**Out with the old and in with the new**

Text: Mark 2:13-3:6

Rev. David Waldron

**Scriptures:** Isaiah 58:1-10; Mark 2:13-3:6

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 27, 449, 116, 216, 513

**Series:** The gospel of Mark (#6)

**Theme:** Jesus calls Levi, a tax collector, to be one of His disciples and He is increasingly opposed by the Pharisees as he fellowships with despised classes of people, his disciples do not fast, they pluck grain on the Sabbath, and Jesus healed a man with a withered hand on the Sabbath.

**Proposition:** The actions and word of Christ challenge each one of us to ask, ‘who do I really think Jesus is?’

**Introduction**

Many of us have experienced ‘laundry fails’: When you forgot to take that important piece of paper out of a pocket, and you end up with wet confetti over the whole load; When you shrink an item of clothing in a hot wash so that it no longer fits you; When the dye from one garment taints all the white clothes in the washing machine.

Jesus uses a simple earthly illustration about mixed cloth and washing to teach a deep truth about the heavenly kingdom of God: “*No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old garment. If he does, the patch tears away from it, the new from the old, and a worse tear is made*” (Mark 2:21). Today much clothing is made from synthetic materials that do not shrink when washed. Garments made of natural fibres like cotton can be purchased as ‘pre-shrunk’ or ‘pre-washed’. In Bible times, new fabric shrunk in water and so would rip an old ‘pre-shrunk’ garment when washed if it had been used to repair a hole. Here’s the simple message: the new cannot be joined onto the old to repair it. With the coming of Jesus, the kingdom of God is at hand, and He calls for a radically new way that cannot exist alongside the old way.

Today wine is usually bought and stored in bottles until it is drunk. In Bible times leather containers made of animal skin (usually goat or sheep) were used to store and transport wine. Jesus uses an illustration of these wine containers to emphasize this same key truth - that the new cannot be combined with the old. “*No one puts new wine into old wineskins. If he does, the wine will burst the skins- and the wine is destroyed, and so are the skins. But new wine is for fresh wineskins*" (Mark 2:21). In Bible times, new wine continued to ferment after it was put into the wineskin and the gasses given off caused the skin to expand. Older leather wineskins that had already been stretched became brittle with age and would burst with the pressure of the gases released from new wine. Here’s the simple message: the new cannot be contained within the old.

The message is simple, but the big question here is ‘*what is the old and what is the new*’? Perhaps Jesus is referring to the Old Testament and the new covenant? No. That cannot be the meaning. Jesus explains: "*Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them*” (Matt 5:17). As we’ll see from our text in Mark 2:13-3:6, the ‘old’ is the oral law, the religious traditions that had been built up over time by the scribes and Pharisees and taught to the people as the way to be right with God. The ‘new’ is the gospel of God – the fulfilment in Christ of all the Old Testament laws and prophesies.

The person of Jesus confronts all who encounter him with a choice: either to remain in the old way or to follow the new way. We’ll look at the calling of Levi, a question about fasting, plucking grain, and healing on the Sabbath. We’ll see how they all connect to the central idea of the old way, the new way, and the decision each of us must make about Jesus. Here are the three points:

1. The old way of self-approval
2. The new way of Christ’s approval
3. Who do you really think Jesus is?
4. **The old way of self-approval**

Having high self-esteem is highly rated in contemporary thought and psychology. Self-esteem is your overall opinion of yourself and your abilities. The Pharisees were ‘big on’ self-esteem. The name ‘pharisee’ means ‘separated ones’. That is why they would not associate with anyone who did not follow the traditions that had been developed by the scribes (termed the oral law or ‘mishnah’).

That is why they asked the disciples of Jesus “*why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?*’ (2:16) Tax-collectors or ‘publicans’ were tasked with collecting public revenue on exports and imports which would then go to the Roman treasury. Chief publicans like Zacchaeus (Luke 19:2) would appoint lower rank ‘publicans’ to sit at booths and collect taxes from the people. The main tax booths were located at Caesarea, Capernaum and Jericho. Tax collectors were usually greedy and dishonest and had a reputation as being extortionists. Jewish publicans were regarded as traitors, unfaithful to their own people because they were in the service of a foreign oppressor. They were also ceremonially unclean – mixing with non-Jews.

The term ‘sinners’ used by the Pharisees doesn’t have the usual Scriptural definition of ‘transgressors of the moral law of God’. Here it meant the class of people viewed as inferior by the Pharisees because they did not follow the law of the scribes. These man-made laws were ethical teachings known as ‘*the tradition of the elders*’ (7:3). This tradition included ritual fasting twice every week (Luke 18:12) and is the background to the second critical question posed by the Pharisees to the disciples of Jesus. "*Why do John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?*" (2:18).

In the Old Testament law, only one fast was required – annually on the Day of Atonement (Lev 16:29-31), called ‘the Fast’ in Acts 27:9. Voluntary fasting was practiced on other occasions such as in times of grief, and humble prayer (e.g. Ezra 8:21) and to seek help and guidance from God (e.g. 2 Chron 20:3). There was liberty to fast if a person so desired and the general pattern of regular fasting in 1st century AD Judaism is revealed by Christ’s words in Matt 6:16 “*When you fast*”. It was fitting for the disciples of John the Baptist to fast, given the focus of his ministry on repentance (1:4) in preparation for the coming Lord. The Pharisees had turned a beneficial voluntary spiritual discipline into a compulsory duty to be performed if a person wanted to be ‘righteous’. This was part of the ‘old way’ of self-approval.

When the disciples of Jesus plucked heads of grain as they went through the fields on a sabbath day they broke the tradition followed by the Pharisees. So they were ‘sinners’. The truth is that the disciples were not breaking God’s law. They were neither stealing nor breaking the 4th commandment by working on the Sabbath (Ex 34:21). The Old Testament law gave liberty for them to satisfy their hunger from someone else’s crop: “*If you go into your neighbour’s standing grain, you may pluck the ears with your hand, but you shall not put a sickle to your neighbour’s standing grain*” (Deut 23:25).

The Pharisees third critical question was directed to Jesus: "*Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?*" Their tradition had 39 categories of work that could not be performed on the Sabbath. They had placed themselves as ‘lords of the sabbath’ with authority to enforce regulations where God had provided gracious liberty. Jesus responded to the Pharisees by reminding them of the freedom that David and his men had when they did break the ceremonial law by eating the consecrated ‘showbread’ (1 Sam 21:1-6).

The Pharisees had turned God’s Sabbath law upside down by teaching that people were created for the purpose of keeping this law. Jesus corrected their legalism by saying “*The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath*” (2:27). The Sabbath is God’s gracious gift of a day of rest, not a burdensome vehicle for gaining religious credit (Isa 58:13). Christ spectacularly demonstrated that He has authority over the Sabbath (2:28) by healing a man with a withered hand in the synagogue.

The Pharisees had ‘*neglected the weightier matters of the law; justice, mercy and faithfulness*’ (Matt 23:23). Their way was a hard, cold, staunch, unfeeling, religion of man-made rules that denied the gracious intent of God’s good law. Mark records the righteous wrath of Jesus when ‘*he looked around at them with anger, grieved at their hardness of heart*’ (Mark 3:5). The proud, self-righteous attitude of the ‘old-way’ of self-approval by the Pharisees is revealed in the parable that Jesus taught: “*The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.'*” (Luke 18:11-12).

The gospel of the kingdom of God could not be joined to, or contained within, this ‘old way’. The gospel replaces self-approval with God’s approval, as we’ll see in our second point.

1. **The new way of Christ’s approval**

Last year we looked at the ‘one another’ commands of Scripture and saw how they all stem from the gospel call of Christ: “*A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another*” (John 13:34). We saw how the command to ‘*show hospitality to one another*’ (1 Pet 4:9) is not primarily about providing food or lodging, but about forming and strengthening interpersonal relationships. The Greek word translated ‘hospitality’ literally means ‘love of strangers, foreigners’.

In our text today we see Jesus showing hospitality to ‘*many tax collectors and sinners*’ (2:15) in his house at Capernaum where he had earlier healed the paralytic. Jesus is the only truly ‘separated one’. He alone is perfectly holy, righteous and pure. He is God in the person of the Son. If anyone has a case for keeping themselves apart from the unholy, unrighteous and impure, surely it is Jesus. He is in reality what the Pharisees falsely believed themselves to be: righteous. Yet, whilst they prided themselves on not being ‘like other men’, Jesus willingly became like us, ‘*being born in the likeness of men*’ (Phil 2:7).

Jesus graciously extended hospitality in His own home to tax-collectors and sinners, entering into close fellowship with them at the meal table. There is absolutely nothing in the actions and words of Christ revealed in the gospels to suggest that He approved of the lifestyles of tax-collectors, prostitutes, and other sinners. This is very clear in Mark’s account when Jesus responds to the criticism of the scribes who were Pharisees, saying “*Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick*” (2:17). Jesus knew that the spiritual sickness of the tax-collectors and those who broke the traditions of the Pharisees was sin. He knew that the spiritual sickness of the Pharisees themselves was also sin (ref. Matt 23).

During the COVID pandemic most doctors did not seeing patients in person, but only had ‘phone consults’. These medical professionals understandably didn’t want to catch the virus from their patients and then not be able to continue working. Jesus, the ‘physician of the soul’ had no concern about ‘catching’ the sinfulness of those He fellowshipped with. He needed to be close to them so that they could hear Him calling them to follow Him. He needed to be close to them so that they could see for themselves that He is a genuinely approachable Saviour who sympathises with the weaknesses of people like us (Heb 4:15).

When Jesus explains that He ‘*came not to call the righteous, but sinners’* (2:17) He uses the word ‘righteous’ to describe those who like the Pharisees think themselves to be right with God because they approve of themselves as having met their own standard of ‘righteous behaviour’. Those who knew themselves to be unrighteous were drawn to Christ because He has something they knew they needed. They were feasting with Jesus, not fasting. When Christ referred to Himself as the Bridegroom who is with the wedding guests, the Pharisees would have known that in the Old Testament, the metaphor of the bridegroom is often used of the covenant God Himself (e.g. Hos 2:19; Isa 54:4ff 62:4ff and Eze 16:7ff).

One of those disciples feasting at home with Jesus was Levi the son of Alphaeus. This despised tax-collector had been called by Christ and would become the gospel writer Matthew (Matt 9:9), not self-approved, but approved by God through faith in Jesus. The hospitable fellowship of Christ with sinful people was not reason for sadness or criticism, but joy as Jesus continued to equip His disciples as gospel workers who lived out and taught the new way of Christ’s approval. Jesus’ acceptance of people like us never means that He finds our attitudes or actions fully acceptable. He receives us as we are and gradually changes us through the work of the Holy Spirit to become more like Him.

In contrast, the Pharisees wanted people to reach their self-made standards before having anything to do with ‘sinners’. Their ‘old-way’ approach was a bit like a church not accepting members unless they know and believe all the doctrines of Scripture and have their lives fully in order (or at least appear to do so in public).

We see the new way of Christ’s approval in His Sabbath activities. He upheld the acceptability of what we might call ‘works of necessity’ on the Lord’s Day; His disciples need to eat. He upheld the importance of what we might call ‘works of mercy’ on the Lord’s Day. He healed a man in need. The four gospel accounts evidence that Jesus, as a devout Jew, was faithful in attending Sabbath worship in the synagogue, but He showed that the spirit of God’s 4th commandment was the promotion of what is good, gracious and beneficial for people like us.

There was a clash, a conflict, between the ‘old-way’ of the scribes and Pharisees and the ‘new-way’ of the gospel of the Kingdom of God. As a result, everyone who came into contact with the person of Jesus was confronted with the question: ‘who do you really think Jesus is’, which is our third point:

1. **Who do you really think Jesus is?**

‘Conservatives’ are those who are ‘averse to change or innovation and who hold to traditional values’. The Pharisees were the ultra-conservatives in first century AD Judaism. They wanted to conserve their traditions which enabled them to live in their ‘comfort zone’ of being separated from others and of experiencing the false security of self-approval. As we’ve seen Christ did not behave in ways they considered to be acceptable, especially from someone who was a teacher of the Scriptures.

In his gospel, Mark traces the increasing opposition to Jesus from the Jewish religious leaders leading ultimately to His death on the cross. Jesus knew that the time was coming when He would allow the evil plans of the Pharisees to succeed in having Him executed. He predicted this when He said, ‘*The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast in that day*’ (2:20). After He had healed the man with the withered hand ‘*the Pharisees went out and immediately held counsel with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him*’ (Mark 3:6). They saw Jesus as a threat to the established order despite the evidence that He had supreme authority and power of a kind that is only possessed by God. Their traditions were more important to them than the truths of Scripture. Jesus would later declare to them “*You leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men*" (Mark 7:8).

Traditions are not necessarily bad. Paul writes to the Corinthians “*I commend you because you remember me in everything and maintain the traditions even as I delivered them to you*” (1 Cor 11:2). He is referring here to the apostolic traditions – the teaching of the apostles about who Christ is, what He has done and what He taught. The apostolic tradition is contained in the New Testament Word of God. It is a good and necessary tradition.

Churches, like ours, also have traditions – practices that are consistent with the Bible and have developed over time and have proven to be helpful in times past. When it comes to traditions of this kind, there are often two kinds of people: Those who desire to conserve traditions in the church and who fiercely resist any possible change, and those who desire to change traditions in the church and who are not at ease with the way things have always been. Which group is correct and how would we know?

By asking the question: “*who do you really think Jesus is?*’ Is Jesus who He says that He is? Is He calling you and me to ‘repent and believe the gospel’? Are we hostile to changes that the gospel calls us to make in our lives? Do we have a strict set of rules as to what we should and shouldn’t do on a Sunday and do we expect others to follow them like we do? Do we have a hardness of heart like that of the Pharisees when confronted with someone in need whose life is a mess? Do we hold to church traditions more tightly than we should? Is our way a hard, cold, staunch, unfeeling, religion of man-made rules that denies the gracious intent of God’s good law? Are we willing to review the ways in which live, both as individual believers and as a collective church in light of the gospel?

It is very easy for you and me to wag our finger at the Pharisees in disapproval when we see how blind and wicked they were. It is harder to look at ourselves and ask if we are also guilty in some ways of following the old way of self-approval. It is hard to be willing to review our church practices today in light of Scripture and to be ready to make changes if necessary. Saying “we’ve always done it this way” is not a Biblical defence unless ‘this way’ is clearly commanded in Scripture.

It is hard to question whether we actually have high opinion of ourselves as good Christians who attend church twice each Lord’s Day. It is hard to question whether we feel good about ourselves because we are active in congregational life whilst ‘turning a blind eye’ when we have little contact with those who wouldn’t dare step inside a church building because they don’t see themselves as ‘good enough’. It’s hard to ask yourself ‘Am I willing to open my home to people who are disliked and mistrusted by our society or who don’t behave in the ways I would expect of a church goer?’ These questions make me feel uncomfortable. How about you?

That’s likely how the Pharisees felt in the presence of Jesus. Very uncomfortable. Christ challenged their established patterns of behaviour, and they didn’t like that. They were inwardly proud of the way they lived. They were so critical of Christ and His ministry that they met with the Herodians – a party who supported the dynasty of the Herods who were in alliance with Rome. How ironic that they despised the tax-collectors who served their foreign oppressors, yet they were willing to enlist the help of the unclean, pagan, Romans in order to plot to destroy Jesus.

How amazing that Jesus called a hated publicans to be one of His own disciples. Luke (5:28) records that Matthew ‘*leaving everything, he rose and followed Him*’. Matthew was prepared to leave behind his old way of life and follow the new way of being approved by Jesus. How about you?

AMEN.