

SERMON

**What the Servant Offers You** (Mark 2:1-3:12)

Have you ever wondered about forgiveness? What do you think of when you hear the word forgiveness? Do you think of it as:

- **Punitive** – that is that you will forgive the person, but that they have to suffer some sort of punishment to do away with the wrong they have caused you.

This may be at one extreme, a prison sentence for something they have done as in the case of Michael Saward whose was the vicar of Ealing when his house was broken into. He was badly injured, his wife, Jackie, was killed and his daughter was raped. He said from his hospital bed that he could forgive the perpetrators of the crime against his family but that they still had to be caught and punished.

At the other extreme it may be that you expect the other party to come and grovel and ask forgiveness of you and you will not forgive or even think about it until this happens

- **Inclusive** – this is when a situation is accepted and nothing much appears to happen in the act of forgiveness. Often in the soaps, someone or someones does something wrong, then they cover it up until eventually they are discovered, found out and big time of confession and saying sorry and asking of forgiveness happens and the injured party say ‘OK’ and ‘we will say nothing more about it’.
- **Reconciliatory** – this is where the relationship is transformed. This is the relationship that God wants with us which is why Jesus came to die on a cross. Jesus took our punishment, when we confess our sins to God, he puts them as far away from us as the East is from the West, but the overarching concept is that he want to have a relationship with each of us.

**“When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "Son, your sins are forgiven."”** (Mark 2:5 NIV)

The man experienced forgiveness – true forgiveness. He did not have to suffer any further punishment, any sin was not just accepted, but he was in a new relationship with God and with those around him.

For us in our society we carry around with us guilt and anger and anxiety. All of these are related and so often anger turned inwards becomes guilt, and guilt and anxiety can show it as anger, especially when the society around reinforces one particular state. For the time of Jesus, when you were ill it was because you had done something wrong and so the guilt was set up within the system. You felt that God was punishing you and your relationships with most other people were marred and so this produced anger, this could not be shown outwardly, so it was turned in and so the guilt just increased.

**““Why does this fellow talk like that? He’s blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?””** (Mark 2:7 NIV)

‘Only God can forgive – you should take the punishment he has for you.’ But Jesus brings real forgiveness, true forgiveness, that repair of the relationship between us and God and also between us and us.

So the first thing that the Servant offers is forgiveness. And notice forgiveness was offered before the man was perfect. We do not have to be perfect before God will forgive us, before we have this reconciliation. In fact, if you think you are perfect, then you are in trouble for as we read in verse 17

**“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."”** (Mark 2:17 NIV)

The religious leaders thought they were perfect, so they did not need Jesus. The problem was that this blinded them to real forgiveness, to really knowing God, to having that relationship with God. But our life with God does not end with forgiveness. In life we also need fulfillment – we need something to give us that edge, that something that makes us get up in the morning. For Levi, it was making money, it was having status, it was having power.

- He would be making money as in his job he could add a bit on. People would pay him what there taxes were for Rome, the masters, but he could then add on a commission charge and so he was fairly wealthy.
- He was a civil servant, although the name would not have been applied to him, but he worked for the government. This may not have made him popular, but it did give him status.
- And finally he had power. If someone did not pay up, he had the power to have them put in prison until the debt was cleared.

However with all this going for him we read, verse 13

**“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.”** (Mark 2:13-14 NIV)

Levi was so dissatisfied with his life that as soon as Jesus said, "Follow me," that he left everything and followed Jesus. But he did more. He threw a big party, invited all his friends to also meet Jesus. Again notice that the religious leaders were not happy, verse 16

**“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 NIV)

Why does he hang about in such bad company? But to reach the sinners we need to be with them. It is no good sitting in church saying that we would love to see people coming to know Jesus, knowing that we never mix with any. This becomes harder the longer one is a Christian because all one’s friends tend to be Christians. However I remember one couple who moved into our last church. They had worked for a Christian organisation for most of their working lives and they retired to the village, to the countryside. They knew no-one, but they came to the church and in their own words but the end of the first year they had nearly one hundred Christian friends. But it did not tend there. They lived in a cul-de-sac with four other houses around them. By the end of that first year they knew all their neighbours, some better than others it is true, but they had gone out.

They, like Levi found fulfillment in following Jesus. We cannot find fulfillment though if we try to live with Christianity as a tacked on extra. Jesus describes it in a different way. Drop to verse 21

**“No-one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment. If he does, the new piece will pull away from the old, making the tear worse. And no-one pours new wine into old wineskins. If he does, the wine will burst the skins, and both the wine and the wineskins w**

The Christian life is not a tacked on extra, but is a whole new way of life. For Levi it meant not skimming any off the top or overcharging – that is if he ever went back to that life. But it meant a loss of power, a loss of status, but he found fulfillment in Christ – he found that with Jesus he did not need the other parts that went with it.

Where are you at? Where do you find your fulfillment? Is it at work? Is it in a position perhaps at work, or on a committee, or even at church? During a visit prior to a funeral of this man whom I did not know, I heard about the deceased and that he was vice-chairman of this club and vice-President of this club within the village. This seemed to happen several times in his life. What went through my mind was he was either very unfortunate to always be in the situation where there was always someone whom everyone preferred to be the President or Chairman over him, or else he was a good number two. Although I did wonder if he really wanted the status of being number one, but was so obnoxious or incompetent that people made him number two – to keep him happy!

Hopefully your fulfillment is in Christ. You have a new lifestyle with differing priorities, different perspectives on life, with a different worldview. Yours is not one that is dominated by money or power or status, but one that is dominated by God and what he wants for you.

But Jesus came to bring more than just forgiveness and fulfillment, he also came to bring freedom. Verse 23

**“One Sabbath Jesus was going through the cornfields, and as his disciples walked along, they began to pick some ears of corn. The Pharisees said to him, “Look, why are they doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath?””** (Mark 2:23-24 NIV)

Legalism or fun. The disciples were having fun that day. They were allowed to eat the corn as they walked along, as long as they did not take a container in which to collect the corn. It had to be hand to mouth. The law also said that they could not work on the Sabbath. Harvesting was work, what the disciples were doing was considered work, so they were doing wrong.

What is Jesus’ reply? ‘Rubbish’. Look at David, he and his men ate bread that was reserved for priests and nothing happened. They were hungry and so needs must. Remember that we are not to be a slave to the Sabbath, the day of rest, but that the Sabbath, the day of rest was made for the human race and now is the day we gather specially to worship God.

He later goes on to ask if there is a problem with keeping the law or doing good, what are we to do?

Jesus brings forgiveness, fulfillment and freedom, but this does not mean that the lifestyle is libertine. When we follow Jesus and the lifestyle that he had laid down for us in the Bible, we have true freedom.

Remember that the Pharisees were just upholding what they saw as the law. They were bound by what they could or could not do because of the past – and because it is easier to live by rules than with principles or with freedom in Christ. Freedom in Christ does not mean that all rules go out of the window, but that we look carefully at the rules we self impose, either as an individual or as a group upon ourselves. As we are ‘Forward Thinking’ we need to make sure that we do not just cling onto the past, as the Pharisees did rather than look at where we are now and reassessing in the light of God’s Word.

The Bible says nothing about many of the ethical dilemmas that we face today.

- Like abortion at one end of the age range to euthanasia at the other end. However it does speak about the sanctity of life and preserving it, but this is not persevering it at all cost, so at times it is right to allow people to die. None of these issues were around in the time of Jesus, so there are no rules we can refer to, but there are principles
- It says nothing about smoking but it does talk about our bodies being the Temple of the Holy Spirit. There was one time when all monks received a tobacco ration, the same as the armed forces received cigarettes and tobacco before we realised the connection with cancer.
- The Bible does talk about alcohol and at times most Christians were teetotalers because of the fact that there was so much drunkenness around as drinking was not regulated. At one time in Swavesey there were six churches and twenty-two public houses. Today there are two pubs and three churches! I know we have the binge drink culture among some, but it was a lot worse at times in previous centuries.
- For the Pharisee he was only allowed to walk a thousand yards, just under a kilometre. If the Pharisees were around today, would it be that they could walk to their car, less than a thousand yards away, drive all day and so not break that rule.

All of this shows that we need to be 'Forward Thinking', of realising the danger of becoming straight jacketed again like the Pharisees, of living in the past and not moving forward, of thinking that all things religious remain static and so are fixed and never changing.

That is our challenge today. Not to throw out the new wine of Christ, but it may be that we have to put it into new wineskins, to think through ethical questions in the light of the Bible and our society, although we will always need to defer to the Bible, but at times it is the interpretation that can be too rigid like the Pharisees did, or the add-ons that are not Biblical that are seen as being very, very important.

It may be that we have to think of what we do, how we tell others about Jesus. Is the best way to do what Levi did and throw a party every so often and invite all the neighbours round and tell them why? Do we have to modernise the building, because it was fine when it was built, but not perhaps fit for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century!

However the great thing is that in all things we know that we have:

- **Forgiveness** – so we should be ready to forgive others. This may mean punitive and inclusive but also reconciliatory forgiveness where the relationship is restored. I know that this is difficult, but it must be done – God does it for us.
- **Fulfillment** – what are the guiding principles of your life? For Levi it was to follow Jesus wholeheartedly. Someone looking at your life, could they say that as well?
- **Freedom** – are you really free or still held by the past or some self-imposed rules that are over and above what God is saying? Remember that freedom is not a licence to do what we want – that is anarchy and not what God is saying. Freedom is being free to follow God.

Jesus offers all this, but are we prepared to take it, really take it with both hands. To be someone who knows to be wholeheartedly for Christ.

PRAYER