

'And the Pharisees Went Out, and Straightway With the Herodians Took Counsel Against Him, How They Might Destroy him.'- Mar 3:6

by G. Campbell Morgan

G. Campbell Morgan's sermon explores the opposition Jesus faced from the Pharisees and Herodians, emphasizing His compassionate responses to their criticisms.

Topics: "Opposition to Christ", "Compassion and Service"

Description

G. Campbell Morgan addresses the growing opposition Jesus faced from the Pharisees and Herodians, culminating in their conspiracy to destroy Him. He highlights how Jesus, despite criticism for associating with sinners and breaking traditions, remained focused on His mission to heal and save. Morgan emphasizes that Jesus' actions were rooted in compassion and the understanding that the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. The sermon calls for self-reflection on how Christians today may face similar criticisms for their joyfulness and engagement with the world. Ultimately, it challenges believers to embody Christ's love and service to humanity, even amidst misunderstanding and opposition.

Transcript

Mar 2:13-28 - Mar 3:1-6.

THIS is a singularly sad text. It is the record of the climax of a hostile movement manifest throughout the paragraph of our reading.

In our consideration of the early morning communion of Jesus with His Father after the first Sabbath in Capernaum, we turned to the prophecy of Isaiah, and saw the picture there presented of the Servant of God, wakened by His Lord to hear the secrets of His will. In that picture we saw also, the Servant of God resolutely giving His back to the smiters, and His cheek to them that plucked off the hair, going forward with courage to face all opposition in order to accomplish the will of His God. The suggestiveness of that picture of Isaiah is illustrated in the paragraph. Jesus, passing down from the place of solitude, went throughout all Galilee, followed by great multitudes of people. Mark briefly records that fact; and gives two illustrative incidents, those of the leper and the palsied man.

That ministry was exercised in the face of constant opposition. This was first manifested in the reasoning of the scribes when He pronounced the sins of the palsied forgiven. Now, following the chronological sequence, Mark records four incidents specially revealing the growth and the nature of that opposition.

Each of these incidents has values beyond those now to occupy our attention. Each conveys messages of truth concerning the Lord Himself in His dealings with men. We propose now to observe that opposition which found its climax, as the text declares, when "the Pharisees went out, and straightway with the Herodians took counsel against Him, how they might destroy Him."

Let us then observe this opposition, in order that we may consider the attitude of Jesus in the presence thereof.

The opposition is at once clearly revealed in the four words of criticism which were uttered. Observe how these words advance to the climax of the text.

"He eateth and drinketh with publicans and sinners" (Mar 2:16).

"Why do John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but Thy disciples fast not?" (Mar 2:18).

"Why do they on the Sabbath day that which is not lawful?" (Mar 2:24).

"They watched Him . . . that they might accuse Him" (Mar 3:2).

The first criticism was spoken, not to the Lord, but to His disciples concerning Him. The next two words were spoken, not concerning the Lord, but to the Lord concerning His disciples, and were undoubtedly intended to reflect upon Him for the influence He had been exerting upon them. In the last sentence there is no record of any word spoken; but a graphic fact is presented. Again they were in the synagogue, -a week later, as Luke declares, -and these men were silently and malevolently watching Him to see whether He would heal, that they might accuse Him.

With regard to the first of these criticisms, the occasion was that of the call of Levi, and the feast that followed. Jesus, passing along saw Levi (or Matthew) sitting at the receipt of custom, and said to him, "Follow me." Immediately he followed Him. Whether on the same day, or later, cannot be stated with any certainty, but the fact is recorded definitely that Matthew gathered together a number of people of his own order, and made a feast that they might have the opportunity of meeting with Jesus. Our Lord is seen accepting that hospitality of Matthew, and Himself becoming a veritable Host in the midst of these men, the gathered publicans and sinners, old friends of Matthew, a class held in supreme contempt by the religious men of the time. The Pharisees charged Him with entering upon a fellowship with sinning men, which was defiling.

While recognizing the fact of the traditions by which these Pharisees were bound, it must also be recognized that theirs was a very sincere difficulty in this regard, and in all probability their philosophy was perfectly sound, had they applied it to any other than Jesus. This was one of those occasions when our Lord made Himself, without patronage and without any appearance of contempt for the men among whom He sat, the common Friend of publicans and sinners. From the criticism of the Pharisees upon this occasion, and also upon other occasions, we have a picture which is still a startling one. Jesus is seen sitting at the feast with these men, without taking up toward them anything of the attitude of superiority, patronage, or contempt. They charged Him with cultivating a friendship with sinning men which, as it seemed to them, must be defiling.

In the second of the scenes, the occasion was the observance of some fast. The tenses warrant the declaration that it was not a general question merely, but that at the time some fast was being observed, which the disciples of John and the disciples of the Pharisees observed, but which the disciples of Jesus did not observe. The enemies of Christ came to Him thus again still strangely perplexed, and asked Him a general question, which nevertheless had a particular and immediate application. They charged Him and those associated with Him, with an absence of seriousness and solemnity. There were evidences on the part of His disciples of joyfulness and happiness. They were neglecting to fast, and were rather given to feasting. That was the second criticism.

The third incident was in the cornfields. His disciples began, not to pluck merely, but as they moved forward other evangelists tell us that they rubbed the ears of corn in their hands, and ate. That was the occasion for the third criticism. They charged our Lord with permitting His disciples to do secular things on a sacred day.

In the last picture the occasion was again a Sabbath day in the synagogue. In that synagogue was a man with a withered hand. Here occurs one of those incidental things, which are so full of beauty in these narratives. Seeking to find an accusation against Him, His enemies nevertheless all unconsciously paid Him a supreme compliment. They associated Him immediately, not with the chief seat in the synagogue, but with the most needy man in the crowd. They expected He would do something for that man with the withered hand. They hated Him, but they were quick to know Him, and they watched Him that they might have their opportunity to accuse Him:

There was a new element of rooted objection to Himself now entering into their criticism. This opposition expressed itself in the most startling way, startling because the Pharisees took counsel with the Herodians. Here were two political parties in the State, always bitterly opposed to each other, now brought together. The Herodians believed in the government of Rome, in order that Herod's jurisdiction might be maintained. The Pharisees were against the yoke of Rome. Many and bitter were the disputes and quarrels between them. But the Pharisees went out and took counsel with the Herodians; they sank their political differences in their mutual hostility to Jesus; and they took counsel how they might destroy Him.

Now let us watch the Lord, and observe His attitude toward all this opposition; how He opposed Himself, His mission, and the meaning of His ministry, against every successive form of criticism; until when these men went out to take counsel against Him, He withdrew, and left them. A fourfold charge had been made against Him; first, that of a moral carelessness, in that He sat to eat with publicans and sinners; secondly, that of lack of seriousness, in that He encouraged His disciples to violate a tradition by not observing a fast; thirdly, failure to differentiate as between the sacred and the secular, in that He allowed His disciples to do a thing, not in itself wrong, but purely secular, upon a sacred day, in plucking the ears of corn; and finally, by their very silence, and the malevolence of their intention, these men declared their conviction of His utter worthlessness, and that He merited destruction.

First with regard to the charge of moral carelessness, our Lord admitted at once, by the figure of speech that He used, the moral maladies of the men among whom He sat that day as Guest, or among whom He sat as Host. That is seen in the answer He gave: "They that are whole have no need of a physician, but they that are sick." He thus immediately revealed Himself as conscious of the spiritual and moral disease of the men among whom He sat. His sense of evil was not less acute than that of His enemies. This was His answer. He knew these men, their nefarious tricks, and their gross life. There is no doubt that there was a good deal of ground for the opposition of the Pharisees to these men. They were debased men.

Jesus admitted their moral maladies, and then quietly, and without any argument, assumed for Himself the authority and the ability of the physician.

Thus He denied the charge of moral carelessness by declaring that He cared so much, that He was there to cure these men of their spiritual sicknesses. He revealed the fact that the reason why He sat familiarly at the board and condescended to the level of these men, assuming no attitude of superiority, patronage, or of contempt, was that He was against the very things to which the Pharisees objected, but that He was there as the Pharisees never could be, with the healing power of the physician. He declared in effect when they criticized Him for moral carelessness, that there had been committed to Him the cure of souls, and that in order to cure them, it was necessary to come into contact with them.

Observe our Lord's method in dealing with the second of these criticisms. I have named this the charge of lack of seriousness. Surely this is what these men meant. The observance of the fast was always the time of solemnity, and fasts had been multiplied far beyond those commanded in the Law; occasions when men wore sackcloth, put ashes upon their heads, did not anoint their faces, and appeared in the garments of mourning, in sorrowful and solemn silence. They were doubtless observing such a fast on this particular occasion. But the disciples of Jesus were not wrapped in sackcloth, nor had they scattered ashes upon their heads. They were not abstaining from food, but were filled with gladness and joy. When they asked the question why His disciples did not fast, these men were thus charging Him with failure to realize the seriousness and solemnity of life.

In reply to this criticism, He at once adopted the figure of the wedding, spoke of Himself as the Bridegroom, and declared that these men could never be sad while the Bridegroom remained with them. The adoption of the figure was in itself a vindication of the right of His disciples to be joyful. In those Eastern lands during a period of seven days, all the friends of the bridegroom were full of joy and merriment and laughter and songs and gladness. When these men questioned the disciples' attitude toward fasting, suggesting thereby that they had no sense of the seriousness and solemnity of life, He did not deny it. He admitted it, and said, "As long as they have the Bridegroom with them, they cannot fast." Then in an aside, He recognized the fact that there were days coming to these men when the Bridegroom should be taken away;—lifted away, snatched away, for such is the word, a very significant word, having in it an element of tragedy, a suggestion of violence. The choice of the word was in itself a recognition of the purpose which was already in the hearts of the men who were watching Him. There was a reference to what He knew would be the ultimate of their hostility, His taking away, His lifting up, and that by violent and evil men. Looking at these men who were criticizing Him, and knowing whereunto their hostility would grow, He said: These men will have their day of fasting presently when the Bridegroom is taken away from them. This declaration was an aside, and not the declaration of a final truth, for spiritually we have no place in that sadness, for the Bridegroom is not taken away from us. He abides with us. Therefore our whole attitude toward life should be that, not of men who fast, but of men who sit at the eternal feast.

Our Lord immediately proceeded to illustrate this by the figures of the cloth and the wine skins. New cloth cannot be put into old. It will tear it. New wine cannot be put into old skins. It will burst them. In that word our Lord claimed that He had come to initiate an entirely new order of religious life and experience, which would make necessary new methods of expression; instead of the fast, the feast; instead of the sackcloth, the purple; instead of the perpetual and solemn melancholy, a perennial and glad joyfulness. Thus, recognizing and understanding the meaning of their criticism of the men who were about Him, for the gladness of their lives, and their refusal to fast, recognizing also that days of sorrow were coming to them, He indicated in a prophetic and illuminative figure the fact that presently there would be for men the joy of

gladness and song, and the necessity for sackcloth would forever pass away; the sackcloth in that day would be transfigured, metamorphosed into the purple of royalty; all the underlying reason for the fast being destroyed, the eternal feast would begin.

The third charge against Him was that of failure to distinguish between sacred and secular. "Why do thy disciples on the Sabbath day that which is not lawful?" The plucking of the ears of corn was not wrong in itself. The rubbing of them, and the eating of the corn, was not sinful. The wrong as these men saw it, was that the disciples failed, under the influence of Jesus, to distinguish between that sacred day and that secular act; and failed to realize the fact that the sacred must ever be kept separate from the secular; that the secular, however proper it may be, must be left when the sacred precincts are entered. That was their criticism. I believe that view still holds captive a great many to-day who think they understand Jesus Christ, and His teaching.

Let us therefore carefully see how He answered them. Incidentally, by the illustrations He used, He recognized the reason of His disciples' action. They were hungry, they had need of food. "David, when he ... was hungry. . . entered into the house of God . . . and ate the shewbread . . . and gave also to them that were with him." In that illustration there was first of all a careful understanding and recognition of the fact that the reason why His disciples had plucked these ears of corn, and rubbed them and eaten them on the Sabbath day, was that of the perfectly natural hunger of the men. Only as we see this aspect of this story do we reach the real teaching of Christ on this occasion.

Then, by the two illustrations which He gave, which flashed their light upon His disciples' action, and explained that action, He revealed the falseness of the divisions these men were making. Man is sacred in all his being; sacred not merely in his spiritual nature; but sacred as certainly in his moral and mental capacities; and sacred also in his physical life. A call for food is a healthy call, and a healthy call is a holy call; for health and holiness are identical terms. In our perpetual use of them we have divided between material and spiritual, but we of the Anglo-Saxon tongue have derived them both from the old word Halig, which means whole, complete. A cry for food is a sign of health, therefore it is holy. Anything that the physical demands is essentially holy. The wrong of life begins when men answer a perfectly healthy call in ways forbidden. A cry for food is holy, it is sacred! Were it not so, in the economy of God He would provide that men never become hungry on the Sabbath day. The fact that hunger crosses the threshold on the Sabbath day demonstrates its sacredness, and no man can escape from that. Our Lord recognized the sacredness of man; and then particularly, condensed into brief words the whole law of the Sabbath day. The Sabbath is indeed sacred, but wherein lies its sanctity? It is sacred because it is made for man. Man was not made for it. It was made for man, to minister to his needs. Therein lies the sanctity of the Sabbath day. The ultimate and final sanction of Sabbath observance is that of its service to humanity. It is indeed sacred. It was made for man; it retains its sanctity as it serves man.

So the Son of man, Who came not to be ministered unto but to minister, is Lord of the Sabbath; and the Sabbath must serve Him as He serves humanity, and consequently must be compelled to the service of humanity. The hunger of the disciples on the Sabbath day was healthy, was holy, and therefore the Sabbath must not be allowed to interfere with the supply of the need.

Of course all intelligent beings will discriminate between the doing of that which is the answer to a need, and the doing of that which is the answer to a desire which is not created by essential need. We must distinguish for evermore between that which is right and that which is wrong on the Sabbath day, whether it be the seventh day of the week, or the first day set apart for worship and rest.

Our Lord however answered the charge of failure to distinguish between the sacred and the secular, by enlarging the area of the sacred, and bringing into it man with all his essential needs; for the sanctity of man is the final secret of the sanctity of the Sabbath. Therefore whatever is necessary for holiness and health, is sacred as is the hour of worship, and must be observed.

Finally we look at that synagogue scene, at the antagonism which no longer finds expression in words, but which was all the more dangerous because it had become silent; the antagonism which sought an opportunity for attack, watching Him, knowing that the man with the withered hand was in the synagogue, to see if He would heal, that they might find an occasion of accusation (a legal term), in order to His arrest, and that they might encompass His destruction. How did our Lord deal with this?

Let it be observed first of all that He gave them the opportunity they sought, and healed the man. Then notice that He compelled them to face actual and startling contrasts of motive, startling even until this hour if quietly considered. Observe then, with real care, the alternatives He suggested to these men. He said to them, "Is it lawful on the Sabbath day to do good, or to do harm? to save a life, or to kill?" The startling nature of the enquiry is only revealed when we begin to ask ourselves the question. We might be inclined to say, But are we forced to that alternative? Is there not a middle position we could occupy? We do not want to do good to that man because it is the Sabbath, but sincerely we do not want to harm him. We have no desire to kill that man, but we do not feel that to-day we ought to stretch out the hand to save him. Is there not a middle position?

Christ in effect said, There is no middle position in the face of human disability and need. We do good to the man when he is in need, or we do him harm; we help to save him, or we help to kill him,

It is a stern, hard, and yet necessary standard. Is it not still a startling one? There lies the man upon the highway that runs from Jerusalem to Jericho, bruised by the robbers. Take up a negative position; look at him, and pass by on the other side. The man who does so perpetuates his pain, and is guilty of the continuity of his suffering. In the presence of human pain, in the presence of limitation like this, there is this one alternative. In effect Jesus said, Which shall I do? You are watching to accuse Me. Shall I do that man good, or shall I harm him by leaving him for another twenty-four hours in that limitation, when I have the power to help him? Shall I save him or kill him? Which shall I do? His action did not depend upon their decision. He did him good, He saved him. By so doing He separated between Himself and them. He did good to that man, He saved him. They, even though it was the Sabbath day, were trying to do Him harm, and to kill Him. Even though it was the Sabbath, presently they crossed the synagogue threshold, and entered into unholy coalition in order to destroy Him. The alternatives of Heaven admit of no compromises.

Thus our Lord opposed to their criticism, the real meaning of His mission from beginning to end. He had come for the cure of spiritual malady. He had come to create the reason for abiding and abounding joyfulness. He had come to enlarge the area of the sacred, and to reveal to men that man is sacred, and that the sanctions of all ordinances are to be found in their ministry to the well-being of humanity. He had come to men, to save them; not to harm and kill them.

Such a meditation as this opens the door for much investigation by way of application. Are these criticisms ever made of us, that were made of the Lord? The question needs safeguarding by another. If they are made, are they made for the same reason?

Are we ever charged with moral carelessness because we are consorting with sinners? I am constrained to say that I believe at this very hour one of the secrets of arrest, and one of the reasons for the condition

of things in the Christian Church that is troubling us in many ways, is the aloofness of the Christian Church from sinning men and women. We still build our sanctuaries, and set up our standards, and institute our arrangements, and say to the sinning ones: If you will come to us, we will help you! The way of the Lord is to go and sit where they sit, without patronage and without contempt. We may run great risks if we begin to do it. If we will dare to do it some one will say that we are consorting with sinning men, and that we are in moral and spiritual peril. I am afraid, however, that the Church is not often criticized on these lines.

Are we ever criticized to-day for lack of seriousness because we are joyful in the Lord? Ah yes, we may be criticized for lack of seriousness because we are joyful in other ways, and I am not sure that such a criticism is not well deserved. There is a sense in which I fear that we do lack seriousness. These men were not glad because they were sharing in the frivolity of an age. They were glad because they were with Jesus. That was the gladness which made men criticize them for lack of seriousness. Are we ever so criticized to-day? How little we really seem to know of the joy of the Lord. I asked Dan Crawford what impressed him most forcibly when he got back to London after twenty-three years in the long grass of Central Africa. He said, "The fact that London had lost its smile. I stood on the bridges, and walked along the thoroughfares, and looked at the hurrying peoples, and they all looked so sad." Is not that also true of the Church? Would not the fairer criticism of those who name His name to-day be not lack of seriousness born of joyfulness in the Lord, but lack of joyfulness in the Lord, expressing itself in depressing seriousness in the things of life?

Once again, are we ever criticized for our failure to distinguish between the sacred and the secular, because we are sanctifying the secular? We are criticized for neglecting the Sabbath, and rightly so perchance. I cannot tell. I cannot judge. You tell me of men who spend their Sabbath, and week-ends, motoring and playing golf. I say frankly, I have nothing to do with legislating for these men. I can pity them honestly and kindly and without patronage. I can pray for them. But unless there is the expulsive power of a new affection, I do not wonder that they do it.

My trouble is not with these men outside the Christian Church. My trouble is with men inside the Christian Church. Is there a sanctification of the secular that makes other men criticize us, or are we secularizing the sacred? Along these lines of investigation I think we may profitably press forward alone; and that for the correction and inspiration of our own lives.

Or once more, are men of the world ever saying that we are worthless because we rebuke their worthlessness? That is the story of the Son of God. The very character of Christ, the very attitude of Christ, the known purpose of Christ toward that man with the withered hand, made these men hate Him. They called Him worthless because they themselves were worthless. Are we ever criticized for worthlessness for these reasons?

A real fellowship with Christ must bring us into a partnership with Him in expression and experience. If by diligence we add to faith all the things implicated therein, we shall go with Him where He goes, do with Him what He does, for our emotional nature will be mastered by His compassions. That will inevitably mean that we are misunderstood as He was, hated as He was, and persecuted as He was. But it will also mean that through us needy humanity will be served and saved, as it was through Him.

The supreme value of our meditation is that of its revelation of the glory of Christ, the Servant of God; and in proportion as we desire to serve as we should, we must come into line, in fellowship with Him:

"O Who like Thee, so calm, so bright,

Thou Son of man, Thou Light of light!

O Who like Thee did ever go

So patient through a world of woe!

"O Who like Thee so humbly bore

The scorn, the scoffs of men before;

So meek, forgiving, Godlike, high,

So glorious in humility.

"O in this light be mine to go,

Illuming all my way of woe;

And give me ever on the road

To trace Thy footsteps, O my God."

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