

Lesson Three

(Mark 2:13 - 4:9)

Jesus Calls Levi

(Mark 2:13-22)

13 Jesus went back again to the shore of Lake Galilee. A crowd came to him and he started teaching them. 14 As he walked along he saw a tax collector, Levi, the son of Alphaeus, sitting in his office. Jesus said to him, "Follow me." Levi got up and followed him.

15 Later on Jesus was having a meal in Levi's house. A large number of tax collectors and outcasts was following Jesus, and many of them joined him and his disciples at the table. 16 Some teachers of the Law, who were Pharisees, saw that Jesus was eating with these outcasts and tax collectors; so they asked his disciples, "Why does he eat with such people?"

17 Jesus heard them and answered, "People who are well do not need a doctor, but only those who are sick. I have not come to call the respectable people, but the outcasts."

18 On one occasion the followers of John the Baptist and the Pharisees were fasting. Some people came to Jesus and asked him, "Why is it that the disciples of John the Baptist and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but yours do not?"

19 Jesus answered, "Do you expect the guests at a wedding party to go without food? Of course not! As long as the bridegroom is with them they will not do that. 20 But the time will come when the bridegroom will be taken away from them; when that day comes then they will go without food.

21 "No one uses a piece of new cloth to patch up an old coat. If he does, the new patch will tear off some of the old cloth, making an even bigger hole. 22 Nor does anyone pour new wine into used wineskins. If he does, the wine will burst the skins, and both the wine and the skins will be ruined. No! Fresh skins for new wine!"

This section might also be called "The Universal Nature of the Gospel." Mark shows us something about the kind of men Jesus called to be his apostles. Try to view Matthew Levi as the Jewish people saw him. He was a tax collector, and therefore a "turncoat" who represented the hated occupation government. The Roman method of collecting taxes involved *selling* the right to collect. That way they received their money immediately, and the tax collector could squeeze every cent out of the people he could get; legally (but not morally) right. Tax collectors mingled freely with Gentiles, and so were ritually unclean. They were viewed as "sinners," and included in with the outcasts from the synagogue. However, some of them were honest, such as Zacchaeus (Luke 19:7-8) and certainly Levi. The "sinners" and "outcasts" were all people who simply made no effort to live up to the strict standards of the Pharisees. For Jesus to openly associate with such as these, brought him into direct confrontation with the super-religious Pharisees, and they were the most influential religious party in the nation. If Jesus had the authority to forgive sins, he has the right to come to those who are deeply *aware* of their need for him (vs 17). Certainly Jesus does not mean to say that some are

already righteous, but that the Pharisees would also come if they only knew their great need. Compare Luke 7:36-50.

In the calling of Levi, then, we can see Jesus defend his gospel of grace and his mission to bring this to all who need it. God's sensational offer of salvation is intended for everyone -- Jew or Gentile, male or female -- who will believe it and respond to it!!! Compare the "whosoever will" of Rev. 22:17, and read what James quotes in Acts 15:14-18.

We do not know whether Levi already knew Jesus personally. He was certainly a disciple of John the Baptizer (compare Acts 1:21-22). We may be sure that when Jesus said, "Follow me," the words fell on a heart that was prepared to receive them. Here was a hungry soul in a most unlikely place! But compare the woman at the well (John 4:7-38). Mark identifies Levi as the son of Alphaeus, so it is possible that Thomas may have been his twin and James also his brother (see Luke 6:15).

God through the Law of Moses required all Jews to *fast* (go without food) on the Day of Atonement (Lev. 16:29). The Pharisees had expanded this, and required fasting on every Monday and Thursday (compare Luke 18:12). John the Baptizer seems to have required his disciples to fast regularly. But Jesus does not do this! Therefore the question. Jesus answers them with three parables which show something of the *jubilant nature* of true Christianity (compare John 16:33). First, "*Do you expect the guests at a wedding party to go without food?*" The Jewish leaders did not think of the Messiah in terms of "the heavenly bridegroom," but it is evident that Jesus did! Verse 20 points to his coming death, but it was to climax in the joy of his resurrection! Second, "*No one uses a piece of new cloth, etc.*" The new age Jesus was bringing in, would not be a "warmed over version" of the old Judaism. To try to patch the new movement into the old Judaism would be a disaster. Third, "*Nor does anyone pour new wine into, etc.*" The *joy* of the new message of truth is not to be stifled by Jewish legalism. It is tragic that some Christians no longer believe these things which Jesus taught. Geoffrey Paxton says, "Now is the time for weeping. The veil has been sewn back together again, the stone rolled up against the mouth of the tomb, and we mount the rostrum as self-made victors. May God grant us the gift of repentance."

The Question about the Sabbath

(Mark 2:23-3:6)

23 Jesus was walking through some wheat fields on a Sabbath day. As his disciples walked along with him, they began to pick the heads of wheat. 24 So the Pharisees said to Jesus, "Look, it is against our Law for your disciples to do this on the Sabbath!"

25 Jesus answered, "Have you never read what David did that time when he needed something to eat? He and his men were hungry, 26 so he went into the house of God and ate the bread offered to God. This happened when Abiathar was the High Priest. According to our Law only the priests may eat this bread -- but David ate it, and even gave it to his men."

27 And Jesus concluded, "The Sabbath was made for the good of man; man was not made for the Sabbath. 28 So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath."

3 Then Jesus went back to the synagogue, where there was a man who had a crippled hand. **2** Some people were there who wanted to accuse Jesus of doing wrong; so they watched him very closely, to see whether he would cure him on the Sabbath. **3** Jesus said to the man with the crippled hand, "Come up here to the front." **4** Then he asked the people, "What does our Law allow us to do on the Sabbath? To help, or to harm? To save a man's life, or to destroy it?" But they did not say a thing. **5** Jesus was angry as he looked around at them, but at the same time he felt sorry for them, because they were so stubborn and wrong. Then he said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He stretched it out and it became well again. **6** So the Pharisees left the synagogue and met at once with some members of Herod's party; and they made plans against Jesus to kill him.

These two stories of conflict deal with the tradition surrounding the Sabbath. God's Law prohibited working on the Sabbath day (which was our Saturday). The Pharisees distorted this into something God had not intended. It was their tradition which Jesus and his disciples kicked by their actions. Jesus answers their charge by referring them to what David did at Nob (1 Sam. 21:1-6). This clearly broke the letter of the law (see Exod. 25:23-30); Lev. 24:5-9). We usually think this was excused as a matter of necessity. Yet Jesus shows that what David did was not condemned by scripture! His disciples broke no law (that is, the spirit of the law) of scripture by their act of shelling out and eating the grains of wheat. It was their Tradition which was in error!

Jesus teaches two new positive principles here. First, "*The Sabbath was made for the good of man.*" The man-made rules, which made it into a heavy burden for the people, were wrong. Compare Matt. 7:21-23. Second, "*the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath.*" If the Sabbath is for man's good, how much more is man's Lord and representative, the Son of man, the One who has authority over its use. In the Old Testament portion of the Bible, the Sabbath is uniquely the *Lord's* day. By his claim, then, Jesus is making himself equal with God! McGarvey says, "The passage teaches, then, not that man might violate the law of the Sabbath when their welfare seemed to them to demand it, but that Jesus could set it aside, as he afterward did, when his own judgment of man's welfare required him to do so." (There is no mention of "Sabbath-breaking" in the catalogue of sins in the New Testament portion of the Bible. The Christian's "Sabbath" comes in heaven, Heb. 4:1-11.) As a side note, the "Church Fathers" said that *both* father and son were named Abiathar Ahimelech (compare 1 Sam. 22:20; 2 Sam. 8:17; 1 Chron. 18:16).

Jewish law warned the first offender rather than punishing him. It might have been, they said, that he did not know he was breaking the law. If he did it a second time, this could only have been a deliberate act of disobedience. The second act would require severe punishment. With this in mind, we see Jesus again kick the tradition of the Pharisees by deliberately healing a man in the synagogue on the Sabbath. Some who were looking for an excuse to accuse Jesus, were watching very closely to see what he would do. (It may be that they had planted the man there.) Their tradition only permitted an act of healing (on the Sabbath) in response to an actual threat to life. Jesus ignores Tradition to ask what the law itself allows. His words imply that his critics want to "destroy," while he wants to "save" (compare John 10:7-10). The Pharisees show the truth of this by their action in verse 6. "Herod's party" was a political group who wanted

to replace the Roman governor with a descendant of Herod. Since the Herods were agents of the Roman occupation forces, it is unthinkable that the superpatriot Pharisees would form an alliance with them! But evil can unite men as well as good.

We note Jesus felt both anger and sorrow toward his critics. They had such a great need, yet they were rejecting God's mercy! Compare Matt. 23:29-39; Rom. 9:30-33; 11:1-12; also see verses 1 Thess. 2:14-16.

Jesus Chooses the Twelve

(Mark 3:7-19)

7 Jesus and his disciples went away to Lake Galilee, and a large crowd followed him. They came from Galilee, from Judea, 8 from Jerusalem, from the territory of Idumea, from the territory on the other side of the Jordan, and from the neighborhood of the cities of Tyre and Sidon. This large crowd came to Jesus because they heard of the things he was doing. 9 The crowd was so large that Jesus told his disciples to get a boat ready for him, so the people would not crush him. 10 He had healed many people, and all the sick kept pushing their way to him in order to touch him. 11 and whenever the people who had evil spirits in them saw him they would fall down before him and scream, "You are the Son of God!"

12 Jesus gave a stern command to the evil spirits not to tell who he was.

13 Then Jesus went up a hill and called to himself the men he wanted. They came to him

14 and he chose twelve, whom he named apostles. "I have chosen you to be with me," he told them; "I will also send you out to preach, 15 and you will have authority to drive out demons."

16 These are the twelve he chose: Simon (Jesus gave him the name Peter); 17 James and his brother John, the sons of Zebedee (Jesus gave them the name Boanerges, which means "Men of Thunder"); 18 Andrew, Philip, Bartholomew, Matthew, Thomas, James, the son of Alphaeus, Thaddaeus, Simon the Patriot, 19 and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed Jesus.

At this point, the conflict with the Pharisees has done nothing to diminish the popularity of Jesus. Large crowds come from all over Palestine, but drawn by his miracles rather than his preaching. So many people come that Jesus plans to go out in the lake to escape the press of the crowds. The statement that they wanted to "touch him" suggests the incident of the woman with severe bleeding (5:24-34). It must have been that Jesus' power to heal could be claimed just by touching him. Notice also the action of those possessed by evil spirits. "*And whenever the people, etc.*" Every time the spirits saw Jesus they began to speak (through the person they possessed) in the way recorded here!

". . . and scream, 'You are the Son of God!'" Earlier they had said, '*God's holy messenger.*' Jesus again sternly orders their silence! It must have been very difficult to reveal his divinity in just the right way. The evil spirits must have made his healing ministry much more demanding and strenuous.

For the "New Israel" to emerge, it was necessary to intensify the efforts in a way that demanded *helpers*. There were a number of disciples (Paul later mentions 500 in 1

Cor. 15:6), and from this group, Jesus chooses twelve who would form the hard core of God's new "nation." These would first of all be trained by Jesus, and then be sent out to extend the scope of his work. "Twelve" suggests the twelve tribes of Israel (Matt. 19:28), also the twelve spies sent into Canaan (Num. 13:8-16). "Apostle" conveys the idea of "messenger" or "agent." Jesus was sending them out to preach, and giving them authority over evil spirits (compare Matt.10:8; John 20:21-23). This is known as the "limited commission." Later Jesus would send out 72 more (70 in some versions) to assist in this work (Luke 10:1-12). Still later, after Jesus had been raised from death, the "unlimited commission" was given, sending the followers of Christ "*to all peoples everywhere*" (Matt. 28:19-20).

Mark gives us a list of the original Twelve (see also Matt. 10:1-4; Luke 6:12-16; Acts 1:13). It was common to have more than one name, and sometimes two children in the same family were given the *same* name. "Boanerges" may refer to their quick temper but probably to their forceful preaching. Bartholomew is Nathaniel. "Patriot" is the same as "Zealot" or "Canaanite," and we would use the word "Zionist." "Iscariot" probably means "man of Kerioth" (in Judah, see Joshua 15:25). Judas Iscariot was the only non-Galilean. All were from the ranks of the common people. Many of these Twelve had been disciples of John the Baptizer, had left him to follow Jesus, and would stay with Jesus during his teaching ministry (compare Acts 1:21-22). Except for Judas Iscariot, all would see Jesus after he was raised from death. There were many who could fit this description, but Matthias was the one later chosen to take the place of Judas. Paul was a special case, the thirteenth apostle (there were actually 13 tribes of Israel, Levi not being counted). Each of the Twelve plus Paul were hand picked by Jesus for their mission.

Jesus and Beelzebul

(Mark 3:20-35)

20 Then Jesus went home. Again such a large crowd gathered that Jesus and his disciples had no time to eat. 21 When his family heard about this they set out to get him, because people were saying, "He's gone mad!"

22 Some teachers of the Law who had come from Jerusalem were saying, "He has Beelzebul in him!" Others said, "It is the chief of the demons who gives him the power to drive them out."

23 So Jesus called the people to him and told them some parables: "How can Satan drive out Satan? 24 If a country divides itself into groups that fight each other, that country will fall apart. 25 If a family divides itself into groups that fight each other, that family will fall apart. 26 So if Satan's kingdom divides into groups, it cannot last, but will fall apart and come to an end.

27 "No one can break into a strong man's house and take away his belongings unless he ties up the strong man first; then he can plunder his house.

28 "Remember this! Men can be forgiven all their sins and all the evil things they may say. 29 But whoever says evil things against the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven, because he has committed an eternal sin." 30 (Jesus said this because some had said, "He has an evil spirit in him.")

31 Then Jesus' mother and brothers arrived. They stood outside the house and sent in a message, asking for him. 32 A crowd was sitting around Jesus, and they told him, "Look, your mother and brothers are outside, and they want you."

33 Jesus answered, "Who is my mother? Who are my brothers?" 34 He looked over the people sitting around him and said, "Look! Here are my mother and my brothers! 35 Whoever does what God wants him to do is my brother, my sister, my mother."

"Beelzebul" (or "Beelzebub," compare "Baalzebub," 2 Kings 1:2) is a New Testament name given to the Devil as the chief of the evil spirits. This Satan is the accuser who opposed Christ and continues to oppose the followers of Christ (compare Rev. 12:10). Satan does not work directly, but uses human agents. We are not surprised to find Satan using the enemies of Christ. But even the family and friends of Christ are used in the battles, the Devil uses their *misunderstandings* and *good intentions* to try to stop what Jesus is doing. See verses 21 and 31. The Devil hoped to use their concern to defeat Jesus. We learn an important lesson from the family and friends of Jesus. We see that good intentions may be opposed to God. Because some were saying, "He's gone mad! -- they believed they must save him from himself. Yet everything Jesus did was in response to God's will.

The local religious leaders had called in the high officials from Jerusalem to give the verdict on the ministry of Jesus. "*He has Beelzebul in him! It is the chief of the demons who gives him the power to drive them out.*" That was the charge, but Jesus shows it is ridiculous. "*How can Satan drive out Satan?*" Since the evil spirits were Satan's servants, then to drive them out by Satan's power would have Satan fighting against himself, a situation which would produce collapse of Satan's power. Obviously this is illogical. But for a Jew to reject Jesus, it became necessary for him to repudiate the power and authority of Jesus and claim it was really the Devil's power and authority. Compare Heb. 10:29. One who does this places him in a position where there is *no way to lead him to repent* (compare Heb. 6:4-6), and it becomes an *eternal sin*. (It is commonly called: "The Unpardonable Sin." One who *worries* about having committed it obviously has not.)

Jesus uses the parable of plundering a strong man's house, to show that he has "tied up Satan and rendered him powerless." Was he thinking of the temptation? Was this comparison to show that what he had been doing proved he was in conflict with Satan? Compare Isa. 49:24-26. God does deliver his people! Satan's most crushing defeat came at the Cross (see John 12:31-33; Col. 2:15; Rev. 5:6-14)! The Old Testament portion of the Bible contains two streams of prophecy about the Messiah. One describes him as a great King, the other shows him a One who suffers. Both streams were fulfilled in Christ Jesus.

A final lesson is that spiritual relationships are every bit as important as physical ones. Those who make God their *Leader* and *Father* find themselves to be brothers. In fact, the spiritual even supersedes the physical when a choice must be made (see Matt. 10:34-39). Certainly Jesus does not intend to teach that family relationships should be destroyed (compare 1 Cor. 7:12-16). What he does teach is that when a choice must be made, we must choose HIM. (The *church* is a *community* of believers in the Messiah -- who are united to each other by the common *bond* of their relationship to God through

Christ. Compare Eph. 4:25-32; 5:21 to 6:9. Jews and Gentiles, slaves and freemen, men and women, children and parents -- can all *respect* each other because of their *oneness* in Christ!!!)

The Parable of the Sower

(Mark 4:1-9)

4 *Again Jesus began to teach by Lake Galilee. The crowd that gathered around him was so large that he got into a boat and sat in it. The boat was out in the water, while the crowd stood on the shore, at the water's edge. 2 He used parables to teach them many things, and in his teaching said to them,*

3 *"Listen! There was a man who went out to sow. 4 As he scattered the seed in the field, some of it fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. 5 Some of it fell on rocky ground, where there was little soil. The seeds soon sprouted, because the soil wasn't deep. 6 Then when the sun came up it burned the young plants, and because the roots had not grown deep enough the plants soon dried up. 7 Some of the seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants, and they didn't bear grain. 8 But some seeds fell in good soil, and the plants sprouted, grew, and bore grain: some had thirty grains, others sixty, and others one hundred."*

9 *And Jesus concluded, "Listen, then, if you have ears to hear with!"*

How would you describe color to a man born blind??? You could only do so in terms of reference of things that he already knew. Just so, we who are unspiritual must have spiritual things described in a way we can understand. One of the most amazing things about Jesus was the way in which he used parables. He took things well known by his hearers and used simple stories of common things in such a way as to explain spiritual truth.

The farmers of Palestine lived in cities and towns and walked as much as two or three miles to their fields. Isolated farmhouses were nonexistent. There were no fences, and paths through the fields were packed hard with centuries of use. The area was rocky, and some sections would be a rocky ledge with only a thin covering of soil. Some sixteen varieties of thorny plants grew in Palestine. Thistles grew so tall and strong that even horses could not push through them. Thorns and thistles were part of the "curse" (see Gen. 3:18), grew rapidly, and were extremely difficult to kill. There may have been farmers working in their fields as Jesus taught this parable.

Everyone knew that a farmer planted his seed by taking it by the handful and flinging it out over the prepared ground. Because of this, some of the seed would fall on unfavorable places, such as the paths which crisscrossed the fields, rocky grounds, thorns, etc. The seed which found good soil grew in response to how fertile it found the soil.

Obviously this all has a spiritual application. What does it mean??? We must allow Jesus to furnish the key. And this gives us a second fact about parables: each is intended to teach one lesson. They were not intended to be allegories, and we must accept the interpretation which Jesus gives. The spiritual meaning remains hidden to one who is not given the key. In this case Jesus explains to his disciples in verses 13-20. But the crowds would not have heard the explanation. What would they have made of this parable??? "Listen, then. . ." calls the attention of the crowd. What Jesus means, is:

“You must find something more in this than a simple lesson on farming.” But what could the crowd have thought -- since even the disciples did not understand the parable??? Was he comforting his disciples? Promising a great harvest? Telling them to be like the good soil? Saying that, just as in farming, mixed results were to be expected? And of course we have no way of knowing.

Parables, then, are unusual ways of speaking that teach a sharp and pointed lesson. In the Old Testament portion of the Bible we find a number of similar things: proverbial statements (compare 1 Sam. 24:13); fables (Judges 9:8-15; 2 Kings 14:9); examples of disaster (Deut. 28:37-45); oracles (Num. 23:7-10); tales and allegories (Ezek. 17:2-10). Jesus used: proverbial sayings (Luke 4:23-24); metaphors and similes (Mark 2:21-22; 3:23-25); typical events (such as the Sower); and accounts of particular events (such as the Good Samaritan). Jesus was a master at telling stories in such a way that those who wanted to learn (i.e. those who believed in him) could see the lesson. But for those who did not believe, it would remain a mystery which they would be unable to use against him.

Questions for discussion

1. Why would a tax collector be working by Lake Galilee?
2. Why was Matthew willing to respond immediately to Jesus' call?
3. Why did Jesus go to a meal at the home of Matthew? Be specific.
4. Why were the tax collectors and outcasts at the meal also?
5. Was there anything wrong with associating with tax collectors and outcasts?
6. Who may have been the brothers of Matthew?
7. Why the question about fasting? What was the probable motive?
8. What does Jesus' answer show us about the contrast between Judaism and Christianity?

9. Does “Christ’s law” (1 Cor. 9:21) make any difference in our interpretation of the “Sabbath?”
Compare Col. 2:16.

10. In what sense is the son of Man “Lord of the Sabbath?”

11. Jesus deliberately “offended” the Jewish leaders. Was this right?

12. Why the question in verse four?

13. Why the decision to *kill Jesus*, and why this particular time?

14. Why the testimony of the demons?

15. Why did he sternly order their silence?

16. What was the purpose in the appointment of the Twelve?

17. What does the word “apostle” mean?

18. What were the requirements to be an apostle?

19. Did Christ give Peter more authority than he gave the others? Compare John 20:19-23; 1 Peter 5:1-4.

20. Why the authority to drive out evil spirits?

21. In view of the agitation of the political activists (compare mark 15:7), why would Jesus choose a “Patriot” as an apostle?

22. Compare the four lists of apostles. How can we harmonize them?

23. What was it about this (vs. 20-21) that disturbed his family and friends? What did they intend to do about it?

24. What incident is verse 27 pointing to?

25. In what way were the Jewish leaders speaking evil against the Holy Spirit? What is an “eternal sin,” and why would it be impossible to be forgiven for it?

26. Are family relationships more important than spiritual relationships?

27. What do we know about the methods of the farmer in the parable?

28. Why did paths run through the fields?

29. Why would there be thorns in a field prepared for sowing?

30. What is the meaning of a seed giving “some thirty grains, some sixty, and others one hundred?”