

The Good News as told by Mark (8)

Jesus introduces the kingdom (5)

A kingdom of grace

Reading: Mark 2:23-3:6

The opposition grows. Now the Pharisees are waiting for Jesus to slip up. The story that Mark tells in these verses comes in two parts, both about infringements of Sabbath law. In both cases the Pharisees come off worse and the result is an unholy alliance between the Pharisees, the orthodox religious leaders and the Herodians, the representatives of political power.

Last week we saw how, in an effort to protect the law from being inadvertently broken, the Pharisees built a fence around the Old Testament injunction too fast once a year by requiring everyone too fast twice a week. If you think that was extreme wait till you hear what they did to the Sabbath! The commandment to keep the Sabbath holy is quite vague in its detail. The law says no one was to work on the Sabbath, but what constitutes work? The Pharisees answered this with an almost endless list of things you couldn't do on the Sabbath. By their simple act of picking a handful of corn, taking off the husks and eating it the disciples broke several regulations, including a prohibition on reaping, threshing and winnowing. They may even have broken regulations governing preparing food on the Sabbath.

The Pharisees were waiting to pounce. It is as if they followed Jesus for the very purpose of finding fault. Theirs was a religion of rules, of standards that had to be maintained. They spent their whole life struggling to keep the people on the right path. They weren't bad people, but they had forgotten the more important things: ““But woe to you Pharisees! For you tithe mint and rue and herbs of all kinds, and neglect justice and the love of God; it is these you ought to have practiced, without neglecting the others.” (Luke 11:42).

Jesus reply points then back to those more important things. Yes, the Sabbath is to be kept holy, but there is a higher principle. God gave the sabbath to be a blessing to the people not a straitjacket. Jesus uses an example of lawbreaking from the stories of David. What David did in eating the special bread put on an altar in the temple was wrong by the letter of the law, but no one, least of all God, condemns him for it.

How could the Pharisees stand for such an upstart as this? He broke the rules and quoted their own scriptures to justify himself. Jesus' and the Pharisees' whole way of looking at things was completely at odds with one another. The Pharisees wanted respectability and order in society. They wanted the laws of God to be central in public life. They wanted proper behaviour from everyone: children should respect their elders; sinners should be properly punished and duly ashamed of their sin. Jesus on the other hand went back to a deeper understanding of the law. For him, the centre of life was the two-fold command to “love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbour as yourself.” (Luke 10:27, see Deuteronomy 6:5; Leviticus 19:18)

The Kingdom of God that Jesus proclaimed is not a rule book religion where we can tick off the rules we have kept day by day and feel smug about ourselves and look down on those who don't do as well as us. Jesus' kingdom is a kingdom of compassion, forgiveness, hope and joy. In short it is a kingdom where grace is the key.

This is not some new-fangled idea. It goes back to the beginning of the story of Israel's walk with God: "The Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love for thousands and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin." (Exodus 34:6f)

But for the Pharisees, and their modern counterparts, all this is just head knowledge. It represents a scary freedom that is too uncertain for many. All the rules and regulations may not be exciting but at least you know where you are. If you start believing in Jesus and following him God knows where you might end up!

All this was too much for some, and it comes to a head on another Sabbath. Now there was no doubt: the Pharisees were out to catch Jesus. For the Pharisees keeping the law was more important than works of compassion. There are still those who hold doctrinal purity over love, for whom it is more important to be right than kind. Jesus' response to such attitudes is twofold: he is both angered and deeply distressed. Here is a sure sign that these people have lost sight of grace. Whatever it was that guided their life it was not grace. How can it be that those who have received so much from the hand of the gracious God should live so far from grace themselves?

Amen.

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