

Dr. Mark Jennings, Mark, Lecture 5, Mark 2:18-28. The Public Ministry Continues

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This is Dr. Mark Jennings in his teaching on the Gospel of Mark. This is session 5 on Mark 2:18-28. The Public Ministry Continues.

Hello, good to be with you again. We've been working through Mark chapter 2 and we've been working through the public ministry of Jesus. One of the things that we looked at last time, beginning with the very end with the leper, the man with leprosy, and we looked at the relationship between leprosy and purity and purity language, and Jesus is the stronger.

His purity is stronger than the leper's impurity. Then we looked at the paralyzed man and how Jesus used that opportunity with the man who is paralyzed to affirm their faith, the muscular display of their faith, their active commitment to getting to Jesus, used that as an opportunity to declare his power to forgive sins and how he linked his power to forgive sins with his ability to fully restore the paralyzed man. In the middle of that was a statement about Jesus' authority, Jesus' ability to perceive the thoughts.

That began to introduce a growing conflict that was starting to bubble up now between the religious leaders and Jesus. What was hinted at before now starts, that division starts to become more and more pronounced as they are asking who can do this, but God alone, what is this man saying? He is blaspheming. Then that tension fed into the calling of Levi, where Jesus calls one who would have been considered a despicable person, deplorable, a sinner by definition because of the extortion that he would have done given his ability as a tax collector and his position.

One such as this was still called, there was no pre-qualification, if you will, for Jesus' call; it is completely Jesus' decision, and he says, follow me, and he immediately follows. There was a party, and he was eating with tax collectors, and what I argued would have been people from other sinful vocations, prostitution, perhaps strong men who had been used as ruffians of sorts to do physical harm and others. There is a controversy that happens there, again the religious leaders asking the disciples why is it that Jesus is committing a social error and even one that would have affected his honor and his shame by associating with those who are by definition sinners to which Jesus replies that this is the exact group from whom he has come.

With that in mind, I want us to keep thinking about this growing controversies that are occurring and we see this stacking one upon each other in Mark. Mark will often present controversies right in a row and so there is a way that what has happened previously is informing what is occurring. I want to look at a controversy that

happens regarding the question of fasting here in chapter 2 continuing our work looking at verses 18-22.

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? 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 but the time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them that on that day they will fast. 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. 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. So there seems to be a combination of some material here that's been condensed verses 18-20 and then verses 21-22 this question of fasting and then these statements about cloth and wine. And when we look at it, there's a biographical focus as well, which is what I find interesting in verses 18-20, what it tells us about Jesus, about how he's the focus of the celebration as one who brought something new to the scene that made fasting wrong.

So, think about this fasting again, trying to set the context. Likely, it's referring to regular fasting, fasting that might have occurred on Mondays and Thursdays, perhaps more than the annual fast day associated with festivals like the Day of Atonement or Rosh Hashanah. The implication, of course, is that there's this established ritual of fasting that would occur regularly, which the followers of John, who refer to John the Baptist, are doing, and the Pharisees are doing.

So, presumably, the way the logic works is here are two very respected groups, those who have been following John and the Pharisees, and these groups continually practice regular fasting, but the disciples of Jesus are not. And in the question, you know, but yours are not. I think it's interesting. What is the tone of the question? And when we look at the tone of the question, if I were to say that, or rather if Mark was to say some religious leader from Jerusalem came and asked Jesus this question, we would immediately know the tone is that the religious leaders are having an issue with this and this may be a way of trapping. The fact that Mark tells us that just some people came and asked Jesus may indicate that there might actually be some earnest questioning happening here, not simply controversy surrounding trying to trap or trip Jesus.

That being said, the nature of the question might allow the mention of the Pharisees to allow for a bit of blending of both. I just find it interesting; I think as you work through narrative, we must always ask the question of who is doing what and where

and how that helps us understand what is going on. Now Jesus' answer is interesting because the implication is the teacher is responsible for the behavior of the disciples.

The question isn't getting at the heart of what the disciples are doing wrong, but why is it that you do not make sure your disciples are fasting? So, really, the question is about why Jesus is not having them fast. And he answers by presenting a picture here where he says, how can the guests of the bridegroom fast while he was with them? Now, this translation of how the guests of the bridegroom fast might, I think, downplay it a little bit. It's really the sons of the bridegroom is sort of the idea that's presented in the language of the sons of the bridal chamber.

So, it isn't just the guests, but it's those who are the close group who have the responsibility of enjoying and celebrating with the bridegroom. They would stand guard at the bridal chamber; that was one of their jobs, protecting it, guaranteeing being able to announce the consummation of the marriage. So, these aren't just people who are invited to come sit and go enjoy some cake.

These are individuals who have a special relationship with the groom. And the question is how can the guests of the bridegroom fast while he was with them so long, they cannot so long as they have him with them. And the idea here is Jesus is painting a scene of what is currently occurring with the bridegroom.

With the disciples and him, it's akin to a bridal celebration. It's akin to a moment of joy where the bridegroom and the sons of the bridegroom, metaphorically speaking, the attendants of the bridegroom, are together, and at a wedding, you wouldn't think of fasting.

To fast at a wedding celebration like this would be completely inconsistent with the moment. And the moment is one of joy and one of celebration. Fasting is this idea of purposefully keeping food from yourself for a reason, whether it is to the suffering of the fast to help contemplate in a devotional act or a symbolic refusal of something to set an atmosphere of devotion.

There were different reasons that were given for fasting. There were usually seasons that were set apart related to some form of devotion or piety. But at the heart of fasting is a lack.

To fast is to lack food, to suffer, to feel a lack. And what Jesus is saying is that it makes no sense when one's around him. That there's the idea of suffering or of lacking in the presence of Jesus is as inconsistent as the sons of the bridegroom fasting during the middle of a wedding celebration.

I think this is fascinating because he's clearly presenting himself as the bridegroom. It's possible that you see Old Testament references even at play in this view, whether

it's Isaiah 54, Isaiah 62, or Ezekiel 16, where God himself is depicted as a bridegroom. And there may even be implicitly here a complaint that Jesus is taking on this role previously predicated to God.

And, of course, the great wedding banquet feast idea of which at the end of all things, there is a perpetual, continual, eternal banquet, a wedding feast that is being celebrated. So, all kinds of imagery come into play. The analogy is that the bridegroom, the idea of the wedding, and fasting at the wedding show the incongruity of the disciples, as well as fasting in his presence.

But he doesn't stop there, which I think is fascinating. And that might have been sufficient. He said that what the Pharisees are doing and what John's disciples are doing, and to some extent, he's almost implying, yeah, that makes sense in their situation.

But it doesn't make sense here because I'm here. I'm the thing that changes. Why are the disciples not fasting? Because they're with me.

That something is different in my presence. A very, very strong statement. But then he shifts from this picture and metaphor, and he goes into an idea of a wedding that would never happen.

You get this, but the time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them. And on that day they will fast. Well, there isn't this picture of normal wedding practices where all of a sudden the guests of the bridegroom all fast and go into mourning.

So, he's changed something here in this story. There's a bit of a surprise. And I find that interesting that maybe here you have, and I think here you do have, a foreshadowing that Jesus while saying because I'm currently here as an occasion of joy akin to a wedding, there's going to be a moment where those here who are with me are not going to be experiencing joy, where they're going to be experiencing heartache and yearning, the very motivations that are akin to calling for a fast.

And so the question becomes, what is this time he's talking about? But the time will come. What is he referring to? And for me, the answer to that is the phrase taken from them. I think the option of the ascension doesn't work here because Jesus isn't forcefully taken.

In fact, Scripture is quite clear that that is a good moment. Jesus gives commands as the Holy Spirit will come in the paraclete and will inform. So, it seems unlikely that Jesus would want to connect his ascension after his resurrection to this.

It seems more likely that I think he's referring to his coming arrest and death, that there will be a time when he will be taken from them. Then, those moments where he is taken, referring to the trial, the arrest, the trial, the crucifixion, and the burial, will be qualitatively different. Those moments will be the opposite, if you will, of the wedding feast, but they will be full of lack.

And that there are these times that are coming for these particular disciples. I think that's what he's referring to. And so, you have this metaphor, this idea that there's a new state of affairs, the bridegroom is present, there's a new state of affairs that's at work.

And I think that's what initiates into what happens in 21 and following. No one sews a patch of untrimmed cloth on an old garment. If he does, the new piece pulls away from the old, making the tear worse.

And no one pours a new wine to old wineskins. If he does, the wine will burst the skins and both the wine and the wineskins will be ruined. So, I think we have this: he presents two pictures of how the old and the new cannot simply be mixed together.

Something profoundly different has occurred, just as his resurrection has made the behavior of the disciples profoundly different. This discussion of cloth and wine shows the potency of the new thing that the new wine is so potent that the old cannot hold it.

Or that the untrimmed cloth, the new piece, will pull away from the old. It has a strength and picture to it. And, of course, these images would have been ones they readily understood.

They readily understood that of course you would never do that between old and new cloth. And you never do new wine in old wineskins. The idea here is, whereas the Pharisees might have assumed, the religious leaders might have assumed that to prepare for the messianic age, prepare for the Messiah coming, that would be congruent with a strict adherence to their traditions.

Jesus is saying the coming of God is very different and is much more potent and is much stronger and it comes in my presence. And so, there's this forceful rethinking of things. He's challenging those who are asking this question to try to think of what is happening in the presence of Jesus in the same terms that you thought of everything else is to try to put new wine into old wineskins.

To try to think of the arrival of Jesus in the same way as the oral traditions or the understanding of what was thought to occur with the coming of the Messiah is to try to put new cloth into old cloth. And so, to think of the disciples needing to fast in the

presence of Jesus would be to do the same. And so, we get this controversy at work, this small, little, powerful statement.

I want to move on to the next controversy that occurs here with verses 23 through 28. And again, note that there is this continual stacking of controversies. And notice how often it focuses on food.

So many of the issues that come up in the Gospel of Mark deal with eating or somehow related to food. I don't think that's an accident. One, so much of the oral tradition was around food and dealt with dining practices.

But I find it interesting how these continue to have very similar themes. So, let's pick this up here at the end of chapter 2 with verse 23. One Sabbath, Jesus was going through the grain fields, and as his disciples walked along, they began to pick some heads of grain.

The Pharisees said to him, look, why are they doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath? He answered, have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need? In the days of Abiathar, the high priest, he entered the house of God and ate the consecrated bread, which is lawful and only for priests to eat. And he also gave some to his companions. Then he said to them, the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.

So, the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath. So now we have eating and Sabbath, which is kind of working together. And I think we should note that the controversy really is not over the gleaming and eating of a little grain.

That was allowed. That was allowed to the stranger and the poor by Deuteronomy 23. The issue is not then really the eating.

The issue is more that they could be accused of reaping. It's the reaping on the Sabbath. There's a type of work that is prohibited in Exodus 34.

And in the Mishnah, it's explicitly prohibited. So, we have this pattern that we're looking at. Verse 24, excuse me, with verse 27 having this maxim, which leads to a conclusion in verse 28.

So, we have this setting that leads to a maxim and that leads to a conclusion from that maxim. So, let's look at the process of how this plays out. First of all, notice that pattern.

The Pharisees said, look, why are they doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath? That interplay, asking the master why the followers are doing wrong, asking the followers why the master is doing wrong. This is a common tactic and not an uncommon way

of beginning a conflict. So, at the heart here is not Jesus; you need to correct your disciples.

That's not what is happening here. The implication is Jesus. Why are you providing such a teaching or such a way of thinking that your disciples feel free to neglect the Sabbath, especially in your presence? So we have this attack on the disciples, if you will, Sabbath behavior.

But notice Jesus' response: He defends his disciples by turning to Scripture. So Jesus is going to have a scriptural debate with these leaders. This gets in that category which we would expect with scribes and scribes' interpretations where they would be using bits of the Scriptures to help inform into specific situations because the assumption was there was a univocally in Scripture, that Scripture said the same thing, and so you could go to other parts of Scripture to affirm or interpret disputed areas.

He goes by mentioning that David and his men were at a time in Scripture when David and his men were hungry and that their need allowed them to do a certain action, that their need allowed them to take advantage of the social security system if you will, that's in Leviticus, that the poor and the hungry were allowed to pluck grain in other people's fields. And so even though they're talking about the Sabbath, Christ responds by affirming their right, by going to David and showing precedence to ignore a ritualistic practice if need warranted it. So that's the connection he's trying to make, that the ritualistic practice that David did was to ignore the legal right of the priest to eat the consecrated bread but no one else.

So, David allows his men to enter into the house of God and eat bread that was set apart, consecrated bread, ritualistic set apart bread. Of course, in 1 Samuel 21, we know David and his men are certainly in need; they're on the run from Saul; this is the moment, and this is the story that he's referring to. And what David is, and how Jesus' argument works, is it presumes that the Pharisees here that he's speaking to, that the Pharisees would affirm what David did was right.

I mean the assumption here is that what David did was right. And that well if David was right to have his men eat bread because of need, they were on the run from Saul. If they were right to eat because of need, to break the ritual, that need was more important than observing the ritual; if David was right, then he says, so are my disciples.

The reaping requirement on the Sabbath does not demand that they surrender their need here if you will, and that their need to eat is justified. This would be sort of a common way of illustrating a point, a type of Jewish argumentation that the Pharisees would have been familiar with. Now, there is a bit of a problem, maybe as a side note to address, which is the question of whether Jesus knows his Bible.

Because verse 26 says, Jesus said, in the days of Abiathar the high priest, he meaning David, entered the house of God and ate the consecrated bread.

Well, here's the problem: when we look at the Hebrew Bible, it isn't Abiathar, who was the high priest at that time, but Ahimelech. Is there a mistake here? Indeed, when you look at Matthew and Luke, Matthew 12 and Luke 6, and their accounts of it, they take the days of high priest Abiathar out, and they remove it. Of course, it gets even more confusing when you add to the fact in the Old Testament that Abiathar and Ahimelech also appeared to be confused, or at least it's confusing.

If you look at 1 Samuel 22 20, 2 Samuel 8 17, 1 Chronicles 18 16, 1 Chronicles 24 6, and even the genealogy, it seems to be there's a little bit of interplay. What are we to make of that? Did Jesus get the wrong guy when he said in the days of Abiathar? Well, I think the important aspect here is to recognize that we do not want to import a modern way of speaking into the ancient context. It was not uncommon to speak of a time period or the days of and use the most dominant figure as the one to characterize that time period.

So, Abiathar was the more dominant high priest during David's span, not Ahimelech. So, to call it in the days of Abiathar would not have been an incorrect statement. Where we would think of it in terms of well that's not accurate, but we're looking at it from a different way of conveying information.

Jesus is not disputing whether Ahimelech was the high priest there or not, he's characterizing the time. And you would characterize the time frequently by the most dominant figure. It would be akin perhaps to say during the Revolutionary War period of the United States of America in the days of George Washington.

You do not necessarily have to be referring to something that occurred during the presidency of John Adams, but you could still refer to it in the days of George Washington as a characterization of that period. It would be akin to something like that. In case you're interested, this would have been the showbread that's in view here, the bread that is baked just before Sabbath; twelve loaves are baked for the priest.

Now, I love that he goes to David here, and going to David here also allows a messianic echo to be in place. He is using an example of David doing right and the followers of David as justification for what he did and what he allowed his followers to do. And this leads then, of course, to the statement that he said to them, the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.

Incidentally, we have something very similar from a second-century rabbi, second-century A.D. rabbi, written in commenting on Exodus. The Sabbath has been given to you, you have not been given to the Sabbath. It could be a possibility that we have

there from the second century, a rabbi picking up on a statement known that Jesus had made, and that had gotten legs, or that there maybe was a tradition that had this sort of statement idea.

Even more important, remember that in Capernaum, when Jesus was teaching, comments were made that he had a teaching with authority, unlike the scribes. I think this is a great example of it. We asked the question when we were looking at chapter one: what does it mean to have a teaching authority that's unlike the scribes? Well, this is the first bit of this interaction, and it is clearly a debate.

I mean, when Jesus introduced it in verse 25 with, have you never read? I mean, to say have you never read to the Pharisees is an insult, indicating we're going to have a debate where my goal is to prove your ignorance. I mean, that was not a kind way of introducing a polite discussion. So, this is clearly a scribal discussion, and Jesus follows a very Haggadah way of arguing.

He follows a very standard way of arguing. I'm going to find a different example from scripture that proves the principle, namely, that the need warrants overcoming legal precepts, and let it apply here. So, everything he's doing up to that point is extremely in keeping with an authority like the scribes.

But it's the next statement that I think starts getting into the authority unlike the scribes, where he declares the intent of the Sabbath. That the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. That he is taking a position of declaring, I know the purpose of the Sabbath.

This has moved beyond, the debate here then has moved beyond did they do right in this gleaning of the grains. Did they do right? It's moved beyond that. Had that been his only goal, which was to justify the behavior, saying that this is in keeping with scripture, he would have accomplished that goal.

But he goes one step further and begins to declare the intent of why the Sabbath exists, to begin with. This is a divine perspective that allows us to declare the intent of the Sabbath. No longer is it in keeping with the Sabbath, it's why the Sabbath.

The position that Christ takes in the Sabbath is to serve, a gift to serve humanity. The Sabbath was put in place so that humanity could rest. So that those could enjoy and set apart a time to worship and to recover and to recoup.

It was a gift from God to humanity, and indeed, the time of the age to come is often frequently depicted as enjoying the Sabbath as a time of perpetual rest and enjoyment from hard work. So, the Sabbath was supposed to be of service, and so thus, if the Sabbath was supposed to be of service, if a man was in need, if a woman

was in need on the Sabbath, well, the design in the heart of the Sabbath was God wants their needs met. God wants them to be taken care of.

The Sabbath was a means of care. It was an artificial time that God inserted. There's nothing natural about the timing of the week.

There is something natural about the timing of the day, if you think about the sun rising and setting or even the year with the rotation of the planet around the sun. But the arbitrary week, that is a God-inserted time of which part of that was set apart, the Sabbath. And what these religious leaders have done, if they've turned the Sabbath from a gift into a burden, they've, instead of the needs of people being met, of which the Sabbath was designed for, what has occurred is actually people are suffering or are potentially allowed to suffer if it somehow violated the Sabbath.

So, it's been a flip. The stipulations of the oral tradition that has surrounded the Sabbath, they've turned the Sabbath into something that it was not. And his justification for being able to say that, he further goes on to say is, so the Son of Man is Lord even of the world.

So the Sabbath. Now we know what the Son of Man is, which is an interesting title. The Son of Man is the Christological title that Jesus most often takes for himself, yet is rarely put upon Jesus by others.

Usually, Jesus is declared to be Lord or Messiah, Son of God. But Son of Man, he takes it upon himself. And Son of Man can have a variety of meanings.

One is that it can simply be another way of speaking about, another way of saying human, man, who is like the Son of Man that you consider him. There's this idea of just the mortality. Another is a possible circumlocution for I. So, it's not Christological at all, not title at all. It's just another way of saying I. So instead of saying I am speaking about the Gospel of Mark, I would say the Son of Man is speaking about the Gospel of Mark, is another way of saying that.

The third, though, is a Christological title that seems to have its root, most likely in Daniel 7. In Daniel 7, you have the apocalyptic visions that are at work, the different beasts that are waging war and battle upon the chosen, upon the elect. In these beasts, Daniel has this vision of a final figure who is described as one like the Son of Man. And this one, like the Son of Man, sits in the company of God, and as you read through Daniel 7, represents also the people and is victorious.

And this one like the Son of Man, and there's all kinds of interesting creation imagery because the kingdoms that are at war and the symbolism associated with those kingdoms that we don't have time to get into now, but they're all beasts but the one who subdues them looks like human. You have Genesis picture, the Garden of Eden

picture, and beasts, yet it is a man who is dominant over the beasts. So, there's all types of imagery available.

Well, this one, like the Son of Man who then sits in judgment, sits in the company of the Most High and represents the people, develops after Daniel, develops into this figure idea to where, and you see this in some of the other Second Temple literature that's around the time of Jesus, where there is this desire for this Son of Man, this figure who Daniel depicted in a vision now becomes a distinct expected figure who will come. And so, it's a very high figure. I mean the irony is we sometimes think of Son of Man as a low figure when it comes to the depiction of Christ, but it's actually a very high Christological title.

If it's coming from Daniel 7, it's a high Christological title. And we'll see often Jesus uses Son of Man in references to authority and to power. When he talks about how the Son of Man must suffer, people have a big problem; the followers of Jesus have a big problem with that because how could this figure, the Son of Man, suffer? Those two seem to be against each other.

When the religious leaders, when the high priests will ask Jesus if he is the Christ, Jesus will affirm it, and then he says, you will see the Son of Man coming in the clouds. And that's when they rip their clothes for blasphemy because he's gone from not only affirming he's the Messiah but even one step more to declaring he's the Son of Man who will come and judge. So, this Son of Man figure is the title Jesus seems to take upon himself that he wants.

And I think that's what's at here. I don't think, verse 28, that some will argue that Son of Man here is another way of saying man. I mean the idea being there that Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.

So, man is Lord even of the Sabbath. That doesn't make a lot of sense here because Jesus is making an authoritative statement. I think he's saying that the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath.

It is not different from what we already saw in chapter 2, but so that you may know that the Son of Man has the authority to forgive sins when this was the healing of the paralytic. There is clearly Jesus. Jesus wasn't declaring so that you may know that all people have the authority to forgive sins.

He's clearly talking about himself and he even goes on to say, which is easier to say, forgive sins or take up your mat and walk. So, I think with that in mind, we look at verse 28 and Jesus is giving the reason for why he can say the intent of the Sabbath. The reason he can say why the intent of the Sabbath is because he is the Son of Man.

He is the Lord of the Sabbath, meaning he gave the Sabbath and knows the reason for it. It becomes a much stronger statement. This is what we've been looking at in chapter 2. These ideas of the various authoritative relationships that are in view.

Notice the way it's been playing out, though. We went from Capernaum this idea of Jesus being able to teach what he's doing to people with an authority that they haven't seen before, to cast out miracles with authority, to exercise demons with authority. We move from that and even through the story of the leper, but when we get into the paralyzed man, and we get into the controversy of the picking grain of the Sabbath, Jesus' authority is becoming more and more pronounced.

He's starting now to make clear his authority isn't simply the stronger one, as John the Baptist called him, but the stronger one because of divine identity. He isn't just the expected Messiah that's come, but there's something more. He's come with the power to forgive sins, meaning to undo the fall.

Something the religious establishment that was their right to do was to declare something clean or unclean. Jesus tells the leper he's clean. It was their authority to do the sacrifices in accordance with what scripture said.

Jesus is saying, I can declare sins are forgiven. It was their authority to say what was right or wrong on the Sabbath and Jesus says, I know why the Sabbath exists for I am the Lord of the Sabbath. He's issuing statements that are going to inevitably lead to further and further conflict because he's establishing his authority on the plane of God, not on the plane of humanity.

We're going to see this continue to play in. We're going to see Sabbath controversies continue to show up. We're going to see food controversies, and we're going to get to, in chapter three, a conflict with the religious leaders regarding the sheer number of exorcisms to where the dividing lines now are clearly set.

I look forward to going through chapter three with you next time when we meet.
Thank you.

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