

## KING JESUS TURNS THE WORLD UPSIDE DOWN

Mark 2:1-3:6

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It's a familiar story. When David<sup>1</sup> moved away from home and went to college, he became a completely free spirit. In short order, he developed three life goals:

- to party as much as possible
- to sleep with as many women as possible
- to make as much money as possible

At first, David says, this life was "satisfying and fun," because he was doing just what the world says would be satisfying and fun. But over time his life became neither. That's when David met King Jesus, who came into his life and turned his world upside-down. Now he's found true satisfaction and true joy in following Jesus and living for him.

The gist of this message is that our world is upside-down. It's cracked, flipped, inverted, inside-out and backwards. What we call freedom is often really slavery, what we call love is often only selfishness, what we call right is often very wrong. But Jesus Christ, who died and rose again, is making all things new. Person by person, situation by situation, he's bringing his resurrection power to bear, re-flipping our world—from upside-down to right-side up.

This is wonderful news! It's news that should make us all very happy, but often it doesn't. We're all disoriented. We don't know which way is up. We've grown accustomed to our upside-down world. It's all we've ever known, and so when King Jesus comes and sets something that formerly was standing on its head back on its feet, we often go along behind him and flip it over again, because in a perverse kind of way we've grown to like things upside-down. This is why nice people like you and me often end up resisting and opposing God's Kingdom. To one degree or another, we all sometimes prefer darkness over light.

It's like the "new" ketchup bottle, with the lid on the bottom, that hit the shelves here in the US back in 2002. For the past 12 years, we've had ketchup in these new bottles, but I still think of the "new" ones as upside-down.

A new ketchup bottle is simply a technological improvement, and we're pros at adopting new technology. We would all eventually welcome the right-side-up Kingdom of God if it were only a matter of learning to live with new technology. But as we'll see in Mark 2:1-3:6, it's not that simple. The core problem we face isn't technological, it's spiritual. There's a battle for control in our world. As "Thy kingdom come... on earth as it is in heaven" continues to expand in our

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<sup>1</sup> <http://pastordaveonline.org/2013/01/31/members-interview-david-dowdy/>

world, the rule of Satan is at the same time being diminished. And Satan refuses to give in easily. He wants to keep us plugged in to his matrix. He will fight tooth and nail to keep us thinking that down is up, slavery is freedom, selfishness is love, and wrong is right.

The stories in Mark 2:1-3:6 are all about this battle for control of our hearts and minds, as King Jesus continues to set the world to rights. In these stories, Jesus asks us four increasingly poignant questions, challenging us to join him in the work of redeeming our upside-down world.

## **1. WHY DO YOU REMAIN IN YOUR SINS? (Mark 2:1-17)**

This first question is Jesus' way of getting our attention, and inviting us to develop some holy skepticism regarding our own ability to truly distinguish up from down. It comes from the first two stories in Mark 2. First came the paralytic who was lowered through the roof in Mark 2:1-12. Not only could Jesus heal the man, but he could also forgive the man's sins. And in a classic example of Mark's use of irony, the Pharisees asked in 2:7, "Who can forgive sins but God alone?" Indeed! That's the whole point. The Kingdom of God has come. Who else could be doing this except for God incarnate?

We meet the Pharisees for the first time in Mark 2. For almost two hundred years, the Pharisees' movement had existed for the purpose of seeking a reconciled relationship with God. Yet when God did come to live among them and do word-for-word what their mission statement said they were about, the Pharisees were scandalized because Jesus was turning their world upside-down.

Then in Mark 2:13-17 Jesus went to a feast in the home of Levi, where he ate with filthy crooks and loose women and God knows what other kinds of rabble. And again the Pharisees were scandalized because Jesus was turning their world upside-down. So Jesus, in 2:17, challenged the Pharisees (and us), saying:

“Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.”

In other words, “What's the matter with you people? I can fix you. Why do you prefer to be broken? I can forgive you. Why do you prefer to remain in your sins?”

This is Jesus' way of getting our attention, and inviting us to develop some holy skepticism regarding our own discernment. He's doing this by showing how upside-down even the Pharisees had become. Think about it. Back in Jesus' day:

- Guess who meditated on the Scriptures daily, and taught people to live according to God's Word? The Pharisees.
- And guess who encouraged fidelity to God alone in the multi-cultural, pantheistic melting pot of the Roman empire? The Pharisees!
- And guess who believed in sin, repentance, salvation, the resurrection of the dead, and the sovereignty of God? The Pharisees!!

Of all the countless cultures and sects in 1st C Palestine, no other group should have been more prepared to welcome King Jesus. But in fact they opposed him fiercely, such that by Mark 3:6, it is the Pharisees who have heard enough of Jesus and are already plotting to destroy him.

What's going on here? The Apostle Paul explains it this way: Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. (2 Cor 11:14) From the very beginning, his strategy has been to deceive us in such a way that we distrust God, and we prefer Satan's kingdom to God's kingdom, even though Satan's version is a cheap imitation. Even the Pharisees were so completely deceived that when Jesus came, they hated him.

Jesus is challenging us to rethink our orientation by asking us provocative questions. "Are you really righteous? Are you truly healthy? I can forgive you. Why do you remain in your sins?"

## **2. WHY DO YOU PREFER TO BE SAD? (Mark 2:18-22)**

In this next episode (2:18-22), following on Jesus' feast at Levi's house, people started asking why all the other religious sects were fasting, while Jesus and his disciples did precisely the opposite. And Jesus responds by saying, essentially, "Look, the Kingdom of God has come. A new day has dawned. Rejoice and be merry! Why do you prefer to be sad?" Then he gives three illustrations in quick succession:

- My coming as King to inaugurate God's kingdom is like great a wedding feast. I'm the groom. You're the wedding party. Of course we should be celebrating. Why does everyone want to play funeral instead? (Then in v. 20 Jesus foreshadows his crucifixion, when they will have to play funeral for a few days. But for now, it's time to celebrate.)
- My kingdom is like new, unshrunk fabric. Why would you sew it onto your old clothes? It would only tear them up. No, make some new clothes out of it. Why do you prefer your old filthy rags to new ones?
- My kingdom is like good new wine. Why would you put it into an old wineskin? The old skin couldn't stretch with the new fermentation; it would burst the skin and everything would be ruined. It's the same with my kingdom. Why do you prefer your old wineskin?

All of these illustrations make the same point. A new day has dawned, and the long-awaited King has come. Why do you prefer to be sad?

CS Lewis famously said, we're "fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea."<sup>2</sup> Not only does Satan keep us satisfied with mud pies, but he also convinces us to hate the seashore and oppose it as evil. That's how he keeps the world upside down.

Around the world there are many Christians who are genuinely suffering, whether because of persecution, or illness, or some other true hardship. You may be one of these who suffer in Jesus' name. We pray for God's grace and mercy to be showered upon you if this is your situation.

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<sup>2</sup> C. S. Lewis, "The Weight of Glory"

There are others, however, who aren't genuinely suffering, but who prefer cynicism over gratefulness, and sadness instead of joy. Our generation in particular has perfected pessimism and made it into something of an art form, such that we can find the flaw in every good thing that happens, even within the church. Beware of cynicism or jealousy disguised as spirituality! "Authentic Christianity" isn't at war with the joy of the Lord.

Enough already! A new day has dawned. King Jesus has come, and it's time to rejoice. As Samwise Gamgee says, "Gandalf! I thought you were dead! But then I thought I was dead myself. Is everything sad going to come untrue? What's happened to the world?"

"A great Shadow has departed," said Gandalf, and then he laughed and the sound was like music, or like water in a parched land; and as he listened the thought came to Sam that he had not heard laughter, the pure sound of merriment, for days upon days without count.<sup>3</sup>

Why do you prefer to be sad? In a cynical culture, one of our very best apologetics is our joy. Rejoice, give thanks and sing a new song of praise in honor of the bridegroom, King Jesus!

### 3. WHY ARE YOU SO STUBBORN?

In this next episode (2:23-28), it's the Sabbath and Jesus and his disciples are walking together through a grain field. The disciples are hungry, so they begin to pick grain and eat it. The Pharisees cry foul, saying that disciples are working on the Sabbath, in that they're harvesting wheat. In response, Jesus points them back to the story of King David, when he and his men ate the communion bread in the tabernacle, even though technically that bread was reserved for the priests.<sup>4</sup> But the whole point of the bread was to symbolize God's presence with and nurture of his people, who were serving him in mission. Of course it was okay for King David to eat of it, because the Lord was leading him. And of course now that the Lord has come, his men can pluck grain and eat with him.

Jesus goes on to say: "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath." This takes us back to the very beginning of the Bible, when God finished his work of creating the world, and then he began to inhabit the world he had made. The Sabbath was supposed to go on forever, with God dwelling with his people, and his people resting in him. But sin invaded the world, and Satan enslaved us. He keeps us from being able to rest in the Lord. The Sabbath, on the other hand, was reinstated among God's people as a sign of the future restoration of God's kingdom, and the re-installation of God as king, when we would once again be able to rest in his presence.

So with this punchline in 2:28, Jesus is saying: "The Sabbath was made for man, not the other way around," so that people might remember the Kingdom of God, return to the Lord and find rest in him. And Jesus "is lord even of the Sabbath," because he's the new King who has come to set the world to rights and dwell among us forever.

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<sup>3</sup> J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Return of the King*

<sup>4</sup> 1 Sam 21:1-6.

In other words, a new day has dawned. King Jesus has come to restore our broken world, which includes nurturing and communing with you. Thus he asks in this episode: Why are you so stubborn? Why do you keep digging in your heels? Why do you put up some old restriction that misses the point altogether? Not working on the Sabbath was so that you would have more time to be with God. Now God is here. You can eat and commune with him. Why do you insist on remaining hungry and alone?

We all know this feeling. We're angry, and we've been angry for so long that we can't remember why we're angry. And the other person is completely over it, and reaching out to be friends again, but we'll find any lame excuse to keep on being angry. The other person removes a brick from the wall, and we put one right back in its place. Even though letting the other person win is going to bring peace and healing and reconciliation, we'll stay one step ahead in order to keep from losing.

Do you hear Jesus saying, "Why are you so stubborn?" I've come to bring you what you've always dreamed of: peace and healing and reconciliation. Don't lose by winning. Come, ye weary and heavy laden, take my yoke upon you, and I will give you rest.

#### **4. WHY DO YOU PREFER DEATH? (3:1-6)**

The last episode (3:1-6) is the most poignant. Back in the synagogue in Capernaum, where last time Jesus' opposition came in the form of a demon-possessed man, now his opposition comes from the Pharisees.<sup>5</sup> This time Jesus heals a man with a withered hand, and he says to the Pharisees, "Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to kill?" The Pharisees have no reply, only dramatic silence. We've all been there before—knowing that we're wrong, and there's nothing we can say that won't sharpen the focus on our guilt. Of course loving your neighbor is a lawful Sabbath practice. How could the Pharisees say otherwise?

At the end of all these stories, the healed man fades into the background, and the spotlight remains on Jesus and the Pharisees, whom you will remember were the people voted most likely to be holy in the 1st C AD. Of all people, they should have welcomed Jesus and his miraculous deeds. Instead, they hated him. And when we see Jesus standing beside them, and we see how good he is, then we see how really wicked the Pharisees actually are.

What makes Jesus angry? See 3:5. "Jesus looked at them with anger, grieved at their hardness of heart." They are no longer simply deceived by Satan. Now it's a blindness of their own making. Having been confronted again and again with the Kingdom of God, they have deliberately chosen the darkness rather than the light. So their hearts are hard, and even our kind and gentle savior Jesus is furious with them.

What Jesus is asking us is this, "Why do you prefer death?" Which would you rather have, good or evil? Which is better, to save life or to kill? This is no trick question. It's the plain truth. In

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<sup>5</sup> Mark would have us compare these two episodes and draw our own conclusions regarding the root source of the Pharisees' deception.

John's Gospel Jesus says it this way, "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly." (John 10:10). So what will it be? Whose side will you choose?

## CONCLUSION

Not only have we seen what makes Jesus angry, but we've also seen what makes Jesus' opponents angry. The final verse in this lesson, 3:6, is a major plot point in Mark's Gospel, as from this point on the Pharisees work to have Jesus murdered. What makes Jesus' opponents angry? Whenever Jesus and his disciples turn our upside-down world right-side-up.

Ten years ago, Matt Anderson turned me on to Acts 17:1-8, in which there's this lovely little line from the opposition about how the Christians are turning the world upside-down. And then the other day, Matthew Mason shared a quote with me from Michael Banner, Dean of Trinity College, Cambridge. Banner is talking about how our Lord's aim and promise is to make "all things new" (Rev 22:5), and how we often misunderstand that in cataclysmic terms as a sweeping away of the old, rather than what the Bible describes in terms of renewal and re-creation. Listen to what Banner goes on to say:

Specifically, God's new deed is not finally directed at human condemnation, but at human liberation, and in the very particular sense that God's action seeks to evoke and evince a newness in the life and action of those who are its object. God does a new thing that humankind may do a new thing. So it is that in the Book of Acts, those who are the first and privileged objects of God's original action, of his doing of a "new thing," those Christians whose lives have been shaped by the gift of the Spirit at Pentecost, are themselves the doers of new things—a fact which is not concealed even from the rabble who denounce the Christians as "these that have turned the world upside down," who "do contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, one Jesus" (Acts 17:6-7).<sup>6</sup>

Here's the point: Our world is broken, but Jesus is turning it right-side-up. Only a fool would say that the things that Jesus is doing are evil. Everywhere he goes there's healing and life and joy. But the most wonderful thing of all, which is Banner's point, is this: when Jesus enters into our lives and finally sets us right-side-up, his ministry is contagious. We become extensions of his ministry of renewal, on mission with him, so that healing and restoration also flow through us to a hurting world.

So don't be like the Pharisees. Why do you remain in your sins? Why do you prefer to be sad? Why are you so stubborn? Why do you prefer death? Leave those old wineskins behind, and be a part of something infinitely better. Let's join with King Jesus as he turns our world upside-down.

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<sup>6</sup> Michael Banner, *Christian Ethics and Contemporary Moral Problems* (Cambridge: CUP, 1999), 2.