feasting: Mark, location 2676.

<sup>8</sup> NICNT: Mark, 2:15-16.

In the narrative, the teachers of the law are joined with Pharisees..., and the complaint is that Jesus sets a bad example as a holy man by welcoming known sinners into his circle. In the minds of these critics, Jesus should have disassociated himself publicly from such sinners and should have summoned them to repentance and study of the religious law as a precondition for any social acceptance. These critics were desirous of upholding a religious standard and of chastening and perhaps reforming transgressors.<sup>9</sup>

4. The Markan portrayal of “God’s judgment”
  - a. Who chooses to have table fellowship with Jesus?
    - i. His disciples, tax collectors, and “sinners”
  - b. Who chooses to remain outside?
    - i. The scribes and Pharisees
  - c. In other words, it is not God or Jesus who judges/decides who is in or out. The people judge for themselves. (c.f., John’s Gospel)
5. Jesus is seen as a teacher of the Law
  - a. If he was seen as something less than, there would have been no controversy
  - b. But he is seen as one of the “scribes of the Pharisees” or a rabbi
  - c. Thus he is violating the group’s norms and traditions – hence the controversy
6. The scribes’ challenge
  - a. Is to Jesus’ disciples, not Jesus himself – perhaps seeking to sow discord
  - b. Eating together at the same table is no insignificant matter
    - i. It symbolizes acceptance, reconciliation, and since Jesus represents a religious authority figure, it also represents religious and spiritual acceptance of those who are eating with him

We must understand that generally in the ancient Near Eastern lands sharing a meal was considered a significant and even an intimate social contact, establishing a bond among those who partook. Among ancient religious Jews, eating with a person implied religious acceptance of that person.<sup>10</sup>

- c. Thus the question, “Why are these people, having not left behind their sinful lives, being accepted as being part of the spiritual family of God?”
      - d. The scribes are zealous for purity and holiness
7. Jesus hears their question and responds
  - a. The first sentence (ESV) of verse 17 is a common proverb of the time
    - i. The scribes would readily agree to it
  - b. The second sentence is Jesus’ application of the proverb to the present situation
  - c. Jesus’ response demands a decision – who is well and who is sick? And therefore, who is righteous and who is the sinner?
  - d. It may also be a bit of sarcasm and irony on Jesus’ part to the scribes: “If you think you are well/righteous, why are you bothering me by following me around? Are you silently admitting that you are sick/sinner?”

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<sup>9</sup> UBC: Mark, 2:13-17.

<sup>10</sup> UBC: Mark, 2:13-17.

- e. Jesus' unsaid point is that all are sick, no one is well, and all need him. That's why he invites *everyone* to the banquet table so that they can receive "food" and "drink" from him that will heal/save all who eat and drink from him. Those who choose not to eat and drink from his table choose to remain sick/lost. Jesus does not prevent anyone from coming to the table nor does he force anyone to come to the table.
8. Mark does not include the Parable of the Wedding Feast, but this story with the next one may be seen as taking its place – they convey the same message

... Those who want to be insiders in Jesus' group must envision themselves reclining next to people whose politics and behavior they find disgusting, and eating out of the same dish with them (14:20).<sup>11</sup>

## Weddings Are Not the Time for Fasting

*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."* (ESV)

1. John's disciples – John the Baptist's disciples
  - a. Even though John himself was in Herod's prison, John's influence was still great – in fact disciples of the Baptist would continue into our time
  - b. John was seen as a great prophet, so his example certainly could not be dismissed
2. Why did observant Jews fast?
  - a. Only one day of fasting was required – the day leading up to the Day of Atonement
  - b. But in the post-exilic period in particular, fasting became a way of showing remorse and repentance
    - i. Pharisees set aside two days a week – Monday and Thursday – for fasting
  - c. To show their separation from the common and ordinary: remorse for past sins, repentance for current sins, piety, purity, and holiness – these are not bad things at all
  - d. To bring about the Day of the Lord, the day of the Messiah
    - i. It was believed that if all Jews were perfectly righteous for one day, the Messiah would arrive – so personal and corporate piety and holiness were crucial
  - e. John the Baptist announced the impending arrival of the Kingdom of God, so it would make sense that he and his disciples practiced this tradition
3. People came and asked Jesus why his disciples don't fast
  - a. These could be any of Jesus' followers, John's disciples, some of the crowd, the Pharisees, or some or all of the above
  - b. They want to know why Jesus' disciples don't fast if the Kingdom of God is at hand

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<sup>11</sup> Reading Mark: 2:15-17.

- i. It goes against their traditions and doctrines going back centuries
- c. They are asking an honest, sincere question – there is no hint that they are actively seeking to discredit Jesus (at least not yet)

The puzzlement of those who questioned Jesus on this issue was caused by the fact that Jesus proclaimed the near arrival of the kingdom of God, the day of salvation, but was not showing what his critics regarded as proper preparation by mourning over its delay.<sup>12</sup>

- 4. Jesus responds with an implied parable of a wedding feast
  - a. It makes no sense to fast while a feast is going on – not only that but it would be rude to the host, the bridegroom
  - b. Nowhere in the OT is the Messiah associated with being the bridegroom<sup>13</sup>
  - c. But in the OT God is sometimes likened to the bridegroom and Israel as the bride<sup>14</sup>
    - i. In a very veiled way, Jesus is saying something far more profound and dangerous than simply that he is the Messiah – he is announcing his divinity
    - ii. But no one understood it – understanding only happens after the resurrection
  - d. Jesus speaks in a veiled way about his foreknowledge of his own death
  - e. It is ambiguous whether Jesus' absence is during the time in the tomb or also includes the time between his ascension and second coming
    - i. It can be taken either way and applications derived from both
    - ii. It may be best to see it as both – Jesus is here but he is also away
      - 1. We can feast and fast as we celebrate what we have now but look forward to what is to come
      - 2. It would have spoken closely to the experience of Roman Christians
- 5. Two sayings about old and new
  - a. Typically understood as meaning that new teachings and ways of life cannot be made to fit into old paradigms
    - i. That Jesus' way of life is 100% incompatible with Judaism
    - ii. Taken by progressive Christians to argue against traditional and conservative Christianity
    - iii. Or at the very least those following a new way need to distance themselves from the old because the both will be destroyed if they try to stay together
  - b. The Jewish New Testament Commentary makes an alternate observation<sup>15</sup>
    - i. The saying involving wine and wineskins is interpreted as above
    - ii. But the saying about the cloth is different
      - 1. First, there is nothing that says old garment should never be patched
      - 2. What it says is that a unshrunk piece of cloth should not be placed directly onto old garment
      - 3. But what if the new cloth is pre-shrunk and then used to patch the old?
      - 4. The old garment becomes useful again

<sup>12</sup> *UBC: Mark, 2:18-22.*

<sup>13</sup> *NICNT: Mark, 2:19-20.*

<sup>14</sup> *Exploring Mark, p. 76.*

<sup>15</sup> *JNTC, notes for parallel text of Mark 2:21-22 in Matthew 9:16 and 17.*

5. Likewise, the new way of Jesus can be adapted to Judaism
  - a. This is what Apostle Paul did when he was with Jews
  - b. With the Gentiles Paul followed the wine/wineskin metaphor
- iii. In other words the old isn't completely obsolete or incompatible with the new
- iv. Both can and should change and adapt
- v. But at the same time there may be multiple ways in which the "new" is lived

Taken together, verses 16 and 17 imply that both Messianic faith and Judaism should adjust to each other. However, the accommodating must be true to God's Word; on that there is no room for compromise.<sup>16</sup>

6. Jesus is telling the people that a new age has arrived
  - a. The wedding feast has begun and the guests are already eating (see previous story)
  - b. Everyone is invited; the previously outsiders are now insiders
  - c. The old can be made useful again, but it will require patching with the new
    - i. Is this speaking to the Pharisees who are being told that not everything of the old needs to be discarded, but at the same time they must also accept the new?
  - d. While Jesus is present there can be no fasting, but a time will come when fasting will be appropriate in seeking for the arrival of the full eschaton

## Lord of the Sabbath

*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." (ESV)*

1. Taking some grain out of another's fields is perfectly fine – it is sanctioned by the Law
  - a. It is part of the "take care of one another, especially those in need" ethos of the Hebrews
2. The problem is the meaning of the Sabbath (as will also be the next story)
3. Pharisees bring up the matter to Jesus
  - a. Jesus, as the master, is responsible for the actions of his disciples
  - b. Two points of contention: how far can one travel on the Sabbath, and what "work" is allowed on the Sabbath
  - c. There were 39 proscribed "work" to help interpret the Law
  - d. Oral tradition allowed for work that was necessary to saving a life
  - e. Harvesting did not qualify as life-saving
  - f. Therefore, Jesus was sanctioning the breaking of the Law
  - g. Proper observance of the Sabbath was more than just a minor matter

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<sup>16</sup> JNTC, Matthew 9:17.



- h. It was grounded in both the Creation (Ex. 20) and Exodus (Deut. 5) accounts
  - i. It was one of the critical laws that the Jews believed proper observance by all would lead to the coming of the Messiah and his associated deliverance for them<sup>17</sup>
  - j. It was a practical means of guiding Jews toward purity and holiness
  - k. Thus for Jesus, a teacher of the Law, to sanction breaking it was unthinkable
4. Why does Jesus use this example from the OT Writings (and not the Law)?
- a. First, Jesus implicitly makes the point that he is at least the equal of David
  - b. Second, meeting human need can transcend the demands of Law
    - i. But really, harvesting grain by the disciples...? Is this really a “need”?
  - c. Third and most important reason – the dual use of “he and those who were with him”
    - i. Interpretation: Jesus is giving the grain to his disciples
    - ii. The disciples may not be starving, but they are hungry, and Jesus provides
    - iii. Meeting a human need, emergency or not, is appropriate Sabbath work
    - iv. Jesus meets human needs – this is an essential part of the gospel of God
  - d. Fourth, Jesus identifies himself with David
    - i. David is not king yet – he is a fugitive running from Saul, the established power
      - 1. Saul was appointed by God, but strayed
    - ii. Jesus too, identifies as a fugitive from the keepers of the Law
      - 1. The Law was given by God, but its keepers have strayed
      - 2. As such Jesus places his lot with who Law considers “outside,” those who are oppressed, and perhaps even those who have literally broken laws (i.e., criminals)
      - 3. The Sabbath is meant as a time where all stand equal before God
        - a. Recall that Israelites and everyone in their households, including slaves, were given that day for rest from their labors
        - b. There should be no hierarchies, classes, and differences in privilege and power among those who keep the Sabbath, but especially during the Sabbath

One key element that will be of interest to the reader/preacher is that this [2:15] is the first time Mark uses the term “disciples” to name Jesus’ followers... It seems he wants to stress here that Jesus’ disciples may freely mix with ‘sinners,’ because Jesus’ repudiation of the debt code has made everyone equal again before God.<sup>18</sup>

5. Verse 27 is probably something Jesus said that is not part of the original setting
- a. The purpose of Shabbat is to meet human needs – this may be actual physical rest, but it may mean work to bring physical relief and comfort to those in need
  - b. Church and worship attendance can meet such needs, but is not a requirement nor does it always meet human needs
  - c. Jesus gives a great latitude of freedom to his disciples (Christians) in how to remember and observe the Sabbath – when the disciples believe they are meeting human needs on

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<sup>17</sup> UBC: Mark, 2:23-28.

<sup>18</sup> Feasting: Mark, location 2611.

the Sabbath, their actions are sanctioned by Jesus. (The disciples did not get permission from Jesus *before* they harvested grain. Jesus approved their actions afterwards.

... These controversy stories were intended to show Jesus defending not only his own authority and message (as in 2:1–17; 3:1–6) but also the "lifestyle" or religious practices of his disciples, with whom the readers would naturally identify themselves.<sup>19</sup>

6. Verse 28 is Markan commentary (c.f., 2:10)
  - a. Mark telling his audience what the significance of this story is for them

## Summary

To side with Jesus will mean for the audience of the Gospel the loss of any claim to righteousness, the loss of the prerogative of avoiding unpleasant people, and the loss of absolute certainty about biblical interpretation.<sup>20</sup>

When Jesus broke bread with the outcasts, Messiah ate with them at his table and extended to them fellowship with God. Mark's interest in recording this incident lies precisely in the demonstration of forgiveness which it affords. It takes its place very naturally with the two preceding sections of the Gospel (Ch. 2:1–12, 13–14) as a sovereign demonstration of the forgiveness of sins. The meal was an extension of the grace of God and an anticipation of the consummation when Messiah will sit down with sinners in the Kingdom of God.<sup>21</sup>

The starting point for understanding Sabbath is not the law, but humanity. Humanity is the measure of all things? Talk about a slippery slope. The next thing you know Jesus' followers will be eating the wrong things, with the wrong people, and enjoying it too much.<sup>22</sup>

For the Pharisees, (risking oversimplification) holiness meant perfect observance of the law and avoidance of all that the law proscribes (i.e., "sin"). By separating themselves from "sinners" and excluding them, they hoped to motivate the "sinners" to recognize their "sins" and lead them to "repentance" so that then they could be included in the community of God. They sincerely believed that achieving perfect community through perfect obedience would allow the Messiah to come and deliver them from physical and political oppression. In their sincerity, they were blinded to the Truth working right in front of their eyes.

We haven't seen a clear description of what "holiness" meant to Jesus. But we can see how genuine holiness acts. It invites all, accepts all, participates in the joys and pleasures of humanity, and meets human needs. In other words, holiness is defined not by God's transcendence and "otherness" but by his incarnation and participation in human lives. The problem I see is that modern Christianity has often defined holiness according to OT laws and rituals rather than through Jesus' actions. As a result we too, like the Pharisees, are in danger of making a means to Truth – holiness – an end in itself.

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<sup>19</sup> *UBC: Mark*, 2:18-22.

<sup>20</sup> *Reading Mark*: 2:18-22.

<sup>21</sup> *NICNT: Mark*, 2:17.

<sup>22</sup> *Feasting: Mark*, location 3044.