

Mark 2:13-22

¹³⁻¹⁴ Then Jesus went again to walk alongside the lake. Again a crowd came to him, and he taught them. Strolling along, he saw Levi, son of Alphaeus, at his work collecting taxes. Jesus said, “Come along with me.” He came.

¹⁵⁻¹⁶ Later Jesus and his disciples were at home having supper with a collection of disreputable guests. Unlikely as it seems, more than a few of them had become followers. The religion scholars and Pharisees saw him keeping this kind of company and lit into his disciples: “What kind of example is this, acting cozy with the riffraff?”

¹⁷ Jesus, overhearing, shot back, “Who needs a doctor: the healthy or the sick? I’m here inviting the sin-sick, not the spiritually-fit.”

¹⁸ The disciples of John and the disciples of the Pharisees made a practice of fasting. Some people confronted Jesus: “Why do the followers of John and the Pharisees take on the discipline of fasting, but your followers don’t?”

¹⁹⁻²⁰ Jesus said, “When you’re celebrating a wedding, you don’t skimp on the cake and wine. You feast. Later you may need to pull in your belt, but not now. As long as the bride and groom are with you, you have a good time. No one throws cold water on a friendly bonfire. This is Kingdom Come!”

²¹⁻²² He went on, “No one cuts up a fine silk scarf to patch old work clothes; you want fabrics that match. And you don’t put your wine in cracked bottles.”

Kingdom Life 101

We are in week 4 of our worship series “Born Anew” where we’re exploring the new life that we have in Jesus Christ as it is displayed in the life of Jesus. We began on Ash Wednesday, and I said that our new life begins with a *realization* that we are dead in our sin (that’s why pastors remind people that “from dust you came and to dust you will return” on Ash Wednesday), but with that realization also comes another realization that *there is grace*, that God loves you so much that he acts through Jesus Christ to redeem you. And so we begin our new life with repentance (i.e. turning away from sin and death) and turning *toward* God where we find forgiveness and new life. But once we’re born anew we need to grow up, and like children we need to be nurtured by the Holy Spirit, and so I spoke to you about *being prepared* for our new life; Jesus spent 40 days in the wilderness before he began his ministry. Likewise *we* need to spend time in prayer and fasting as a way to prepare us for ministry, because the world is very often opposed to the message that we carry, and unless we are spiritually prepared and fortified for ministry we will flounder. Two weeks ago I said that our main task as Christians is *proclamation*; that’s the first thing Jesus did when he came out of the wilderness – he went about *proclaiming* God’s kingdom, and I said that you can’t proclaim what you don’t believe, that your enthusiasm for Christ has to be authentic otherwise no one will be interested. You need to recognize how your life has been so radically changed for the good because of Jesus Christ, and

if it hasn't been changed to the point where you are eager to proclaim it you need to go back to the wilderness and spend some more time in prayer until you *are* enthusiastic about this new life that you have in Christ. Last week I spoke about Jesus' selection of his first disciples (fishermen) and suggested that he made his choice because a) his message was simple and did not require intellectuals to grasp it or proclaim it, and b) because fishermen knew how to work as a team, and how we need to *co-operate* with one another in ministry.

Today is about *education*. We are born anew, but like children we are always learning, and fortunately for us Jesus teaches us so many lessons in scripture. Hence a big part of our education involves Bible study, and the best place to learn about Jesus is through the Gospels – Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. And as many of you know I have been concentrating on those four books for nearly eight years at this church, and I'm not near finished. There's a lot of other lessons to be learned in the Bible, but I figure that as long as we have struggles as disciples of Jesus Christ, and I think we all do, it's best to focus on the lessons that Jesus taught us directly, and therefore to focus on those four books: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. And so let's look at today's lesson from Mark and see what God wants to teach us in this class I call *Kingdom Life 101*.

As I read today's scripture passage I came up with another possible reason that Jesus chose fishermen; the things Jesus did and said offended quite a few people, so maybe he wanted to have disciples with a good boat and good nautical skills as a means of escape if ever a crowd got really upset with him! Jesus did a lot of his preaching from the shoreline, even preaching from a boat, maybe a good way to make a quick getaway. (As a pastor I always gain some comfort when I remind myself that after Jesus preached his first sermon in his home town the congregation just about threw him off a cliff). Jesus said and did things that confused and upset a lot of people; in fact we could say that his murder was the direct result of his words and actions.

And so **LESSON 1 about Kingdom Life is that Kingdom Life does not come easy to everyone**, not even to disciples. Kingdom life is so radically different from what the world has been used to that *even those who sincerely seek righteousness* are confused by it. The Pharisees often get a bad rap in scripture, but scripture also makes the point that some of them invited Jesus to dine with them, and some came to learn from him. The key verse for this entire worship series ("Truly I tell you unless a man be born anew he will not see the kingdom of God") was spoken by Jesus to a Pharisee who really wanted to understand what Jesus was teaching. In today's scripture these Pharisees are asking a good question; "Jesus, why do you hang out with the riff raff?" Jesus answers that those are precisely the ones who need help – I remember someone who has come to church drunk on more than one occasion, and I'm glad that such a person feels welcome enough to come drunk. We don't condone drinking by welcoming that person, but we welcome that person nonetheless. Jesus confounds the disciples of John the Baptist as well; "Jesus, we fast; why don't you and your disciples fast?" He says, "Now is not the time to fast; now is the time to celebrate!" How many Christians approach Jesus with a spirit of celebration? It's not God's will that you go through life dull and sour. The new life is a life of joy and thanksgiving, and remember, Jesus is alive! Easter and every other Sunday should remind us of that.

So that's lesson 1: Kingdom Life does not come easy to many. **The next lesson, one that piggybacks on that first lesson, is that we obviously have a lot to learn about kingdom life.** I offer my own testimony as an illustration. I think I was like most kids when I was growing up; my mom insisted that I go to church and get confirmed, but once I was confirmed I stopped attending church. When I was in my late teens, and thoroughly upset with the world and with myself, I started going back to church and came to know God's love and forgiveness, and I truly *felt* born anew. The trouble was that I wanted to remain in that same state for the rest of my life; I wanted to remain a child in faith. It was as if I was one of Jesus' disciples, but instead of following him I wanted him to stay home with me, where I was comfortable and happy. The problem is that Jesus doesn't sit still; he's always on the move, and as disciples we are called to be on the move, to be learning and acting along the way. And the kingdom of God is so radically different from the kingdom of this world that we have to keep challenging ourselves to see things as God wants us to see them, to act in ways that God wants us to act. It was many years later that I finally got off my butt and started following Jesus. And even though I'm a pastor and lead a church, I still have a hard time following Jesus.

Which is lesson 3: Kingdom Life can be dangerous. Kingdom life is more than uncomfortable; it's downright hazardous. The greatest challenge that you and I face as Christians is to follow Jesus when we know that others may respond to us with anger or with violence. Most of us remember images from Selma, Alabama fifty-three years ago when blacks were bludgeoned by police and a 38-year-old white pastor (James Reeb) was actually killed by KKK members (exactly 53 years ago today). Most of us are also aware that today Christians are killed around the world. Why are they killed? It's not just because they go to a church rather than a temple or mosque, but rather it's the *implications* behind being a Christian, because Christians have a reputation for rocking the boat in many places. One thing that offends a lot of folks about Christians is the way Christians stand up for the downtrodden, just as James Reeb stood up for blacks in the South. Christians are persecuted in India in part because Indian culture has embraced a caste system that says that if you're poor it's your own fault. Christians are persecuted in Muslim countries because the rulers, who are predominantly men, look at the way Western nations have empowered women and even religious minorities by separating church and state, and they consider it a threat to their theocracy. This "threatening" behavior displayed by Christians is behavior that Christians understand to be obedience to their Lord, Jesus, which is obedience to the will of God, that is, *Kingdom Living*. And so lesson 3 for today is that Kingdom Life can be dangerous.

This realization sheds a little more light on the previous lesson on cooperation: when I spoke of cooperation in ministry I noted that Jesus chose disciples who worked together, but they also STOOD together. When we face danger it's consoling to know that we do so *together*, and when enough of us stand together the danger may actually be diminished as our opposition recognizes our strength. The fact that kingdom life can be dangerous also re-emphasizes our need to be spiritually *prepared*. We need to have absolute conviction of our message of God's kingdom if we expect to not only meet the resistance that we will often encounter, but to also bring others into that kingdom. And it all starts with that wonderful realization that something new is happening in us.

I'm afraid that if I ended the message here, with the lesson that Kingdom Life is dangerous, we might simply decide that it's TOO dangerous and thus remain in our comfort zones, because let's face it; most of us are pretty comfortable all things considered. We eat good food, we live in safe neighborhoods, we drive nice enough cars, and we can take vacations. But we still have death to contend with. And this is where I'll jump ahead to the end of the series with a reminder that Easter is about victory over death. It happened with Jesus, and it will happen with us. Jesus challenges us, saying, "those who love their life will lose it and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life." (John 12:25). Hate is a strong word, but if our life is consumed with self-gratification, self-indulgence, self-glorification, and self-aggrandizement, we *should* hate it, because that kind of life only leads to death. But Kingdom Life is eternal life, and that is the life we need to learn. That is the life we need to live.