



**Sermon Notes: Cameron Webber,
“The Good News causes Controversy”**

23 February 2025

Readings: Mark 2:18-3:35, Jeremiah 31:31-34, Galatians 1:6-8

Pre-Introduction

We are continuing our series on the first half of Mark’s account of the life of Jesus; his account which he introduces in the opening verse as being... *The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God.* (Mark 1:1)

Today we pick it up in the middle of chapter 2 and will go to the end of chapter 3, as Mark continues at a pace, with short reports of particular events, moving quickly from one to the next. You get the sense of that movement as you read bigger slabs (which I encourage you to be doing through this series – perhaps reading the whole of Mark in one or two sittings).

We saw, in the first week, the Good News of the Kingdom. In Jesus, the Kingdom of God has come near as heard in his words and shown in his actions, and that the appropriate response is repent and believe the Good News (1:14-15). And then last week, in the first half of chapter 2, we heard of the **Good News of Forgiveness** which really is the heart of the Good News. It covers our biggest need with the offer of forgiveness, through Jesus, bringing restoration in our relationship with God.

With that in mind, let’s hear the first part of today’s reading.

Reading - Mark 2:18 - 3:6

Introduction

A quote from a movie from about 20 years ago - ‘Anchorman.’ I’ve never seen it but it generated a number of memes at the time.

‘Boy, that escalated quickly. I mean, that really got out of hand fast.’ ‘It jumped up a notch.’ ‘It did, didn’t it!’

In less than a page in your Bible, we went from a discussion about ritual fasting, to a discussion about how they might kill Jesus! (3:6) Well might we say, *‘Boy, that escalated quickly!’*

After a couple of chapters of Good News, of seeing this one who is doing and saying things that imply he is the long awaited Messiah; this one who is announcing Good News; you would think everyone would get on board, or at the very least, give this Jesus a fair hearing.

But no. Last week we didn’t focus on it, but there was some controversy in the first half of chapter 2. The Teachers of the Law, rather than rejoicing that the long expected Messiah has come, they got their backs up because he wasn’t doing things their way and they don’t believe he is from God.

‘Why does this man speak like that? He is blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?’ (2:7) ‘Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?’ (2:16b)

And in what we have heard read today, that continues, because **The Good News Causes Controversy**

The underlying questions through the first half of Mark are...

- Is Jesus (the Messiah) the Christ?? Is he the Son of God?? (1:1)
- Has the Kingdom of God come near in him?? (1:15)
- Who is this Man??

And that's what creates the controversy in the mind of many. "How could this Jesus be the Messiah? Surely the Messiah's followers would do the ritual fasts?" But Jesus' disciples don't. "Surely the Messiah will keep the Sabbath?" But Jesus doesn't follow their rules.

So let's pray as we look further at this passage.

Prayer

Our God and Father, we thank you for the Good News of Jesus that Mark wrote down for us. Speak to us through your Word and may your Holy Spirit who inspired it to be written, help us understand the controversy the Good News causes and how we should respond to it.

Amen.

1. Controversy Over the New (2:18-22, 3:13-19)

In Jesus the Kingdom (the Reign) of God has come near, but it's not like what the Pharisees and others expected, and this causes controversy. And Jesus responds to questions about fasting, by telling them that something new is happening.

'No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth onto an old garment. Otherwise, the new piece will pull away from the old, making the tear worse.' And it's the same with wineskins. 'Pour new wine into new wineskins.' (2:21-22)

Pharisees are looking at what Jesus is doing through old eyes, but they should have been expecting something new. It was in our Jeremiah reading...

'The time is coming,' declares the LORD, 'when I will make a new covenant ... It will not be like the [old] covenant' (Jeremiah 31:31-32)

And now, Jesus says, 'The time has come.' (1:15) In Him, not only has God's Kingdom come near, but through Him the New Covenant will be established - though his death, as He explained at the Last Supper.

And the nature of this new covenant is this:

'I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.' (Jeremiah 31:33b-34)

-Or in a parallel prophecy in Ezekiel:

'I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; ... And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. (Ezekiel 36:26-27)

It's not that the Old Covenant wasn't about the heart – it was: 'Love the LORD with all your heart.' But the New Covenant is qualitatively different, as we are moved from within by the very Spirit of God.

And you "can't graft the new onto the old. The old does not support the new. The old points to the new, it prepares for it and then it gives way to it." (Don Carson)

In the Old Covenant, trying to keep the law with a heart of stone - well it's difficult. So the Teachers of the Law tried to be helpful by give some extra guidelines to help the people keep the law.

2. Controversy over the Sabbath (2:23-27, 3:1-6)

And that was certainly true with the Sabbath. You know what it says in the ten commandments, 'Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labour and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work. (Exodus 20:8-10)

That's all well and good, but what constitutes work? So they set about defining how far you could walk, what you could and couldn't do in terms of meal preparation, what you must not do on the Sabbath in terms of caring for the sick. There was to be no preparation of ointments or medication. You could do that the day before. And more besides - all that you could and couldn't do if you wanted to 'keep the Sabbath.'

It's easy to make a caricature of what they did. When the rules included that you could only tie a knot on the Sabbath that could be untied with one hand, it's easy to laugh. But at its best, this was all to help people honour the LORD their God. Lower level rules were specified to put a 'fence' around the law, so you made sure you didn't come close to working on the Sabbath.

Harvesting is obviously work, but just to be on the safe side you'd better not even pick a bit of grain as you walk past.

The initial motive might have been OK, but it quickly became just a legalistic burden and no help at all. (See Luke 11:46.)

And so 'one Sabbath Jesus was going through the grainfields, and as his disciples walked along, they began to pick some heads of grain. The Pharisees said to him, "Look, why are they doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath?"' (2:23-24)

Jesus is having none of it. He picks a slightly different example but shows that the intent of the law is critical not their man-made additions. He moves beyond their simplistic legalism and says, 'The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath,' (2:27) which explains purpose of the law. The God-ordained rhythm of work/rest is actually good for us but not when you exhaust yourself figuring out what constitutes work or rest.

Plus Jesus is Lord over it anyway,

'So the Son of Man [Jesus] is Lord even of the Sabbath.' (2:28)

Then in the Synagogue (3:1-6) Jesus gets to heart of issue when he heals the man on the Sabbath and draws attention to the hypocrisy of man-made rules. 'Which is lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?' (3:4)

What Jesus did, did not break the law, and he actually didn't even break their rules -

no medicine was given, no lifting, no ointment applied - just a word! He only broke their rules under the narrowest and most nit-picky interpretation but that's enough for them and they want him out of the way!

I think there are two dangers for us. The **first**, like the Pharisees is that we fall into legalism. Helpful suggestions become defining rules. Rules which may have some merit - like no smokin', no drinkin' no cussin'. Or more positively framed ones: Have a quiet time each day, be part of a Bible Study Group. Or boundaries to safeguard ourselves on the internet, or how we spend time with someone of the opposite sex who is not your spouse. We get that. But when they become legalistic fences designed to keep people out, that's not so good.

And certainly, our job for those outside the church, is not to give them a list of rules, but to point them to Jesus.

And **second** (and perhaps more likely) danger is that we ignore the rules, saying we are not bound by them or casually redefining them so we can do what we want to do. Jesus was particularly tough on legalistic burdens, but he still did all that God wanted.

And with the Sabbath particularly in mind in these verses, it is worth thinking through how we use our Sabbath - our Sunday. Notwithstanding the complexities of modern life, is it just another day or a day to set aside for rest, for fellowship, for corporate worship. It is a gift from God, that we neglect to our loss, and to the loss of the church family.

3. Controversy over Jesus' Authority (3:6, 13-35, 31-35)

The Pharisees see this new thing. Deep down they know Jesus has a point about the Sabbath, but they don't want to know, so 'the Pharisees went out and began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus.' (3:6)

They are not disputing Jesus is doing things like healing and casting out evil spirits. They just don't think he is from God. The controversy is over his Authority.

So let's read on.

Reading - Mark 3:7- 30

Jesus acts and speaks with divine authority. He appoints 12 Apostles, (3:13-19) as a deliberate parallel with the 12 tribes of Israel. He is establishing a New Israel, a new Kingdom.

The teachers of the law don't doubt that he is healing and casting out evil spirits but their verdict is,

'He is possessed by Beelzebul! By the prince of demons he is driving out demons.'
(3:22)

They don't want to believe he is from God so he must be from Satan. And in making such statements they are committing the unforgiveable sin of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit.
(3:29)

We don't have time to go into that, but suffice to say, that if you are worrying that you may have committed the unforgivable sin, you probably haven't. In this exchange, it is the spiteful denial of the activity of the Holy Spirit in the Ministry of Jesus. It's attributing to Satan what is of God.

And if you fail to recognise Jesus as Mark has introduced him:

- Jesus - the Messiah (Christ, The King); the Son of God (1:1),
- Jesus - the one in whom God's kingdom has come near (1:15),
- Jesus - the one who can forgive sin (last week - chapter 2),

then - of course you will remain unforgiven.

And here in Mark 2-3 - someone is blaspheming - it's either the Teachers of the Law or it's Jesus and we must make up our mind - and respond accordingly. And that is the perpetual question: here in Mark, and still today, Who is this Man?

Bono from U2 says,

'I think a defining question for a Christian is: Who was Christ? And I don't think you're let off easily by saying, a great thinker or a great philosopher, because actually he went around saying he was the Messiah. That's why he was crucified. He was crucified because he said he was the Son of God. So, he either, in my view, was the Son of God, or he was nuts. And, I find it hard to accept that millions of lives, for two thousand years have been touched, have felt their lives touched and inspired by some nutter.'

It's the old CS Lewis dichotomy...

If Jesus is not God in human flesh, you've got two choices. Either he's in league with the Devil of hell (as the teachers of the law say) or he's a lunatic, on the level with the man who says he's a poached egg (and that's what some were saying here in Mark 3:21 - 'He is out of his mind.'

If Jesus is not from God, that's the choice – He's in league with the Devil - or a lying lunatic. But of course, if he is who he said, if he is, as Mark has introduced him, then he is Lord! Lord of the Sabbath, Lord of All, God in Human Flesh. He is the Messiah who has all authority, the King in whom God's Kingdom has come and in whom the Kingdom will come, in final fullness, when he returns. Jesus, the one who will be their apparent victim when the plans they begin in 3:6 come to fruition in 15:37, but who will be the One, who, in dying for our sin, establishes the New Covenant and reigns as king?

And that's the controversy still today. Is he who he said he was? Or not?

To borrow from a musical theologian of the 1970s (*Larry Norman*)

*Some say he is the Son of God, a man above all men,
that he came to be a servant and to set us free from sin.
And that's who I believe he is, and that's who I believe...*

That is, that's what I believe about him, and I also believe in him - trust in him, rely on him, place my faith in him – in his perfect life, and his death for the forgiveness of sin. And if we believe all that, and then submit to the authority of the one who is Lord of all then we will be part of God's kingdom.

And we are given a hint of what that looks like at the end of the chapter.

Reading - Mark 3:31-35

Being part of God's kingdom and part of God's family, is entered into by repenting and believing the Good News about Jesus. And then it is shown by doing his will, by keeping in step with his Spirit - the Spirit of the New Covenant who has been placed in us, to move us to follow his decrees, and be careful to keep his laws.

And that leads to understanding the value of living God's way, without falling into legalism; of doing God's will in response to the love, grace, and forgiveness we have received.

As in Galilee 2,000 years ago, so today, there are plenty of people who don't recognise Jesus' authority and are not interested in the salvation he offers, or the kingdom he brings, or in living his way. And that's evident as you look around at how people live, watch the news, and see laws being passed in nations' parliaments.

But for us in this building, part of the church, it's shown in obedience, because whoever does God's will, is part of Jesus' family. (3:25)

Conclusion

Jesus comes bringing the Good News of God's reign, of forgiveness, of the new covenant, and as the one who has all authority. So how do we respond? In repentance and faith, trusting in, and relying on, Jesus. And showing the reality of that by growing as those who live it out in response, doing God's will and sharing the Good News.