

From the big picture perspective, we see a definite *direction* to Jesus' ministry: from the wilderness into Galilee, and from Galilee into Jerusalem. But when we enter into the details, we see that within that overall movement, there is a rhythm, a cycle to how Jesus works. And so our text today begins with "he went out again". Jesus goes out on another seaside preaching trip and recruiting mission, pulling another fish, Levi, out of the sea into His gospel net.

But while Jesus' first tour might be called his approval tour, this next go-around will be the disapproval tour. After challenging the scribes by claiming divine authority to forgive sins, Jesus starts tearing down false piety left and right. There are four sections today's text, and in each one, Jesus puts his foot through the side of the beautiful whitewashed walls that the Jews have erected.

First, Doctor Jesus associates with the sick tax collectors and sinners, rather than healing only healthy people. Second, Jesus the Bridegroom refuses to fast at his own wedding, choosing to celebrate instead. Third, Jesus the Anointed-but-not-yet-crowned King imitates King David, feeding the hungry rather than allowing the needy to suffer in the name of God. Fourth, Jesus the Restorer gives Sabbath rest to man with a cursed hand over the protests of those who preferred pious passivity to compassionate action on the day of rest.

What ties all of these stories together is Jesus' mission of announcing and displaying the incoming kingdom of God as a kingdom of *life* and *restoration* and *joy* and *blessing*, rather than a kingdom of strict rules used to make hurting and hopeless people behave. As we heard in Exodus 20 and in Psalm 19, the law of God was meant to be life-giving for God's people (and so Paul says that the law is good *if one uses it lawfully*), but when used *wrongly*, when wielded as a weapon, it brings death.

That's what was happening among God's people when Jesus came, and that's why such a big part of His mission involved making the religious leaders so angry. They were using God's gifts as weapons against God's people. And what made Jesus so very *angry* (3:5) was they attached God's name to their oppressive, destructive legalism. Although they were using God's gifts in God's name, they were actually doing the work of the Devil, and Jesus came to cast him out, and so this made them want to kill him (3:6). (Which is lawful...?)

So in the first section, the calling of Levi, also known as Matthew, Jesus becomes *socially* unclean. Levi was a Jew who worked for Rome taking money from Jews, a traitor on multiple levels. Jesus calls an IRS agent to join the vanguard of God's kingdom! He's someone who would have worked for Lehman brothers; he's the guy setting up phony accounts at Wells Fargo, and now he's calling *you* to repent! Jesus, that's just offensive!

And it seems that the scribes and Pharisees want to give Jesus an out – maybe he doesn't know that respectable leaders of religious reform movements don't associate with people like that. They ask, "Why would a righteous man go and eat with sinners?" If bad people ever want to become good, we're over here! But Jesus turns the tables on them with His answer: "You don't think doctors ought to see patients?" Righteousness for Jesus is not like fine china, easily broken and best kept hidden. Righteousness is *medicine for sick people*, and God doesn't wait for sick people to become well before He gives them the medicine! That's not how the kingdom works!

Jesus came for sinners, and when Jesus calls, He turns the worst people in the world in saints, full members of the kingdom just like well-behaved *you*. Are you on board with that?

Think of the worst group in America, the tribe causing the most damage and inflicting the most pain on our culture. Or, closer to home, think of someone who has wronged or betrayed you or your family. Now, get ready for Jesus to have *them* call *you* to repentance. Not only do they need what you've been given, but you need to become the kind of person who loves your enemies. The same gospel that cures their sin-sickness is also chemotherapy for your self-righteousness. That's why Jesus uses a tax-collector to join Him in calling Israel to repentance.

This is *supposed* to challenge you. It's *supposed* to be hard to swallow. We all want to set ourselves up as the Lord of Welcome. We pick our own community; we choose our friends; we decide who's in and who's out. But that's what *Pharisees* do. If you're going to follow someone in this passage, for Jesus' sake, don't pick the Pharisees! **Jesus is the Lord of Welcome**. Follow him! Romans 15:7 gives us the application: *Welcome one another, just as Christ has welcomed you*.

Okay, fine, Jesus. We'll grudgingly admit that sinners need repentance. But the important thing is that they when they repent, they worship just like us, right? Now we're in vv. 18-22. It's fasting time, Jesus. Why aren't you fasting? I thought you picked up where John left off; *his* disciples are fasting. What gives?

And it's actually a bit pitiful: the Pharisees believe that *they* are the ones ushering in God's blessings through their scrupulous keeping of the law. If we keep the law well enough, the kingdom will come! And so if Jesus wants in on this whole reformation of God's people thing, He needs to get on board!

But Jesus hits them with a devastating image that reveal the folly of their approach: "Who fasts at a wedding?" Jesus asks. "God spreads a feast for you, and you try to honor him by *not* eating?" It doesn't make any sense. But this is how the Jews thought. God gives them a special name to know Him by, and they are careful never to use it.

It's like thinking it's more holy *not* to read the Bible – “I gave you a book.” God says. “Thanks! I'll make sure I never open it!” Or more honoring to God *not* to pray to Him. “Here's how to pray. Come boldly, ask for whatever you want, and I'll give it to you.” “Thanks! I'll never bother you again!” It's completely missing the point! Actually, it's *insulting* to God – “I threw a party.” God says. “We know,” the Jews replied, “We made sure nobody came, just like you wanted.” What?!?!

Notice, though, that it isn't so much that the actions are wrong; it's the *timing*. The tempo has changed, and the singers haven't caught up, and so they're on the wrong words. Fasting time will come, Jesus says, but not *now*. The important thing is to fast at the fast and feast at the feast, and **Jesus is Lord of the Feast**. The Pharisees say: “Sinners coming! Time to hide!” Jesus says, “Time to help!” “Kingdom is coming!” Jesus says. “Look sad, everyone!” The Pharisees say. No! It's time to rejoice! The Bridegroom is here! The Lord of the Feast is here! So feast!

By trying to conform Jesus to their plan for God's kingdom, they're trying to squeeze the New Covenant inside the Old Covenant box. That's like trying to fit my son into 18 month clothes. *It ain't happenin!* A new unshrunk patch will *ruin* an old garment. New wine will *burst* old wineskins. Again, see the focus on new/old, not right/wrong. The Old Covenant was great, and was designed to last until Jesus came. But now that He's come, Jesus and His Kingdom can't fit into the Pharisee's box!

And the biggest flashpoint of the conflict, the one that keeps coming up, is about Sabbath. What is the Sabbath like, and what is it for? What does Sabbath tell us about God? Jesus is going to give radically different answers to those questions than the scribes and Pharisees, and that's why our focus is on 2:27: “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.”

That's Jesus' principle, but then He follows it up in v. 28 with an assertion of authority: “So the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath.” By revisiting the title that He claimed when He forgave the paralytic, He's deliberately reminded them of the authority that He established by healing him. He's not just another scribe advancing a different interpretation. *He's the Lord*, and until *they* start healing paralytics, then Jesus is the one with authority, over sin, over sickness, and over the Sabbath.

So then, what does the Lord of the Sabbath *do*? Does He crush people with Sabbath rules, or does He give people Sabbath rest? These two stories, eating the grain and healing the man with the withered hand, are both testimonies to how the Lord of the Sabbath uses the Sabbath. This is what the Sabbath is for: the Sabbath is for giving food to the hungry, help to the needy. The Sabbath is for healing, for giving life. The Sabbath is meant to be a blessing to man.

And here's why Sabbath is such a big deal to Jesus: it's because the incoming kingdom is a Sabbath kingdom. The life of the kingdom looks like Sabbath, bringing rest and restoring life to the world. How? By being with Jesus – hearing Him, following Him, being healed by Him. Sabbath is one of the key pictures of Jesus' kingdom – if you get Sabbath wrong, you get the kingdom wrong, you crush the kingdom people, you get the king wrong, you end up crucifying the king.

And so we need to get Sabbath *right*, and the Lord Jesus shows us the way. But understand well: using the Sabbath to bless and give life *is not the same thing* as ignoring the Sabbath so that people can do what they want. The Sabbath is *not* about catering to the felt needs you have. It's not about naps and football and movies and family time. Those things are all well and good, *but that's not what Sabbath is about*. The Sabbath isn't about time to do what you want.

Sabbath is time for you to receive rest from God, and what that rest looks like is up to the Lord of the Sabbath! Jesus knows what the rest you need looks like, and you don't! The Lord of the Sabbath knows that in order to rest, you need to worship God. You need to eat with God. You need to be restored by God. That's what gives you life! Your "need" for entertainment and indulgence and distraction will kill you. It will kill your soul, and it will kill your body. Which is lawful on the Sabbath? To save life, or to kill?

And so instead of starting with your own ideas about what will restore you and give you and your family life, look to the Lord of the Sabbath. Who knows best what gives life and rest? What did He tell us and show us to do on the Sabbath? If we really trusted Jesus about what will give us rest and life, then we'd be clamoring for an evening service, and we would rejoice in opportunities to *serve* on the Sabbath, because *that's* how we receive the restful life of the incoming kingdom that Jesus brings, and offer it to others.

And that's what "feeds" Jesus – doing the will of His Father. That's the food that followers of Jesus need, too. The Sabbath was made so that you could pluck worship and mercy like heads of grain, and eat the bread of heaven on the Lord's Sabbath Day.

So here is the charge: the Lord of Welcome says: "Welcome one another, just as I have welcomed you." The Lord of the Feast calls you to come and rejoice in the kingdom feast. And the Lord of the Sabbath cries out, "Come to me, all who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest." May God help us to follow our Lord.

- *In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.*