

Fitting the Kingdom

Things that don't fit, and the kingdom that won't be made to fit

Mark 2:18 – 3:30 · Robert G. Taylor · Class transcription, edited

LESSON AT A GLANCE

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PART ONE

Three Questions to Start

We are going to be in the Gospel of Mark until after Christmas, so settle in. I want to start with a question for you. A couple, three questions, in fact.

Rules we no longer keep

Question number one: Are there any rules, whether in your life or in church or in society, that you used to keep that we don’t keep any longer?

Here’s one from the road. When I went to Nicaragua, there was a rule among Nicaraguan drivers: it’s a game of who can get through the red light first. If you were a tenth of a second slow, they’d be honking at you. That’s kind of the way it’s getting in the United States.

Now let me give you one for church, and this will date me just a little bit: wearing hats in the door. Now you see cowboy hats and baseball hats everywhere. In fact, if you go to church, you see guys in baseball caps. Drives me nuts. I know that’s a personal thing.

Here's another one for church. My grandparents would tell me about this, even though I didn't witness it myself. There was a time when they had a cloth over the communion table. Now, I have some theories on that. The first theory is to keep flies off. I say that because I was in a country church for three and a half years, and that's a real problem. It's really bad to get up to serve communion and have to do this before you say the prayer. But we haven't done that in, I don't know, fifty or sixty years.

Clothes that no longer fit

The next question is much more personal. Do you have something in your closet that no longer fits? Everybody has a section of clothes called "One Day I'll Get Back Into This." Have you ever gone back into it?

The picture you see there, by the way, is the suit I left our wedding in, a little over fifty years ago. I've kept it for sentimental reasons. I tried this week to put it on, and my knees would not go through the holes. And if you ever put the coat on, the coat's like this, and the sleeves are like this. So I decided not to have a visual aid this morning, except for pictures. But everybody has something that doesn't fit, and we hold on to it, don't we? Just in case. One of these days I might need it.

Making things fit

The third question: Have you ever *made* something fit? Cut to fit, file to fit, bash to fit. Men are real bad about this, by the way. If things don't fit, a hammer fixes everything. Screw doesn't fit? Bang it.

When my granddaughter was about to be born, we bought a crib for her, and my son-in-law was putting it together. He couldn't get it to fit, so he said, "I've got this," and he got a hammer. What happened? He didn't read the directions. My wife stood there, and my daughter sat there. The good thing is we got it apart and put it back together the right way, without the hammer.

But there's always a way we try to say, "This is the way it's supposed to work, and I'm going to make it work like that." That's the whole crux of our lesson today.

Mark chapter two: things that don't fit the kingdom.

Those three questions. We're in Mark chapter two, and these are things that don't fit the kingdom. That's the common thread in all of this. We're going to talk about something that gets really misunderstood, or lost in translation, if you will.

PART TWO

The Landscape: “Why Don’t You Fit In?”

Let's survey this whole lesson. I'm going to be honest with you up front: we're not going to cover everything in these verses. There are four lessons in those verses. I started trying to put it all in, and I thought, no way to do it. So some of it's left out. That's my warning label to you.

The landscape of this whole passage is a question: Why don't you fit? Why don't you fit in? Why don't you do what we do? I don't understand why you are so different. Don't you know the way we're supposed to do that?

And there's a series of mismatched pictures, things that, when you look at them, aren't what you say they're supposed to be. They don't fit the situation. It's kind of like having a picture of dogs playing poker in the front of the church. That just doesn't fit.

Poker on the communion table

I always remember Fred Craddock said one time that when he was in college, he would have to drive to Oklahoma to preach. He would stay someplace in the afternoon, and one day he decided to come back early for the evening service. He walked in the door, and there were four guys playing poker on the communion table. He said, “There are some things you just don't do on communion tables. I know it's just a table. A table's a table. But it's just not right to play poker on a communion table.”

Well, see, that's what this whole issue is here too. This all takes place on a series of Sabbaths, in which there are tests of whether or not you are kosher, which is a good Jewish word. And then they basically say, “Whatever you're doing, we don't believe you're from God. We believe you're from Satan.” So the question has to be, what is it? That's the encapsulation of the story, if you will.

PART THREE

The Background: The Teachings

We're going to start here, because there is a background to this whole idea, and you have to understand the background. It's kind of like the story of Rip Van Winkle. He goes to sleep, and he wakes back up in a world he doesn't understand. It doesn't make sense to him. If we don't touch on this, we'll be in a world we really don't understand, because everybody in Jewish society understood this.

Oral tradition since Babylon

We're going to talk about something called the teachings. There's going to be a codification of this around A.D. 200, but it was still in the background. The teachings are oral traditions that had been handed down since the people came back from Babylon. When they came back from Babylon, one of the interesting things was they tried to decide, "How are we going to be good Jews? What does it take to live?" They were trying to define how you obey God. In fact, the word *Talmud* means instruction. These are the instructions. How do you know if you kept the Sabbath? How do you know if you kept Passover or not?

This is how you set up the structure we saw last week, the pigeonholes of sinner and righteous. If you did these things, you were righteous. If you didn't do these things, you were a sinner. Simple, hard rules. A white line.

What is work?

Working on the Sabbath is an interesting problem. What is work? Try to define work. They tried. They said you could prepare the meal on Friday and have it ready for the Sabbath, but not serve it. Everybody served himself, and when you did, you could use only a spoon, not a fork, because you can pull but you can't push. Pushing is work. There are Sabbath elevators in Israel. Why? Because you have to push a button, and that's wrong.

How far can you travel? How far is legitimate? From the couch to the TV? We are all violating it every Sunday, I guarantee that. They decided seven-eighths of a mile. How, I don't know. Do you heal or not? Do you help animals or not? Over time, they came to have thirty-nine different categories of what work was. Think about that. Before you can do anything: "Can I do this today?" Look it up. "No, can't do that. Sorry."

Two forces collide

So there's this idea buried in all of this about the teachings, and it defines those two things, sinner and righteous. Jesus is going to run afoul of it, because he doesn't buy into that whole concept. The two forces will collide, because there's Jewish tradition, and there's the kingdom that has come, and they don't have all the same values overlapping. Some they do, some they don't. The ones they don't are the traditions of the elders.

PART FOUR

Four Collisions

1. The question of fasting Mark 2:18-20

The first thing comes up in Mark chapter two, verse 18. People are looking around, and they see the disciples of Jesus eating on a day everybody else is fasting. John's disciples are fasting. The Pharisees' disciples are fasting. Jesus's disciples are not. So the question is, "Why don't you fast?" What they're really saying is, "Why don't you keep the rules? Don't you know the rules?"

Now, lest we think we're above this, we're not. If a kid cries in church, we say, "Keep your kid quiet." I know some folks who say that out loud to people. Shame on them. But we have these expectations that people are supposed to do certain things a certain way at certain times.

Fasting is an interesting problem. Fasting is only specified once in the Old Testament, and that's on the Day of Atonement. You fast because of sorrow for your sins. When you fast, there's a reason for it. But there's no other prescribed fast in the Old Testament, ever. The problem was they came up with a tradition that said you've got to fast twice a week, and they specified the days: Mondays and Thursdays. Some of the Jews, when they became Christians, didn't want to look too Jewish, so they fasted on Wednesdays and Fridays. Missed the point, I think, but that's where it is.

And when you fast, make sure you look pitiful. They put on this white makeup so they'd look sad. In other words, make the religion as sorrowful and with as little joy as you can, because the only way you're going to serve God is to be miserable. These things defined a good Jew. If you did that, you were righteous. If you didn't, you were a sinner.

Jesus answers them with a wedding. Jewish weddings were not the same as ours. A wedding for us starts at a certain time and ends about three hours later. You've eaten a lot, you go home tired, and that's the end of it. A Jewish wedding might last a week. And the big deal in a Jewish wedding was not the bride but the bridegroom, because he's paying for this thing. When the bridegroom and the bride come, it's time for feasting and celebration. Over the next seven days there's all this food and all this joy, so you're going to miss the fasts. There was even a regulation that relieved someone of religious obligations during a wedding feast. It's an exception: we know you're going to break it anyway.

So Jesus says, "Let me ask you this. You go to wedding feasts all the time. Do you fast while the bridegroom's still there, while the feast is going on, or do you wait until after it's over?" He knows the answer. Every one of them does this. He says the time will come when the bridegroom will be gone, and maybe that's the appropriate time for fasting.

2. The grain field on the Sabbath Mark 2:23-28

Then along comes the question of what you do on the Sabbath day. Now, when I grew up in church, I heard preachers regularly say things that, when I got to be an adult, I realized were just wrong. They said, "You know what Sabbath means? Seventh. So if we have church on the first day of the week, it can't be the Sabbath." If you need a cheap, easy sermon, if you forgot to study that week, there you go. I've heard several of those.

But what you find out is that the Sabbath is part of God's creation. It's not out of the law of Moses; it predates that. God expects something out of human beings: you work hard, but you rest a day. We are not productivity machines. We work 24/7. Bad idea for lots of reasons, and God knew all of them. Sabbath really means rest. It doesn't mean seven.

The disciples were going through a grain field on the Sabbath day, and one of the Sabbath regulations was that you could not harvest. Harvest can be defined a lot of ways, but for them it was picking anything. The disciples are hungry, so they snap the heads off the grain, roll it in their hands, and pop it in their mouths. Who cares? The Pharisees did.

"Look, what they're doing is unlawful on the Sabbath."

MARK 2:24

They have this small set of regulations: “Here’s what we do.”

It’s still happening

Lest you think any of what we’re talking about today is irrelevant, it’s not. It’s happening today. Some thirty-odd years ago we had a movement within Churches of Christ called the Boston Movement, started by a man named Kip McKean, who had good motives and lousy methods. Good motives: we need to disciple people when they become Christians. Bad methods: when you were baptized into Christ, you were assigned a discipler. I’d rather call him a handler, because that’s really what he was. He would examine your schedule. Who did you hang around with? What movies did you watch? What television shows? Where did you eat? How many Bible studies have you gone to this week? And he would dictate what you could and couldn’t do. If you had friends he didn’t approve of, you had to get rid of those friends. If you watched this TV show, unplug your TV set. A very stringent idea, and the same thing is in play here.

While I was in ministry here, I got a phone call from somebody who asked, “Are there any churches in the Dallas–Fort Worth area affiliated with the Boston Movement?” I said, “Not as far as I know, but there is one in Houston.” He said, “Oh, okay, I don’t mind driving.” Think about that: driving to Houston and back every Sunday for church. Five miles is sometimes too far for me. He was going to drive five hours, because he was caught up in the system.

“Have you not read?”

Jesus’s response is twofold. First, he shames them. The best way to handle somebody who thinks they’re smart is not to tell them they’re not smart; it’s to show them. “Have you not read?” That’s what he’s really saying: “Guys of your stature, your knowledge, and you don’t know this? Amazing.”

David is their shining example. David is the one whose heir will sit on the throne. David is the one history turned on. So Jesus goes back and says, “Have you not read about David?” When David was fleeing from Saul, his men were hungry and out of provisions, so they went to Abiathar the priest. In the tabernacle was the table of the showbread, which was only supposed to be eaten by the priests themselves. And Abiathar says, “Go ahead and eat it.” David eats it. If that was permissible for them because they were hungry, why can’t we do the same because we’re hungry? Ooh, that’s hard.

“The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.”

MARK 2:27

God created the Sabbath for the benefit of human beings. He didn't create human beings to be robots of religious tradition. And then Jesus goes on to say, “Besides that, I'm the Lord of the Sabbath. I control what happens, not you.” That's a pretty powerful element when you think about it.

3. The man with the shriveled hand Mark 3:1–6

Another time, Jesus goes into the synagogue, because it's the Sabbath day and that's what you did, and there's a man with a shriveled hand. A shriveled hand meant you were kind of worthless.

I had a speech teacher one time. Loved the guy to death. He taught me more than anybody could ever imagine and put me on a trajectory for what I did the rest of my life. But he had a shriveled hand. He would go to a counter and do everything with his left hand, and he'd kind of tuck stuff under the other one. It just hung there. I'm not being cruel; that's just the way he was, and it didn't bother him any.

This man apparently came to see somebody who could heal him. And some of the Pharisees are there now, looking for reasons. Jesus has already violated the rules four times; they're going to find a way to get rid of him, because he's creating trouble.

They were looking for a reason to accuse Jesus, so they watched him closely to see if he would heal on the Sabbath.

MARK 3:2

So Jesus says, “Stretch out your hand.” Show everybody. I always found that interesting. If you've got a shriveled hand, stretching it out is kind of tough. But he's holding it out there: see, it doesn't work. And then Jesus turns to the Pharisees: “It's your law. So let me ask you, as practitioners of the religious law...”

“Is it lawful to do good or to do evil? ... Is it better to save a life or to kill one?”

MARK 3:4

Those are questions you don't want to answer. They resemble the old question, "Have you stopped beating your wife?" If you answer yes, how long did you beat your wife? If you answer no, you're still beating your wife. There's no good answer without hanging themselves, so they decide to keep their mouths shut.

He looked at them in anger and deep distress at their stubborn hearts ... "Stretch out your hand."

MARK 3:5

We're going to return to this later. Jesus has those two emotions in him. He's angry because they won't confront their issue, and he's distressed because they won't listen to him. And he says, "Stretch out your hand," and the hand is healed.

Strange bedfellows

The next thing they do is go out and plot with the Herodians how they're going to kill Jesus. That's an interesting problem. There are three parties in Judaism, political or religious, whatever you want to call them. There are the Sadducees, who comply with everything for power. There are the Pharisees, who want to kick the Romans out of Palestine. And then there are the Herodians, who want to ingratiate themselves to the Romans to have power. The Pharisees can't stand the Herodians, and the Herodians can't stand the Pharisees. But they all decide to get together to try to kill Jesus. Politics makes strange bedfellows, and that's what was happening here.

4. "By the prince of demons" Mark 3:22-30

Now they call in the big guns. The teachers come down from Jerusalem to Galilee, and they say:

"He is possessed by Beelzebub! By the prince of demons he is driving out demons."

MARK 3:22

Beelzebub is a Philistine god. If you remember the book *Lord of the Flies*, about a dystopian world where boys are stranded on an island and everything falls apart: the term "lord of the flies" is Beelzebub. It's the Philistine lord of the flies. If you know

anything about flies and where they come from, and I'm not going to go into great detail, you know how filthy this is. They're saying he's given power by the very worst, most horrible deity.

Jesus responds very simply: "How can that be?" And he says something that has become very famous because Abraham Lincoln said it:

"A house divided against itself cannot stand."

MARK 3:25

Kingdoms that oppose themselves won't stand. How can evil kick out evil if evil wants to be preserved? Why would evil try to destroy itself? He gives them a conundrum. It doesn't work.

The unforgivable sin

And then we come to this. This is tough.

"I tell you, people can be forgiven for all their sin and every slander they utter, but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven. They are guilty of the eternal sin." He said this because they said he has an unclean spirit.

MARK 3:28-30

This idea bothers people. I remember a man who attended this class. He's gone on now. He came to me one Sunday morning, and we stood out there in the foyer, and he said to me, with tears in his eyes, "I don't think I can ever go to heaven." I said, "Well, why not?" He said, "I've committed the unforgivable sin." I said, "What is that?" I wanted to know where his mind was. He said, "Well, there are times I've had my doubts, and so I don't think I'll ever be forgiven. There was a time I didn't believe at all. I got it all straightened out, but that moment just damned me to hell." That's a hard thing for people.

To understand it, you've got to go backwards. Jesus was watching these men as they refused to answer, and he was deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts. They were not going to move. And then Mark says Jesus said this because they said he had an unclean spirit. They had excluded him as anything else. What we do know about the Pharisees is that they never changed their minds on this.

It is a settled posture against Christ that refuses to change.

In other words: no matter what you tell me, no matter what is explained to me, I am so entrenched in what I don't want to believe that I refuse to believe any of it. And the reason that's so serious is that suddenly you have closed yourself off from the very thing that can forgive you. If Jesus can forgive you, and you refuse to believe in Jesus, and you're never going to change, you have no way of being forgiven. It's unforgivable at that point. Can people change? Yes. But a lot of people never do, and that's always going to be a problem in their lives.

PART FIVE

Beneath the Iceberg: New Patches and New Wineskins

So what's the real problem? I've told you a lot of stuff, but underneath it, what's the thread holding all this together? It's kind of like an iceberg. What you see is what we've already talked about. What you haven't seen is what's beneath it. To get at that, we're going back to a couple of illustrations Jesus uses in this lesson. I skipped over them deliberately and put them here, because this is the point I think he's driving at.

A new patch on old cloth Mark 2:21

One is about a patch on clothes, and we don't patch clothes anymore. We throw them away and order four more on Amazon. That's life. But when I was a kid, back in the dark ages when the dinosaurs were knocking on the door, my mother sewed. I remember she would buy two yards of cloth, and before she'd sew anything, she did the strangest thing: she'd throw it in the washing machine. I'm thinking, it's clean, it came out of the factory. She did it every time. Why? Because if she sewed it first, you know what was going to happen the first time you washed it. It all rips apart.

Jesus says there are people who have old clothes that have already been shrunk, and they put a new piece of fabric on them. That new piece, as nice as it is, is incompatible with the fabric. The first time it's washed, it tears even more. The original fabric can't stand it, and the patch can't stand it. They're incompatible.

New wine in old wineskins Mark 2:22

The next is about wineskins. A wineskin was an animal skin used to store wine while it fermented, and when wine ferments, it expands. I've read about that; I have never tried it. Now, I have tried something. My seven-year-old grandson and I go to the store with my wife, and he says, "Can we buy Diet Coke and Mentos?" No. "Why not?" Well, we're just not going to do it. We drink Diet Coke at our house, but we don't have Mentos, because my wife knows she has a seven-year-old grandson and a 71-year-old husband who acts like a seven-year-old grandson. If you put Mentos in Diet Coke, seal it back up, and say, "Here, you want a drink?" it expands and explodes. That's what he's trying to talk about.

If the wineskin is fresh, it's pliable. It'll take on the shape of whatever happens. But if it's old and brittle and hard, and you put the wine in, and it begins to expand, it'll crack and break, and you lose everything. It's incompatible with the new.

The bumper-sticker reading

Some people have taken this passage and said Jesus was a revolutionary who was going to tear everything apart, who was going to throw a hand grenade in the church building and blow it all up because he didn't like that stuff. That's not what he says. But that's how it comes across: the old is bad, the new is good. Whenever you simplify something to a bumper sticker, you think you've got it, and you've just messed it up.

When I was in college, there was a magazine circulating in our brotherhood, put out by some guys who were not exactly the most traditional people. It was called *Wineskins*. The whole purpose of the publication was to show how the church had messed it all up and how we needed to change it all. You want to know why we are what we are today? Those guys grew up, and nobody ever showed them any different. What came out of that was: you only sing new songs, not old ones. Anything not written in the last five years is anathema, because we've got this new wine, and we can't put it in that old wineskin, that old songbook. That's when we started talking about worship styles, contemporary and traditional. I know churches that had one of each, and they were not compatible.

Many times in my lifetime, people have used this passage to impose what they would like to see done, on the premise that this is what God wants done. In other words, we're doing what suits us, not what is suitable to the kingdom. Those are two different things:

“I like it,” or “God commands it.” This is one of the reasons I believe that if you can’t put your finger on a verse that says exactly what you just said, you’ve got to be very, very careful, because now it’s yours, not God’s.

What Jesus never discards

But I want you to pay attention. Jesus never discards the Sabbath. Ever. He never says you should stop keeping the Sabbath. He only says it needs to be in its rightful place: not a club to beat people over the head with, but a place where people can learn to rest, relax, and reflect. Put the Sabbath back where God wants it, and quit putting it where you want it.

He says the same thing about fasting. It’s not that you shouldn’t fast. There are good reasons to fast. If you’re sad, you fast; it’s appropriate. Some years ago, when my wife’s mother died, my wife had spent all her time caring for her mother in her last days at her house, and she didn’t take time to eat. When her mother died, she weighed less than when we got married. She looked like a ghost. People kept saying to her, “You need to eat something.” When people die, folks say, “Here, have a steak.” I don’t understand it. She said, “I can’t. I don’t feel like eating.” There are times you don’t feel like eating, and it’s okay to fast. There are times you decide you want to fast, and that’s okay too, as long as I don’t tell you you have to. If it’s appropriate to the moment you’re in, do it. If it’s inappropriate to the moment, you don’t have to.

Does it fit with what Christ is doing with the kingdom?

That’s the question he’s asking. If it’s nothing more than a man-made structure that says you will comply with the rules, there’s something that needs to be questioned about that. How does it fit with what God is trying to do with the kingdom of God? Because God is trying to do something different than what we think. What Jesus is trying to do is make us into something beyond measure, not herd cats. He wants the spirit to expand. In the Old Testament, in places like Jeremiah and Ezekiel, you hear this idea:

“I will give you a new covenant, and I’ll write it on your hearts.”

JEREMIAH 31:31–33; CF. EZEKIEL 36:26

And you will respond with your hearts. It won't be carved on stone. It will be responsive to his teaching. So Jesus says, "That's what's going to happen here. I'm trying to make you into something big. I'm not trying to make you into a controlled substance."

Closing: Fitting Our Lives to the Message

So here's the question we need to end our class on: Do you want the message to fit you, rather than changing you to fit the message? We live in a world today that likes the message of Jesus as long as it works the way I want it to work, as long as it lets me do what I want to do. I like the teaching. I like loving my neighbor. I like all that stuff. But I don't want the structure. I don't want him to say, "I need your life and your heart."

The second question is even harder: How do we fit our lives to the message? Because that demands that we question everything we do and everything we say. How are we living in response to the command of God? That's the problem for most people. They don't know how it fits.

Jesus says the wine needs to fit in a new wineskin. The message needs to fit in a prepared, new heart, not an old one that just wants to be reformed. A lot of people like to be reformed, by the way. Reformation of life is a big deal. "What are the four things I need to do to make me happier?" That's a blog post. That's not Jesus. God's not after reformation. He's after transformation. And that takes a whole lot more.

Next week we continue.

Edited from a live class recording. Class discussion has been omitted and the material arranged for reading; Scripture wording follows the teacher's spoken quotation.