



The Gospel of Mark - Chapter Two

II. Mark 1:14-8:26 - Demonstration of Jesus' Authority (continues)

II.a Mark 1:14-3:12 - Jesus' early Galilæan ministry (continues)

Summary of Chapter Two

In Capernaum, a paralysed man was lowered through the roof of the house where Jesus was teaching a crowd of people, a crowd so large that it prevented the man's friends from entering the house, so they climbed onto the roof, made a hole in it and lowered him down to the Lord. Jesus forgave the man his sins and healed him, due to the faith exhibited by his friends.

Jesus added Levi, a tax collector, to his growing band of close disciples. Tax collectors were despised by their fellow Jews as they were seen as collaborating with their Roman oppressors. Jesus had no such concerns in having such a man as a close companion and disciple.

Again, a conflict arose as to why Jesus' disciples did not fast as the other Jews were doing. Jesus stated that there was no need for them to fast all the time he was with them. After his death, they would then need to fast whenever they needed to seek the presence of God.

This section introduces the first of the Sabbath controversies where Jesus' disciples picked some corn on a Sabbath Day, something the Pharisees thought was illegal under the law as it constituted work. Jesus used a Scriptural example to rebuff their claims.

II.a.vi Mark 2:1-12 - Jesus Forgives and Heals a Paralytic

While teaching a large crowd in Capernaum, probably in Peter's house, some men brought their paralysed friend to Jesus to be healed. Because the crowd was so large, they could not get near to Jesus, so they carried their friend up on to the flat roof, dug a hole in it and lowered their friend down to Jesus' feet. Recognising the faith of the friends, Jesus forgave the man his sins and set him free from his physical infirmity as well.

¹ A few days later, when Jesus again entered Capernaum, the people heard that he had come home.

Mark 2:1

A few days later links back to Jesus' teaching ministry in other nearby towns and villages as noted by: <<*Jesus replied, "Let us go somewhere else – to the nearby villages – so I can preach there also. That is why I have come."* So he travelled throughout Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and driving out demons>> (Mark 1:38-39).

Jesus returned to Capernaum from his time of preaching and ministry throughout Galilee, as already discussed. Capernaum now served as the base for his Galilæan ministry.

The people heard. In an age where there was no access to modern telecommunications that are so prevalent in the 21st Century, news seemed to travel very quickly, not just in the town or village but to others as well.

He had come home. Jesus seems to have taken up residence in Capernaum, probably as a house guest of Simon Peter.

² They gathered in such large numbers that there was no room left, not even outside the door, and he preached the word to them.

Mark 2:2

They gathered confirms the prophecy discussed in Chapter One: <<*and unto him shall the gathering of the people be*>> (Genesis 49:10b KJV). People naturally migrated to Jesus for a number of reasons: to receive healing, to hear him teach and later on to have him executed: <<*"What shall I do, then, with the one you call the king of the Jews?" Pilate asked them. "Crucify him!" they shouted. "Why? What crime has he committed?" asked Pilate. But they shouted all the louder, "Crucify him!"*>> (Mark 15:12-14).

They gathered in such large numbers seems to indicate there was a lot of excitement, probably more to do with the miraculous healings than what Jesus was teaching them. Such is human nature not to fully grasp the reality of who it was they had with them and only to accept what their eyes perceived.

No room left. It is likely that less than fifty people could come into the house; the rest would have listened from outside, although not even outside the door indicates that many could not get close enough to hear him on this occasion. This is probably why Jesus so often went down to the side of the Lake, where he could speak to such a large crowd, especially if he were a little distance off shore in a boat: <<*Such large crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat in it, while all the people stood on the shore*>> (Matthew 13:2).

Outside the door would be a place where they would still receive Christ's blessing, whether they realised it or not, for: <<*Blessed are those who listen to me, watching daily at my doors, waiting at my doorway*>> (Proverbs 8:34). Perhaps more people should have the attitude and belief of Jacob on the occasion

when he had wrestled all night with God: <<*Then the man said, “Let me go, for it is daybreak.” But Jacob replied, “I will not let you go unless you bless me”*>> (Genesis 32:26); although this may well have been a theophany of Christ for he is referred to as a man.

Jesus’ core concern is to preach the Word, including his teaching about the imminent rule of God, as well as the need for repentance and trust in him. After all, this was the Good News he had come to proclaim.

³ Some men came, bringing to him a paralysed man, carried by four of them.

Mark 2:3

Some men came indicates the randomness of Jesus’ healing. Jesus did not go and select the people he would teach or heal, although it does appear that he has chosen those who will accept his message: <<*You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit – fruit that will last – and so that whatever you ask in my name the Father will give you*>> (John 15:16), <<*But we ought always to thank God for you, brothers and sisters loved by the Lord, because God chose you as firstfruits to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth*>> (2 Thessalonians 2:13), <<*Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, To God’s elect, exiles scattered throughout the provinces of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia, who have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, to be obedient to Jesus Christ and sprinkled with his blood: Grace and peace be yours in abundance*>> (1 Peter 1:1-2), as well as: <<*The children of your sister, who is chosen by God, send their greetings*>> (2 John 13).

Paralysed man. In an account that precedes this story in the first Gospel, Jesus had already become renowned for healing those who were paralysed: <<*News about him spread all over Syria, and people brought to him all who were ill with various diseases, those suffering severe pain, the demon-possessed, those having seizures, and the paralysed; and he healed them*>> (Matthew 4:24). Therefore, these men would have come in hope and expectation that their friend too would be healed.

Carried by four of them. It was not uncommon for disabled people to be taken or carried to a place where they could beg, their only means of supporting themselves and their families: <<*Now a man who was lame from birth was being carried to the temple gate called Beautiful, where he was put every day to beg from those going into the temple courts*>> (Acts 3:2). However, on this occasion, it seems the men were acting out of compassion for their friend, in the belief that an encounter with Jesus would restore his full quality of life to him.

⁴ Since they could not get him to Jesus because of the crowd, they made an opening in the roof above Jesus by digging through it and then lowered the mat the man was lying on.

Mark 2:4

They could not get him to Jesus because of the large crowd but they did not give up and found a suitable, if novel solution. The Lord would later teach his disciples on the need for perseverance in 'The Parable of the Persistent Widow' <<*Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up. He said: "In a certain town there was a judge who neither feared God nor cared what people thought. And there was a widow in that town who kept coming to him with the plea, 'Grant me justice against my adversary.'* "For some time he refused. But finally he said to himself, 'Even though I don't fear God or care what people think, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see that she gets justice, so that she won't eventually come and attack me!'" And the Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly. However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?">> (Luke 18:1-8).

They made an opening in the roof. A flat roof could be accessed from the inner court or possible from the outside of the house. The roof consisted of branches or sticks, combined with clay, although Luke adds the detail that this roof was made of clay tiles, sun-baked slabs of clay, which were used on some houses at that time. This house was most likely a single story structure as people were listening to Jesus from the doorway. If it had two stories then Jesus would have to have been on the upper floor to be reached from the roof, making it less likely that those outside would be able to hear him.

Houses in Palestine were generally one or two storied structures, built in the form of a square or rectangle, with an open space in the centre called the court. They had one door which opened into an open space called the porch, and this porch in turn gave access either to the street or opened into the inner court. In this porch there was usually a stairway leading to the roof, although the stairway may have been on the outside wall. The roof was invariably flat and would normally be surrounded by a parapet to keep those on the roof from falling off. The roof was used in a similar way to a modern back garden as a place of privacy. It was common practice for people to spend time on the roof as it was a cool place to sleep at night and free from the normal aromas within a house, created by fires or cooking. It also provided an area for drying food or crops.

There are other examples of people being on the roof in Scripture, such as when the prostitute Rahab hid the two Hebrew spies in Jericho: <<*But the woman had taken the two men and hidden them. She said, "Yes, the men came to me, but I did not know where they had come from. At dusk, when it was time to close the city gate, they left. I don't know which way they went. Go after them quickly. You may catch up with them."* (But she had taken them up to the roof and hidden them under the stalks of flax she had laid out on the roof)>> (Joshua 2:4-7), King David used the roof of his Jerusalem palace: <<*One evening David got up from his bed and walked around on the roof of the palace. From the roof he saw a woman bathing. The woman was very beautiful, and David sent someone to find out about her. The man said, "She*

is Bathsheba, the daughter of Eliam and the wife of Uriah the Hittite”>> (2 Samuel 11:2-3), and Peter went onto the roof of the house of Simon the Tanner in Joppa: <<About noon the following day as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the roof to pray>> (Acts 10:9).

Lowered the mat. This can refer to several similar items. One could be simply like a traditional mat or rug that was easy to pick up and carry, such as the man had when Jesus healed him in the temple: <<At once the man was cured; he picked up his mat and walked. The day on which this took place was a Sabbath, and so the Jewish leaders said to the man who had been healed, “It is the Sabbath; the law forbids you to carry your mat.” But he replied, “The man who made me well said to me, ‘Pick up your mat and walk.’” So they asked him, “Who is this fellow who told you to pick it up and walk?”>> (John 5:9-12). However, it is more likely to have been a bed-like structure that would be a thin mattress, possibly on a retaining frame like a pallet that could have ropes attached in order to lower it down through the roof, which would be distinguished from a mat: <<As a result, people brought the sick into the streets and laid them on beds and mats so that at least Peter’s shadow might fall on some of them as he passed by>> (Acts 5:15).

⁵ When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralysed man, “Son, your sins are forgiven.”

⁶ Now some teachers of the law were sitting there, thinking to themselves, ⁷ “Why does this fellow talk like that? He’s blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?”

Mark 2:5-7

Their faith is plural and most naturally refers to the faith of the friends who brought the paralysed man to Jesus, although it may include the faith of the man as well. The Lord’s brother wrote: <<Is anyone among you sick? Let them call the elders of the church to pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise them up. If they have sinned, they will be forgiven>> (James 5:14-15), which infers it is not the faith of the sick person but the faith of those praying. In this instance, James mentioned no requirement for the sick person to exercise faith themselves, only that he calls for the elders. It should be noted that many Christians who are ill often find personal prayer difficult and are reliant on their friends and the church to do so on their behalf, in expectant faith.

Your sins are forgiven. An OT prophet like Nathan might declare: <<The Lord has taken away your sin>> (2 Samuel 12:13b). Jesus, however, claims to be able to forgive sins directly, as God alone can. His opponents, the teachers of the law, reason therefore that Jesus is guilty of blasphemy, which is punishable by death, as confirmed in Leviticus 24:10-23 and Numbers 15:30-31.

The forgiveness of sins was nothing new: <<Surely it was for my benefit that I suffered such anguish. In your love you kept me from the pit of destruction; you have put all my sins behind your back>> (Isaiah 38:17), <<Praise the Lord,

my soul, and forget not all his benefits – who forgives all your sins and heals all your diseases>> (Psalm 103:2-3), and the blessing that brings beyond the physical healing, for David proclaims that: <<Blessed is the one whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the one whose sin the Lord does not count against them and in whose spirit is no deceit>> (Psalm 32:1-2).

This passage does not necessarily imply the man was paralysed as a punishment for his sins, for most disabilities are a result either of damage to, or the natural decay of, the body in a world that has been decaying since the fall caused by the disobedience of Adam. That the man himself may not have displayed faith is fully understandable as it is easy for people with such disabilities to become resigned to their condition. God clearly has a purpose for not healing those he has chosen as his own and yet who have to struggle so much in this life because of their disability. There are occasions where people have disabilities for many years and are subsequently cured by God for his glory and to demonstrate his power. This is demonstrated in one account of Jesus: <<As he went along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” “Neither this man nor his parents sinned,” said Jesus, “but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him>> (John 9:1-3). However, for those whose illness is a result of sin can also be assured that, with healing, comes the removal of the root cause of their condition: <<No one living in Zion will say, “I am ill”; and the sins of those who dwell there will be forgiven>> (Isaiah 33:24). That the man was a sinner was clear for: <<This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus>> (Romans 3:22-24).

It is interesting that some teachers of the law were sitting there but made no attempt to challenge Jesus over his perceived blasphemy. Even if they feared the crowd, their duty before God would have been at least to voice their concerns to the crowd that they believed Jesus to be a blasphemer. Instead, they did nothing.

If Jesus were just an ordinary, though clearly gifted Rabbi, he would have been guilty of blasphemy and deserving of due punishment. Since his actions and words clearly indicated he was who he claimed to be then Jesus was innocent of the charges. This made no difference to the religious leaders for he would subsequently be erroneously found guilty of blasphemy by the Sanhedrin: <<But Jesus remained silent and gave no answer. Again the high priest asked him, “Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?” “I am,” said Jesus. “And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven.” The high priest tore his clothes. “Why do we need any more witnesses?” he asked. “You have heard the blasphemy. What do you think?” They all condemned him as worthy of death>> (Mark 14:61-64).

⁸ Immediately Jesus knew in his spirit that this was what they were thinking in their hearts, and he said to them, “Why are you thinking these things?”

Mark 2:8

Immediately Jesus knew. This was not some form of telepathy, or even a revelation from God, for Jesus knew in his spirit, showing it is his divine nature itself that is revealed in this ability to perceive even the thoughts of others. Jesus was simultaneously fully human and fully God. There are times when it appears Jesus spoke purely from his human nature and other times, like this, where his divine powers were in operation. How, when and why Jesus chose to use either source of knowledge and power remains a mystery that has not been revealed to humankind. It is simply accepted by faith.

Thinking in their hearts. This is a warning to all that Jesus perceives every thought and knows the secrets of everyone’s heart: *<<I will strike her children dead. Then all the churches will know that I am he who searches hearts and minds, and I will repay each of you according to your deeds>>* (Revelation 2:23). Therefore, it is both hypocrisy and a sin to say or do one thing in the church meeting, and something opposite in the car park outside! Although it should be noted that this proven ability of God shows the depth of his grace, love and mercy, for he still forgives those who harbour such evil thoughts within themselves.

⁹ Which is easier: to say to this paralysed man, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Get up, take your mat and walk’?

Mark 2:9

Which is easier? On the surface, of course, it is easier to say the words, your sins are forgiven, because that is something invisible and impossible to disprove. But it is harder to say, take up your mat and walk because, if the man does not get up, the one who said the words will be shown to have no authority to heal. On a deeper level, however, it is harder to forgive sins, because only God can – at the cost of Christ’s death on the Cross. The logic here is that, since Jesus can do the visible miracle by healing this paralysed man, then this is sufficient evidence that he also has the power and authority to do the invisible miracle and forgive his sins.

¹⁰ But I want you to know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins.” So he said to the man,

Mark 2:10

But I want you to know is more than a statement but a heart-felt plea that people would know and understand this fundamental truth that would have such a positive impact on their earthly life and eternal destiny, if only they would accept it.

Jesus’ healing of the paralysed man verifies that he also has divine authority, i.e. has authority on earth to forgive sins.

That Jesus is the Son of Man, when fully understood, will communicate his exalted authority. The exiled prophet wrote: *<<In my vision at night I looked, and there*

before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all nations and peoples of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed>> (Daniel 7:13-14).

Drawing specifically on the imagery in Daniel, the Son of Man is Jesus' favourite self-designation, bearing witness to the true meaning of his identity and ministry:

1. The humble servant who has come to forgive common sinners.
2. The suffering servant whose atoning death and resurrection will redeem his people.
3. The glorious King and Judge who will return to establish God's kingdom on earth.

¹¹ "I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home." ¹² He got up, took his mat and walked out in full view of them all. This amazed everyone and they praised God, saying, "We have never seen anything like this!"

Mark 2:11-12

I tell you. As with creation itself, the divine Jesus only has to speak and things come to pass: <<And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light>> (Genesis 1:3).

In full view of them all shows that these are not just fabricated stories or myths, but true historical events, with eye-witness testimonies from all sectors of society, including those who would later record them in the Gospel accounts.

We have never seen anything like this! There were others at that time who were claiming to be the Messiah, and still others who claimed they had the power to cast out demons. This was very different, for what Jesus demonstrated was unique and authentic, amazing everyone so that they had no other reaction than to praise God.

II.a.vii Mark 2:13-17 - Jesus Calls Levi and Eats With Sinners

Jesus encountered a tax collector called Levi and invited him to become his disciple, which Levi immediately accepted, subsequently inviting Jesus to dine at his house with a group of his friends, all of them tax collectors or other sinners. This was something that the Pharisaic Jews disapproved of, for they believed that a Rabbi should not associate with such people. Jesus went on to show them that they should have more compassion on such people rather than simply disassociating themselves from them.

¹³ Once again Jesus went out beside the lake. A large crowd came to him, and he began to teach them. ¹⁴ As he walked along, he saw Levi son of Alphæus sitting at the tax collector's booth. "Follow me," Jesus told him, and Levi got up and followed him.

Mark 2:13-14

Once again indicates this was a favourite place for Jesus to go and teach. During the six weeks that Jesus appeared on the earth after his resurrection he would choose to meet with some of his apostles there at least once more in order to share a meal with them: <<*Early in the morning, Jesus stood on the shore, but the disciples did not realise that it was Jesus. He called out to them, “Friends, haven’t you any fish?” “No,” they answered. He said, “Throw your net on the right side of the boat and you will find some.” When they did, they were unable to haul the net in because of the large number of fish. Then the disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, “It is the Lord!” As soon as Simon Peter heard him say, “It is the Lord,” he wrapped his outer garment around him (for he had taken it off) and jumped into the water. The other disciples followed in the boat, towing the net full of fish, for they were not far from shore, about a hundred yards. When they landed, they saw a fire of burning coals there with fish on it, and some bread*>> (John 21:4-9).

Jesus continued to focus on teaching, once again by the Sea of Galilee or Lake Gennesaret as Luke 5:1 refers to it. All the Gospel writers frequently refer to this simply as the lake.

Levi is better known as Matthew, the author of the first Gospel and later Mark will refer to him by this other name: <<*These are the twelve he appointed: Simon (to whom he gave the name Peter), James son of Zebedee and his brother John (to them he gave the name Boanerges, which means “sons of thunder”), Andrew, Philip, Bartholomew, Matthew, Thomas, James son of Alphæus, Thaddæus, Simon the Zealot and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him*>> (Mark 3:16-19).

Levi collected taxes and thus collaborated with Herod Antipas who, in turn, collaborated with the Roman Empire. As the occupying political and military force in the Jewish land of Palestine, Rome and all who collaborated with Rome, like Levi here, were despised by the pious Jews. The taxation system was burdensome and corrupt, with most tax collectors skimming money from the taxes for themselves. It is remarkable that the influence of Jesus was such that Levi would later be paired with Simon the Zealot, for both men would have had a natural antipathy toward one another before becoming disciples. This was because of Simon’s nationalistic fervency and Levi, as a tax collector, would be seen as an affront to the liberty of their nation and a badge of their continued slavery.

Beside the lake and: <<*at Levi’s house*>> (v.15), suggest that Levi was a local man who operated a tax booth by the Sea of Galilee, so that he could collect the tax from fishermen as they sold their catches to the market traders, who would be on the beach to meet the fishermen as they landed their catch.

“Follow me,” Jesus told him. The command was simple and was an offer of grace to a man who was similar to a paid criminal, not only collecting unpopular taxes, but also probably extorting money for himself as well. In fact, a faithful and honest tax collector was so rare, even at Rome, that a man called Sabinus, who had an honest reputation in that office, was, after his death, honoured with this inscription, *Kalos telonesanti* – here lies an honest tax collector.

Levi got up and followed him. As with Peter, Andrew, James and John, Matthew was prepared to give up his paid employment to serve this little known Rabbi. He did so without any apparent thought or time in prayer, yet also not on a whim, for such men do not normally act in that way! There are some who say they did so out of curiosity rather than conviction, although there is no supporting evidence for such a claim.

¹⁵ 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. 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 2:15-16

Was having dinner. Another translation says that Jesus reclined at the table: *<<And as he reclined at table in his house, many tax collectors and sinners were reclining with Jesus and his disciples, for there were many who followed him>>* (v.15 ESV). This adds significance for to recline at table indicates personal acceptance and cordiality. When dining formally in a home, guests reclined on a couch that stretched around three sides of a room. The host took the central place surrounded by a U-shaped series of tables. The most honoured guests reclined on either side of the host, with the guests' heads toward the tables and their feet toward the wall.

Having dinner at Levi's house might represent a farewell meal with his friends before leaving them to follow Jesus, such as was seen with Elisha: *<<So Elisha left him and went back. He took his yoke of oxen and slaughtered them. He burned the ploughing equipment to cook the meat and gave it to the people, and they ate. Then he set out to follow Elijah and became his servant>>* (1 Kings 19:21), although Jesus would later let people know this would not be the norm when called into his service: *<<Jesus said to him, "Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God">>* (Luke 9:60).

Tax collectors and sinners conveys the Pharisaic perspective that both groups disregard the Law of Moses. According to Pharisaic interpretation, Jesus should have kept himself ceremonially clean by not associating with such people: *<<You are to distinguish between the holy and the common, and between the unclean and the clean>>* (Leviticus 10:10 ESV). Jesus always pursued a third path - personal purity and the fellowship of mercy. Paul explains why men like Matthew, a sinner, was chosen to be an apostle, for he, although a zealous Pharisee, was also a sinner who was chosen to be an apostle through grace: *<<Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners – of whom I am the worst. But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his immense patience as an example for those who would believe in him and receive eternal life>>* (1 Timothy 1:15-16).

Tax collectors and sinners are frequently paired in the Gospels, for example: <<*The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and you say, 'Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners'*>> (Luke 7:34).

Many who followed him. By now Jesus had attracted a large group of disciples, many more than the twelve named who formed his inner core of chosen ones.

The Pharisees were a group of strict and highly influential religious leaders, who interpreted the Law of Moses and advised the Teachers of the Law or scribes what to teach in the synagogues. Although Mark here refers to the scribes as being Pharisees, it is generally accepted that scribes had a distinct function, who shared the same values as the Pharisees. The two groups are frequently paired together in the Gospels but they were not priests. For more information on Pharisees refer to comments made on Luke 5:17.

Why does he eat would seem to indicate Jesus' full humanity for the spiritual Jesus would presumably not need the same type of food that humans eat. Although it is known that there will still be food available in the next life, assuming that is the purpose for catching fish and growing fruit, as recorded in the following Scriptures: <<*When I arrived there, I saw a great number of trees on each side of the river. He said to me, "This water flows toward the eastern region and goes down into the Arabah, where it enters the Dead Sea. When it empties into the sea, the salty water there becomes fresh. Swarms of living creatures will live wherever the river flows. There will be large numbers of fish, because this water flows there and makes the salt water fresh; so where the river flows everything will live. Fishermen will stand along the shore; from En Gedi to En Eglaim there will be places for spreading nets. The fish will be of many kinds – like the fish of the Mediterranean Sea*>> (Ezekiel 47:7-10), and: <<*Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations*>> (Revelation 22:1-2).

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

On hearing this. Although Jesus justified his actions before these influential Pharisees, he in no way turned aside from what he knew to be right. Even Peter, along with some others, was swayed away from what he knew was correct on one occasion at least, for which Paul felt the need to confront him: <<*When Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. For before certain men came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But when they arrived, he began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group. The other Jews joined him in his hypocrisy, so that by their hypocrisy even Barnabas was led astray*>> (Galatians 2:11-13).

It is only right for followers of Jesus to stand firm for what they believe in and not be swayed by public opinion or to conform to those around them, no matter how much influence these people have or how persuasive they may appear. Jesus spoke of this when he said: <<*If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first*>> (John 15:18). King Solomon perhaps had the worldly people in mind when he wrote: <<*Do you see a person wise in their own eyes? There is more hope for a fool than for them*>> (Proverbs 26:12).

Jesus likened those who were healthy to those who were righteous, and those who were sick to sinners; Jesus' opponents must judge for themselves which ones they were. On account of their lack of mercy, they were in fact sick and sinners. Indeed, all of mankind is in need of this doctor. Jesus' offer of salvation to sinners threatened the Pharisees' way of life, yet it is at the heart of the Gospel he came announcing. In the corresponding passage in the first Gospel, the writer further elaborates: <<*But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners*>> (Matthew 9:13), a quotation from Hosea 6:6, where sacrifice summarised observance of religious rituals. More important to God is mercy, which would have led the Pharisees to care for these sinners as Jesus did.

II.a.viii Mark 2:18-22 - Jesus Questioned About Fasting

Fasting is the voluntary abstinence from food for a period of time in order to seek the presence of God that usually symbolises recognition that God's help is needed during times of mourning, danger or when one is hoping for a revelation from God. It is a discipline that is undertaken in many religions although some of the Pharisaic Jews had turned it more into a ritual, even going so far as to put ash on their faces to appear disfigured so that people would see the hardship they were enduring for God. The prophet had noted such behaviour: <<'Why have we fasted,' they say, 'and you have not seen it? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you have not noticed?' "Yet on the day of your fasting, you do as you please and exploit all your workers">> (Isaiah 58:3). One Pharisee even claimed to fast twice a week: <<*The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people – robbers, evildoers, adulterers – or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get'*>> (Luke 18:11-12).

Jesus shows that there are times when fasting is appropriate and other times when it is better to simply enjoy all the good things that God has provided, being thankful for that and giving God all the praise he deserves.

¹⁸ 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

Some people came and asked Jesus. In the previous passages, Jesus was called to justify his own actions, here and later in the chapter he is called to justify the actions of his disciples. As their Rabbi he had ultimate responsibility for their behaviour.

If the disciples were perceived to be in the wrong, the Pharisees complained to Jesus; if Jesus appeared to be in the wrong, they complained to the disciples. This seems a deliberate ploy to sow doubt and discord within the group. This is a common ploy of the enemy within the modern church, as there is no better way to attack the Kingdom work than to cause disharmony in the church.

Fasting. Various kinds of fasts were commonly practiced in OT times, although the law required only one fast a year, on the Day of Atonement, where fasting is probably implied by the command to deny yourselves: <<“*This is to be a lasting ordinance for you: On the tenth day of the seventh month you must deny yourselves and not do any work – whether native-born or a foreigner residing among you – because on this day atonement will be made for you, to cleanse you. Then, before the Lord, you will be clean from all your sins. It is a day of Sabbath rest, and you must deny yourselves; it is a lasting ordinance. The priest who is anointed and ordained to succeed his father as high priest is to make atonement. He is to put on the sacred linen garments and make atonement for the Most Holy Place, for the tent of meeting and the altar, and for the priests and all the members of the community. “This is to be a lasting ordinance for you: Atonement is to be made once a year for all the sins of the Israelites.” And it was done, as the Lord commanded Moses>> (Leviticus 16:29-34). In addition to abstaining from food, people were to humble themselves by praying, mourning, and wearing sackcloth. As with giving and praying, fasting is to be a matter of the heart between the Christian and God.*

This type of reaction of humility before God is commonly seen in the OT: <<*In every province to which the edict and order of the king came, there was great mourning among the Jews, with fasting, weeping and wailing. Many lay in sackcloth and ashes>> (Esther 4:1), <<*I have sewed sackcloth over my skin and buried my brow in the dust>> (Job 16:15), <<*The elders of Daughter Zion sit on the ground in silence; they have sprinkled dust on their heads and put on sackcloth. The young women of Jerusalem have bowed their heads to the ground>> (Lamentations 2:10), <<*I will turn your religious festivals into mourning and all your singing into weeping. I will make all of you wear sackcloth and shave your heads. I will make that time like mourning for an only son and the end of it like a bitter day>> (Amos 8:10), and even the pagan Assyrians knew it was the thing to do when threatened by destruction for their apostasy: <<*When Jonah’s warning reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, took off his royal robes, covered himself with sackcloth and sat down in the dust>> (Jonah 3:6).*****

¹⁹ 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.

²⁰ 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 refers to himself as the bridegroom, for his church is his bride, and the guests represent this group of disciples. In the OT the bridegroom was the Lord: <<*As a young man marries a young woman, so will your Builder marry you; as*

a bridegroom rejoices over his bride, so will your God rejoice over you>> (Isaiah 62:5), and perhaps less obviously in: *<<I will betroth you to me forever; I will betroth you in righteousness and justice, in love and compassion. I will betroth you in faithfulness, and you will acknowledge the Lord>>* (Hosea 2:19-20). While Jesus is present with his disciples, they are to rejoice; when he is taken from them then they will fast. They will then return to the practice of fasting to seek the presence of God, but they need not do so all the time that Jesus, the Son of God, is with them.

Here, it would have been as inappropriate for the disciples to fast in Jesus presence as it was for Samson's wife to cry before him the entire week of their wedding feast: *<<She cried the whole seven days of the feast. So on the seventh day he finally told her, because she continued to press him. She in turn explained the riddle to her people>>* (Judges 14:17), for the early church that Jesus was forming were still in celebratory mood. Their time of sacrifice, hardship, suffering and death would come soon enough, as Jesus knew all too well.

Taken from them is an indirect prediction of Jesus' death, which is spoken of by the prophet: *<<By oppression and judgment he was taken away. Yet who of his generation protested? For he was cut off from the land of the living; for the transgression of my people he was punished>>* (Isaiah 53:8).

²¹ “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. ²² 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 2:21-22

Just as new, unshrunk cloth cannot coexist with an old garment, the Kingdom of God cannot be regarded merely as a patch over the regulations of the Mosaic Law and the Pharisees' extra-biblical traditions.

New wine into old wineskins illustrates the same truth; for Jesus heralds in a new era with new ways. This is both the fulfilment of all that was promised and a revelation of so much more than any human could have envisaged: *<<However, as it is written: “What no eye has seen, what no ear has heard, and what no human mind has conceived” – the things God has prepared for those who love him – these are the things God has revealed to us by his Spirit. The Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God>>* (1 Corinthians 2:9-10).

These metaphors can be applied to the attitude of those who accept the ideas of the Gospel and the New Covenant with Jesus and those who resolutely hold to OT ideas and, in particular, their traditions.

Old wineskins would have become stretched and inelastic. Pouring the new, still fermenting wine into them would most likely cause them to burst, wasting both the wine and ruining the wineskin.

II.a.ix Mark 2:23-28 - Jesus is Lord of the Sabbath

This encounter is the first of the Sabbath controversies recorded where Jesus came into conflict with the Pharisaic Jews over breaches of the law, or more accurately, their interpretations of the Sabbath law.

Here, Jesus' disciples picked the heads of corn in a field and ate them, something that was permitted for someone to do in someone else's field by law, although not on the Sabbath according to the Pharisees, who saw it as work.

Jesus used an example from Scripture that shows King David apparently broke the law in a time of great need but was not admonished for doing so. Jesus explained that God had made these laws for the benefit of his people, not as a barrier for them. It is especially true for Jesus who, as the Son of God, is Lord of the Sabbath.

²³ One Sabbath Jesus was going through the cornfields, and as his disciples walked along, they began to pick some heads of corn. ²⁴ The Pharisees said to him, "Look, why are they doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath?"

Mark 2:23-24

One Sabbath. Some translations specify the Sabbath: *<<And it came to pass on the second Sabbath after the first, that He went through the cornfields>>* (v.23 21st Century KJV). This would indicate that it was the first Sabbath after the Passover festival and part of the counting towards the Festival of Weeks, that is, Pentecost. Therefore, it occurred in springtime.

The Law of Moses states that: *<<If you enter your neighbour's cornfield, you may pick kernels with your hands, but you must not put a sickle to their standing corn>>* (Deuteronomy 23:25), which implies that, in the case of hunger, it was permissible to eat heads of corn from any field one might pass by. Work, however, was **unlawful on the Sabbath**: *<<Six days you shall labour, but on the seventh day you shall rest; even during the ploughing season and harvest you must rest>>* (Exodus 34:21). Pharisaic interpretation sought to guard against work on the Sabbath by prohibiting even the minimal work involved in thus satisfying one's hunger.

²⁵ He answered, "Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need? ²⁶ In the days of Abiathar the high priest, he entered the house of God and ate the consecrated bread, which is lawful only for priests to eat. And he also gave some to his companions."

Mark 2:25-26

Have you never read what David did? Jesus initially emphasises that the restrictive Pharisaic interpretation of the law does not take into account the situation of need in which David and his men found themselves: *<<David went to Nob, to Ahimelek the priest. Ahimelek trembled when he met him, and asked, "Why are you alone? Why is no one with you?" David answered Ahimelek the*

priest, “The king sent me on a mission and said to me, ‘No one is to know anything about the mission I am sending you on.’ As for my men, I have told them to meet me at a certain place. Now then, what do you have on hand? Give me five loaves of bread, or whatever you can find.” But the priest answered David, “I don’t have any ordinary bread on hand; however, there is some consecrated bread here – provided the men have kept themselves from women.” David replied, “Indeed women have been kept from us, as usual whenever I set out. The men’s bodies are holy even on missions that are not holy. How much more so today!” So the priest gave him the consecrated bread, since there was no bread there except the bread of the Presence that had been removed from before the Lord and replaced by hot bread on the day it was taken away>> (1 Samuel 21:1-6). David ate the bread of the Presence, the consecrated bread, so by analogy it follows that, at least in the case of genuine need, actions are allowed on a Sabbath that otherwise might not be permitted.

In the days of Abiathar the high priest. The incident with David actually occurred when Ahimelech, not his son Abiathar, was high priest.

In the days of Abiathar could mean:

1. In the days of Abiathar, who later became high priest, naming Abiathar because he was a more prominent person in the OT narrative, remaining high priest for many years of David’s reign.
2. In the Scripture section of Abiathar, the high priest, taking the Greek word *epi* plus the genitive to indicate an account in Scripture, as in: <<*Now about the dead rising – have you not read in the Book of Moses, in the account of the burning bush, how God said to him, ‘I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob’?*>> (Mark 12:26).

Usually *epi* conveys a sense of location, as when translated ‘upon’. Since 18 of the 21 times that Mark uses the genitive form of *epi*, he does so with reference to location rather than time. Therefore, when probably is not the best rendering in v.26.

Abiathar, the only son of Ahimelech to survive the slaughter by Doeg the Edomite as recounted in 1 Samuel Chapter 22. He is the best known high priest in this larger section of 1 Samuel.

²⁷ Then he said to them, “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. ²⁸ So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath.”

Mark 2:27-28

The Sabbath was made for man. Jesus went on to emphasise that man is not to be confined by the Sabbath but rather that the Sabbath is given as a gracious gift to man for both spiritual and physical refreshment.

The Sabbath law is one of many that were superseded by the Cross, when a new era of grace was brought upon all who believe. However, it would be wise for people to reflect on the reasoning why God so graciously gave man a Sabbath day of rest in the first place. The 21st Century is very much a 24/7 rat race, and there are many people called to work throughout the entire week.

The original Sabbath was a Saturday, with Sunday meetings being introduced by Jewish Christians, who would meet on that day to avoid contravening the Sabbath laws, and the first day of the week represented both the day Christ rose from death and the giving of the Spirit at Pentecost. All people today would do well to make some time for themselves and their families in their busy schedule. At all times disciples are to remember that life is to be enjoyed, for that is one of the reasons Christ has redeemed them: <<*The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full*>> (John 10:10). They should make time for God all the time!

Again, Jesus emphasises his authority as Son of Man. If the Sabbath is for the benefit of mankind, and if the Son of Man is Lord over all mankind, then the Son of Man is surely Lord even of the Sabbath, for: <<*Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made*>> (John 1:3).