

The Growing Conflict: an exposition of Mark Chapter 2

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As we move from chapter 1 into chapter 2 of Mark's Gospel there is a deliberate and noticeable contrast. In the first chapter everything seems to be going well: chapter 2 begins what are usually known as the conflict stories, in which the growing opposition of the religious leaders is seen with increasing clarity. Our chapter divides into three main sections. The first, verses 1-12, is the story of the healing of the paralytic in which the twin needs of pardon and power are brought before us. The second, verses 13-17, portrays the calling of Matthew and the change that Christ can make in those who obey His call. The third, verses 18-28, includes the first two of three controversies with the authorities which Mark introduces at this point. It is possible to see each of these situations as an illustration of the conflict with the powers of darkness, which is built into the ministry of Jesus from the very beginning. In fact, in 1:13 we have already been alerted to this dimension.

1. CONFLICT WITH SICKNESS AND SIN vv. 1-12

Here is a familiar healing story, but with a difference. The healing would not have happened but for the extraordinary determination and faith of the paralytic's friends, yet for Jesus clearly the healing was not the most important thing. Rather He uses the miracle to teach us about Himself and His great power, which was as chapter 1 made clear His first priority (see 1:14).

No one wanted to miss the opportunity of seeing the miracles of which Jesus' growing reputation spoke, but his own priority was to preach the Word (v. 2). It is significant that Christ Himself believed in the priority of teaching and preaching. We need to recapture this priority in our current thinking.

We are to imagine the little one-storey house jammed full, but not with the curious or the convinced only. Luke tells of Pharisees and scribes who were present not only from Galilee, but from Judea and Jerusalem, and Mark himself as the Gospel progresses will introduce us to this official delegation that seems to have been sent from headquarters to observe and report on the phenomenon of Jesus. He was under observation by the authorities. The conflict is already beginning.

There are three key themes to notice in the miracle.

a. *Faith* vv. 3-5. Verse 5a clearly links the miracle to the faith of the men who carried the paralytic. Jesus usually healed only in response to faith, not indiscriminately. There had to be a request, a touch, some presentation of need. In this case, great tenacity of purpose was needed to get through to Jesus at all. The paralysed man, by definition unable to help himself, had to be brought by his friends, friends who were prepared to put themselves out to help him. In fact that is how many of us first came to Christ. How much we need people today who will have faith like that for others who are helpless.

Such real faith is not put off by initial difficulties. Had their faith not been genuine they would not have bothered, but their courage and ingenuity illustrate how much they trusted Jesus (v. 4). God honours that sort of faith; faith so confident of Christ's capacity and willingness to bless that nothing is allowed to deter it. This must have created quite a stir, but Jesus saw it

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supremely as an expression of faith (v. 5a). As such, it illustrates a spiritual principle. The quality of our faith is tested by the amount of effort it generates. The same lesson is taught us by James in his Epistle, "what good is it if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds?" (James 2.14). Or again, "faith without deeds is dead." (James 2.26). By contrast, we give up so easily and pray so little. If we had a firmer grasp of who Jesus is and what He can and will do, we would persevere the more. Faith like that grows by feeding on His Word and by coming to know Him in an increasingly deep and personal way. Faith like that always meets with a response from Christ.

b. *Forgiveness* (vv. 5-9). Neither the friends nor the man are reported as speaking. The need is presented to Jesus, Who makes His own diagnosis, and He sees that the man's primary need is for forgiveness.

So verse 5b presents us with an authoritative declaration of the fact that Jesus can forgive sins with a personal application to the man in question. Was the man's sickness directly caused by his sin? Many would have thought so, and undoubtedly some illness is the direct result of sin, but Jesus never made an equation between sin and sickness. Also, the teaching of Jesus concerning the tower of Siloam (Luke 13 v. 1-3) indicates that natural disasters, sickness, and even death itself are evidences of living in a fallen world, and should be warnings to us of our mortality, and of our over-riding need to find God's forgiveness. Before sin entered the world, it seems that disease did not exist. Jesus came to do battle with both, so that the healing of disease is a sign and token in the physical realm of what He is able to do spiritually and eternally, and that depends upon the forgiveness of sins. The healing of the one is a picture of the forgiveness of the other.

Jesus therefore saw sin as the man's greatest problem, and forgiveness as his greatest need. His paralysis is a graphic sign of his inward spiritual condition. Jesus never under-estimated sin. He didn't say "try to forget it and rise above it", or "turn over a new leaf." His solution was more realistic and radical. Christ offers forgiveness which removes all guilt and wipes the slate clean. But as Mark reminds us, there is a crucial theological question to be asked. "What right or authority does Christ have to do that?" This was the unspoken thought of the religious experts (v. 6). We are shown however that their attitude of mind was quite wrong. They began with hostility. They despised Jesus ("this fellow"). So Mark underlines this first evidence of conflict, unexpressed, but known fully to Jesus. And yet the question is a crucial one, "Who is this man?" They were right (v. 7) to say that only God can forgive sins, and

this man, if not divine, is a blasphemer. But they were utterly wrong and blind to dismiss the possibility that he could be God. As we study Mark's Gospel we find the question of these verses raised over and over again, "Who is this Jesus?" It is in one sense the key question of the Gospel. All sin is a direct offence against God, and as He is the offended party only He can forgive. So we are to see v. 5 as evidence that Jesus is claiming to be God in His ability to forgive and cleanse. How can we know if that is true?

By looking at the evidence, is the answer that Mark gives us. Jesus gives His critics a sign that they have not asked for, which in fact proves His identity. In verse 9 He puts to them the challenge: it would be easy merely to say, your sins are forgiven. Or to say, Get up, take your bed and walk. But what is going to be the proof of real power? The answer is action. No outward sign can prove forgiveness, except a changed life over a period of time. But there can be an outward and visible sign of healing, and so that is what Jesus grants (vv. 11-12).

c. *Fulfilment* (vv. 10-12). The command in verse 11 has the same authority behind it as the declaration in v. 5. Both depend on Christ's personal word of power (v. 12). It is the word that gives the power. From the beginning God created by His word. God's Son heals by a word — instantaneously, totally and publicly. The reaction of the crowd is to rejoice and praise God. The key verse is perhaps verse 10. This is why the whole event happened as it did, and it provides us with the first occurrence of the phrase, Son of Man, which comes fourteen times in the Gospel overall. Jesus chose this term to describe Himself, which as many have pointed out, conceals as much as it reveals. There is always in His self-disclosure a hiddenness, for there is always more that faith can discover in the Person of the Lord Jesus Christ. Obviously the term stresses His humanity, though if we relate it to the Old Testament reference in Daniel 7 vv. 13-14, such humanity as is given total authority by God over all other men. Christ is saying to His critics, "if I, a man, have power to forgive sins, what does that say about my real identity? I can forgive your sin. I can give you wholeness and fulfilment". The story stresses that there must be first pardon before power, first forgiveness then fulfilment. And both of these are given by the Son of Man in response to faith.

2. THE CONFLICT OVER PERSONAL PRIORITIES vv. 13-17.

In the calling of Matthew, it is the question of verse 16 that takes us to the heart of the issue. "Why does he eat with tax-collectors and sinners?" The guests were "reclining", a verb used to indicate a special festival meal or party. It may have been Levi's farewell to his life as a tax-collector, but mainly it seems to have been an opportunity to introduce his friends to Jesus, who had so revolutionized his life (v. 15b). The natural place for them to learn more was in the home of their colleague and equal, Levi. He invited Jesus on to *their* home ground, and this reminds us that such is the natural place for evangelism. Many people will not come into a church in the first instance, or even read the Bible, but they will come to our homes and are prepared to read the Gospel according to us. Mark is again underlining for us the opportunities we all have as disciples of Christ. In the previous verses it was the four stretcher-bearers; now it is someone who is prepared to give a dinner party and share Christ with his colleagues.

But there were critics, especially about the people with whom Jesus was socializing. How could this man be taken seriously if he was prepared to defile himself by associating with people who were the agents of the occupying Roman army? The Jews' contempt for tax-collectors was well-known. Their work was a sin against God and man, as far as the orthodox were

concerned, and because they were social outcasts, they tended to associate with the other outcasts, described here as "sinners". The nub of the objection is that no representative of God would allow Himself to be defiled by this sort of contact.

The answer came from Jesus' own lips (v. 17). Why does a doctor carry on his work? His whole vocation is to heal the sick.

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If Jesus were to refuse to deal with sinners He could not be the Saviour. Note that He is telling us He has come. His origins are elsewhere, but He has come to this world in time and space, for a specific mission. He defines the central purpose of that mission as seeking out the sick and sinful. Here is a further irrefutable proof that He is Son of Man and Son of God. In referring to "the righteous", Jesus is not meaning that He saw the religious leaders in that category, not needing His forgiveness. You don't go to a doctor unless you have a sense of need. In their proud self-righteousness the Pharisees thought they had no need, so they would not turn to Christ. However, all who know they are spiritually sick can be healed if they will turn to Christ.

The illustration of this is in the life of Levi (v. 14). He was just as much on life's scrap-heap as the leper in 1 v. 40. He may have had plenty of money but that never was the way to satisfaction. He probably had a tormented conscience, certainly a constant battle with hostility and contempt. But the Lord who touched the leper called Levi, and made him a foundation stone of his band of disciples. He comes to us where we are, in all our mess and sin; enters the situation that we could not possibly change and calls us out of it to a new life. He doesn't ask us to reform, to make ourselves better until we are good enough for God, for He knows that that could never be. He asks us to get up and follow Him. But there is a cost. Leaving the old way of life and launching out in obedience to Christ means severing our own dependence and venturing out entirely upon Him. For Levi there had to be a complete break with sin. For all disciples following means obeying Christ and trusting the future to Him. Sinners can be changed, whether they are respectable or not. But in either case only Jesus can do it.

3. TWO CONTROVERSIES ABOUT RELIGIOUS TRADITION vv. 18-27.

In vv. 18-22 the controversy settles on the issue of fasting, and the question is presented at the beginning in verse 18. While the written law of Scripture prescribed fasting on one day of the year only, the day of atonement, under the tradition of the Pharisees it had become expected that fasting should occur twice in a week. We are not told why John's disciples were fasting. It may have been because of their rabbi's imprisonment. But the Pharisees argued that if Jesus was so concerned about sin then the least he and his disciples could do would be to fast. If, on the other hand, he did not keep this part of the oral tradition, what would be his attitude to the rest, and to their

own authority?

The answer which Jesus gives in verses 19 and 20 is at two levels. His immediate reason (v. 19) is that you do not fast at a wedding feast. One Old Testament picture of the Messianic presence is that of the banquet. While Jesus is teaching, healing, rescuing and cleansing, it is no time to fast. But v. 20 may be a reference to John's disciples. If their master had already been taken from them then their fasting could be understood. Certainly it is a shadow of the cross already falling across the Gospel story. What has happened to the forerunner will happen to His Lord, and that will be the time to fast and mourn. But the joy of sharing life with Jesus is undiluted in its richness when we truly follow Him.

The illustration of verses 21-22 takes us to a deeper level. One of the facets of a wedding is that it means nothing can be the same again. A new unit is formed and new structures are appropriate to it. A wedding is a life-changing event. And Jesus makes that sort of change in people's lives. This seems to be the main point of the two short parables within these verses. In verse 21 He is teaching that, as Hendriksen puts it, "A patch that was supposed to solve a problem creates a bigger problem." Similarly in verse 22 old wine skins cannot contain new, still fermenting, wine. They will burst, and both the wine and skins will be lost. Jesus does not simply patch up lives, He brings about a new creation. Wherever the new life of Jesus comes it will create new structures. The old Jewish oral tradition which was added to Scripture, and sometimes as later chapters in the Gospel will show, effectively destroyed

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Scripture, was about to be exploded with the new wine of the good news of Christ. Jesus is saying that the new wine of the Gospel must always find new expression, for there is in every individual life a radical change at the heart of things.

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The second controversy forms the last paragraph of chapter 2, and is the first of a pair of conflict stories which focus on the Sabbath. In this one, (vv. 23-28) the disciples are walking with Jesus through a field of standing corn. They pick some grains and are accused by the Pharisees of breaking the law. It is not that they have stolen the corn, for provision was made for the

casual passer through the field to take corn in this way. The significant thing is that they did it on the Sabbath Day and therefore were guilty of working in the form of reaping (see Deut. 23 v. 25). This was one of the 39 activities which the Pharisee has listed as work forbidden by the 4th commandment. And the Pharisees challenged Jesus with not only breaking regulations, but apparently going out of His way to do so, though Matthew tells us that the disciples were hungry. (Matthew 12 v. 1). Again Mark uses the same pattern to take us to the heart of the matter. There is a question, an answer, and an illustration.

For the illustration (vv. 25-26) Jesus uses the story of David and his men from 1 Samuel 21. Having fled for his life from Saul's court David came to Nob where Ahimelech and his son Abiathar preserved the worship of the Lord. The consecrated bread in question, 12 loaves, was replaced fresh every Sabbath. Leviticus 24 v. 9 states that only the priests were allowed to eat the shew bread. But David and his companions did so in their extreme need, and the Old Testament doesn't condemn them for that. Nor does the Lord Himself, the ultimate Author of Scripture. So He uses one apparent case of unlawful eating in order to answer the charge being brought against him.

What is Jesus actually saying? Is it that anyone can break God's laws if they really need to? That can hardly be so when He came to fulfil that law in His own Person to perfection! Rather, Jesus is saying that the rigid interpretation the Pharisees put upon the ritual law was not in accord with Scripture. On the broader principle, He is teaching that tradition must be judged by Scripture. God's laws are meant to be a blessing not a burden (1 John 5 v. 3). Scripture can be destroyed as much by addition as by subtraction. It is especially dangerous in a day when special revelation is being claimed by some. We must make quite sure that any so-called prophetic utterances are judged by Scripture and are clearly seen to be subsidiary to the written Word of God.

For the principle on which our actions are to be based, Jesus takes them back to what Scripture does say with clarity (vv. 27 and 28). The Sabbath was given as a blessing from God for man. Man was created first, then the Sabbath was given. It was given as a break from his everyday life of toil as a rest. It was given as a special day in which he may delight himself in the Lord, focus on the things of God, and devote himself to worship and spiritual growth — a day to be enjoyed, not endured. But the rabbis had turned this blessing into a tyranny and had wanted to enslave man to a Sabbath legalism. Sadly that has happened in the church at various times and places, and the Lord's Day has become a travesty of the liberty and joy of the Gospel. But in verse 28 Jesus takes us even beyond this. As earlier in the chapter all the response of Jesus centres on Himself and His mission. God the Lord made the Sabbath what it is and who is able to dictate principles for its observance more accurately or more effectively than the Lord, the Creator Himself? Christ claims to possess authority to govern the Sabbath Day and has exercised that authority in not rebuking His disciples. On these grounds no one has the right to criticize Him.

So, in this final instance, we see a further claim to be the Christ, and that is the issue which the Pharisees, as indeed every reader of the Gospel, must ultimately face.

The Gospel presents us with the challenge of whether we will submit to His authority in everything, or manufacture spurious authorities of our own. That is still the challenge with which Christ meets the world and the Church.