

Mark Chapter 2 A Declaration of War

By David L. Miner

Mark, in his gospel, ties an event with some interesting teaching that, on its face, seems unrelated to the event. In truth, I believe this passage is a subtle but powerful declaration of war on the Pharisees and especially on the established religious belief system enforced by the Pharisees. I believe Jesus, in this passage, subtly announced that he was here to more than just upset the apple cart!

In chapter one of Mark's Gospel, Jesus is recorded as teaching and healing at several times. Casting out evil spirits was an activity that falls under both teaching and healing, as Jesus indicated, and at each event he does some of both.

The result of all this is that by the end of the first chapter, Jesus is thronged by crowds every time he comes into town; and in chapter two, even while he is still out of town.

In chapter two, Jesus is confronted by a man with "the palsy," which was almost certainly some form of paralysis. Four friends brought the man before Jesus in a unique manner that was sure to attract his attention - they destroyed part of the roof in Peter's house, or maybe his mother-in-law's house, and let the man down from above. Jesus was really impressed by the faith of the man's friends. As a result, Jesus said, "*Son, thy sins be forgiven thee.*" [Mark 2:5, KJV]

And this act caused certain teachers of the Law to claim that Jesus was speaking blasphemy, saying, "Who can forgive sins but God only?"

Jesus responds with a question: "*Which is easier to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven, or to say, 'Get up, take your mat and walk?'"*" [Mark 2:9, NIV]

The scribes and the Pharisees knew the importance of that question! In Jewish tradition, if a Jew loved and served God, he was blessed by God in his finances or his health or both. If a Jew rebelled against God and sinned, he was punished by God in his finances or his health or both. To these people, this man was paralyzed; so it was clear that he had sinned. Since he was STILL paralyzed it was clear that he was STILL in his sins, and had not been forgiven by God.

So, if God forgave the man, according to this traditional theology, then the man would become healed.

Because of this, Jesus forgave the man of his sins since this would *result* in his healing, according to their beliefs. **BUT ONLY IF JESUS WAS GOD!**

Hence, Jesus asked, "Which is more difficult?" Either way, Jesus implied one could not happen without affecting the other. And to underscore what was REALLY happening here, Jesus DID BOTH!

Brothers and sisters, *THIS WAS HUGE!*

The fact that Jesus was healing people implied their sins were forgiven. But as long as no one raised this issue, the Pharisees could ignore it, sort of. But Jesus actually forced the issue, and the religious leaders had to respond with accusations of blasphemy.

So let's look at this declaration of war in Chapter 2 of the Gospel according to Mark.

After the events described above, Jesus left town and headed for the lakeside. As he toured the fishing boats and the small villages near the shore, he walked among the carts and booths selling the sorts of things sold in every fishing village throughout time. Including one thing that nobody wanted to see - the local tax collector.

Mark records the event where Jesus recruits Levi, the tax collector, into his ever-increasing team of close disciples. In an act of celebration and welcome, they have a dinner party at the house of the new disciple. As always, there were scribes and Pharisees around to closely observe Jesus in the hopes of catching him in the act of teaching or doing something, *anything*, contrary to established interpretations of the Law.

Naturally, a disparity, or at least a distinction, came to light:

And the disciples of John and of the Pharisees used to fast: and they come and say to him, Why do the disciples of John and of the Pharisees fast, but thy disciples fast not?
[Mark 2:18, KJV]

John's disciples and the Pharisees were fasting; and they came and said to Him, "Why do John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but Your disciples do not fast?"
[Mark 2:18, NASB]

Then Jesus launched into three apparently unrelated stories, even parables, which he offered as if they were answers to the question.

The question now becomes, how do these three apparently unrelated stories relate to the question? And how do they ANSWER the question? And maybe, DO they answer the question?

In other words, was Jesus simply avoiding the question?

Jesus starts his "answer" with a short discussion of the typical wedding celebration, and asks a question: *Can the friends of the bridegroom give up food and drink while they are partying with the groom?*

Without waiting for an answer, he then went on with a short story about the lack of foresight in patching a tear in an old coat with a piece of new material.

And Jesus finishes his "answer" with a warning against pouring new wine into an old wineskin, because the final stages of fermentation, which finish off the wine properly, will produce expansion. A new wineskin has some stretch in it, but an old wineskin does not, and will split as the wine ferments and finishes.

So now the original question becomes, at least for us and almost certainly for the Pharisees: What is it about these three unrelated stories that answers the question?

As we look more closely at this new question, there sneaks into the back of my mind something else: *is Jesus actually trying to answer the actual question?* Or is he really trying to answer a question more fundamental, closer to what Jesus wants the Pharisees to see is really at issue here?

If we take the time to research Jewish weddings of that day, we will easily find dozens of publications on the shelves of a good Jewish library, ranging from pamphlets to chapters in a book to entire books. An overview of them will show a plethora of detailed customs, requirements, restrictions, and traditions. And each variant of Jewish practice has its own library of publications.

There were so many details to a Jewish wedding, and each of these details was tied to varying degrees of "required" rules and traditions, that a serious and formal wedding all but required a professional wedding planner just to keep the wedding within the approval of traditional sensitivities and Pharisaic acceptance. Read again the first miracle by Jesus at the wedding feast that ran short of wine, as recorded in Chapter 2 of John's Gospel.

With all the complexities in a formal wedding to draw from in answer to the question, Jesus chose to focus on the fun part, the portion of the week-long ceremony that relates to the groom's partying, and tells the Pharisees that the groom's friends don't give up food and drink for a week while the groom is still around celebrating his coming wedding night! It would appear that this is the only part of the long wedding ceremony that the Pharisees didn't consider. They were well aware of the requirements and restrictions and customs of wedding feasts, but they most likely had given little thought to the "party" aspect during the week-long wedding feast.

It was almost as if Jesus was treating a serious and formal question on an important issue as if it was a party. Jesus was on the edge of a social and especially a religious insult, and disguised it as an answer to the question they asked.

And if the Pharisees weren't irritated enough at that, Jesus took things a couple steps further.

Jesus brought out two parables that took something old and established, and implied that the old cannot be added to, modified, or fixed, but required something entirely new:

- A tear in an old coat can't be fixed by patching it with new material
- An old wineskin can't be used to contain new wine

For the fast-thinking Pharisee, Jesus just implied that the established complexities of rabbinical teaching about the Law was not as important as the fellowship between the groom and his friends. Further, any attempt to fix the old teachings or use them differently will just make things worse. Jesus was claiming that the old system must be thrown away and the new teachings must be wholly adopted.

NOTE TO THE WORLD: If you really want to irritate a Pharisee, just compare his beliefs and his profession – indeed, his very life – to a party with no rules, where the groom does what he wants. This comparison is so far removed from the reality of the Pharisee that it is offensive to him!

Jesus was subtly and not too gently trying to say, "Out with the old and in with the new" because the old was just too complex and inflexible and cumbersome to update, and it had no fun or joy or love in it.

This was a warning from Jesus of what was to come.

Earlier in this chapter, Jesus had already thrown in front of the Pharisees his ability to heal and his authority to forgive sins by equating them and then doing BOTH right in front of them. See Mark 2:1-12. This was not only novel, but it was blasphemous in the eyes of the Pharisees. Yet Jesus didn't seem the least bit concerned about that.

And Jesus was about to heal a man's deformed hand on the Sabbath, thereby violating the Pharisees' understanding of Sabbath restrictions.

When these and other actions were taken together, it becomes obvious to us looking back that Jesus crossed the Pharisees and contradicted their teachings so drastically that it absolutely REQUIRED they plot to kill him in the near future. And he did it intentionally.

Mark portrayed in his Gospel account that Jesus was not so much willing to rock the boat as he was intending to *sink* the boat and obtain a sleek new catamaran.

And we are only in Chapter two!