



This week at Magdalen Road church we continued our series in Mark's Gospel looking at chapter 2 and the first little bit of chapter 3. We considered this section under 4 apologetic questions that people sometimes ask.

The first question we considered was that

**(1) Christianity is only about words and ideas but with no real evidence (2v1-12)**

Jesus seems to make an absolute clanger as the paralysed man is lowered to him. Rather than telling him to get up and take his mat and walk he says to him his sins are forgiven. This is an important passage as we understand that by forgiving sins Jesus is claiming divinity. In the Bible all sin is primarily against God and so it's only God who can forgive sins. Jesus is implicitly claiming divinity which is why the teachers of the law are correct in their charge of blasphemy... Unless of course Jesus has the authority to forgive sins because he is indeed God!

To back up his claim of forgiveness of sins (he could simply be bluffing) he gives an outward evidence of healing which reveals the inward evidence of sins forgiven. The man takes up his mat and walks...

To those who claim that Christianity is simply a question of words and ideas this passage gives very clear evidence that Jesus is able to help us with our most foundational needs. From here though antagonism with the religious authorities begins to spiral...

The second: **(2) it's only for respectable people (2v13-17)**

Often people think (and we can sometimes give them cause to) that following Jesus is only for those whose lives look sorted. And so as he hangs with tax collectors and sinners once again the religious authorities were angry and confused. Tax collectors were traitors who fund-raised for the army to enable Rome to enforce its rule over a massive territory. They were doubly hated because they were often corrupt and skimmed a percentage of the taxes for themselves. And yet Jesus came for people like this..!

He makes it clear that it's only as people admit their need of him and see that they need a doctor that he can be helpful. The "righteous" who think they are okay already cannot be helped by Jesus. In reality none of us are righteous though - It's just that some are well-behaved and yet unrighteous whilst others are rule breakers and unrighteous...

Again this is not what people think the Christian faith is about - too easily we can give the impression that our lives are all okay - in reality Jesus came for the broken and spiritually bankrupt. People like you and people like me.

The third question is **(3) it's about sucking the joy out of life (2v18-22)**

We move from a scenario of feasting to one of fasting where Jesus's disciples are questioned why they don't fast (like the disciples of John the Baptist or the Pharisees). It's most likely that this fasting is not required by the Scriptures but rather simply something that these groups are engaging in to show their devotion.

Jesus's point is that the bridegroom is here and so it's the time of rejoicing. The kingdom of God is a kingdom of joy.

Again this cuts against ideas of our time that God is here simply to spoil our fun. And yet of course where we are our own masters with freedom to do what we want when we want, we do not end up in charge but rather slaves to our own desires... Jesus came to give us freedom that we might know the one who made us and love him as we were created to.

The final question is: **(4) it's just to do with keeping the rules (2v23-3v6)**

The question at the heart of these concerns about the sabbath seems to actually be what constitutes work. The sabbath was instituted by God as a way to set his people apart - that they might press pause and remember both (1) the goodness of his creation and (2) his rescue and redemption of them. What God's people have done was to find themselves creating extra rules and laws to protect themselves from transgressing. However as they sought to define what work was and whether they could or couldn't do it, they ended up burdening people with ludicrous intricacies and nuances.

Thus as Jesus then seemingly breaks the sabbath - by reaping grain and by restoring the man with the shrivelled hand - they are angry with him. And yet they've lost sight of what the sabbath was all about.

The crescendo of this account in 3v6 climaxes with two utterly polarised groups united as they seek to consider how to get rid of Jesus. On the one hand there were the Herodians - those loyal to King Herod who would be exemplified by progressive pagan freedom and wild living. On the other side were Pharisees those who sought to keep (and create) laws to keep the people of God pure. Both sides are threatened by the gospel of grace.

Ironically 3v6 (and 2v20) show is where this antagonism will ultimately lead - the cross of Jesus where we see the grace that they need most clearly!

*Here are a few questions to start your group off...*

1. *What does Jesus think the paralysed man's greatest need was? How ought that shape our concern for others? How ought that shape our ministry?*
2. *Are we challenge by the kind of people that Jesus hung around with? Do we see ourselves as tax collectors and sinners?! How ought that shape who we are the church? Why do we struggle to reach people like that? What needs to change?*
3. *What does the next encounter show us about the kingdom of God? Do you know this joy and rejoicing? Again how does this challenge our understanding what it means to be a part of God's kingdom?*
4. *Where are we culpable or tempted to add extra laws in the way that seems to be happening in this section? Why do we do this? What are the problems with this?*
5. *How do we feel about the antagonism that Jesus encountered? Do we expect it? Why or why not?*