

## DAY 7: THE MAN WHO FITS NO FORMULA

Mark 2:13–3:6

**SINNERS AND PHARISEES (MARK 2:13-17)** Mark tells us that Jesus “*went out again beside the sea and all the crowd was coming to Him.*” Seeing Levi at his tax booth, Jesus calls to him, “*Follow Me*” (2:14). Levi is a tax collector, a middleman between the Romans and the Jews. During Jesus’ time, Jews hated tax collectors because they collaborated with the Roman occupation, overcharged for their own personal benefit, and through their dealing in taxes came into contact with (unclean) Gentiles. The rabbis ranked them with murderers and robbers and even permitted Jews to lie to them if they deemed it necessary.

In calling Levi, Jesus is again in contact with an unclean person—this time a person defiled by an unclean profession. The call of Jesus often goes to the most unexpected, to those the world would deem undeserving. In the remainder of the story Jesus is with other people like Levi—“*sinners and tax collectors.*” Who were these people? Jewish oral tradition identifies them as gamblers, money-lenders, people who traded on the Sabbath, thieves, shepherds, the violent and, of course, tax collectors. Some were criminals, but most were simply commoners, known in their day as *am-haretz*, *people of the land*. They were just too busy, too poor, too ignorant, or too irreverent to make the grade of the religious elite. “*The scribes of the Pharisees*” were furious when Jesus consorted with “*sinners and tax collectors*” (2:16).

**FASTING AND FESTIVITY (MARK 2:18-22)** This section offers us two incompatible images: fasting and festivity. The episode begins with a question: “*Why do John’s disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but Your disciples do not fast?*” (2:18). The Law of Judaism required but one fast, observed on the Day of Atonement. But the Pharisees normally fasted on Mondays and Thursdays, although this was not required. Fasting had become a traditional expectation for the religiously committed. Jesus responded to this austere picture with an alternative—the joy of a village wedding, a celebration that normally lasted seven days. Friends and guests had no responsibility but to enjoy the festivities. Any thought of fasting at such a time was out of the question! The imagery of Mark 2:19 paints a sharp and intentional contrast to the fasting of 2:18.

Jesus follows the wedding image with parables about two domestic images: sewing and winemaking. The first represents God’s emerging reign as a new patch of cloth sewn onto an old garment. When washed, the new patch will shrink and tear the old, ruining the usefulness of both. Second, God’s reign is like new wine, which expands during fermentation. If it is poured into old, brittle, inflexible wineskins that can no longer expand, all will come to ruin. What clear metaphors! Jesus warns against attempts to preserve the old and the new together, of mixed loyalties, of blending incompatibles. Jesus and the gospel He proclaims require new receptacles in which to live.

**THINK ABOUT** the metaphors of the new patch on an old garment and new wine in old wineskins. Jesus tried to open people’s minds to the *newness* of what God was doing. The fabric of the old garment was no longer strong; it should not be patched but should be replaced. It had served its purpose. Likewise, the old wineskins had served their purpose. The Law and the ceremonial system, like well-used wineskins, must give way to the new—the gospel of Jesus Christ. The problem was that the Jews had become so attached to the old that they reacted negatively to the energy, joy, and freedom of the gospel.

We can easily repeat their mistake by failing to see the new things God is doing in our world. We must remember that the wine is more important than the wineskins. The way we worship, the religious programs we establish, and our ecclesiastical structures are familiar to us and they are “ours.”



We must ask ourselves if they are important to Jesus or just something familiar, comfortable, and important to us. The eternal reality is Jesus Christ—never changing but always new. God forbid that we should cling to the wrong thing!

**THE LORD OF THE SABBATH (MARK 2:23-28)** The Sabbath was no incidental matter for the Jews. The fourth commandment, which concerns it, is the longest of any of the Ten Commandments and is

fundamental to Israel's religion. Jewish rabbis forbade 39 activities that profaned the Sabbath. Chief among them was "work." Jesus and His disciples violated at least two such categories in this passage. For one, they were *traveling*; anything over 1,999 paces (800 meters or approximately one-half mile) was considered a journey and was forbidden on the Sabbath. Curiously, the Pharisees leave this infraction unmentioned. Their complaint is that His disciples were plucking ears of grain from a cornfield. According to Deuteronomy 23:25, plucking grain was allowed, but later, the rabbis considered this *harvesting*, a form of work forbidden on the Sabbath. The intent of the Old Testament law became choked by the tightening strictures of the Pharisaic interpretation.

Jesus responds by appealing to the example of David who, along with his men, ate consecrated bread. The bread in question refers to the 12 loaves that were placed on the Temple's altar each Sabbath; this bread was food only for the priests, "*Aaron and his sons*" (Leviticus 24:5-9). The important point is that Jesus responds to the Pharisees' legalism from their own Old Testament Scripture, which they so respect and try to obey. David, of course, was Israel's greatest king and, for the Pharisees, the prefigurement of the Messiah. This story concludes with two sayings of Jesus: People were not made for Sabbath rules; but rather, Sabbath rules were instituted for human enrichment and protection. Jesus is recovering the true intent of the Law. Then He makes a bold statement: "*The Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath*" (Mark 2:28). God alone instituted the Sabbath, and Jesus now presumes preeminence over it!

**THE SABBATH PLOT (MARK 3:1-6)** In a synagogue on the Sabbath Jesus encounters a man with a withered or paralyzed hand. For the law-abiding Jew, healing is permitted on the Sabbath only in life-threatening circumstances. This was not an emergency, so the religious leaders "*watched Jesus to see if He would heal on the Sabbath*" (3:2). Fully aware of this, Jesus tells the handicapped man to step forward and asks the crowd, "*Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to kill?*" (3:4). The Pharisees respond with silence. Jesus "*looked around at them with anger, grieved at their hardness of heart. ... 'Stretch out your hand,'*" He commands (3:5). When the man extends his hand to Jesus, he finds himself healed! But Jesus' kindness is costly; "*the Pharisees went out and immediately held counsel with the Herodians against Him, how to destroy Him*" (3:6).

**PERSONALIZE** this lesson. God constantly surprises us with the people He chooses for leadership that we would overlook or reject, with the doors of opportunity He opens, with the ways He works in the lives of our friends and loved ones. He is working in your life to conform you to His image and prepare you for heaven! He really is the Man who fits no formula! He is the Man who meets our deepest needs, challenges our inflexibility, calls us to follow Him, and to relate to some unexpected fellow-followers. He opens our minds to new ways of thinking, our spirits to new ways of worshiping, our hearts to new ways of loving. He is the God of the unexpected! Are you willing to give Him freedom to work in your life, in your family, in your church, and in your world?

#### **REVIEW: THE MAN WHO FITS NO FORMULA**

17. From your observations of Jesus as a man through the eyes of Mark during the first weeks of this study, share *your* impressions of Him in one of the following areas: His character qualities; His inner motivation/direction; or His relationship skills (anything that attracts *you* to Him as a person).