

This morning, we are in the third week of a sermon series I am calling “Savior and Lord,” looking at what it means to relate to Jesus as both Savior – the one who died for our sins to give us eternal life – and Lord – the one who we follow and emulate. We are working our way through Mark’s gospel in this series. Mark was Peter’s traveling companion, and the Gospel of Mark is mainly Peter’s eyewitness testimony of Jesus (Peter was first known as Simon before Jesus changed his name). It is also the first gospel written, around 60-70 AD. So far, Jesus has begun to call disciples to him and shown himself to be one who teaches and heals with a divine authority. Let’s pick up the story in Mark 2:13:

From the beginning of chapter 2 until the verse I just read, we have five episodes of conflict between Jesus and the religious leaders, culminating in the Pharisees beginning to plot to kill Him – and we’re only in chapter 3! We covered the first conflict last week, when Jesus forgave a paralytic and the religious leaders accused him of blasphemy. We’ll cover the other four this morning. These conflicts highlight three differences between religion and following Jesus.

Mark 2:13 - 3:6 - *Once again Jesus went out beside the lake. A large crowd came to him, and he began to teach them. ¹⁴ 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. ¹⁵ 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. ¹⁶ 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'?" ¹⁷ 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." ¹⁸ 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?" ¹⁹ 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. ²⁰ But the time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them, and on that day they will fast. ²¹ "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. ²² 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." ²³ One Sabbath Jesus was going through the grainfields, and as his disciples walked along, they began to pick some heads of grain. ²⁴ The Pharisees said to him, "Look, why are they doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath?" ²⁵ He answered, "Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need? ²⁶ 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." ²⁷ Then 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." ^{NIV} **Mark 3:1** Another time he went into the synagogue, and a man with a shriveled hand was there. ² Some of them were looking for a reason to accuse Jesus, so they watched him closely to see if he would heal him on the Sabbath. ³ Jesus said to the man with the shriveled hand, "Stand up in front of everyone." ⁴ Then Jesus asked them, "Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?" But they remained silent. ⁵ He looked around at them in anger and, deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts, said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He stretched it out, and his hand was completely restored. ⁶ Then the Pharisees went out and began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus.*

Let's take a look at these episodes of conflict and what they tell us about the contrast between religion and Jesus.

Episode 1:

Once again Jesus went out beside the lake. A large crowd came to him, and he began to teach them. ¹⁴ 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. ¹⁵ 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. ¹⁶ 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'?" ¹⁷ 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."

Levi is a Jewish man who is a tax collector for the Roman government. As you might imagine, this was the lowest of the low as far as the Jews were concerned. How the taxes worked was that each district was assessed a fixed tax figure, and then the Romans sold the right to collect taxes to the highest bidder. The highest bidder, in this case Levi, would have to hand over the assessed figure at the end of the year, and keep whatever he could gather above that amount. People had no idea what the figure was, and so there was plenty of opportunity for extortion. Tax collectors were hated so much that they were excommunicated from the synagogue and seen as a disgrace to their family. And there was even evidence in the ancient literature that among the taxes in this region was a tax on fish that were caught,

which means that some of Jesus' other disciples, who were fishermen, probably knew – and despised – Levi.

Nevertheless, Jesus calls Levi to follow him, and he leaves his post and follows Him. The first thing Levi does is to throw a banquet at his house, inviting all kinds of unsavory characters. And when the religious leaders see this, they ask Jesus' disciples why Jesus eats with them. And Jesus replies, *"It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."*

Let's look at what the difference is between religion and Jesus in this episode:

Religion says: separate yourself from sinners so that you will not be defiled

The main religious leaders in Jesus' day were known as Pharisees. The word Pharisee comes from the Hebrew word "parash," meaning "to separate". They were following Leviticus 19:1-2:

Leviticus 19:1-2 - The LORD said to Moses, ² "Speak to the entire assembly of Israel and say to them: 'Be holy because I, the LORD your God, am holy.

They avoided ritual impurity by refraining from contact with others. The Pharisees particularly avoided eating with sinners, since it was likely that their food had probably not been properly tithed or prepared.

By contrast:

Jesus says: love, welcome, and show grace to sinners in order to bring them to God

Jesus, in contrast to the Pharisees, joins the tax collectors and sinners at the meal, extending the love and grace of God to those who would have been excluded from fellowship in Israel. This attitude can be summed up in **Luke 19:10 - For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost.**"

It also calls to mind **Luke 14:15-24**, a parable about the Messianic banquet at the end of time - *When one of those at the table with him heard this, he said to Jesus, "Blessed is the man who will eat at the feast in the kingdom of God."* ¹⁶ Jesus replied: *"A certain man was preparing a great banquet and invited many guests. ¹⁷ At the time of the banquet he sent his servant to tell those who had been invited, 'Come, for everything is now ready.'* ¹⁸ *"But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said, 'I have just bought a field, and I must go and see it. Please excuse*

me.' ¹⁹ "Another said, 'I have just bought five yoke of oxen, and I'm on my way to try them out. Please excuse me.' ²⁰ "Still another said, 'I just got married, so I can't come.' ²¹ "The servant came back and reported this to his master. Then the owner of the house became angry and ordered his servant, 'Go out quickly into the streets and alleys of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame.' ²² "'Sir,' the servant said, 'what you ordered has been done, but there is still room.' ²³ "Then the master told his servant, 'Go out to the roads and country lanes and make them come in, so that my house will be full. ²⁴ I tell you, not one of those men who were invited will get a taste of my banquet.'"

Jesus used this parable to say that those who had been invited – the religious people – were missing out on the feast, while the outcasts were the ones who would enjoy eternal fellowship with Him. The Pharisees were missing out on their own Messiah, while sinners and outcasts like Levi were responding. Certainly it was this grace of Jesus that compelled Levi to leave everything and follow Him. And instead of these sinners making Jesus impure, He makes them pure.

That is Jesus' approach. Is it yours? How do you develop that kind of attitude? Look at Jesus' last line – *"It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."* Is Jesus' point that the Pharisees are righteous – right with God – so they don't need Him? No. His point is that we're all sinners, we are all spiritually sick, and we all need a Savior. But some don't realize it and think they are well. **So why don't we separate ourselves from sinners? Because we're sinners too!** We may be sinners who have been saved by the undeserved grace of God, but we are no better than anyone else.

As the Russian writer Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn wrote in his novel *The Gulag Archipelago*: *"If only it were all so simple! If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?"*

Who are we to look down on anyone, to separate from anyone else? When you recognize that you are a sinner saved by grace, how can you look down on and separate yourself from anyone else? Think of how Paul put it:

1 Timothy 1:15-16 - *Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners-- of whom I am the worst. ¹⁶ But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ*

Jesus might display his unlimited patience as an example for those who would believe on him and receive eternal life.

Can I say something else? **Look at Levi's banquet. Recent Christian converts often trade in their friends for Christians. Don't do that!** Don't leave your friends. Stay with them, and show them Jesus. Now, we are not as perfect as Jesus, and for some of you, you may need more Christian fellowship, or accountability from other men and women so that you don't fall back into old patterns. But on the whole, the call to discipleship is not to live a life separated from sinners, but to live among them, showing them the grace and love of Jesus.

John 17:15-19 - *My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one.* ¹⁶ *They are not of the world, even as I am not of it.* ¹⁷ *Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth.* ¹⁸ *As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world.* ¹⁹ *For them I sanctify myself, that they too may be truly sanctified.*

Religion says to separate yourself from sinners so that you will not be defiled. But Jesus says to love, welcome, and show grace to sinners in order to bring them to God.

One of the best examples I have heard to illustrate this grace that we are to bring to the world was from **Tony Campolo**, a sociologist from Eastern University in Philadelphia who also preaches. He shares about being at a conference in Hawaii, and being wide awake at 3:30 AM due to the time change, and going to a seedy diner to eat. As he sat there eating, 10 prostitutes walked in and sat around him, and he heard a conversation between 2 women where one said that tomorrow was her birthday, and that she had never had a birthday party in her life. After they left, Tony turned to Harry, the owner of the diner, and proposed throwing this woman, Agnes, a birthday party the following day and inviting all of her friends. And so, the following evening, Tony and about 20 prostitutes decorated the diner and yelled "Surprise!" when Agnes came in. As they sang "Happy Birthday" to Agnes, she was in tears at the incredible surprise. When it came time to cut the cake, she asked if she could save it and bring it down to her mother to see, promising that she would be right back. As she was gone, Tony asked everyone if they could take a moment to pray for Agnes, and he prayed for God to heal her of the pain that had been caused to her, to love her and to make this next year the best year of her life. When he was done, Harry leaned over and said, "You never told me you were a preacher. What kind of church do you belong to?" And Tony said, "I belong to the kind of church that throws birthday parties for whores at 3:30 in the morning."

To which Harry replied, “no you don’t – if there was a church like that, I would belong to it.”

That’s not religion. That’s Jesus. That is the kind of church that reflects the love of Jesus. Not separating from the world, but extending the welcoming love and grace of God to everyone, no matter their background.

Episode 2: The second confrontation:

¹⁸ 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?" ¹⁹ 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. ²⁰ But the time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them, and on that day they will fast. ²¹ "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. ²² 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."

The second confrontation is over fasting. The Old Testament commanded all Jews to fast once a year, on the Day of Atonement. But by the time of Jesus, the Pharisees were teaching that godly people should fast every Monday and Thursday as a sign of devotion to God. And so they question Jesus as to why his disciples don’t fast. They are obviously comparing their level of spirituality and are not impressed by the level of Jesus and his disciples. In response, Jesus asks them, *How can the guests of the bridegroom fast while he is with them?* In those days the newlywed couple stayed home for a week of open house in which there was continual feasting and celebration as they were attended to by the guests of the bridegroom. Jesus is saying to them, now is the time for celebration, not mourning and sorrow. Those days will come when the bridegroom is taken away, but now it is time for joy and celebration.

And then he tells two analogies – one about sewing a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment, and another about pouring new wine into old wineskins. Both analogies are told to show that the kingdom that He is bringing is not going to work with their old way of thinking. Jesus won’t fit their old model of religion, their old paradigm. He is going to burst it open.

What is the contrast here?

Religion says “Impress God by your piety and devotion.”

Fast, pray, give, and do it regularly because God is taking notes and is going to reward you in the end for your piety.

But Jesus says, “enjoy a relationship with me.”

This faith thing, this thing called Christianity, is not about working to impress God. It’s not about building up credit in our account with God through our good deeds. It is about knowing and enjoying a relationship with Jesus, the eternal, perfect, beautiful God.

Do you understand this? **You know that you get this concept when duty becomes a delight.** Tim Keller gives the example of listening to Beethoven to get a good grade in music appreciation class. But now he listens to it because he enjoys listening to Beethoven. Duty has become delight. Do you think that coming to church impresses God? I think of my uncle at my brother’s wedding, taking communion and asking the priest, “Does this count?” Do you believe that God is taking attendance? That He is taking a record of what you do in order to render a final judgment as to whether or not you are good enough for heaven? No!

I hope you come to church because you want to, not because you have to! I hope you serve because you want to, not because you have to. I hope you give because you want to, not because you have to. **This is not a religion; this is a relationship with the God of the universe.** Give because you are making a difference. As Paul wrote:

*2 Corinthians 9:6-8 - Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. ⁷ Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under **compulsion**, for God loves a cheerful giver. ⁸ And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work.*

Serve because it is a privilege to be a part of what God is doing in this world. Serve because there is nothing greater than knowing that God is using you to change the hearts of men and women and lead them closer to Him. Come to church because this is your family, and your God has come to meet with you. **Not because you**

have to, but because you GET to. Because it is such a privilege to be an adopted child of the God of the universe.

Religion says "Impress God by your piety and devotion." Jesus says, "enjoy a relationship with me."

The third and fourth confrontation are about the Sabbath:

²³ *One Sabbath Jesus was going through the grainfields, and as his disciples walked along, they began to pick some heads of grain.* ²⁴ *The Pharisees said to him, "Look, why are they doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath?"* ²⁵ *He answered, "Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need?"* ²⁶ *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."* ²⁷ *Then 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."* ^{NIV} **Mark 3:1** *Another time he went into the synagogue, and a man with a shriveled hand was there.* ² *Some of them were looking for a reason to accuse Jesus, so they watched him closely to see if he would heal him on the Sabbath.* ³ *Jesus said to the man with the shriveled hand, "Stand up in front of everyone."* ⁴ *Then Jesus asked them, "Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?" But they remained silent.* ⁵ *He looked around at them in anger and, deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts, said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He stretched it out, and his hand was completely restored.* ⁶ *Then the Pharisees went out and began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus.*

In the Old Testament, God gave Israel the Sabbath as a day to rest from labor and to worship and enjoy their relationship with Him. But the Pharisees, in order to clarify for the people what it meant to rest from labor, had added 39 activities you could not do on the Sabbath, including reaping grain. And they had also laid out in detail what kind of healing could be done on the Sabbath. Only if someone's life was in danger could they be healed. If not, they needed to come back the next day. You see this more clearly in Luke 13:10-14:

Luke 13:10-14 - *On a Sabbath Jesus was teaching in one of the synagogues,* ¹¹ *and a woman was there who had been crippled by a spirit for eighteen years. She was bent over and could not straighten up at all.* ¹² *When Jesus saw her, he called her forward and said to her, "Woman, you are set free from your infirmity."* ¹³ *Then he put his hands on her, and immediately she straightened up and praised*

God. ¹⁴ Indignant because Jesus had healed on the Sabbath, the synagogue ruler said to the people, "There are six days for work. So come and be healed on those days, not on the Sabbath."

What is the contrast here between religion and Jesus?

Religion says: Laws, including Sabbath laws, are given so that you might obey them

Don't ask questions. Just obey them. I don't care if they don't make sense or if they are burdensome. I don't care if you're hungry or someone has a deformed hand. Just obey them.

Jesus: Laws, including Sabbath laws, are a gift from God for our benefit

The Sabbath is a gift from God to bring healing and renewal. Can you believe that God commands us to rest? To remember that we are not God, that the world will continue even if we stop working? And so it is right to pick and eat grain. And it is right to heal.

For the Pharisees, obedience is a necessary burden in order to please God. But for Jesus, the laws of God are a delight, a gift for our benefit.

***Psalm 19:7-11** - The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul. The statutes of the LORD are trustworthy, making wise the simple. ⁸ The precepts of the LORD are right, giving joy to the heart. The commands of the LORD are radiant, giving light to the eyes. ⁹ The fear of the LORD is pure, enduring forever. The ordinances of the LORD are sure and altogether righteous. ¹⁰ They are more precious than gold, than much pure gold; they are sweeter than honey, than honey from the comb. ¹¹ By them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward.*

Do you see God's law this way?

***James 1:23-25** - Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror ²⁴ and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. ²⁵ But the man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it-- he will be blessed in what he does.*

Do you understand that God's law brings freedom? The freedom that comes from becoming the person you were created to be to the fullest.

Religion tells you that you relate to God by being good and obeying the laws, and then God will accept you. It is a burden, work to be done so that you can enjoy heaven. But the gospel tells you that you are fully accepted in Jesus, because He lived the law perfectly and died on the cross to take the penalty you deserved because of your sin, and that is why you obey. Because you love Him. Because you want to honor Him. Because you believe He is good and trustworthy.

How does the law become a joy? By seeing Jesus calling you when you were a sinner into relationship with Him. "Come, follow me." "But I'm a tax collector. I am not worthy to be called by you." This church right here is no different than Levi's banquet. If you could just hear the other stories in this room of who we used to be and how Jesus has transformed our life by His love. The law becomes a joy as you see Him, out of love, dying for you when you were His enemy.

Romans 5:6-8 - You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. ⁷ Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. ⁸ But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

Entering into a relationship with God transforms our duty into a delight. We are loved, we are accepted, we are significant, because He says we are.

By the end of these confrontations, the Pharisees want to kill Jesus. They are so upset that they are willing to cooperate with the pagan Herodians in order to get rid of Jesus. Look how offensive the gospel is to religion. It proclaims that no one, not even the most religious person, is good enough for God. No one on their own can stand before God. Only the sick need a doctor. And only those who know they need a Savior can be saved. But thanks be to God that He freely offers sinners like us salvation in Jesus.