

Many years ago, as a young married couple, Julie had the opportunity to do a mission trip to Czechoslovakia. The iron curtain was still up, so we had to travel back and forth through checkpoints at the border. After our trip, we were able to take a few days and tour what was then West Germany. We both love history and wanted to see as many sites as we could before we flew home. We thought it was right for us to visit a memorial dedicated to those who had died in Nazi death camps in World War II. So one day, we visited Dachau. One scene that haunts me is the sign that every victim saw when they were marched through the gate.

Above the entryway to the camp were the words, *ARBEIT MACHT FREI*. The same sign was on the iron gates surrounding the camp at Auschwitz. It means work makes free—work will liberate you and give you your freedom.

It was false hope to all who entered those gates. It was a lie. The Nazis manipulated the prisoners into believing that their reward for hard work would be liberation, but the promised liberation never came.

ARBEIT MACHT FREI. This phrase still rattles me because it still seems to be the spiritual lie of this age. Work makes free is a lie of false religion. It's a cynical lie. It is a satanic lie. It sends a message of false hope—an impossible dream. The belief that their good works will be good enough to outweigh their bad works. And that their good works will allow them to one day stand before God and say, "When I compare myself to others, look at all the good work I did, and look at how little bad I did. God, you must approve of me and allow me to enter into your heaven."

It is the hope of every false religion—*ARBEIT MACHT FREI*. But it's the love of God that liberates. It's the blood of Jesus Christ that liberates. It's the grace of God that saves. Jesus died in my place for my sins. Jesus makes free.

We continue our series in Mark titled, To Know and Follow Jesus. We continue to build out an answer to the question, "Who is Jesus?" Over the past few weeks, we have learned from Mark that Jesus is the Messiah and the Son of God. Jesus is the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit, the one sent by his Heavenly Father, the one who came with a mission to bring the Kingdom of God to earth through his preaching of the gospel. Jesus is the one who calls people to repent, believe, and follow him. Jesus is the one who drives out demons, touches unclean lepers, and heals them. Jesus is fully man who was tempted as we are, who

gets hungry and tired and needs to withdraw and connect with his heavenly Father as we do. And Jesus is fully God who heals a paralyzed man and forgives his sins.

We could be right to describe Jesus as a religious man. And we would be right to describe the Pharisees and scribes as religious as well. How did they end up on the wrong side of Jesus and become the ultimate villains in all the gospel stories? What got them so upset with Jesus? Our goal today is not to pile onto the Pharisees and scribes that Jesus exposes. My prayer is that we learn from the Pharisees and not fall for the lie "Good works will set you free."

Once again, Jesus went out beside the lake. A large crowd came to him, and he began to teach them. As he walked along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax collector's booth. "Follow me," Jesus told him, and Levi got up and followed him. While Jesus was having dinner at Levi's house, many tax collectors and sinners were eating with him and his disciples, for there were many who followed him.

When the teachers of the law who were Pharisees saw him eating with the sinners and tax collectors, they asked his disciples: "Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?"

On hearing this, Jesus said to them, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."

Now John's disciples and the Pharisees were fasting. Some people came and asked Jesus, "How is it that John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees are fasting, but yours are not?"

Jesus answered, "How can the guests of the bridegroom fast while he is with them? They cannot, so long as they have him with them. But the time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them, and on that day they will fast. "No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment. Otherwise, the new piece will pull away from the old, making the tear worse. And no one pours new wine into old wineskins. Otherwise, the wine will burst the skins, and both the wine and the wineskins will be ruined. No, they pour new wine into new wineskins." Mark 2:13-22

To help us understand the magnitude of what we just read, I want you to imagine that you wake up tomorrow morning and learn that Steph Curry decided he no longer wanted to play for

the Warriors, and he accepted a deal to go down to Los Angeles and play alongside LeBron James. Try to imagine Steph Curry in a Laker jersey. As a lifetime Laker fan, believe me, I have.

As jarring as it is for Warrior fans to imagine Steph Curry changing sides, it would be even more jarring for some religious fans to see that a hated tax collector could just change sides, just up and put on a different jersey that says, "I follow Jesus now."

The Gospel of Jesus Christ collides with religion. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is completely incompatible with "Work Makes Free." In our text, we see the gospel on display. Jesus Christ is the embodiment of the gospel. The first way that Jesus exposes religion is by showing us he's a friend of sinners.

Jesus is the friend of sinners

"Once again Jesus went out beside the lake. A large crowd came to him, and he began to teach them" (Mark 2:13). We learned last week that Jesus performed spectacular healings in Capernaum. Once again, Jesus went out by himself along the shoreline. And once again, a crowd was moving toward him. The tense of the word tells us that the crowd is building, and he began to teach them. Mark 1:14 tells us what Jesus taught. He was proclaiming the Gospel of God. "The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!"

And in the midst of the large crowd, Jesus notices a person. "As he walked along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax collector's booth" (Mark 2:14a). Who is Levi? I'm sure his dad, Alphaeus, had great hopes for his son Levi. He named him after one of the sons of Jacob from the tribe of the Jewish priesthood. He probably hoped Levi would become a great Jew. Instead, Levi grew up to be a tax collector.

The phrases "tax collector" and "scum of the earth" were synonymous. Matthew had purchased from the Roman government a tax franchise. Capernaum was located on a major highway en route between Syria and Egypt. His tax license allowed him to collect taxes from anyone for virtually anything. He collected taxes on any goods transported on his highway. He could tax the catch of the fisherman on the lake. He taxed imports and exports, even the number of axles on a wagon.

He had to collect a certain percentage for Rome, but he could charge whatever he wanted to keep the extra as personal profit. Their reputation preceded them. Levi was seen by the religious class and by pretty much anybody as dishonest. His testimony as a witness in a Jewish court was not even allowed. Levi was considered a traitor to his people because he worked with the Romans. He was disgraced by his Father and a source of shame for his family. And what did the holiest man who ever lived do when he noticed this man?

"Follow me," Jesus told him, and Levi got up and followed him" (Mark 2:14b). Follow Me in the present tense is "be following

with me." Just as Jesus drew near to a physical leper back in chapter 1, here in chapter 2, he draws near to a spiritual leper. And as Stephen shared with us three weeks ago, "When Jesus draws near to the unclean, he doesn't become unclean. Instead, the unclean become clean."

Luke tells us that he leaves everything and follows Jesus. In chapter 1, the fisherman left their nets to follow Jesus. But they could always go back to their trade. But for Levi, he left everything. Levi burned his bridges. Four fishermen and now one tax collector. I could see these fishermen saying, "Really, Jesus? Do you know how much that guy used to tax me on my fish?"

In the Gospel of Matthew, we see this same story. But we see the name Matthew, not Levi. So are Levi and Matthew the same person? Most scholars believe Levi and Matthew are the same person. Levi was his Hebrew name, and Matthew was his new name as a follower of Christ. Similar to Jesus giving Simon the new name Peter. And what a great name! Matthew means "gift from God."

So the first thing we learn from Jesus about true religion is not to work hard to be set free; it's to leave behind your old life and follow Jesus. The second thing we learn from Jesus about true religion is that it is focused on sinners.

Focus on Sinners

If you could have asked Matthew if he thought Jesus could use him as an evangelist, he would have thought you were nuts. So Matthew probably thought, "I want to celebrate that Jesus changed my heart. People tell me I throw great parties, but what good is that now that I am a religious person. No religious person would approve of one of my parties. Never have I seen a Pharisee inside my house at one of my parties. But I have this sense that I need to do what Jesus wants me to do, not what religious people want. What Jesus says seems way more important to me."

And then it hits him, "I want to throw a party to celebrate what God has done. What if I throw a party for all my IRS buddies, and I invite Jesus and the guys?"

"While Jesus was having dinner at Levi's house, many tax collectors and sinners were eating with him and his disciples, for there were many who followed him" (Mark 2:15). Understand, what we are reading is unprecedented. The Pharisees and Scribes had no construct to make sense of what Jesus was doing here. The root word for Pharisee literally means separated ones. The term "sinners" was established by the Pharisees to mean inferior. So Levi, the tax collector, considered the most inferior of them all, was throwing a party for all the inferior people he could round up. And then Jesus, the son of Joseph and Mary, joined in!

What did Jesus do? The original language says he was reclined at the table, lying on his side. Tax collectors were on his right, and sinners were on his left. They were settled in for a long meal

with Levi's friends. Joining in a meal like this means that Jesus is saying, "I accept you and join with you. I accept your hospitality. I offer you hospitality."

I can picture Levi, the host, looking around and hearing Jesus between bites of food, engaging with his guests, talking to them about his kingdom. And then seeing John and Peter looking very uncomfortable in a corner, wanting to leave, but still trying to converse with people that a day earlier they would have walked on the other side of the street to avoid.

Levi took it all in, loving every minute of it. His life had changed. That night was the beginning for him. After his party guest left for the night, do you think he might have begun to write down what he saw and heard from Jesus? In the next three years, he compiled what would become the Gospel according to Matthew.

If we follow Jesus and embrace his true religion, we will engage with those far from Christ. We may get criticized for it, even by those you assume are the most religious. But we follow Jesus' example. That's what we do.

When the teachers of the law who were Pharisees saw him eating with the sinners and tax collectors, they asked his disciples: "Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?" (Mark 2:16). This is the first of several questions that the religious class asks in this next section of Mark. Here they ask Jesus' disciples. "Why is Jesus not acting as expected?" Jesus is a friend of sinners. But he is also an enemy of the self-righteous. The Gospel of Jesus Christ comes to sinners who realize their needs.

Jesus is a Friend of Sinners and the Enemy of the Self Righteous

Jesus makes it quite clear he is interested only in people who realize they're sick, not the people who think they are healthy. So, the qualification for coming to Jesus is not, "Are you good enough?" but, "Are you bad enough? Are you desperate enough?" "I've come," says Jesus, "to rescue you." Why did Jesus come? Jesus came to rescue sinners. It's not surprising that the disciples didn't have an answer for the Pharisees.

On hearing this, Jesus said to them, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick" (Mark 2:17a). If you are a doctor, you know that people come to you when they are sick. I remember being introduced at a party to a doctor, and I had this strange urge to show him a mole on my arm. I felt I could only connect with him if I talked about my health. Why? Because a doctor is for the sick.

The people needed a spiritual healer. The false religion of the Pharisees had made them sick. Jesus says in Matthew 11:28-30:

"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light. Matthew 11:28-30

"I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners" (Mark 2: 17b). Doesn't it make sense that when our Savior came into the world, he would go to sinners? Jesus shows his authority here. Jesus says, "I didn't come for you because as long as you see yourselves as righteous, I can't do anything for you. You don't think you need me, so I can't offer you anything. I came to call sinners to repentance." And they hated him for this. They hated that he had exposed their sinful hearts, and they hated him because they didn't want to be merciful to sinners. If you want to be engaged in true religion, how much of your story includes friendship with sinners?

When Oliver Cromwell ruled England, the nation ran out of silver and couldn't mint any coins. It was a national crisis. So Cromwell sent his soldiers to the Cathedral to see if any silver was available. They reported back that the only silver was in the statues of the saints, to which Cromwell replied, "Melt down the saints and get them back into circulation."

Isn't it right to ask Jesus to melt us down so that we get back into circulation? The way our world is today makes for a great opportunity not to separate but to engage culturally. If ever there is a time to shine in our lifetime, now is the time.

So Jesus collides with the religious establishment when he reveals that he is a friend of sinners. Next, we see that he collides with the religious establishment when he reveals how far their religious traditions have drifted from the heart of God.

Jesus is the new reality.

"Now John's disciples and the Pharisees were fasting. Some people came and asked Jesus, 'How is it that John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees are fasting, but yours are not?'" (Mark 2:18). These people ask a really important question. Because Jesus' disciples were not behaving like the religious people. Instead of fasting, they are feasting.

And we don't think much about John the Baptist's followers. Remember, the whole countryside came out to the desert to hear him preach. They were devout, and apparently, many were associated with the Pharisees. They took the Jewish ceremonies and traditions seriously. They tried hard to obey the Old Testament. But there is no evidence that John's disciples were sinister, plotting like the Pharisees were to kill Jesus.

Did the Old Testament require fasting? Yes, it did. There was one day a year that fasting was required. It was on Yom Kippur, the day of atonement. *"The Lord said to Moses, 'The tenth day of this seventh month is the Day of Atonement. Hold a sacred assembly and deny yourselves, and present a food offering to the Lord" (Leviticus 23:26-27).*

There are other places in the Old Testament where voluntary fasts are recommended. We have already seen in Mark that Jesus

fasted. And in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says when we fast, not if we fast, but when we fast, don't be like the Pharisees.

Somehow, along the way, the tool of fasting became a rule of fasting. They were required to fast two times a week. They thanked God that they were not like other men because they fasted two times a week. But they lost the point of fasting.

Jesus answered, "How can the guests of the bridegroom fast while he is with them? They cannot, so long as they have him with them. But the time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them, and on that day they will fast. Mark 2:19-20"

Jesus' answer reveals that he is the new reality. The old is gone; the new has come. A wedding is a celebration with food and wine. No one fasts at a wedding. The party can go on for a week. Chosen friends were called guests of the bridegroom. And guests were exempt from fasting.

The whole purpose of a wedding feast is joy and being together celebrating. The new reality is the presence of Jesus, the true bridegroom, and his presence means a time of joy and celebration. But then Jesus reveals his destiny. One day in the future, he will be abruptly taken away, that day will be the proper time to fast and mourn. Jesus was referring to his arrest and crucifixion.

So is the spiritual practice of fasting important today? I mean, the groom has come; even though Jesus has ascended, God is here with us. There is evidence of the presence of the Holy Spirit all around us. And even when we grieve a death, a tragedy, any sadness, we grieve with hope because we know Christ will come again and restore all things. The new reality is about hope and joy.

So, what place does the spiritual practice of fasting have in this new reality? We know fasting was practiced in the New Testament. What role does fasting have in our spiritual journeys? There will be times in our lives when we are especially needy and hungry for God's closeness. Fasting seems especially important when our neediness is for guidance and clarity from God about a decision. Especially for guidance on how to be used by God for his mission to seek and save those who are far from God.

Fasting is a way to say to God with our stomachs and with our whole body how much we need Jesus and want to trust Jesus. Fasting is a way of saying, "I love you, Jesus! I need you more than I need food." And then give away the money you would have spent on food.

Jesus continues to explain the new reality with two beautiful illustrations.

"No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment. Otherwise, the new piece will pull away from the old, making the tear worse" (Mark 2:21). The new fabric which Christ brings cannot be interwoven with the old material of old religion. It will tear apart. The new cloth of Jesus tears apart the fibers of the old religion.

You don't patch holes with the gospel; the gospel is putting on a whole new wardrobe.

Here is his second illustration. *"And no one pours new wine into old wineskins. Otherwise, the wine will burst the skins, and both the wine and the wineskins will be ruined. No, they pour new wine into new wineskins" (Mark 2:22).* New wine must be put in new wineskins. Wineskins in Jesus' day were goat skins. The new goatskins were supple, and new wine continued to ferment with the gas expanding the skins. If the skins were not supple, they would burst, and the wine would be ruined. Jesus' point is that he is the new wine. You can't fit his life into old brittle forms. Jesus traded sackcloth and ashes for robes of righteousness, mourning for joy, and law for grace. And when you think about it in the history of the church, the old forms rarely contain fresh workings of the Holy Spirit.

Work makes free is the hope of every false religion. But it's the love of God that liberates. It's the blood of Jesus Christ that liberates. He died in my place, and I am free. It's the Gospel of Jesus Christ that liberates.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ frees us for true religion.

Let me ask you a question. When you think about the Pharisees, do you have a negative reaction or a positive reaction? Actually, in Jesus' day, to be seen as a Pharisee was a good thing, not a bad thing. If someone called you a "Pharisee," it would be seen as a compliment. They were zealous for God and committed to their faith. They knew their Old Testament and appeared to obey everything they knew. They practiced the spiritual disciplines like praying and fasting, and keeping a sabbath. Maybe a little over the top, but something to behold.

So if the Pharisees were so good and righteous, what happened? I mean, how did they end up on the wrong side of Jesus? I think it boils down to two words. Two words caused the Pharisees to end up on the wrong side of God—comparison and pride. And if we're not careful, we can become like them. We can become an accidental pharisee.

Accidental Pharisee

Accidental Pharisees are people just like you and me—people who love God, love the Bible, and are trying their best to live up to it. But it's like eating at Arby's. Nobody actually plans to eat dinner there; you just accidentally end up there.

How does it happen? We begin to compare ourselves to others. We become frustrated because they don't seem to have the same passion as we have. We start to get frustrated with other church members and pastors who don't appear to share our passion for what we think is important.

And then pride kicks in, and instead of becoming more like Jesus (full of mercy, kindness, compassion, and patience), you become arrogant, pious, and confident in your own righteousness. Fewer

and fewer people will measure up to your definition of what a true disciple is.

Early in my ministry, when I started at a new church, I spent most of my time with new people, getting to know them and helping them assimilate into the church. One day, a long-time attendee came to me and said that some of the long-term attendees didn't feel I was spending enough time with them, that I hardly knew them. When I heard this, I was shocked. I was defensive and hurt. My pride switch flipped on. I felt pretty puffed up that I was doing the right thing by helping grow the church wider, that anyone who didn't understand or follow my lead or applaud what I was doing was getting it wrong—inferior.

The man who approached me called me the next day. And he said, "Why don't I just keep my eye out for some of our long-time folks, and if I think they would like a phone call, or visit or a prayer from you, I'll let you know. I will help you, Pastor." I was humbled by this man's attitude. And I was ashamed of my attitude. Our partnership began, and it worked great.

Here's the deceptive thing, as long as I view a Pharisee as a spiritual loser, an enemy of Jesus, I'll never recognize the danger of becoming one in my own life! You don't think it's possible, but believe me, it is. In fact, as a person who loves God with all my heart, I can testify to how easy it is to become an accidental Pharisee.

I have no idea what tempts you to feel superior. I don't know what causes you to look down on others, but most of us have a list. And if you don't work at getting rid of it, it'll nullify all the good you do; for example,

If you're doing pretty well financially, and if you have very little patience or sensitivity towards those who need public assistance, you may be an accidental pharisee. If you live "green," care for the planet, recycle, drive electric, and if you are tempted to look down on your neighbor who has a big ole gas guzzler in his driveway, you may be an accidental pharisee.

If you read your Bible regularly, if you pray daily, if you pull away and unplug to spend time with God, I commend you. You are using the tools that God has given you. But just a caution, if you let your spiritual tools become rules, you may be an accidental pharisee. If you're committed to your ministry and you get really frustrated and talk poorly and put down others who don't show the same kind of commitment as you do, you may be an accidental pharisee.

How do we keep from becoming an accidental Pharisee? How do we keep from wandering away from the gospel? Every day pray a simple prayer for God to help you to be faithful, stay close to Jesus, and continue to learn and appreciate the Gospel of Jesus. And take the needed steps to open yourself up to others you trust to speak truth into your life and help you in your blind spots.

Let's continue to learn about Jesus together as we study the Gospel of Mark!