

CRITICS: The Scandal of Grace (Mark 2:13 – 3:6) – Sun, Sept 27, 2009 – Summit EFC

Series: *Way to Go: Serving & Giving Like Jesus* (Gospel of Mark), Message #3 – Pastor Doug Corlew

A guy came to his pastor and said, “Reverend, I only have one talent.” The pastor asked, “What’s your talent?” The man said, “I have the gift of criticism.” So the pastor replied, “The Bible says that the guy who had only one talent went out and buried it. Maybe that’s what you ought to do with yours!”

Perhaps you know someone who thinks they have the gift of criticism also, and you wish they’d bury it, but instead they seem to practice their gift on you. Maybe it’s a parent or a spouse or a friend or a boss. But there’s no pleasing them. It seems every move you make is under their microscope and you can never meet their expectations. Even your good deeds are misunderstood or criticized.

It’s a safe bet that anyone who majors in criticizing others struggles with the concept of grace. If you think that your acceptance before God depends on your ability to adhere to a set of rules and atone for your own sins – if you think you will go to heaven only because you deserve to be there – then you have never truly experienced God’s grace, so it’s not likely that you will be a dispenser of grace.

In fact, grace may be offensive to you. If you pride yourself in how moral or religious you are, then you don’t want to live by some heavenly “welfare system.” You want to earn your own way, so you expect others to do the same, and you may actually find yourself critical of a gracious person.

And this is what we see happening in **Mark 2-3**, where opposition to Jesus first begins to appear. We saw a glimpse of it last week, with the scribes grumbling about Jesus’ claim to forgive the sins of the paralytic. But the tension continues to mount in several incidents that follow, as we see that even the Servant of the Lord is not immune from criticism.

If you want to serve and give like Jesus, then get ready for some opposition along the way, because not everyone will appreciate what you are trying to do. Despite His impressive *credentials* as the Beloved Son of God, despite His amazing *compassion* for those in need, the Lord Jesus Christ also had His *critics*.

And sadly, these critics were from the religious establishment. Time after time, they were unable to process the grace that was displayed in the life of Jesus. In fact, they were scandalized by grace! What did Jesus do that was so upsetting to them?

1st, HE CONNECTED WITH SINNERS NOT THE SELF-RIGHTEOUS. We see this in **2:13-17** - *He went out again beside the sea, and all the crowd was coming to him, and he was teaching them. 14 And as he passed by, he saw Levi the son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, "Follow me." And he rose and followed him. 15 And as he reclined at table in his house, many tax collectors and sinners were reclining with Jesus and his disciples, for there were many who followed him. 16 And the scribes of the Pharisees, when they saw that he was eating with sinners and tax collectors, said to his disciples, "Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?" 17 And when Jesus heard it, he said to them, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners."*

In view of how popular the IRS is in our society ☺, it may shock you to learn this, but in first century Palestine, a tax collector was not often greeted with a warm smile! I’m sure none of us like to fill out tax forms or hand over our hard-earned income to Uncle Sam. But if it’s any consolation to you, it has been this way for at least the past 2,000 years! In Christ’s day, Palestine was under Roman dominance, and taxes were collected like this: The Roman government assessed each district a fixed tax figure and sold the right to collect those taxes to the highest bidder. They farmed it out, you might say.

The buyer was then responsible to hand over the assessed figure at the end of the year, and he could keep for himself whatever he was able to gather above that amount. Now obviously, the potential for extortion was huge in this system, especially in the ancient world, where people couldn't go online or make a telephone call to find out exactly what they were *supposed* to be paying.

So the tax collectors had tremendous power. They could stop you on the road, make you unpack your luggage, and collect ridiculous fees for just about anything. They could charge you for using the road, tax each wheel of your cart, and impose duties on everything you were importing or exporting.

If you couldn't pay, they might offer to loan you the money – at an exorbitant interest rate of course. The whole Roman system of taxation virtually depended on greed, so you can imagine how this career appealed to the criminal element of society, and why nobody trusted or respected a tax collector.

Jewish tax collectors were easily the most despised men in society. They were considered traitors, they were disqualified to serve as witnesses in court, they were expelled from the synagogue, and they were a disgrace to their families. Jews were even forbidden to receive money or alms from tax collectors since revenue from taxes was considered stolen money.

Yet it was to one of these individuals, the lowest of the low, the scum of society, that Jesus extends an invitation in **v 14**. His name was Levi, later to become Matthew. “*Follow me,*” Jesus said. And He did.

Notice, Levi was not out looking for Jesus; he hadn't made an appointment or dropped by His office to chat. In **v 13** we're told that Jesus *went out* and *passed by* Levi's tax booth and initiated the conversation.

See, Mark continually shows us that Jesus was not some “talking head” philosopher type. He was always on the *GO!* The gospel was not something He merely spoke; it was something He lived. And this meant He had to get out there and mix it up a bit with the folks He came to reach. And this drew fire from His opponents, who thought that sinners were to be avoided, not befriended.

But the *first* mistake of the critics was to not include *themselves* in the group they were labeling “sinners.” I think that many people miss the whole point of Jesus' reply to the Pharisees in **v 17** –

“*Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.*” The point is not that you, as a good person, have less of a need for Jesus than a notorious sinner might have. The point is that Jesus only saves those who admit they are among those who are spiritually sick. There is none righteous, not even one, Scripture says (**Romans 3:10**).

The Pharisees were *self*-righteous; they were righteous in their own eyes, but not in God's eyes. The first step toward your spiritual cure is to feel your sins and know your sickness. Until you become aware of your corruption and hate your own sinfulness, you will never experience true spiritual health.

Jesus was saying, “To people who think they are righteous, I have nothing to say. But to those who know they have need, I have come for them. I am The Physician who can diagnose the disease of their souls and provide the only cure. And yes, I even make house calls.” In fact, we are all so sick with sin that we are not going to find Jesus on our own. He *must* come to us and call on us first, or we'll never call on Him.

When the critics complain that Jesus is connecting with sinners, their first mistake is failing to see *themselves* as those who are in need of His grace. But their second mistake was failing to view ministry as *bridge-building*. They viewed ministry more as gate-keeping than bridge-building. How about you? Do you see yourself as a gate-keeper or a bridge-builder? What's the difference?

Bridge-builders find ways to extend God's love from the church into the community. Gate-keepers find ways to keep the community from coming into the church! Christ goes into the community, meets Levi, and Levi obeys the call. This is a radical step for Levi, a risky move on his part. But he has no regrets –

He's ready to throw a party instead, and that's exactly what he does. This is a beautiful thing; it's just a spontaneous reaction – holding a reception to honor the Lord Jesus Christ. He wanted others to meet the One who changed his life! Of course Levi had some wealth, so he probably had a large house, and the place was just packed out with all his friends. And Jesus was there, enjoying the party! Isn't that great?

The Pharisees erected barriers among people, to keep out the undesirables; Jesus ignored those barriers and built bridges instead, so the undesirables would know His love and acceptance. The scandal of this story is that Jesus accepts sinners as they are. And He doesn't just happen to cross their path; He initiates the relationships. He intentionally connects with them on their turf – not to fit in with the world, or compromise the truth. His goal is missional – to call them to repentance and salvation.

This is what scandalized the religious leaders of His day, and it still scandalizes those who define the gospel in terms of measuring up to outward standards of behavior, rather than humbly admitting our own need of grace, and seeking then to build bridges toward others who are in need of His grace.

We discover a 2nd example of how grace raises suspicions in v 18-22, as **JESUS CELEBRATES NEW LIFE WITH HIS FOLLOWERS**. *18 Now John's disciples and the Pharisees were fasting. And people came and said to him, "Why do John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?" 19 And Jesus said to them, "Can the wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them? As long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast. 20 The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast in that day. 21 No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old garment. If he does, the patch tears away from it, the new from the old, and a worse tear is made. 22 And no one puts new wine into old wineskins. If he does, the wine will burst the skins—and the wine is destroyed, and so are the skins. But new wine is for fresh wineskins."*

I think most people probably have a distorted caricature of Jesus Christ in their minds. However they view Him, I doubt if many would picture Him laughing, going to parties, and celebrating with friends. But that's exactly what we find Him doing here in Mark 2, while His adversaries are *not* laughing.

Humorist **Erma Bombeck** noticed how grim many people are when they come to church. She said they look like they've just read the will of their rich aunt and learned that she has given everything to her pet hamster! And I think the Pharisees would have fit this description too – always sober, never smiling. They thought you couldn't be spiritual unless you were miserable, or at least uncomfortable.

Who were the Pharisees? Although they comprised only 1% of the population, the Pharisees were an influential, highly respected group of religious leaders. Doctrinally, they were very conservative. In fact, Jesus Himself stood much closer to the foundational beliefs of the Pharisees than to those of any other party in Judaism. But where Jesus took issue with them was over the role of tradition. Jesus was constantly showing how they overvalued oral traditions and undervalued the intent of the law itself.

In the scene before us, the question relates to fasting. The Old Testament actually required only one day of fasting each year, on the Day of Atonement. But with good intentions, I'm sure, Jewish leaders began to add other occasions when fasts were required for national or personal reasons. By the time of Jesus, the Pharisees fasted twice a week, every Monday and Thursday. Fasting had become a pre-requisite of religious commitment. It was the accepted sign of genuine humility, contrition, repentance, and mourning.

And so to ask why John's disciples fast, as do the Pharisees, but Jesus' disciples do not fast, is to insinuate that Jesus' followers better pay greater attention to fasting protocol if they want to be taken seriously. And it's against this somber backdrop of fasting that Jesus volunteers a more festive image instead:

“Can the wedding guests fast, He asks, while the bridegroom is with them?” (v 19) In our culture we understand the concept of a wedding celebration. But we should realize that wedding celebrations in a first century Jewish village normally lasted not for an evening but seven days! During that time, friends and relatives had no responsibilities other than to enjoy the festivities. There was an abundance of food and drink, music and dancing, and fun that always spilled out of the house and into the streets.

And Jesus is saying, “That’s what I’m all about! That’s the life I came to bring. Think of Me as the Bridegroom, because life is not supposed to be a funeral, but a feast!” The wedding guests of v 19 have gathered for a celebration and they are waiting impatiently to eat. And Jesus says, “Any thought of fasting at such a moment is out of the question! Not while I’m here! This is a time for living it up!”

By the way, this is an unusually provocative thing for Jesus to say, calling Himself the bridegroom – because in the Old Testament, it is none other than God who calls Himself Israel’s Lover and Husband.

So Jesus is leaving it for His listeners to connect the dots here, and supply their own answer to the question of His identity. But it should be rather obvious: To describe Himself as the Bridegroom is to equate Himself with God. And if people don’t want to join the party, it can only mean that they don’t accept Him as God.

Now keep in mind, Jesus has no complaint with fasting per se; in fact elsewhere He recommends it as a spiritual discipline. The New Testament teaches us that fasting can be a great way to sharpen our spiritual sensitivities for prayer. But timing is everything.

The days will come, Jesus adds in v 20, when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast in that day. So here Jesus introduces a rather abrupt, disturbing image. In a normal wedding, after a week of celebrating, it would have been the guests who would finally leave the groom and his bride so they could enjoy their new life together. But Jesus speaks of the groom being forcibly removed from the wedding celebration.

The prophet **Isaiah** predicted that the Servant of the Lord would be *cut off from the land of the living (53:8)*, because in order to overcome sin and death, Jesus would have to become the victim of sin and death. *That* would be a time for fasting.

However, Jesus was not suggesting that His absence from earth would mean that His followers would have to replace the feast with a funeral! He was only pointing out that occasional fasting would be proper at a future time, but that joyful celebration should be the normal experience of those who follow Him. We celebrate because He has come and we’ve tasted His grace; He has given us a brand new life.

That’s the point of the two short parables of the new patch and the new wine. If you sew a new patch on old clothing, the new patch will shrink when it is washed, causing a tear. In a similar way, if you pour new wine into old, brittle wineskins, the new wine expands when it ferments, bursting the seams.

Jesus is the new patch and the new wine, and He is incompatible with the old cloth and the old wineskins. The new life that Christ gives is always expanding. When you become a Christian your life will be stretched to new limits. His grace will bring about huge changes as He fills every corner of your life. You will be full! So full, that the old garments and old wineskins of your life must give way.

Jesus came to usher in the new, not to unite with the old. Some people think they can accept a little bit of Jesus along with a little bit of this and a little bit of that. Compromise, take whatever you like from every religious tradition or whatever. But it doesn't work, because the Christian faith is exclusive in character! Salvation is not a partial patching up of one's life; it is a whole new robe of righteousness. When Christ comes into your life, you become an entirely new receptacle of His grace.

If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come (2 Cor 5:17). And that, by the way, is why we have decided to call our new store on Main Street... ready?...

The Olive Branch. When the dove returned to the ark with an olive branch, Noah knew that brighter days were ahead (**Gen 8:11**). And so this ministry will proclaim *Hope for a New Beginning* to people throughout this area, not only helping them get back on their feet with clothing and household items for their family, but ultimately hearing the Good News of Jesus Christ, who still calls people today to experience a new spiritual birth and a life of perpetual joy, despite the trials that come our way.

Next Sunday you'll be hearing more about how you can participate in this very practical ministry opportunity beyond the walls of Summit, into the lives of people in our communities.

"*Why do you eat with sinners?*" "*Why don't your disciples fast?*" And a **3rd** question, in regard to the Sabbath, comes up, beginning at v **23**, as the critics of Jesus learn that

HE CARED ABOUT PEOPLE MORE THAN TRADITIONS. *23 One Sabbath he was going through the grainfields, and as they made their way, his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. 24 And the Pharisees were saying to him, "Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?" 25 And he said to them, "Have you never read what David did, when he was in need and was hungry, he and those who were with him: 26 how he entered the house of God, in the time of Abiathar the high priest, and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and also gave it to those who were with him?" 27 And he said to them, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. 28 So the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath."*

Every Jew was obliged to keep the fourth commandment, which meant no labor on the seventh day, since God Himself rested on the seventh day of creation (**Exodus 20:8-11**). From sunset Friday until sunset Saturday, the Israelites were supposed to rest as a testimony to the divine pattern of the Creator.

However, once again the Jewish leaders were so determined to uphold this commandment that they added to it countless details, hoping to clarify exactly what should be considered work.

For example, they said you couldn't carry children, retrieve an animal fallen into a pit, tie or loosen a knot, walk more than 1,999 paces, sew more than one stitch, or write more than one letter. According to their interpretation, you couldn't even set a dislocated bone or repair a fallen roof on the Sabbath!

So when the disciples were caught plucking grain for a Sabbath snack, the Pharisees were outraged – you can't reap on the Sabbath! And Jesus answers this criticism by appealing to the Word of God, pointing out that David broke a definite law given by Moses, when he allowed his hungry friends to eat the holy bread from the temple. But Jesus' disciples had only violated a man-made tradition.

In either case, *the spirit of the law* needed to be taken into account. Jesus is saying that the Pharisees had their priorities confused. God certainly cares more about meeting the needs of people than protecting human traditions.

There is nothing here to lead us to the conclusion that the Sabbath principle has been repealed. In the New Testament, we see a shift from Sabbath to Lord's Day, as the early Christians set aside the first day of the week for worship, in honor of the day Christ rose from the grave. One day out of seven is still to be different from the other six, as we acknowledge our Creator and trust His grace to meet all our needs.

But Jesus' point is made clear in **v 27**: "*The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.*" You see, Jesus is recovering the true intent of the law: The Sabbath wasn't given to slow us down, or reduce our productivity, or prevent acts of kindness from being carried out. That totally misses the point! All of God's laws were given to protect us and provide for us, not to be a burden on us.

And if we're wondering by what authority Jesus makes this claim, in **v 28**, He boldly declares it – "*So the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath.*" As we noted, *God* instituted the Sabbath, and now Jesus says He is pre-eminent over it! Once again, He is putting Himself squarely in the place of God.

And by now, His opponents were really getting steamed. As **chapter 3** opens, *Again he entered the synagogue, and a man was there with a withered hand. 2 And they watched Jesus, to see whether he would heal him on the Sabbath, so that they might accuse him.*

First aid was considered permissible on the Sabbath *if* you were preventing an injury from getting worse, but efforts toward a cure were regarded as work and had to wait until the next day. A withered hand was obviously not life-threatening, so Jesus knew they would not approve what He was about to do. *3 And he said to the man with the withered hand, "Come here."* Now in each of the three previous incidents, the critics raise the accusatory question. But this time Jesus saves them the trouble –

He knows what they're thinking anyway! So, in **v 4** *he said to them, "Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm?"* You see, you can debate all kinds of theological questions in the abstract, but for Jesus it all boiled down to how you treat the person in need. It's as simple as that. If you have an opportunity to do good, you do it, even if it *is* the Sabbath.

But the second half of Jesus' question exposes what's really going on. "*Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to kill?*" With the second half of His question, Jesus is no longer referring to the disabled man, but to Himself. The irony is stunning! The religious authorities want to deny Jesus the right to do good on the Sabbath, even while they are conspiring to kill Him on the Sabbath!

But they were silent. v 5 - And he looked around at them with anger, grieved at their hardness of heart, and said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He stretched it out, and his hand was restored. 6 The Pharisees went out and immediately held counsel with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him.

And so Jesus, the most grace-filled Person who has ever lived, already in His ministry has a reputation as a blasphemer, a colleague of sinners, an apostate from religious custom, a Sabbath breaker... And now there is a contract on His life. So with His entire road still before Him, Jesus must now conduct His journey in the shadow of the cross.

But because He willingly accepted that cross on our behalf, and conquered the grave three days later, you and I can now be the beneficiaries of His grace. He is still changing the lives of His followers – those who do not stumble over His grace, but who receive it with humble and thankful hearts –

Like **John Newton**, who wrote *Amazing Grace*, and also these words, with which we now close:
*I am not what I ought to be. I am not what I want to be. I am not what I hope to be.
But still, I am not what I used to be. And by the grace of God, I am what I am. Amen.*