

Prayer

All praise be to You, Living Lord, for in my darkest depths, You have lifted my soul; and from my deepest despair You have raised me up. Remind me daily of Your power to save, Lord God, so that I never forget the wonder of Your grace and the provision You make for my life. Thank You, Lord Jesus, Thank you from the bottom of my heart: AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas

As you hear any item of news today, pray for the people whose lives have been affected by what you hear

On-going prayers

- **Pray for those who are growing old** *Pray for those in your own family who are growing towards the latter years of their lives*
- *Pray about bullying in the workplace, which is topical in the UK*
- *Give thanks for the gift of water and pray for those who supply it*

Meditation

Serve the Lord; serve Him without ceasing.

Serve Him by living the life of a servant:
By loving all others as you would love yourself.

Serve the Lord by honouring Him in worship:
Come, sing and dance, and join in His praises!

Serve Him by fulfilling His Great Commission:
To preach the Good News to all people on earth.

Serve Him by being His priests in the world:
Work for others and remember them in prayer.

Serve the Lord by fighting hard against evil:
Wherever you may find it, in yourself or in others.

Serve Him; serve the Lord without ceasing:
There is no reward, save being at peace with God.

Bible passage – Mark 2:13-22

¹³ Jesus went out again by the sea, and the whole crowd came out to Him and He taught them.

¹⁴ As He walked on by, He saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the revenue post. He said to him, 'Follow me.' And he got up and followed Him. ¹⁵ It so happened that as He reclined at table in Levi's house, there were many tax-collectors and sinners eating together with Jesus and His disciples (for there were many who followed Him). ¹⁶ When the scribes and the Pharisees saw that He ate with the sinners and tax-collectors, they asked His disciples, 'Why does He eat with tax-collectors and sinners?' ¹⁷ When Jesus heard about this He said to them; 'Those who are well have no need of a doctor, but those who are sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.'

¹⁸ Now the disciples of John and the Pharisees were fasting, and people came and asked Jesus, 'Why do John's disciples and the followers of the Pharisees fast, but yours do not?' ¹⁹ Jesus replied to them, 'Are you suggesting that the wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them? No! they cannot fast while they have the bridegroom with them. ²⁰ But the time will come when the bridegroom is taken from them, and that is the day on which they will fast.'

²¹ 'No-one will sew a piece of un-shrunk cloth onto an old garment, otherwise when it shrinks, the new will come away from the old and make an ever worse tear! ²² No-one pours new wine into old wineskins because the wine will burst the skins and the wine will be lost as well as the skins. Rather, new wine is poured into new wineskins.'

Bible Study

Review

This reading comes towards the beginning of Jesus' ministry, when he was concerned to add to the number of his disciples. The first story is that of the call of Levi (2:14-17), followed by a discussion about fasting (2:18-20), and lastly, a famous saying by Jesus about cloth and wineskins (2:21-22). We mostly hear these discussed separately, as if each was independent of the other. However, I suggest that whilst they all have a distinct message, they are all connected, and there is a good reason for them to follow on from the call of Levi. Put simply, these three tell us something about the nature of Jesus' work to establish His Kingdom, and the story of the call of Levi introduces the idea that the Kingdom of God is about saving sinners. The discussion of fasting tells us that this work of saving sinners is hard work and whilst Jesus was alive, the work of the Kingdom was more important than fasting. Lastly, sinners are called into a new work of God that is incompatible with the old.

The passage begins with the call of Levi. He is identified as an Israelite ('*son of Alpheus*' – 2:14), and his trade was to gather as much taxes from the populace as possible for the Roman authorities. Israelites regarded this as incompatible with God, and Levi was cut off from the religious life of the community, or as we might say today, he was 'beyond the pale'. It is therefore entirely scandalous that Jews should see Jesus spending time with such people (2:15). When challenged by the authorities, Jesus spoke one of his most famous 'sound-bites', '*I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners*' (2:17).

In saying this, Jesus meant that the Kingdom of God was open to those who were beyond the bounds of the religious system. Moreover, the word 'sinners' was used in the same breath as the word 'Gentiles'. Levi was as good as a Gentile to them and not worthy of the things of God. Now today, when people preach from this text, they generalise the message and refer to sinners as those who are not Christian, preaching that in love God calls even the worst of sinners. However, when we recall the details about who Levi was, then we remember that God is always seeking out those who are beyond the boundaries of human prejudice and presumption, whether religious or cultural.

The second incident describes how people compared the disciples of John and the Pharisees with the disciples of Jesus (2:18-20). Clearly, this discussion must have arisen when religious people were expected to fast, though it is not clear exactly when. The criticism of Jesus' disciples is that they were doing something else (perhaps 'eating and drinking with sinners – 2:14-17) when they thought all good people should be fasting. Jesus confronted such attitudes directly. His reply said that saving sinners was more important than traditional religious observance, and in order to make His point, He used the picture of a wedding feast and appropriate practice in the presence of the bridegroom. Clearly, Jesus likened Himself to the bridegroom.

It is not by coincidence that Jesus went on to make His well known comments about the 'new' and the 'old'. His examples of using new cloth to mend old and new wine in old wineskins are obvious to us; the two are incompatible. However, we should be wary about how we interpret this saying. He was of course saying that new and old do not go together, but His meaning here is more specific. He was saying that the new work of God to establish His Kingdom was not compatible with the old Jewish covenant with God.

The general message we can take from all this is that when God calls a sinner to be saved from sin, something new is happening in the Kingdom of God and it has no connection with the Jewish interpretation of the old covenant. Today, we should be rather cautious about suggesting it means that any new work of God's Spirit today is incompatible with the work of God's Spirit in our own recent past; this is to be too cavalier with the text. God's call to everyone is to take part in the new work of His Kingdom, from when He preached it until He comes in glory.

Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at these issues:

- The calling of Levi, the son of Alpheus
- The meal at Levi's house.
- When did people fast and what did it mean?

- The new and the old

Going Deeper

Each part of the passage holds its special interests and intrigues. Who was Levi son of Alphaeus? He is not listed as a disciple of Christ! Why were John's disciples fasting together with those of the Pharisees? This sounds quite strange because John and the Pharisees were not normally found too close to each other. Lastly, if the old and the new are as incompatible as this passage suggests, what connection can the Old Covenant have with the New?

The calling of Levi son of Alphaeus.

The big problem with the story in Mark of the call of Levi, son of Alphaeus, is that it is the same as the call of Matthew in Matthew's Gospel (9:9f.) and the same as the call of Levi (with no mention of his father) in Luke (5:27f.). It would be easy for us to say that this is a simple case of someone having two names and that Matthew and Levi are the same person, but the problem with this is that the name of the father, Alphaeus, is not mentioned in the lists of the disciples except as the father of a different disciple named James (Matt 10:3, Luke 6:15)! In the end, this is a conundrum we cannot solve, except by saying either that 'Levi' was a different person than 'Matthew', or that 'Alphaeus' was a common name for a father in those days, or that someone recorded something wrong somewhere! Indeed, there is some evidence in the very earliest of copies of Mark's Gospel we now possess (from the fourth century AD) that the name 'Levi son of Alphaeus' was tampered with on the scroll, but by whom and why, we do not know! Perhaps they had problems with the original text just as we do!

Despite these problems, I prefer to think that Matthew and Levi were indeed the same person, and that if there is a problem it is to do with the name 'Alphaeus' and not anything else! These matters are always important for people who want to be sure that every feature of God's Word is properly understood, but what is more important is the extraordinary story which followed Jesus' summary call of Levi.

The meal at Levi's house

Levi responded to Jesus' call just as quickly as had Simon, Andrew, James and John (1:16-20), but his response was very different. He called all his friends who, like himself, were outcasts from the Jewish faith because of their financial association with the Roman authorities and the puppet king Herod. All these friends would be regarded as ritually unclean by rigorous Jews, and therefore 'sinners'. The phrase 'tax-collectors and sinners' does not describe two categories of people; both words described Levi and his friends. Moreover Jesus was content to 'recline at table' with these people (i.e. 'eat with them'). What is quietly remarkable in the middle of this passage is the brief comment in verse 15 that Jesus ate together with His disciples. The early disciples, Simon, Andrew, James and John must have felt able to trust their Master above all their fears and prejudices in order to do this!

The power and authority of Jesus' reply to the acrid question posed to Him by the Pharisees, 'why does He eat with tax-collectors and sinners?' is stunning. It is one of the first famous 'ripostes' given by Jesus to the Pharisees which put them in their place; 'Those who are well have no need of a doctor, but those who are sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.' The scribes and Pharisees were looking for a Messiah who fulfilled all the Laws including those of cleanliness because in their day, they believed that this was necessary in order to maintain the purity of God's people at a time of political oppression. They were unable to see that Jesus the Messiah fulfilled God's prophecies by offering people the opportunity to repent and change their ways, as He had preached from the beginning of His ministry. Jesus' first sermon was hypocritical if He did not open the door for sinners to repent; moreover, the Pharisees were not able to see that if Jesus was truly the Messiah, then His purity was greater than the ritual impurity of the tax-collectors, and He was not compromised by contact with them. Only good could come from Jesus' time spent with 'tax-collectors and sinners'.

When did people fast and what did it mean?

According to the Laws of Moses, Jewish males were only required to fast once a year on the Day of Atonement, but rigorous Pharisees had introduced the practice of fasting twice a week, on Wednesdays and Thursdays. Fasting meant not eating food in the daylight hours of a day from morning until sundown; and a meal was had in the evening. It is not clear, but the implication in this passage is that John's disciples had taken up the rigorous weekly rules of fasting which the Pharisees advocated. The term 'the followers of the Pharisees' in verse 18 is sometimes translated 'disciples of the Pharisees' simply because the same Greek word means 'followers' and 'disciples'. However, there are no other references in Jewish writings of Pharisees having 'disciples', so it seems that the word used here simply refers to those people who followed the Pharisees' practice of fasting; in this case, the disciples of John and others.

Mark does not say who came to Jesus to ask the question about why Jesus' disciples did not fast, but knowing the background to all this, we can imagine that Jesus was not keen on the suggestion. His disciples had been together with Him 'feasting with sinners', and those who asked the question did not see the difference between Jesus' evangelistic work and the religious rituals of the Pharisees. Jesus' response describes a wedding feast purposefully and brings the subject back to feasting. In effect, He said to the Pharisees, 'we are now living at the time of God's banquet for the Messiah, and it is not a time for fasting!' In its day, this would have been well understood.

What is not so clear is that Jesus spoke about a time when the bridegroom was 'taken from them'. This would have puzzled those who heard Jesus, but it is likely that Mark intended his readers to see in Jesus' words a veiled reference to the time when He would go to the Cross and die (2:20). In Mark's view, this was the only reason for fasting.

The new and the old.

The logic of the two sayings with which this passage finishes is fairly straightforward. It is easy to see that new wine that is still fermenting might burst an old wineskin that has become hardened with age. It takes a little more imagination to see how a patch of new cloth sewn onto an old cloak will shrink when it becomes wet, and possibly tear a worse hole in the old garment than was there in the first place!

The message appears clear enough, when it comes to delivering the 'new' things of God, the 'old' will not do. At one level, this is exactly what Jesus said and meant because the new message of the Kingdom of God could not, by the evidence of the previous two incidents (2:14-20), live with the old system of Jewish faith. Certainly not now it was radicalised by the party of the Pharisees. The whole of Jesus' ministry develops around this point, and we will discover that many of the stories of Jesus which come between here and His crucifixion describe the confrontations He had with the Pharisees. In the end, the Pharisees and scribes engineered the accusations against Jesus which resulted in His crucifixion (14:43f.).

But this is not all that these verses say. Read them carefully, for you will see that whilst Jesus talks about new and old not being able to live together, and He is clearly identified with the new, the mini-parables (which is what they are!) do make it clear that it is not right to rip old garments or burst old wineskins! The moral of these texts could well be that there is a place for what is new, and there is a place for what is old, and the old does not have to be torn or burst for the new, even if the two cannot be integrated! It is helpful to read the passage in this way because unless we do, we cannot make sense of Jesus' heartache for His own people (Matt 23:37f. and Luke 13:34f.). This also helps us keep a perspective on the relationship between the Covenant of the Old Testament and that of the New. The Old is our heritage and must be respected as such, but it is not the same as the Gospel found in the New Testament.

Application

We must not forget that these three stories or 'incidents' all follow on from the call of God to sinners. In churches today, there is much preaching designed to call people to repentance, but not much of it is done directly to people who are indeed the worst sinners of our day. Now, all people need to hear this message, but the church has always had evangelists who have gone straight to the worst sinners to tell them the news of God's love. Wesley went outside the churches of his day to preach in the fields and the market places, and he saw revival; it is not a technique people will respond to today, but the principle was right. We are called today to present the Gospel to those who sin, believing that God is always working in the hearts of men and women to make them ready to hear His call for salvation. If we take the message, then people will be saved, not within church, but outside of it, and they will become the new church of our day and beyond.

There are many discussions about the issue of fasting. Jesus' comments (2:20) seem to be a throw-away remark, but now that the 'bridegroom has gone', and Jesus has ascended to the Father, Christians believe that it is right for them to fast. Traditionally, this has been done on Friday; this is because Friday is the day Jesus died on which the 'bridegroom' was 'taken from us' for a time, until the resurrection. It may not be a common practice to fast until sundown on Friday's today, but various forms of Friday fasting have been practiced within the church for centuries, and this is worth considering as a memorial of Christ's death, as indicated in this passage.

The use of the last few verses of our text to justify new things in the life of the church is frequent, but we should be careful. We must not make the mistake of believing automatically that the principle found here applies to anything new we might wish to do. For in this scripture, the issue at stake is not the latest church idea, but the essential difference between the Old Covenant and the New. It is true that the Holy Spirit will frequently work amongst us by sweeping away what has been precious for previous generations so that the Gospel may be preached afresh to others, but Scripture bids us remember that the church of God is always the 'new wine'. We should not be too quick to condemn what God has used in His church in the past as if it were comparable to the Old Covenant which has been superseded.

Discipleship

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Look up the references to Levi son of Alphaeus in your Bible and check out what is said in each Gospel about him. Why do you think these are different?
2. How do we follow Jesus' example to eat with 'tax collectors and sinners'?
3. Discuss how we can apply the last two verses of this passage to the life of the church today.

Topics covered by this text

- *The call of sinners*
- *The practice of fasting*
- *The new work of God and what this means*

Personal comments by author

There is much that is apparently 'evangelical' in this passage of scripture. Jesus' venture to preach to sinners, His call to be recognised as the 'Bridegroom', that is, the Messiah, and the clear urgency of working with the 'new wine' of the Gospel. It would be sad if we thought of these texts as merely illustrative of one church 'group' however. This whole passage is about Jesus' authority, and eventually, we must all decide whether we accept what He has to say or not. All His people are called to hear what He has to say and act accordingly.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *Consider taking one evangelical feature of this passage and using it to ask your church (through its leaders and meetings) how it is engaging in the mission of the church today. Be prepared to discuss this issue and use Scripture to back up what you say!*
- *Pray for all who have the responsibility of making decisions on behalf of local churches, its leaders, elders and ministers. Pray that they will have the wisdom to make good decisions for the sake of all.*

Final Prayer

Lead me, Lord Jesus, through the days ahead. When I do not know what to do, guide me by a word; when I do not know where to go, guide me by your hand; when I do not know what to say, speak tenderly to me I pray. Lead me, Lord Jesus, for alone You are my guide. AMEN
