

It's a New Day!

(The Gospel According to Mark, Chapter 2)

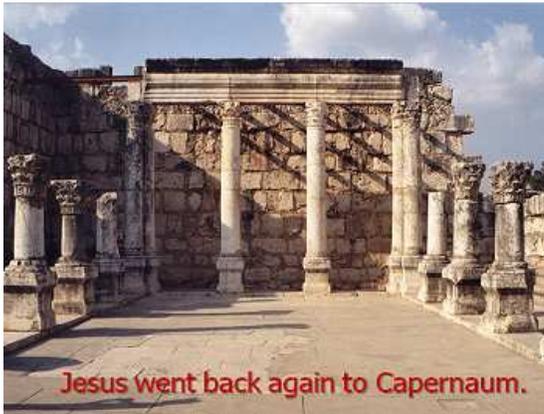
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Today we continue our journey through the Gospel According to Mark. To review, Mark is the shortest of the four Gospels. Apparently his material, which may be based on the reminiscences of Peter, was used as a source by both Matthew and Luke. What those two Gospels often fill out, Mark presents in abbreviated or summary form. As a result, Mark's story moves quickly; his favorite word is *euthus*, "immediately" or "right away."

A few days later, when Jesus again entered Capernaum, the people heard that he had come home (2:1).

At this time Jesus apparently made his home in Capernaum, near the north shore of the Sea of Galilee. Although Jesus later told his disciples, "The Son of man has nowhere to lay his head" (Luke 9:58), at this point he did have a "home base." This leads us to our first question for today: **Can we visualize Jesus being "at home" in our home? As we look around our house, can we see Jesus there?**



Jesus went back again to Capernaum.

At the beginning of his mission to proclaim the arrival of the kingdom of God, Jesus taught in the synagogue of Capernaum. A few centuries after the time of Jesus' teaching the Jewish community of Capernaum erected a magnificent synagogue, the ruins of which still impress the many tourists who visit the area.

So many gathered that there was no room left, not even outside the door, and he preached the word to them. Some men came, bringing to him a paralytic, carried by four of them. Since they could not get him to Jesus because of the crowd, they made an opening in the roof above Jesus and, after digging through it, lowered the mat the paralyzed man was lying on.

When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "Son, your

sins are forgiven."

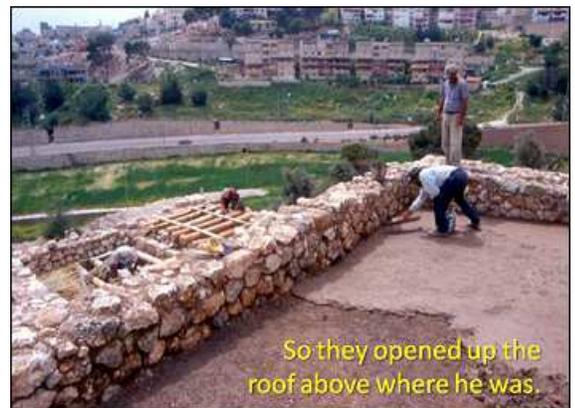
Now some teachers of the law were sitting there, thinking to themselves, "Why does this fellow talk like that? He's blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?"

Immediately Jesus knew in his spirit that this was what they were thinking in their hearts, and he said to them, "Why are you thinking these things? Which is easier: to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up, take your mat and walk'? But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins . . ." He said to the paralytic, "I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home."

He got up, took his mat and walked out in full view of them all. This amazed everyone and they praised God, saying, "We have never seen anything like this!" (2:2-11)

For anyone who knows the gospel story this is a familiar and memorable scene. Jesus is hemmed in by the crowd, so four friends are letting a man down before him by removing part of the roof. This wasn't a tiled or shingled roof; dwellings of this time and place were roofed by wooden beams covered with branches, with a thick layer of mud plaster applied over them and rolled down each year to seal up the cracks. The rafters were sometimes supported by a row of pillars along the center of the room, and families often slept on the roof in the hot summer to take advantage of the cooler night air.

Among the little details we probably never think about: How



So they opened up the roof above where he was.

did the homeowner feel about the damage to his roof? Perhaps this was Jesus' own house. Jesus is called a "carpenter," but the Greek word *tekton* means "general handyman" or even "contractor" in today's terminology. If this was Jesus' own roof, he could probably repair it himself.

When the friends let the man down on a stretcher, Mark says, "Jesus saw their faith" — not the paralyzed man's faith but that of his friends. What did "their faith" mean? Certainly, because the word about Jesus had

been spreading, these men believed Jesus could heal their companion. But "faith" in the Bible means more than belief; it also means *loyalty or faithfulness*. These four men were standing by their paralyzed friend; they were demonstrating their faithfulness to him, and I am sure that's part of what moved Jesus to respond to the man's need. **How can you and I have faith for someone else's healing?** We can believe the Lord will answer prayer, but we can also show our faithfulness — our loyalty — to those who need healing by "sticking it out" with them, and not abandoning them or forgetting them.



At Jesus' word this paralyzed man become able to walk again. How did that happen? As part of his healing ministry, Jesus pronounces the forgiveness of his sins. Often we can be immobilized by "heart" issues — things

hidden deep in our memory that cause stress and manifest themselves in physical symptoms. Perhaps the man could physically walk, but the stress of feeling guilty and unworthy had paralyzed him. The Son of God, the Creator of the universe, can certainly re-create the nerves and muscles and other parts of our bodies. But he can also heal the "heart" issues of our lives by pronouncing the forgiveness of sins. Healing of our hidden fears and stress goes hand in hand with the healing of our physical ailments.

The local religious authorities, who made it their business to safeguard the Law of Moses, are aghast at what Jesus tells the paralyzed man. To them, it's blasphemy to claim to forgive sins, because to make such a claim is to put oneself in God's place. Judaism and Christianity are fiercely monotheistic faiths; God is one, and no one can claim equality with him. But that's the point of the gospel story: in Jesus the Son, the Father himself is at work. God has returned to his people Israel, and has accomplished his return through the work of Jesus, so that what can be said of the Father can also be said of the Son. But these religious authorities are blind to this revelation, which awaits its full disclosure in Jesus' death on the cross and his resurrection from the dead. Once again we see the "Messianic secret" at work in Mark's account; who Jesus really is has to be hidden, so God's plan for the redemption of his people can be fulfilled.

Forgiveness not just a personal issue, but a national issue. Israel had sinned by failing to fulfill its God-given mission to bless all nations. So the Jews, although living in the land of Israel, still felt they were in "exile" because they were under foreign domination. Release from exile would mean the forgiveness of their sins, just as Isaiah 40:2: declares: "Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins." Forgiveness of sins means that God has come back to his people — which is why Jesus is accused of blasphemy.

Let's never forget that forgiveness is central to the gospel — both God's forgiveness of us and our forgiveness of those who've offended us. Jesus taught us to pray, "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." And he adds, in Matthew 6:14-15: "For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins."

Are we ready to forgive those who have wronged us from our hearts — not just with superficial words? Are we willing to let Jesus heal our hearts with his forgiveness, so we can do what God has called us to do? Or do we hold onto the hurts of our heart, with the stress that causes, as an excuse not to succeed in life?

The next incident in Mark's account further illustrates Jesus' forgiveness at work, as a sign of the entrance of God's kingdom on the human scene.

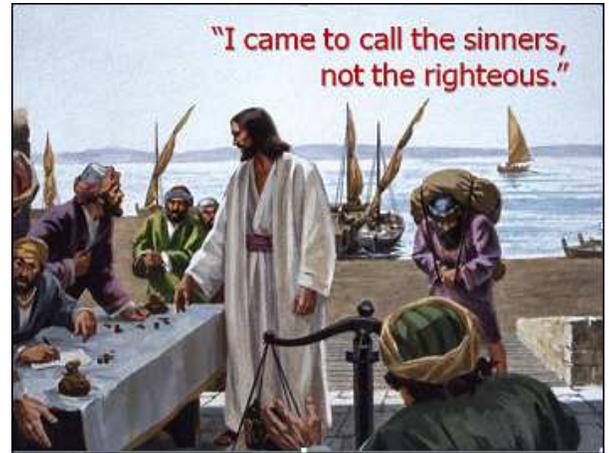
Once again Jesus went out beside the lake. A large crowd came to him, and he began to teach them. As he walked along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax collector's booth. "Follow me," Jesus told him, and Levi got up and followed him.

While Jesus was having dinner at Levi's house, many tax collectors and "sinners" were eating with him and his disciples, for there were many who followed him. When the teachers of the law who were Pharisees saw him eating with the "sinners" and tax collectors, they asked his disciples: "Why does he eat with tax collectors and 'sinners'?"

On hearing this, Jesus said to them, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners" (2:13-17)

Jesus spent time with people who needed forgiveness, those whom the Gospel narrative calls "tax collectors and sinners." You and I may not care for the Internal Revenue Service, but we don't have the same hatred for the people who work for the I.R.S as the Jews had for the "publicans," those who collected taxes for the Roman government. From the viewpoint of the oppressed Jews, who felt they were still in exile, these collaborators with Rome were the worst, on a par with prostitutes and other transgressors of the laws of God. The Roman system allowed the tax collectors to collect as much as they could squeeze out of their fellow citizens; if they collected more than they had contracted with Rome to turn over, they got to keep the rest, to "take their cut." So some of them became wealthy and were highly resented by their fellow Jews.

Yet here is Jesus, calling Levi, a tax collector, to become one of his disciples — one of his associates in proclaiming the entrance of the kingdom of God. And, Mark says, "he got up and followed him." This had to be a serious matter for Levi, who is traditionally equated with Matthew, the Gospel writer. Think of the wealth he had to give up — yet he gave it up to follow Jesus. This, like the incident of the healing of the paralytic, is a story of forgiveness.



So when the upholders of the Jewish tradition criticized Jesus because he "paled around" with the scum of society, Jesus had an answer: "I came not to call the righteous, but sinners." I think that by "bad people" and "good people" Jesus means those who are "sinners" and "righteous" in the eyes of others, not necessarily in the eyes of God. He has come to call not those whom the prevailing culture recognizes as "righteous" but those who, whatever faults they may have, can become "righteous" by responding to the message of the kingdom.

What does Scripture mean by "righteous" (*dikaiois* in Greek)? It means being recognized as belonging to God's family. No matter how "righteous" someone may appear to be in terms of the prevailing "politically correct" ideology, there are no really "righteous" people if God's covenant is not being fulfilled. Those who respond to Jesus' call into the kingdom become "righteous," because they become members of the family of God. The so-called "righteous" who follow the norms of today, and even those who trust in their own dedication to the Lord, may not really be faithful to God's covenant — especially if they're unforgiving and unwilling to follow the new direction in life to which God is pointing them through his Word. That brings us to our next question to ponder: **Do I think of myself as "righteous" because of my own behavior or qualities or what people say about me, or because I have come into God's family by responding to the call of Jesus?**

Now John's disciples and the Pharisees were fasting. Some people came and asked Jesus, "How is it that John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees are fasting, but yours are not?"

Jesus answered, "How can the guests of the bridegroom fast while he is with them? They cannot, so long as they have him with them. But the time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them, and on that day they will fast (2:18-20).

In this incident Jesus compares his coming to a wedding. A little background on weddings in ancient Jewish life: there wasn't a ceremony, with a rabbi officiating, as in the kind of weddings we're familiar with. Instead, the parents of the two had already made the arrangements, perhaps when the two were still children. It wasn't usually a romance; it was something of a business arrangement, involving things like a dowry paid to

the groom's family or perhaps a "bride price." Then, when the time came for the marriage, the couple simply started living together. The big event was the feast, when the whole village got together to celebrate the new family that's coming into being. This partying could last for several days. Feasting is "suspending the rules" of normal life, when people kind of "let themselves go" with dancing, special food and beverages, and the like.



"How can the wedding guests fast, if the bridegroom is there with them?"

That's what we do at parties and receptions, isn't it? You suspend the rules. You don't serve oat meal or vegetable soup at a party, you serve the food that's not really good for you — cake and ice cream and soft drinks. During a celebration it's not appropriate to fast, to deny yourself pleasure. Instead you have a special meal, like a Thanksgiving dinner.

Fasting can be useful as a sign of penitence. It can heighten our experience of prayer and confession of sin, and that's good at the proper time. But fasting can serve other purposes that aren't so good. It can be an attempt to shame God into doing something he seems reluctant to do: "Look, Lord, I'm depriving myself of pleasure, so you're obligated to answer my prayer." Fasting can also be a statement we make about ourselves: "Look, everybody, and see how holy I am."

That's why Jesus had an issue with some of the Pharisees, and said some pointed thing about their hypocrisy in other parts of the Gospels.

Many Jews felt God had let them down because they were kept under foreign rule. But Jesus, in his gospel of the kingdom, is making clear that the Lord is returning to his people and ending their time of exile. He compares himself to the bridegroom at a wedding. This isn't a time to fast, it's a time to celebrate what God is doing — a time, perhaps, to party, maybe get a little "carried away." So here's our question: **Since Jesus has now been raised and reigns with the Father, shouldn't my life be a celebration of his victory, and my victory in him? Should our worship be somber and mournful and colorless (like fasting), or should it be exuberant, joyful, a feast in the presence of God?**

Jesus ends this passage with a warning that times of persecution will come after the crucifixion and resurrection, when his followers will have to face severe opposition to their message. In Mark, as in all the Gospels, Jesus is always on the way to the cross, because it's through the cross and resurrection that the kingdom of God will take effect. But even that is cause to rejoice; as Hebrews puts it, Jesus endured the cross "for the joy that was set before him" (Hebrews 12:2).

"No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment. If he does, the new piece will pull away from the old, making the tear worse. And no one pours new wine into old wineskins. If he does, the wine will burst the skins, and both the wine and the wineskins will be ruined. No, he pours new wine into new wineskins" (2:21-22)

Jesus's metaphor of old and new wine and wineskins became an icon for church renewal in the twentieth century. But what was he really talking about?

Jesus' teaching is all about the entrance of the kingdom of God on the human scene — in particular, the Judaic scene. The wine-and-wineskins metaphor, and the patch-on-the-old-garment illustration, logically follow his comment about the kingdom being like a wedding feast.

The old religious institutions of Judaism, that is, strict Torah-observance and the sacrificial rites of the Temple, can't contain the new move of God. Those things weren't bad in themselves; the hidden goal of the Law of Moses is God's new creation in Christ, and the Temple sacrifices prefigure the cross. But being fixated on those traditions can stifle a free response to what God is now doing through Jesus. It's hard to mix the old with the new, Jesus is saying; you can't sew a new patch on an old, torn, moth-eaten garment, or a worse tear will occur. New wine fermenting in an old wineskin will burst it, and both will be lost.

The church today is struggling with what kind of format to use in presenting the gospel in the twenty-first century. This is



an issue for our church: should we try to "go contemporary" trying to attract new people? But what "wine" would we put in this "new wineskin"? Would it be a different gospel? That's a question, and I don't claim to have the answer.

But here's a reminder: This statement about "new wine in new wineskins" isn't Jesus' only word using this metaphor. Luke 5:39 he states, "No one after drinking old wine wants the new, for he says, 'The old is better.'" Accommodating to contemporary culture may distort the gospel; the news of God's kingdom is always "out of step" with our environment. The atmosphere in the church needs to be different from the atmosphere outside it, or there's no point to "having church." Some churches that have just taken on the prevailing complexion of the culture are in meltdown right now, just dying out, because there's no reason for them to exist.

Take the matter of music. Church music *should* sound different from other music, because *God is different* from human expectations and preferences. But in what way should it be different? Our favorite "old" songs were once new and contemporary. As a Christian church we want to be biblical, but nobody knows what music in the Bible sounded like. If we really want "old" music, let's go back to ancient chant, which is probably closest to music in the Bible. So we need to think this issue through intelligently. Question: **Can we think of our church as a "wineskin," a vehicle for the expression of the Holy Spirit and the kingdom of God? How would our church have to change to be a container for the new move of God? Or if we changed, would we actually be offering "another gospel" instead of the gospel of the kingdom?**

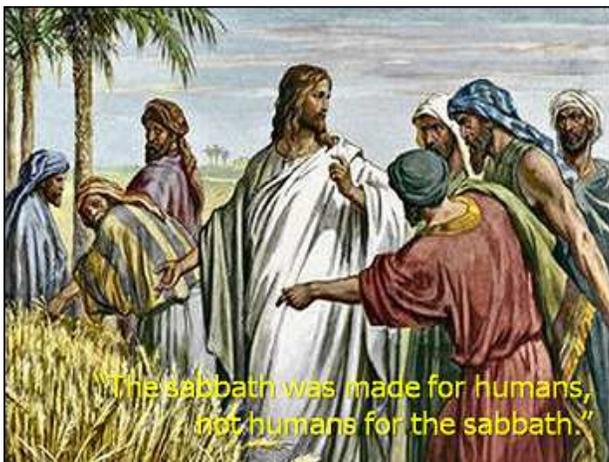
These are tough questions that require a lot of intelligent thought and discussion and prayer. We can't decide questions like this just on the basis of our personal preference, or nostalgia for "the old days." We need to think through these questions biblically.

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?"

He answered, "Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need? In the days of Abiathar the high priest, he entered the house of God and ate the consecrated bread, which is lawful only for priests to eat. And he also gave some to his companions."

Then he said to them, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath" (2:23-28)

Passing a field on the sabbath, the disciples are plucking heads of grain. What did the owner of the field think about this? If a farmer found you pulling ears of corn off the stalks at the edge of his field, how might he react? It was a little different in Bible times. The Torah said you weren't to reap the corners of your field, or glean the grain the harvesters missed; that was to be left for the poor. But plucking heads of grain was considered work, and no work is to be done on the sabbath. So the Pharisees are offended by what the disciples are doing. Why is it so offensive to them to be "working" on the sabbath?



The name "Pharisees" may mean "separated ones." The goal of the Pharisees is to have all Jews keep the Law of Moses. This was not so they could be "saved"; that's a common misperception, that the Jews taught "salvation by works." No, the purpose of keeping the Law was to establish and confirm Jewish identity, as a people specially chosen by God. The Pharisees believed Israel had been chosen for privilege, and for victory over their enemies. But Jesus sees another purpose for God's having chosen his people; they've

been chosen for a mission to the world, as the Lord said to Abraham in Genesis 12:3: "All peoples on earth will be blessed through you." The apostle Paul, in Romans 4:13, refers to "the promise to Abraham and his descendants, that they should inherit the world." This incident Mark is recording exposes the difference between these two views of the Lord's purpose in choosing Israel.

Before we bring this out, let's insert a brief note on the sabbath, or the seventh day of rest from work. The Ten Commandments list two reasons for the day of rest. The first reason, in Exodus, is because God rested from his work of creation. The second reason, in Deuteronomy, is because Israel remembered what it was like to be a slave in Egypt working 24/7, so you should give yourselves and your workers one day off each week.

Most Christians don't worship on the sabbath. We worship on the first day, the Lord's Day — day of resurrection. But traditionally, Christians transferred some features of the Sabbath to the Lord's Day, as a "day of rest." We've mostly abandoned that idea; we eat in restaurants, or go to Walmart, or whatever, on Sunday, which requires others to work on that day. But should we *in some way* make Sunday different? (For example, I might eat out or shop on Sunday, but I don't run power equipment like the lawn tractor.)

Back to the point: in this incident Jesus is directing the Pharisees to the real mission of Israel: not to keep the Law as a badge of superiority, but to benefit the rest of humanity. He used the example of David and his soldiers, who ate consecrated bread although they weren't priests. The Sabbath, and all the Law, was given not to restrict people's behavior but to benefit them, and set them free to be the kind of people God wants them to be. As the Son of man, Jesus takes authority over traditions whose real purpose has been lost, and restores them to their proper significance. Our final question, then: **What am I doing to observe a day of rest, and to attend worship? Am I doing this to make a statement about myself (how righteous I am), or to benefit humanity and equip myself to bless other people?**

Let's review our questions raised in Mark, chapter 2:

- Can I see Jesus being at home in my house?
- Can I have faith for someone else's healing?
- Am I holding on to past hurts and withholding forgiveness?
- Can I think of myself as "righteous" not because of how "good" I am but simply because I've answered the call of Jesus?
- How could my life, and our worship, be a celebration of the presence of God?
- How would our church have to change to be a vehicle for the new move of God?
- Am I observing the Lord's Day in a way that benefits others?

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