

Mark 2: Disdain for Jesus Dinner Party

Luke Bushman, August 18th 2024. Mark 2:13-17

Our main text today comes from the gospel of Mark chapter 2, where Jesus calls yet another disciple to come and follow him. The previous disciples called in Mark's gospel were all fishermen, and Jesus calling them was fairly straightforward. Aside from his peculiar phrase "I will make you fisher's of men", Jesus called, the disciples answered, and as far as Mark is concerned in its fast-paced style, that was that. However this time when Jesus calls Levi to follow he creates an uproar. Mark arranges his retelling of Jesus' life, death and resurrection rather strategically. These brief four verses serve as a transition and a foreshadow of his coming conflicts and debates with the Pharisees.

The Pharisees are a complex topic of discussion, and we could spend a significant portion of our morning learning about this religious sect. To keep things brief, it is important to remember that like most of life, the dynamic between Jesus and the Pharisees is not simple. We often see the gospels as "Good Guy Jesus vs Bad Guy Pharisees". Jesus was absolutely critical of the Pharisees, but generalizing this vast group as "hypocritical" or "legalistic" is not our best course of action. Ched Meyers suggests that the antagonist in many of these writings is not the Pharisees themselves, but the example of the Pharisees (Meyers, 159). I think that is a good way to look at these stories where Jesus comes up against the Pharisees.

The Pharisees were a diverse group, some of its members became followers of Jesus. They were instrumental in the development of the synagogue system and other practices that made rituals and symbols of worship more accessible to people outside of Jerusalem. Jesus was still very critical of them, as their beliefs sometimes created more marginalization, rather than less.

"For all their rhetoric about extending holiness to all of Israel, their practice betrays their commitment to rigid social boundaries between the 'righteous' and the 'sinner'. This boundary Jesus flatly rejects, and his mission is specifically aimed at transgressing it." (Meyers, 158-159).

This is the tension that comes up in our text today, as Jesus and the Pharisees are at odds with one another about the rules and boundaries of table fellowship. Eating with others has always been an important part of culture, though for us today, it is perhaps sometimes difficult to grasp the magnitude of what is happening here.

"Although there were no explicit prohibitions against persons like Jesus and his disciples eating with fellow Jews, even if they were engaged in a despised trade like toll collecting, Pharisees, who sought to maintain a higher standard of holiness than ordinary people, would probably not have done so. Meals played an important role in the religious and social life of ancient peoples, and, further, Jewish meals had to comply with kosher laws" CITATION NEEDED

And so Jesus puts himself in the line of fire from the Pharisees and scribes, because of who chooses to eat with. Jesus does not merely accept invitations to dinner with such folks out of politeness. Jesus is going out of his way to interact with those who are scorned as “sinners and tax collectors”. Pheme Perkins sees this short story around a table as Jesus’ way of redefining the idea of the Lord’s coming. “The coming of the Lord” was understood as the time when The Lord would come, and free the oppressed peoples, while punishing their wicked enemies. The expectation here was very physical and binary- God would come and free the righteous who were suffering, and punish the wicked. Jesus redefines this idea in his ministry, reclaiming the Coming of the Lord as a time of salvation, healing and forgiveness (Perkins). Jesus doesn’t just redefine the idea of the Lord’s coming, he also extends it.

“In this story, Jesus goes even further. He seeks out those whom society considers evil. He accepts their hospitality and with it the complex, reciprocal obligations that go with such a relationship. Scholars often describe Jesus as a person who sought to break down the barriers that existed in his time” (Perkins)

Breaking down these barriers makes people uncomfortable, particularly the Pharisees. In constructing this sermon I looked at a few commentaries, mainly one by Timothy Geddert and one by Ched Myers. The Ched Myers commentary is called *Binding the Strongman, A Political Reading of Mark’s Story of Jesus*. These commentaries often differ in focus, with Meyer’s writing being fairly unique with its political focus. Both of these commentaries offer compelling discussions about why Jesus spending time with sinner rubbed the Pharisees the wrong way.

Through the lens of politics, the Pharisees were upset because Jesus was stepping outside of an established hierarchy. The Pharisees were praised in public for a reason. They were well liked, because they were pious people who tried to make religion more accessible to the common person.

“The Pharisees attempted to extend the purity code to the masses by liberalizing it in order to facilitate observation, a program that relied upon the elaborate interpolations of their oral tradition and their distinctive rituals” (Meyers, 76).

So why are the Pharisees upset at Jesus crossing barriers? Their system of religion was far less elitist, and lacked the top-down in structure of the Sadducees, or the Roman Empire for that matter. Why is Jesus critical of them? Because while boasting a more inclusive image, the Pharisees still fell victim to the human desire for power and order.

“The Pharisees were certainly committed to making piety possible for the masses... But this could be-and was-seen as a strategy of courting the artisan and lower classes in order to build a regional and popular base of socio-political power over against the Jerusalem elite. And in their alternative program, the Pharisees preserved not only their privilege but their indispensability as adjudicants of the system. Their actual social solidarity with the poor was

minimal, as reflected in their own observance of strict purity regulations for table fellowship. It is this reproduction of the elitist system under the guise of popular piety that Mark objects to in his negative portrayal of the Pharisees in the Gospel” (Meyers, 76).

With this background information in mind, Meyers believe that the Pharisees are at odds with Jesus’ dinner guests because they are not concerned about the welfare of the people, but about their own class status (Meyers, 158). The Pharisees have their own system that gives them power, and Jesus in breaking down barriers, threatens this small system of power they possess.

Geddert, understands the Pharisees disdain in a less political but equally critical sense.

“The scribes can clearly see that Jesus’ way of dealing with sinners is the polar opposite of theirs. They call for repentance, they prescribe ceremonies, but they have no power to grant new life. On the other hand, Jesus offers forgiveness without ceremonies, he offers fellowship with people who have neither publicly acknowledge their sinfulness nor visibly cleaned up their lives; he calls people to follow him and in so doing their lives are transformed” (Geddert, 66).

The fact that Jesus is nothing like them upsets the Pharisees. He is bringing forgiveness, repentance and change to the people, without the structures of piety. And Jesus is bringing these things to people who in the Pharisees mind, do not deserve it. Jesus is bringing life to the sick sinners instead of the righteous religious leaders.

As I wrap up this discussion about Mark 2, I would like to give two summary points. I love biblical scholarship, and hearing these quotes on various perspectives, but that can be overwhelming, so I would like to end with two “moral of the story” type points.

Discipleship Isn’t a Hierarchy

If you read through the book of Mark, everyone around Jesus continues to struggle to understand this idea. The disciples and Pharisees alike cannot seem to set aside their structures of control and power. I found it very interesting in researching the Pharisees, that they were one of the more inclusive religious groups at the time. They made rituals and ceremonies more accessible to the common person. Yet they too, enjoyed their position of power, and had a set up that left them on top of the food chain. People needed to come to them to access their spirituality. Jesus chose to go to the people on the margins. To meet them where they were at. This upset the cultural norms that arranged people into groupings.

I think we are an inclusive church. That is something we try to be. I try to be an inclusive person. But reading about the Pharisees setting up a miniature food chain with

them on top made me wonder if I am doing the same thing. Are there ways that I use my spirituality to maintain a level of control and influence. As a pastor I think this is a good thing to ponder. The Pharisees were not bad people, they just fell victim to the categorizing and ranking of people that our world so often engages in. Daniel Kirk in his discussion about why the book of Mark matters, encourages readers to not be so quick to identify with the crowds, or Jesus, or the disciples, but to pause and wonder, how we are like the Pharisees. What are the barriers that we establish to protect our influence and control.

Discipleship is People First

Jesus starts with people. What I mean is that before scripture, repentance, or cultural norms are considered Jesus starts with the people in front of him. In fact, Jesus doesn't seem to have a message or an agenda with this dinner at all. Levi invites him to meet his friends, who are sinners and tax collectors, and Jesus joins in. Maybe like Levi, his friends were enticed by this mysterious teacher. Or maybe they ate dinner, met someone new, and went on their way. We can see why the Pharisees are upset. Why doesn't Jesus change them? Why doesn't Jesus tell them repent? Where is the famous go and sin no more line? It isn't here. Because when discipleship is people first, sometimes you realize you necessarily change or convert someone, but you can always love and listen to them.

I don't think I am alone in saying that I have felt very similar to the Pharisees. The grace and acceptance of Jesus is beautiful and also feels unfair. I imagine there were some hints of jealousy in the Pharisees reaction to Jesus. Imagine dedicating your life to interpreting the Torah, and living out its teachings, only for a revolutionary teacher to choose fellowship with people who lack the same knowledge and piety. In all facets of life, we like to think we have earned or can earn anything. I think Jesus' recognized how this idea can create superiority complexes within groups of people. If someone is wealthy, and believes that is simply because they earned that wealth, the poor are people who did not earn it or deserve it. Life is far more complex than this. Wealth and poverty are often generational. In toppling these systems of hierarchy and superiority, Jesus showing love and acceptance to those who "don't deserve it" can be upsetting. That however is how Jesus chose to do discipleship. That is how change is made. By starting with the people in front of you, not with scripture or right teaching or certain practices. What barriers do we put up between ourselves and others? How can we be like Jesus and step over those barriers to put people first.

Works Cited

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