

Week 3 – Mark Chapter 3

Last week we talked about:

- Jesus forgiving and healing the paralytic man
- Meeting Matthew the tax collector
- Fasting
- The Sabbath

Throughout the Bible, God often compares people to sheep. Jesus called Himself the Good Shepherd, and He proved this as He laid down His life for His sheep – for us – at the cross. At first thought, this imagery of us being like sheep might seem nice of Him as sheep can sometimes seem kind of cute and fluffy. However, when we learn more about sheep, we find that they are some of the dumbest animals God created. Now our being compared to sheep doesn't feel so nice, does it? Before I go any farther, my son, Pastor Wesley, told me he was expecting more puns and Dad jokes from my teaching. Ok...and remember, *he* asked for it. I don't want to pull the wool over your eyes and leave you feeling sheepish over what I'm teaching.

Sheep typically move together in large groups, or herds. You may have “heard” of the concept of “herd mentality.” AI defines herd mentality as “*a psychological phenomenon where individuals in a group adopt behaviors, attitudes, and decisions based on the collective, rather than their own personal beliefs or independent analysis.*” We've seen this many times – largely due to an individual or group's notoriety, or celebrity. It could be entertainers like the Beatles, Taylor Swift, or BTS. Some sports-related celebrities have developed huge followings like Michael Jordan, LeBron James, and Shohei Ohtani. In today's social media driven society, people claiming to be influencers can develop huge followings.

From my observation, there are, typically, three types of people that make up these herds. First, there are those who are genuinely interested in the individual and just want to be close to him/her. A second group doesn't really know all that much about the celebrity, but they're bored with their lives and figure if that many people are into this person, they should go check it out. The third component of the herd is coming from a more sinister place. This group is either just looking for trouble – to criticize and tear down the person; or they want, or had, the attention, and they are not happy that they've lost it to the person being followed.

We saw in last week in Chapter 2 that due to Jesus' wisdom that He was teaching in the Synagogue, His delivering people from demon possession, and Him healing people from their illnesses and ailments, people were flocking to Him. Within these crowds, we learned there were Jewish religious leaders who were the scribes and the Pharisees. They fall into the last category of herd members – the ones who were jealous of Jesus' rapidly-growing following and influence.

Oh, I'm sure they were convincing themselves that given they were the religious elite – the properly trained and educated ones – they needed to protect and defend “what was right.” Jesus was seemingly untrained, uneducated, and unconventional in terms of their interpretations of the Jewish Law. Furthermore, Jesus spoke with great authority, and He was exhibiting a power not seen before. In chapter two, these Jewish leaders were amazed by Jesus' teaching with such authority and miracles. But here in chapter three, that amazement is quickly going to degenerate into jealousy and evil.

¹And He entered the synagogue again, and a man was there who had a withered hand. ²So they watched Him closely, whether He would heal him on the Sabbath, so that they might accuse Him.

I'll confess that I can be a bit of a cynic at times. As I read this scene, there's a part of me that believes this man with a withered hand was intentionally invited by the “they” mentioned here in verse two. The “they” are the religious leaders. As I mentioned, these leaders were the scribes, the Pharisees, and we'll learn about one more group as we get further into this Gospel – the Sadducees. A component of

this group's doctrine was they did not believe in the resurrection. This is why they were called the "Sad, you see?" Remember, Pastor Wesley asked for this.

An important fact in this scene is that it's the Sabbath. I mentioned last week that what was supposed to be a simple day of rest ordained by God, had been made overly complicated by the Jewish leaders. They had added and concocted a long list of things that were forbidden on the Sabbath, and one of those was, shockingly, healing. If someone was cut badly, you could put a covering on the wound to stop the bleeding, but you couldn't try to sew or stitch up the cut until the Sabbath was over.

These leaders had spent enough time with Jesus that they had seen His deep love and compassion for the people. Given this, I'm suggesting they knew He wouldn't be able to resist doing some "handiwork" on this man's withered hand. I've developed this cynical, or conspiracy-based thought on the words "*they watched Him closely.*" These leaders who thought they were so smart and devious thought they could set a trap and catch Jesus in a violation of their goofy additions to the Sabbath.

³ And He said to the man who had the withered hand, "Step forward." ⁴ Then He said to them [the Jewish leaders], "Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?" But they kept silent. ⁵ And when He had looked around at them with anger, being grieved by the hardness of their hearts, He said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." And he stretched *it* out, and his hand was restored as whole as the other. ⁶ Then the Pharisees went out and immediately plotted with the Herodians against Him, how they might destroy Him.

There is so much incredible drama in this scene. If you choose to read this section again, try to insert yourself in the setting. These petty and jealous leaders thought they had Jesus cornered. Here's a little tip for all of us... having a superiority mindset against God never, ever ends well. Jesus tells the man with the withered hand to step forward. The LORD, no doubt, looking straight into the eyes of the Jewish leaders, turns the table on their alleged trickery and asks them if it is lawful on the Sabbath to do good or do evil, to save life or kill? I love this question because it reveals the true heart of God. Our God is a good and life-giving/saving God. Jesus' question isn't so much a challenge to the man-made rules of the Sabbath as it is a revelation of how God truly looks upon us.

There aren't many times throughout the Gospels that we read of Jesus being angry. There is a consistent theme, though, when He does. His anger is directed at those who are supposed to be representatives of God – the Jewish leaders. They are supposed to be mirroring not only God's Word, but also the goodness, the love, and the compassion that is behind it. These leaders were so focused on following the letter of the Law, their extremism was squelching the heart behind it. Having been a teacher of the Bible for almost twenty years and now a pastor, this dynamic of being full of God's Word but void of God's heart hits me to my core. Jesus' anger was targeted at the hardness of their hearts.

The Apostle Paul – writer of a large portion of the New Testament - was highly trained in the Scriptures and possessed great and powerful gifts of the Spirit. He recognized the trap one can fall into with having such accomplished academic and God-given spiritual ability. From 1 Corinthians 13, verses one through three, he said, "*Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I have become sounding brass or a clanging cymbal. ² And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. ³ And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, but have not love, it profits me nothing.*" In summary, if we're not first loving people, whatever mental or physical abilities and achievements we have, they don't, and won't, come close to demonstrating God's true character.

Back to the reading. These allegedly smart and crafty leaders are humbled by Jesus' question and cowardly kept silent. Now, let's put ourselves in the mindset and heart-set of the man with the withered hand. Jesus told the man to stretch out his hand. How many times in this man's life do you think he has been made fun of, ridiculed, and mockingly told to just stretch out his hand? I know I'm speculating here, but I've been around people long enough to know how cruel some of them can be.

Now, this man has been singled out in front of all these people in the Synagogue, and he is ground zero of an epic spiritual confrontation between the Son of God and the religious elite. The man could have easily looked at Jesus and told Him His request was pointless – it was impossible. Again, I’m speculating here, but I’m envisioning the look on Jesus’ face that must have been so reassuring and full of love and compassion that it gave the man the faith to believe that with God all things are possible. The man stretched out his hand, and it was healed – just as functional as the other one.

If you ever want to see a sharp contrast between good and evil, you won’t find a more vivid one than in verse six. What should have been a praise-worthy moment of great joy in the healing of this man’s hand, the darkness of the Pharisees’ hearts is revealed as they had seen enough of Jesus challenging their interpretations of the Law. The Herodians mentioned in verse six were a political group of Jewish people who supported the dynasty of King Herod and the Roman rule in the region. From this point forward, these religious elite and Herodians were determined to destroy Jesus.

One final comment on this incredible scene. For most of us, I would hope, we can’t wrap our minds or hearts around such evil thinking in the face of such a good and compassionate miracle. What I take from this Scripture is never underestimate the power of the sin nature we have residing in each of us. We are living in a world flooded with lies and temptations – all of which, I believe, are designed to distract us, deceive us, and move us as far away from God as possible. The further we drift away from God, the more room we are making for these evil-driven lies and temptations to step in and take hold.

I believe with all my heart that the power of the Holy Spirit that resides in every believer is far greater than any evil attack or temptation, but we have to choose to tap into that power. The choice to believe in Jesus isn’t just a one-and-done thing to become saved. While I don’t believe you can lose your salvation, one of the primary benefits of salvation is being in a close and intimate relationship with God – aided by the gift of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, to protect ourselves from believing in and acting on the lies we’re relentlessly confronted with, choosing to believe in and follow Jesus becomes a daily, and sometimes even moment-by-moment, series of choices. You all being here is a testimony that this is a choice you want to make! God bless you for that!

⁷ But Jesus withdrew with His disciples to the sea. And a great multitude from Galilee followed Him, and from Judea ⁸ and Jerusalem and Idumea and beyond the Jordan; and those from Tyre and Sidon, a great multitude, when they heard how many things He was doing, came to Him.

As I mentioned at the beginning, Jesus’ notoriety was spreading like a wildfire in the Santa Ana winds. You may not be familiar with these cities mentioned in these verses, but the distances people were coming from are as far as 100 miles away from Capernaum. Remember, there were no phones or internet. There also weren’t cars or planes back then. The only mode of travel was by horse or camel. Therefore, for people to be coming from so far away, the only way they could know about Him was by word of mouth. People who had seen what Jesus was doing, must have traveled these distances just to tell their family and friends about Him. That is dedication. If only we had such dedication.

⁹ So He told His disciples that a small boat should be kept ready for Him because of the multitude, lest they should crush Him.

There is a cove on the northern edge of Capernaum on the Sea of Galilee that has remarkable acoustics. When I was there, the guide pushed out on a boat and spoke out loud. It was amazing how far away you could hear his voice. I’m convinced this is where we’re reading about in verse nine. Jesus needed space from the people to accomplish one of His primary missions – to preach the Gospel. Again, while He’s certainly compassionate on our physical needs, His primary focus is on our spiritual needs.

¹⁰ For He healed many, so that as many as had afflictions pressed about Him to touch Him. ¹¹ And the unclean spirits, whenever they saw Him, fell down before Him and cried out, saying, “You are the Son of God.” ¹² But He sternly warned them that they should not make Him known.

The unclean spirits knew exactly who Jesus was – the Son of God. It struck me that they were terrified of Him. Yet, what is the primary mission of Satan and his evil minions? To get us to *not believe* or know Jesus. Doesn't that seem odd? From their perspective, knowing who Jesus was, meant fear to them. Wouldn't they *want* to invoke that fear in us? Wouldn't being afraid of God make people not want to believe in Him or trust in Him? While fear is absolutely a tool of the enemy, there is something missing in their lives that makes the idea of God's presence bring fear. What do you think that is?

Let me read you 1 John 4:18: "*There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves torment. But he who fears has not been made perfect in love.*" The enemy is afraid of Jesus because they know they have no hope of God's love. Praise the Lord – every single one of His human creations has the hope of deliverance from fear because of the availability of God's love. The Scriptures do tell us to fear God, but this fear is one of respect and regard. Christ crucified proved that the hope of God's love is real, available to all, and greater than any fear – even death – the enemy can throw at us.

¹³ And He went up on the mountain and called to *Him* those He Himself wanted. And they came to Him. ¹⁴ Then He appointed twelve, that they might be with Him and that He might send them out to preach, ¹⁵ and to have power to heal sicknesses and to cast out demons: ¹⁶ Simon, to whom He gave the name Peter; ¹⁷ James the *son* of Zebedee and John the brother of James, to whom He gave the name Boanerges, that is, "Sons of Thunder"; ¹⁸ Andrew, Philip, Bartholomew, Matthew, Thomas, James the *son* of Alphaeus, Thaddaeus, Simon the Cananite; ¹⁹ and Judas Iscariot, who also betrayed Him. And they went into a house.

We have in these verses the list of the twelve disciples. Notice that Jesus' calling came with the gift of a life led with intentionality and purpose. How many times have you thought or said regarding your life, "What's the point?" Coming to faith in Jesus isn't just a ticket to heaven. You become a new creation endowed with at least one gift that is designed for a specific purpose to glorify and honor God and provide an important service in His Kingdom.

²⁰ Then the multitude came together again, so that they could not so much as eat bread. ²¹ But when His own people heard *about this*, they went out to lay hold of Him, for they said, "He is out of His mind." ²² And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem said, "He has Beelzebub," and, "By the ruler of the demons He casts out demons."

Beelzebub is another name for Satan.

²³ So He called them to *Himself* and said to them in parables: "How can Satan cast out Satan? ²⁴ If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. ²⁵ And if a house is divided against itself, that house cannot stand. ²⁶ And if Satan has risen up against himself, and is divided, he cannot stand, but has an end. ²⁷ No one can enter a strong man's house and plunder his goods, unless he first binds the strong man. And then he will plunder his house.

I mentioned earlier one of the segments of the large group of people who follow someone includes those who have evil intentions. They have a desire to tear down the person's character in an effort to reduce, or even eliminate, his/her/their popularity. You can always spot a Satanic-driven attack when the attack is so clearly a lie. We read in these verses Jesus' detractors accused Him of being out of His mind and being Satan. I've found that when people don't understand something that is so obviously true, instead of their willingness to adjust their thinking and accept it as truth, they will reject that truth and fall back on the lie they were believing. These people do this to protect their flawed point of view - which is really a mask that what's really being protected is their ego and pride. Some will even go so far as to call those who are promoting the real truth, liars.

Jesus, being the truth, responds to the accusations and lies that He is Satan with a very practical response, “*If a kingdom, or house, is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand.*” In other words, if Jesus is Satan, and He is kicking out the demons, how can His kingdom be sustainable? He’s eliminating the very people that support Him. One of the countless reasons I love the LORD is He is so practical and true.

²⁸ “Assuredly, I say to you, all sins will be forgiven the sons of men, and whatever blasphemies they may utter; ²⁹ but he who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is subject to eternal condemnation” — ³⁰ because they said, “He has an unclean spirit.”

Jesus said, regarding the Holy Spirit, in John 16:13-14, “*However, when He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth; for He will not speak on His own authority, but whatever He hears He will speak; and He will tell you things to come. ¹⁴ He will glorify Me, for He will take of what is Mine and declare it to you.*” The Holy Spirit is probably the most misunderstood member of the Holy Trinity. I believe one of the reasons He is not understood is because He makes no effort to glorify Himself. We read here in these words from John’s Gospel that one of the primary responsibilities of the Holy Spirit is to glorify Jesus. How does He do this? He testifies to the truth of who Jesus is – the only begotten Son of God. He does this by taking the Word of God, which is the truth and applying it to our hearts, minds, and souls. There are multiple verses that testify to the fact that God’s Word is the truth – including Psalm 119:60, Proverbs 30:5, and 2 Samuel 7:28.

If you recall from last week’s teaching on Chapter two, we learned that God is a willingly forgiving God. We also talked about as the offended, He gets to set the terms of extending His forgiveness. What are the terms of receiving God’s forgiveness? That’s right, to believe that Jesus is His only begotten Son, His death on a cross being a substitute for the penalty of our sins, and His resurrection from the dead. There is no other way to receive God’s forgiveness other than to believe in Jesus.

Here in verse 29, we read that there is one sin that God will not forgive. It’s often called the unpardonable sin. Jesus describes this sin as the blaspheming of the Holy Spirit. As I mentioned last week, blaspheme means to speak, act, or write with intentional irreverence, contempt, or disrespect toward God. The unpardonable sin is something that, rightfully so, should leave people very nervous. If a sin is unpardonable, then when they die, they will be going to hell. Detractors of God claim how can you believe in a God who sends His creation to hell?

This claim is 100% not true. We’ve confirmed salvation, via God’s forgiveness, is made available to every member of His creation – no exceptions. We’ve also confirmed that the lone ticket to getting God’s forgiveness is through faith in Jesus. Now, please listen carefully as this is a fundamental truth. If one of the jobs of the Holy Spirit is to glorify or testify to the truth of who Jesus is for the purpose of belief and salvation, then it makes perfect sense that choosing to not believe or reject what the Holy Spirit is testifying to is the unpardonable sin. How can you be forgiven by God, when you don’t believe in the sole term of His forgiveness? Does that make sense?

Since this is true, God does not send people to hell. People send themselves there via their choice, or decision, to not believe in Jesus – to reject the Holy Spirit’s testimony. This brings us back to the irrefutable truth and dynamic of the gift of free will. We all want the freedom to make our choices, but there is an undeniable reality, or sidecar, to our freedom to choose. Our choices have consequences. I believe one of the greatest lies Satan has successfully launched on society is while we should have the *right* to choose, these choices – especially the bad or wrong ones – don’t come with consequences or fall-out. People have the freedom to smoke cigarettes. Yet, if you choose to smoke long enough, you will likely get cancer. The truth is our choices have consequences.

I’ve heard believers in Jesus wonder if they’ve committed the unpardonable sin. Based on what I’ve just shared, if you’re concerned you’ve committed the unpardonable sin and you still believe in Jesus, then you have nothing to worry about. You may have sinned, but it is forgivable based on the terms God has laid out for Him to forgive. Remember, God is a forgiving God – Jesus revealed God’s heart

towards His ongoing forgiveness in Matthew 18:22: *“I do not say to you, up to seven times [you should forgive], but up to seventy times seven.”*

Even as believers in Jesus, we’re going to sin. We’re not perfect. The forgiveness of our sins is rooted in our faith in the permanent cleansing power of Jesus’ blood that He shed on the cross. This is, in my opinion, the most powerful testimonies of God’s grace – making available to those who believe in His Son to have every past, present, and future sin forgiven. Does that sound like a God who wants to send people to hell???? The Apostle Paul laid out God’s heart toward all of us in 1 Timothy 2:3-4, *“For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, ⁴ who desires all men [and women] to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.”*

³¹ Then His brothers and His mother came, and standing outside they sent to Him, calling Him. ³² And a multitude was sitting around Him; and they said to Him, “Look, Your mother and Your brothers are outside seeking You.” ³³ But He answered them, saying, “Who is My mother, or My brothers?” ³⁴ And He looked around in a circle at those who sat about Him, and said, “Here are My mother and My brothers! ³⁵ For whoever does the will of God is My brother and My sister and mother.”

One of the clear testimonies of the wonder of being a believer in, and follower of, Jesus is the spiritual brotherhood and sisterhood we develop. Jesus is not denying or dissing His mother Mary and brothers. Notice there is no mentioning of Joseph, Jesus’ stepfather. Church tradition has it that Joseph likely died before Jesus began His ministry. What Jesus is describing in these verses is the beautiful bonding unrelated people can find through their common faith in Him.

In my early days of becoming a Christian, there was a movement called “Promise Keepers.” This movement was a bunch of Christian men committing to be promise keeping men – to be faithful to their wives, loving husbands/fathers, and servants in the Kingdom. They would hold these huge events – one of which I attended at the Coliseum in Los Angeles. The stadium was packed – full of men of all ages, races, and backgrounds. There was a unity I had never seen before. Whether someone like me – a white dude from Orange County or another man of color from Compton – there was no fear, judgment, or condemnation at this event. It was just roughly one hundred thousand men united in their faith and devotion in Jesus Christ. For me, it was a glimpse of what I believe it will be like in heaven.

One of Vickie’s and my hope for this Bible study is God will bless us with a unity of love for His Word and for each other. We can’t choose the families we’re born into, but from our choice to believe in Jesus, the consequence of that choice comes a brotherhood and sisterhood that can be even more powerful than we will find in our own families. Amen?

Questions

1. Have you ever been part of a larger group of people, like a fan club, that was completely devoted to a certain person or group of persons? What was your experience regarding the dynamics of that group?
2. The “impossible” can mean lots of different things to each of us. It can be something like taking a risky job or having to forgive someone who has deeply hurt you. Have you ever felt challenged by God to do the impossible?
3. Have you ever thought you or someone you know or love committed the unpardonable sin? Does what we covered here help you better understand what that means?