

# THE SCANDAL MAKER

by Ray C. Stedman

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Many view Jesus in the way he is often pictured -- as a very weak and mild man who sought always to live at peace with everyone and who avoided controversy whenever possible. But as you read the gospel accounts you see that the truth is that, from the very beginning, he deliberately provoked certain groups. He never hesitated to flout the petty regulations of men, and he knowingly and deliberately offended people. In fact, he became too hot to handle, and the "establishment" of that day finally decided that the only way out was to get rid of him. We need this view of Jesus to balance the false impressions we often acquire. But we need to keep the entire picture in balance. He was no "radical revolutionist," as we use the term today. He did challenge the status quo, but never in a violent or desperate way.

In the passage in Mark's Gospel we come to now, we have an account of the kind of controversy Jesus constantly raised. This controversy came out of his penetrating knowledge of human nature and his unceasing opposition to anything which threatened true humanity. As we saw in our last study, the theme of this division of Mark is Jesus' knowledge of man. We have seen the clarity of that knowledge reflected in the healings of the leper and the paralytic. In this final section of this division, Mark brings together four incidents which reveal the refusal of Jesus to be boxed in by purely human regulations, and his deliberate provocation of controversy in order that the true nature of freedom might be made evident. The stage for the first of these incidents is set by the calling of Matthew to be a disciple:

**He [Jesus] went out again beside the sea; and all the crowd gathered about him, and he taught them. And as he passed on, he saw Levi the son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax office, and he said to him, "Follow me." And he rose and followed him. {Mark 2:13-14 RSV}**

Levi evidently was Matthew's given name. It is likely that Jesus is the one who changed his name to Matthew. He renamed several disciples. He said to Simon the son of Jonas, "You shall be called Peter," i.e., "rock". He nicknamed James and John, the sons of Zebedee, "sons of thunder." So it is very likely (although Scripture does not say so) that it was Jesus who changed Levi's name to Matthew, which means "gift of God." Perhaps that is how Jesus thought of him.

Levi lived and worked in Capernaum, where Jesus had made his home. He was a tax collector there, and must have known of Jesus and heard him speak, even before this call. This was not his first encounter with Jesus. It is really remarkable that Jesus would call a man like this, for tax men were no more loved then than they are now. In fact, these tax collectors were very often hated. For the most part, they were trained extortioners, making their living by taxing the people beyond what the law demanded. They were paid no salary -- only given the opportunity to fleece everyone they collected from. They did have to turn in a certain percentage to the government, according to law, but they kept the rest. They were usually rich men, but hated by all for their practices. But Jesus saw something in Levi, knew his heart, knew there was something in him which made him discontent with this kind of life. He saw the hunger of his heart. Therefore he called him, and said, "Follow me." He cared nothing at all that it would damage his own reputation to allow such a man to be a disciple.

The next scene probably occurred the following day, and it is associated by Mark with the call of Matthew:

**And as he [Matthew] sat at table in his house, many tax collectors and sinners were sitting with Jesus and his disciples; for there were many who followed him. And the scribes of the Pharisees, when they saw that he was eating with sinners and tax collectors, said to his disciples, "Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?" And when Jesus heard it, he said to them, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I came not to call the righteous, but sinners." {Mark 2:15-17}**

## RSV }

This evidently was a farewell dinner Matthew gave for his friends, his tax-collecting buddies. He was saying farewell to his work and friends, and leaving to follow One who would travel from place to place. It was also an opportunity to introduce them to his new found Lord. It was therefore a normal, natural occasion of festivity and joy as they gathered together for this feast.

Many years ago, when Bob Smith left the engineering field to become a pastor at PBC, he gave a luncheon like this -- inviting all his friends and associates who had worked with him. He asked me to be the speaker, to tell them about the faith which had led him to leave his work to become a pastor. I am sure that scene was very much like this one in the Scriptures, as Matthew invited Jesus to tell his friends why he was leaving to become a disciple.

What a collection of rascals must have been there that day! All the tax collectors of the city, all the sinners, all the despised social outcasts were sitting there. As the scribes of the Pharisees passed by, they saw that right in the midst of it all, among the beer bottles and the poker chips, sat Jesus. And they were absolutely scandalized! It was obvious that he was the friend of these men. He was not lecturing them. He was sitting among them, and eating and drinking with them. The scribes were simply appalled at this, and called the disciples aside: "Why does he do things like that? Doesn't he know who these people are? Why does he allow himself to be seen in the company of such men?"

Jesus' answer is very revealing. He actually agrees with their remarks. He says, in effect, "You're right, these are sick, hurting, troubled men. Their style of life has damaged them deeply. They don't see life rightly; they are covering up many evils; they are false in many ways. You're right, these are sick men. But where else would a doctor be?" That is his argument. "I've come to heal men, and therefore where they are hurting is where I'm needed."

In that marvelous way he has of putting things, he says something to them which directs their attention to the right focus, but also turns their gaze back toward themselves. He says, "I came to call not the righteous, but sinners." That is, those who think they are righteous, as these Pharisees did, are actually more needy than those they regard as social outcasts. These Pharisees were actually more deeply disturbed than the tax collectors and sinners, but they did not know it. But Jesus was saying to them, "To those who think they're righteous, I have absolutely nothing to say. But to these who know they're sick, and are open for help, I am fully available as a minister to their souls."

Our Lord made several things emphatically clear by this reply:

First, he indicated very strongly that when people think they have no need of help from God, they are in no position to be helped. There is nothing to say to them.

We meet people today who are "self-sufficient," who think they do not need God at all. I have long ago learned that the best way to treat them is to smile and be friendly, and let them go their way. Life itself will teach them they are wrong. Sooner or later the bottom will drop out and all their dreams of self-reliance will collapse about their feet. Then is the time you can talk to them; then they will be listening.

This is why God often allows trouble into our lives. It makes us stop clinging to the terrible illusion that we are able to handle life by ourselves. That is the greatest delusion spread among men. As long as people think that, there is little you can do for them, and not much you can say. But our Lord always put his efforts where men and women were open to help, where they were hurting so much they knew they needed help.

This past week I met a man and spent some time talking with him. He had been a self-sufficient, self-made man, a prominent lawyer. But now everything had collapsed. His wife was leaving him, his business had failed, and he had thought of suicide several times. For the first time in his life he understood that he could not handle life, and was wide open to listen to someone who would tell him of the Great Physician.

The second thing our Lord reveals is that people are more important than prejudice. Oh, that we would learn

that! Prejudices are preconceived notions formed before we have sufficient knowledge, usually mistaken or distorted ideas we have grown up with. When prejudices are in opposition to the needs of men, they are to be swept aside without any hesitation.

People are more important than prejudices, and Christians must learn that. The Christian church has been criticized and denounced and forsaken, and justifiably so, because of the prejudices it still manifests in terms of class, race, financial, and even sex distinctions. We Christians must learn to ignore all differences of class, social station, race, wealth, and sex, and meet all alike according to their readiness of heart. Whenever you find someone hungry, hurting, and needing help -- whether he is dressed in gabardine and works in a financial center, or is a savage in the jungle, or a workman in a shop, or a hippie living in the forest -- that is the person who needs the Great Physician; that is the one to whom friendship should be extended.

We Christians must learn to treat people like this -- regardless of what their outward appearance may be. We must learn to see the waiter and waitress, the news vender, the bellboy, the elevator operator, as people whose hearts may be in need. We need not be at all impressed with the topflight executive. He too is a man who may be hurting and needing help. That is the way Jesus approached people everywhere. He was looking for those who were ready to respond because of the hurt of their life.

I love the words of C. T. Studd, that brilliant young Englishman who gave away a fortune, that he might go out to the forests of Africa. He put his philosophy this way:

Some like to dwell  
Within the sound  
Of church and chapel bell.  
But I want to run a rescue shop  
Within a yard of Hell.

That was the philosophy of Jesus, too.

The second incident deals with the power of tradition. Mark says, beginning in Verse 18,

**Now John 's disciples and the Pharisees were fasting; and people came and said to him, "Why do John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?" And Jesus said to them, "Can the wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them? As long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast. The days will come, when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast in that day." {Mark 2:18-20 RSV}**

Once again we have a group of offended Pharisees. Evidently this was a fast day on which this incident occurred. The Law of Moses required only one day of the year to be a fast day -- the day known as Yom Kippur, which the Jews observe to this day. The Day of Atonement is the only fast day the Law requires. But the Pharisees, in order to show how zealous they were, had through the centuries designated day after day as fast days, for they regarded fasting as the best way to call God's attention to their piety -- and, incidentally, the attention of men. This is why the Pharisees put on sackcloth (burlap), rubbed ashes on their faces, and sucked in their cheeks so they would look gaunt -- to call people's attention to how pious and righteous they were. And they hoped God would take notice, too. Many days of the year had become fast days, long established in custom. So it was taken for granted everyone would fast on these days.

This evidently was one of those days, and some people came to Jesus and said, "Why do John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?" "Everybody else is keeping this fast," they said. "Why do you flout the traditions like this? Why do you deliberately ignore these customs? Why don't you make your disciples fast?" This type of question is often asked today: "Why don't you keep the regulations? Why don't you keep the rules? Why does your particular group feel it doesn't have to adhere to the same standards as everybody else?"

Our Lord's answer again is very suggestive. In effect, what he says is, "You've misunderstood entirely the nature of the occasion. You think it is a funeral, but it's not; it's a wedding. A bridegroom is here. And at a

wedding nobody fasts. As long as the bridegroom is there, there will be festivity and rejoicing, laughter and gladness. Now, there will come a day when the bridegroom will be gone, and then it is all right to fast. But when the bridegroom is present there is feasting, not fasting." Of course there was a predictive element in his statement. He indicated there would come a day when he would leave these men, and then they would indeed fast and mourn. But, as these words apply to us, that day never comes -- or never need come. There are times of mourning in our life, times of sorrow. But in every such instance there is always the availability of Jesus Christ to step into the situation and turn it into a feast day.

In these words, our Lord is putting his finger upon the nature of the new relationship he had come to demonstrate and to bring to men -- what it would be like, and what it would mean in terms of activity and expression. All this time the Jews had worshipped in the temple -- solemn, ceremonial, ritualistic services centering upon sacrifice and silence before the greatness of God. Now our Lord is teaching them that a new relationship has come in which there is a vitality and a warmth of intimacy with the bridegroom himself which only can be expressed in terms of joy and gladness and celebration.

This is what we Christians need to see again. Jesus is commenting here upon the drastic changes in the character of worship which occur when people discover the reality of relationship with Jesus Christ. Church services, for far too many centuries, have been borrowed from an Old Testament concept of worship, and have presented a scene of solemnity and silence and ritual. This predominated in the Roman Catholic Church, and it has been carried over unthinkingly into Protestant churches as well, so that even today we suffer from the attitude that a church service ought to be a time of silence, when everyone sits in supposed awestricken solemnity before God. But this is not the picture Jesus came to give. "No," he says, "instead of the fast, it is a feast; instead of the sackcloth, there is a robe; and instead of solemnity, there ought to be joy."

One reason why so much of the church today is written off by people who have come to see what Christians are like is that they are turned off by the morbidity and dullness of what we call worship. In many church services across this land today the diet is what can only be described as predictable pablum, dished-up Pollyanna, as dull and unexciting as can be! Many services are so totally predictable that, without being present, you can look at your watch and, at any given moment, say what is happening. The preaching which comes forth is so shallow and repetitive that people have turned off their ears and no longer listen. Why they subject themselves to coming at all, I do not understand! I honestly do not blame those who do not come. Church people complain that men are out playing golf and boating on Sunday morning. But until the church recovers the excitement and joy of a wedding feast, and the people are gladsome of heart, they cannot be blamed for not coming. When the church does recover what Jesus has indicated here, then the meetings will be full again.

Our Lord highlights this difference with two very perceptive and vivid illustrations, Verses 21-22:

**"No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old garment; if he does, the patch tears away from it, the new from the old, and a worse tear is made. And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; if he does, the wine will burst the skins, and the wine is lost, and so are the skins; but new wine is for fresh skins." {Mark 2:21-22 RSV}**

No one could illustrate better than Jesus. How he would take these simple, commonplace things which were part of everyday life, and make them speak with freshness and clarity the truths he wanted to illustrate! He is talking about this new relationship, when the bridegroom is in their midst, and there is the joy and celebration of the feast. "When you have that kind of a relationship with me," he says, "then it is no longer the time to try to patch up the old with the new."

What did he mean by that? Fresh relationships require new expressions. When you are going on in the old way -- and everything has the tendency to get old after awhile -- and when it gets old, the quality of relationship is affected. The warmth and joy often departs. When that happens, and then something brings a new awakening, a fresh sense of the presence of God, then do not try to express it through the old forms. It will not work. The new is too powerful, and will destroy those old forms which try to contain it. You cannot do it that way.

We have an example of this today in the fresh awakening of the Spirit which has moved through this country

in the last five years. In place after place, people are trying to put this back into the old, familiar forms of church service, and are finding it will not work. It must be done in a new way. Instead of sitting there with folded hands, solemn and pious, even morbid, in the presence of God, showing no response at all, people are manifesting the joy they feel, as Christ has come as a living Person into their lives, by clapping their hands, putting their arms around others, and manifesting loving relationships in that way. To resist this is to fall into the error Jesus has so vividly delineated for us here -- putting an unshrunk patch on an old garment. As the patch shrinks, it tears a hole larger than before.

The second illustration is similar -- new wine cannot be put into old wineskins. They did not have bottles in those days, but used sewed up animal skins. The old ones became brittle, inflexible, and burst easily. New wine is strong, and is still fermenting, giving off gases. If you put new wine into old wineskins, soon it will burst the old skins, and everything will be lost. Jesus means by this that strong reactions (for wine is the symbol of joy) need fresh controls. Wineskins are made to hold wine, but they have to be flexible. They cannot be rigid and unbending and inflexible, but must be able to expand with the wine, expressing the joy they contain. Our Lord, in great wisdom, is showing us here what happens when a people or an individual returns to a vital relationship with Christ. They must find new ways to express it, and not go back to the old ways. This is what the Spirit of God is showing us so vividly in these days.

The principle our Lord is illustrating here is that tradition must never be permitted to destroy relationships. That is what often happens. We have to fight tradition. Jesus fought it in his own day. It was the most pernicious and subtle foe he encountered. Everywhere he turned he found himself in face-to-face combat with the rigid traditions of the past -- the dead hand of the past locking in the present. He was ever opposed to that. And so we must learn to become the foe of traditions which violate relationships.

The third incident touches on the problem of rules, beginning at Verse 23:

**One sabbath he was going through the grainfields; and as they made their way his disciples began to pluck ears of grain. And the Pharisees said to him, "Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the sabbath?" And he said to them, "Have you never read what David did, when he was in need and was hungry, he and those who were with him: how he entered the house of God, when Abiathar was high priest, and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and also gave it to those who were with him?" And he said to them, "The sabbath was made for man, not man for the sabbath; so the Son of man is lord even of the sabbath." {Mark 2:23-27 RSV }**

Those were challenging words to these men. Once again we have an incident that put him in direct confrontation, immediate controversy with these Pharisees. Now, his disciples were doing what would have been perfectly proper on any weekday. They were not stealing from this farmer as they went through his grainfields, for the law said that as long as they did not put a sickle or a scythe to the grain, any passing travelers who were hungry could thresh out a few heads of grain in their hands and eat the wheat. The problem was that this was the Sabbath, and by this time the Sabbath had had a thousand and one restrictions built into it by the Pharisees.

The Sabbath originally was given to restore man, to give him rest and recreation. Properly observed, it would be a joy. But the Pharisees had so ringed it about with their thousands of interpretations of what it meant to cease work that they had made it a terrible burden to bear. For instance, they held that it was perfectly all right to spit on a rock on the Sabbath -- that presented no problem. But if you spit on the ground, that made mud; mud was mortar; therefore you were working on the Sabbath. So it was absolutely wrong to spit on the ground! That was the nature of the restrictions they devised. So it is not surprising that they considered it wrong to thresh a head of grain on the Sabbath day, even though you were hungry, because that was working on the Sabbath.

Jesus skewered them on their own sword: the Scriptures. They were supporting their regulations and defending their laws by the commandment, "Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor, and do all your work; but the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; in it you shall not do any

work," {Exod 20:8-10a RSV}. But Jesus said, "Wait a minute. Have you never read 1 Samuel 21? David and his men, fleeing for their lives, were hungry. There was no ordinary food available, so in desperation they entered the tabernacle, went into the holy place, took the showbread, which the law that God himself had given said was designated for the priests only, and ate it. Twelve loaves of bread, standing as a symbol for Israel, prepared fresh each week, were placed on the table in the tabernacle. After a week, the priests, and only the priests, could eat it. But David, because of the hunger of his men, dared to go in and take those loaves of bread and pass them out among them. And God did not do anything about it. Now what do you make of that?"

Well, they do not give any reply. So Jesus draws a conclusion: "The sabbath was made for man, not man for the sabbath. And the Son of man, the quintessential man, is lord even of the sabbath." By this he underscores the principle which must govern our lives as believers: human needs always take precedence over rules. Hunger is healthy, and therefore holy. It is wrong to make rules which stop men from satisfying the basic needs of their lives. This is why we need to examine the systems of our day. It is easy to focus on a single act and say, "That breaks a rule." Yes, but why is it broken? That is what society and the church must ask. Did we force this individual, by means of the system in which he lives, to do something illegal in order to satisfy a basic need of his life? If so, then there is something wrong with the system. This is what Jesus was forcing them to examine. The Sabbath was made to restore men, but when it became a burden and a hindrance, then it was wrong. Those man-made regulations needed to be broken, and our Lord broke them.

Some years ago we sent a team of men to minister at a midwestern college. We were holding meetings in a large room in the women's dormitory. There was a rule at that college that the girls had to be in their rooms at 10:30 p.m. The boys could stay out till 12:00, but the girls had to be in bed at 10:30. We were having a great meeting. God had broken through in a remarkable way. These kids had begun for the first time to relate to each other as people, and were going to one another, apologizing and being forgiven, standing weeping together with their arms around each other, praying for one another -- it was a great movement of the Spirit. Promptly at 10:30 the Dorm Mother appeared, looking like a thunderstorm. She said,

"It is 10:30, and time for these girls to be in their rooms!"

One of us said, "But, God is working here, and we can't stop this meeting now." She said,

"I'm the Dorm Mother here, and the rule requires that they be in bed at 10:30, and I'm going to see that it's observed!"

One of us had the sense to say, "Well, we understand your problem. Could we go in and talk with you about it?" And so we sent one fellow in who talked for 2-1/2 hours while the meeting went on!

But that is the way we tend to think: Bedtime must be observed, no matter what. Regulations of conduct in the home must always be observed, taking precedence over everything else. But Jesus says, "No, human need takes precedence over rules." Rules are orderly ways to meet needs. That is what they are for. And they are perfectly right in that way. But when a rule actually ends up opposing the meeting of the need, then the rule has to go. Our Lord is the first to make that clear.

The last incident deals with the danger of zealous pride. Chapter 3:

**Again he entered the synagogue, and a man was there who had a withered hand. And they watched him, to see whether he would heal on the sabbath, so that they might accuse him. And he said to the man who had the withered hand, "Come here." And he said to them, "Is it lawful on the sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to kill?" But they were silent. And he looked around at them with anger, grieved at their hardness of heart, and said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He stretched it out, and his hand was restored. The Pharisees went out, and immediately held counsel with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him. {Mark 3:1-6 RSV}**

This evidently is a crucial moment in the ministry of Jesus, marking the climax of a growing hostility which you can trace through the questions asked by these Pharisees. The first one is rather mild: "Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?" The second is a little more serious: "Why do John's disciples fast, and the

disciples of the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?" The third is even more crucial: "Why are you doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?" The fourth brings before us the statement: "they watched him, ... so that they might accuse him." The hostility is sharpened, the synagogue door is closing to Jesus, and these men have now become his open and avowed enemies.

But they paid him a remarkable compliment. They came into that synagogue knowing that there was present a man with a withered hand. They knew without a doubt that Jesus would not be up in the front talking to the priest; he would be concerned about that man with the withered hand. They knew they could trap him that way.

Notice how Jesus handled this. He deliberately called him out into the center, turned a spotlight on the man, said, "I don't want any of you to miss this. Come here." And the man stood out there in the midst of them. While he was standing there, Jesus turned to the Pharisees, and asked two very penetrating questions. He said, in effect, "You're concerned about the Sabbath, aren't you? Let me ask you: whose thoughts are nearer to the purpose of the Sabbath -- yours or mine?" For he read their thoughts. "I want to do good to this man, while you want to harm me. I want to save this man and heal him; you're thinking of killing me. Now, which is in line with the Sabbath?" Mark says they were silent. No wonder!

Then, angered at their hardness of heart, grieved by their resistance, Jesus healed the man, thus underscoring for us that an excess of zeal (which is what motivated these men in their rules and regulations concerning the Sabbath) is destructive and was invalidating something perfectly good. There is nothing wrong with the Sabbath, as God gave it to man. But these men had so heaped it with rules and regulations that they had destroyed it. Their zeal to maintain it had ruined it. Jesus cut across all that. Mark records that their immediate reaction was to be so angry at the threat he represented to their favored position in society that they immediately went out and joined their enemies, the Herodians, in taking counsel how they might destroy him. This is where Jesus always drove evil -- right out into the open, where it was visible to all.

In closing let's ask a couple of questions, because we are confronted with many of these same situations ourselves:

Why did Jesus act this way?

Why did he deliberately provoke controversy and hostility?

The reason we often do it is because we have a certain cause we are trying to advance. Most of the revolutionaries and politicians of today are trying to attack another group, because they are defending their own. They feel it is necessary to destroy the other group in order to uphold their own ideals. But our Lord did not do that. Notice that he never was harsh or threatening. Even though he pointed out things which were wrong, he never was harsh in his words or his attitude towards men. He was grieved and hurt, but he was not harsh. Nor was he ever garish or outlandish. He never did things merely for the sake of being different. He did not try to call attention to himself by bizarre actions, by walking around with a cross on his back, or beating himself in public, or wearing strange clothes, or looking remarkably different than anybody else.

And yet, having said all that, neither was he ever fearful or compromising. The answer, of course, is the principle which governed his actions: he was simply true to truth, always. He reacted as God had made man to be, and disregarded anything which stood in the way. That is why he did these things. All the rules and petty traditions and regulations and prejudices and the excess of zeal, he refused to allow to stand in his way. When it came to dealing with a human being, he dealt with him as God had made him to be. And when our own violation of man-made rules and regulations comes from that source, and with that attitude, then we will act as Jesus did. May God help us to have the wisdom and the courage to do so.

### **Prayer:**

Our Father, we are amazed at the marvelous insight and understanding of humanity our Lord presents. Thank you for his courage which dared to challenge the traditions of men. Grant that we may have it as well. Teach us to walk in the Spirit in this regard, in Jesus' name,

Amen.

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