

Jesus' New World Order

Message 4

To Save Life or to Kill?

Mark 2:18-3:12

The Need to Kill

The sun shone impassively as the miserable soldier clung to his commanding officer's legs, sobbing uncontrollably, begging for mercy. He had committed a crime in a fit of anger and was terrified that he would be punished for his rashness. The squad leader looked down at his comrade. Together they had braved the boiling sun by day and the aching cold by night, fleeing from one raid to another in pursuit of a common dream. Now, that dream was going to die for one of them. The leader commanded his soldier to rise, took careful aim, and shot him through the chest.

What would cause you to kill someone? Would you shoot in self-defense? How about to protect your loved ones – your wife, or your children? Would you be willing to serve in the armed forces to protect your country? Not all, perhaps, but many of us would be willing to kill in urgent cases such as these. But what about more challenging situations? Would you kill a man to prevent the murder of a dozen others?

T. E. Lawrence, now known as Lawrence of Arabia, had never killed a man before. He was a scholar turned soldier and did not have the stomach for killing. But he possessed an intimate understanding of the Arab culture and he knew for certain that a series of murders was about to be unleashed. For the man he shot had just killed a man from another tribe. He was a Moroccan, and he had just killed one of the Ageyl tribe. The strict code of honor meant that the Ageyl could never allow this act to go unavenged.¹

It was World War I, and the Arabs were fighting the Turks for their freedom. They would never succeed if they fell to killing each other. But a blood feud could not be ignored. Lawrence knew that the only way to avert sure disaster for his band was for someone without a tribe or family to settle the blood claim. An Englishman could accomplish what no Arab could do, so he executed justice. He killed one Moroccan to prevent the murder of a dozen others and to preserve his squad. Would you have done the same?

Men resort to killing for many reasons, some noble and others base. Tonight we are going to watch a group of men slowly pushed to the point of murder. As their story unfolds, I think we will discover that we are uncomfortably like them in many ways.

The Problem of Fasting

So far in our studies in the Gospel of Mark we have seen Jesus astonish the people by His wonderful miracles of healing and casting out demons. The impact of these miracles was intensified by the incredible authority He possessed. He seemed to be able to command demons and men with equal ease. He taught without hesitation and with an unprecedented finality. And most amazing of all, He forgave sins! It is no wonder that crowds flocked to Jesus and hung on His every word. And although the scribes wondered how He could forgive sins, it was only when He committed the odious indiscretion of eating with tax collectors that they openly questioned His actions.

Tonight's passage opens with the people – precisely who they are is not stated – asking Him about His practice of fasting. Now to us this seems like a monumentally irrelevant question. Probably most of us

¹ This story is taken from: Don Belt, "Lawrence of Arabia; A Hero's Journey," *National Geographic*, Volume 195 (Number 1, 1999) p. 41.

here have never fasted, or if so, it was only once or twice. Fasting is relatively ignored among Americans, even those who try to live a religious life. But the problem here is not the text, but ourselves. Throughout history, fasting has played a significant role in religion, especially in Jewish religion. It is we who are out of step.

Even so, we might reasonably wonder how these people knew that Jesus' disciples were not fasting. Did they follow the disciples around and check up on them at every meal? I doubt it. Actually, it was fairly easy to notice who was fasting, for the serious Pharisees fasted every Monday and Thursday, and it was probably this practice which the people had in mind when they asked Jesus about the fasting of His disciples.

Jesus replies with an answer which, on the surface, seems reasonable and harmless, but at its heart is an audacious claim. Everyone knows that you don't fast at a wedding. Marriage is joyful occasion, and it would be rude to fast when the host has spent a lot of money so you can feast and celebrate the wedding. So Jesus is saying that it would be wrong to fast when He is present with His disciples, but that when He departs, they will fast. Seems reasonable, doesn't it? The problem is, this explanation carries with it a preposterous implication.

For one thing, it makes Jesus Himself the focus of the disciples' lives. The whole point of fasting is not to draw near to a religious leader, but to God. It is God's presence (or absence) that gives meaning to fasting. For Jesus to make Himself the criterion of fasting is tantamount to putting Himself in God's place.

The Unexpected Bridegroom

Second, by using a bridegroom as a symbol for Himself, Jesus has borrowed a rich Old Testament image which always points to – guess what? – to God. God reveals Himself as the divine bridegroom in several places. In Isaiah 54 we read

“Fear not, for you will not be ashamed; be not confounded, for you will not be disgraced; for you will forget the shame of your youth, and the reproach of your widowhood you will remember no more. ⁵ For your Maker is your husband, the LORD of hosts is his name; and the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer, the God of the whole earth he is called. ⁶ For the LORD has called you like a wife deserted and grieved in spirit, like a wife of youth when she is cast off, says your God.

Isaiah 54:4-6

Later, Isaiah says,

“For as a young man marries a young woman, so shall your sons marry you, and as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you.”

Isaiah 62:5

In these passages God is speaking to His people in exile. Their nation has been destroyed and they have been carried off to a foreign land. But God has not forgotten them. In His zeal to express His love for His people, God compares Himself to a bridegroom. Israel – defeated, impoverished, and rejected – is as delightful to God as a bride is to a bridegroom. What a beautiful message! What a message of hope to those poor captives! Surely these passages of scripture were well-known to the Jews. And when Jesus speaks as though He were the bridegroom, He is virtually claiming to be God.

I don't know the secrets of your heart tonight, but I am sure there are some here who feel disgraced, ashamed, and unloved. Some of you feel this way because in certain ways you have behaved disgracefully and shamefully, just like ancient Israel. But by appropriating the bridegroom identity to Himself, Jesus

declared His marital love, His lover's delight in all who come to Him. Perhaps you have been deeply wounded, perhaps you are damaged goods in some ways – but Jesus wants you anyway. He ravishes all those in His Kingdom, just as a bridegroom ravishes his bride on His wedding night. In this world you will never find love that fully satisfies, but in Jesus' Kingdom you will always be loved by God Himself.

Cloth and Wineskins

Jesus answers the question about fasting with a metaphor – a wedding image – and then proceeds further to explain the situation with a short parable. Paradoxically, the explanatory parable is more perplexing than the original answer! What on earth do cloth and wineskins have to do with a bridegroom? Nothing directly. But remember, Jesus is responding to a question about fasting, and the parable of the cloth and the wineskins has a lot to do with this practice.

Most people misunderstand this parable. They see Jesus promising something new, and they interpret that personally. They conclude that it is the new life promised in the gospel, or the Holy Spirit promised to believers. There are several problems with this interpretation. First, these ideas are generally absent from Mark's gospel. John gives a good deal of attention both to the new life of the believer, and to the promise of the Holy Spirit in his gospel. Paul develops these concepts extensively in his epistles, but Mark seems to focus on other issues. Second, they do not even fit the immediate context. The question is about fasting, not about the soul or the divine presence. If the old wine corresponds to an old, out-moded religious exercise and the new wine corresponds to our new life, we make Jesus guilty of a non-sequitur. In order for the parable to have any coherence, the practice of fasting must match some corresponding new practice. The new wine must correspond to some new practice Jesus will introduce.

What, then of the wineskins? They are the container of the wine – the place where it is found. When you want some wine, you go find a wineskin. Now if that is the case, where are the rituals of the Jews to be found? In the synagogue and the religious life of the Jews, of course. So now we can see the startling implication of this parable – Jesus is announcing the impending demise of the current religious establishment. The old ways are about to pass, and not easily. The wineskins Jesus mentions were leather containers that were filled with new, or unfermented, wine. As the wine fermented, releasing CO₂, the skin stretched to accommodate the gases. By the time the wine was mature and ready to drink, the skins had fully stretched. To put new wine into these old skins would cause them stretch to the breaking point.

The point here is that just as new wine causes old wineskins to burst, so Jesus' new approach to serving God will destroy the old religious establishment. The synagogue, the temple, the leadership structure is about to be replaced by something new. How would this have been received by the people who heard this parable? Many may not have understood it right away. Some may have welcomed a change. But we can be sure there is one class of people who would be dismayed by this news – the religious leaders.

Legal Lawbreaking

As we move into the next scene, any pretense of cordiality between Jesus and the Pharisees has disappeared. This time they ask an accusing question, "Look, why do they do what is not lawful on the Sabbath?" By phrasing the question this way they are implicitly accusing the disciples of breaking the law. Now, you may know that followers of God in all ages are required to obey the law (excepting wicked man-made laws). This was especially true of the Jews with regard to the law handed down by Moses. Surely, if the disciples were breaking the law of Moses, this would be a serious problem. However, the problem lies not with the disciples, but with the Pharisees. For when we go to the law of Moses to search for this command, we are unrewarded. There is no such law! Furthermore, we are somewhat misled by the translation of the word rendered "law". There is a way in Greek to express the concept of breaking the law (using

νομιμος), but this is not it. The word (εξεστι) is properly rendered “not permitted” or “not proper.”² In sum, the Pharisees were picking a fight over a matter of etiquette or custom, not of law.

Jesus nevertheless takes the opportunity to show the Pharisees how poorly they understand their own scriptures (which was the source of great pride for them) and to declare that He is the one with the authority to decide how the Sabbath is properly kept. The scope of His authority keeps expanding! Is there nothing outside of His rule? Or is He the absolute, universal Lord of heaven and earth?

We should notice in passing that Jesus does not cancel the Sabbath anymore than He cancelled fasting. The Sabbath has to be observed differently than the Pharisees were doing, but Jesus is not Lord of a vacated practice. How are you doing with the Lord’s Day? Do you consistently keep Sunday free of business and work, and faithfully join in worship with God’s people? Jesus is still Lord of the Sabbath, and He calls you to remember and obey His commands.

The Sting

Well, this is too much for the Pharisees. By this time they are totally opposed to Jesus and are determined to halt His influence. But how could this be done? The people are thrilled with Him. They are recklessly rushing out to see and hear Him every chance they got. He is rapidly becoming a national hero. It would be impossible simply to arrest and imprison Him. They would need to find some way to stop Him legally.

The Sabbath law provided the perfect opportunity to catch Jesus in some illegal activity. It was held in extremely high regard by everyone in Galilee and Judea at this time, so public opinion could be rallied against someone who broke this law. Besides, Jesus had already demonstrated His refusal to abide by the customary interpretation of the Sabbath. All that was needed was to catch Him publicly breaking it, and the people would not rebel against the religious leaders when they arrested Him.

Their opportunity soon arrives one Sabbath in the synagogue. A man is waiting for Him there – someone with a withered hand – which I take to be some sort of birth defect or degenerative disease. Jesus enters and sees the poor man, severely handicapped by his deformity. Especially in that culture, without modern conveniences, his life would be very difficult. He also sees the Pharisees – watching. They are not there to worship God. They are present to trap Jesus. What shall He do? What would you do?

It is a frightening situation. To heal this man will provoke a great outburst. That will not help anyone, will it? Why endanger yourself and jeopardize your thriving ministry just to heal one man. Think of your disciples. They are depending on you. Why endanger them as well? Besides, he only has a withered hand. It might be different if he had a really serious condition, like demon possession, or complete paralysis. But he has full use of all his faculties except one. Definitely it is not worth risking your safety, your disciples, and your ministry to thousands just for one withered hand.

Such is the contorted reasoning of the human heart. But Jesus is not troubled by the evasiveness of a scheming mind. He only has eyes for the plight of this man. As with the leper, the paralytic, the tax collector, and the demon possessed, Jesus is moved with compassion. Yes, one man *is* worth the risk of a ministry. What is the point of a ministry, what is life for, and what is it worth, if He must waste His time protecting Himself and fail to serve those for whom He came? Jesus loves the poor and suffering, and when He was here on earth, He always took care of those who came to Him for help. He did not hesitate. He

² Walter Bauer, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1979) p. 275.

healed the man.

But before He healed him, Jesus exposed the wickedness of the Pharisees lurking in the synagogue. He showed that the inescapable result of failing to love, is the intent to kill. We might see this merely as a question of whether to do a good deed, but Jesus exposes the truth. To refuse to do good is evil. Furthermore, the result of doing good is life, and the result of doing evil is death.

Have you deceived yourself? Do you live in a fantasy world? It is so easy to look good in the eyes of men. Simply avoid the big bad sins – murder, adultery, theft – and do a good deed now and then, and men will think you righteous. But if you turn your back on the needy and hurting around you, you are committing an evil that leads to death. Do you even notice the hurting around us? Who are those who are friendless, women struggling with their appearance and eating disorders, men enslaved to pornography, students failing to live up to their parents' expectations, lovers in despair over failed romance? We are surrounded by thousands of people whose lives are somewhere between unhappy and miserable – and we have the hope that they need. Maybe you are one of these people. Jesus is the hope that you need!

But there is one last, very significant aspect to Jesus' ministry here. Even as He faced down the Pharisees and showed compassion on the handicapped man, He also had compassion on His accusers. Are you capable of taking this in? Jesus had compassion both on the victim and the oppressor. It is too hard for me to grasp, but we must see it there in the gospel record. He knew that the Pharisees were simply revealing their hard, cold hearts, and He is essentially challenging them to repent – for He cares about them, too.

In one of the greatest ironies of scripture, after Jesus had questioned the Pharisees' intent and challenged them to do good and save life, they immediately began plans to kill Him. What moved them to the point of murder? In this case it was the drive to protect their status in society. The Pharisees were the most religious, the most pious, the most respected Jews of their day. Everyone looked up to them and most accepted their interpretation of the law as the most accurate. But now, over and over, Jesus claims an authority greater than theirs. The Herodians were the supporters of King Herod, whom the Pharisees hated. He was a half-breed – not a true Jew, and was ruthless and blood-thirsty. Here the saying is true, the only thing that will join two enemies is a greater enemy. To these Pharisees, the only thing worse than Herod was Jesus.

Conclusion

Where do you fit in this story? Are you faithfully living under the authority of Jesus, or are you trying to hide certain aspects of your life from Him? Are you fully following Him, or do you have favorite sins that you are harboring? Are you devoted to serving the needs of others around you, or are you committed to your own pleasure and success? Are you following the example of Jesus, or are you a modern Pharisee? Remember, the Pharisees were outwardly pious and righteous. Only when Jesus confronted them was their inner wickedness exposed. Are you wicked inside? Are your heart and mind selfish and hateful like the Pharisees, or fearless and compassionate like Jesus?

The good news is that Jesus came to save us all. Sinner, cripple, possessed, and Pharisee all are called to believe that Jesus is truly the Son of God, the one with all authority, the divine bridegroom – and to repent and follow Him. And to all who follow, Jesus promises forgiveness of sin and true life in His Kingdom. This is the gospel. Do you believe it?

C. David Green
Lehigh University
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