

Jesus Challenges Religious People

Mark 2:18-3:6

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One of the questions I ask participants in our baptism class goes like this. What do people outside of Christianity think of Christians and the Christian life? People share many answers like “They think Christians are judgmental or hypocrites. They think our lives are boring. They think we can’t have any fun because we have to follow all these rules and restrictions. They think we have to live very religious lives where you go to church all the time. ” To some degree I get those conclusions. To people looking from the outside it might seem like we live boring lives. Compared to some other people, our lives can seem quite religious.

Hopefully, the overall attitude of our church family reveals that we earnestly pursue a deep love relationship with God. We seek to find our deepest satisfaction in Him. When that happens, His love flows through us into the lives of those around us. But sometimes we are judgmental. We do act hypocritically. We can just go through the motions of our religious practice with little or no connection to God.

If we realize that we’re doing this, we can confess it and get right with God. But sometimes religious people can settle into a life of judgment, hypocrisy and going through the motions to the point of drying up their souls. They can be far from God even though they do religious stuff. Has any of this crept into our lives? Is there some judgmentalism, hypocrisy or going through the motions of your faith? This problem has afflicted God’s people throughout history. You see the Old Testament Prophets confront it when they call out Israel for engaging in religious practice with hearts far from God. God Himself speaks through the prophets and voices his displeasure at His own people’s worship because their hearts were far from Him. We see it in Jesus’ life where He constantly clashes with religious people who refuse to recognize Him as God in the flesh.

We see this in the next section of the Gospel of Mark that we’re looking at. Jesus confronts religious people who thought their rule keeping meant they were right with God. But through these encounters we will see the following: **Jesus reveals that living religiously without faith can threaten our souls.**

We find this in Mark chapter 7. Jesus healed a paralyzed man. But before healing, Jesus said to him “your sins are forgiven”. Some religious leaders there immediately conclude that Jesus spoke blasphemy because only God could forgive sins. Jesus senses their thoughts so He confronts their unbelief in God. He demonstrates that He has authority on earth to forgive sins by healing the man instantly from his paralysis. Then Jesus goes out to call Matthew, a hated tax

collector as a disciple. After Matthew accepts that call, Jesus goes to eat with Matthew and his friends including other tax collectors and sinners. Jesus again gets criticized for even being seen with such people by the religious leaders including some from the Pharisee group. Their rules did not allow such fellowship. But Jesus responds that “It is not the healthy who need a physician but the sick.” He’s talking about spiritual health. So he concludes “I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.”

So we see this increasing tension between Jesus and the religious leaders. This leads us to our passage today. We will see Jesus reveal that living religiously without faith can lead us away from God. We will see symptoms of such living. Ask the Lord to reveal if any of these are growing or settled in your life. Then we will see how to respond in light of Jesus’ teaching. So we will start in Mark 2:18 and go to chapter 3 verse 6.

Mark 2:18-3:6 (ESV)

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?” ¹⁹ 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. ²⁰ The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast in that day. ²¹ 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. ²² And no one puts new wine into old wineskins. If he does, the wine will burst the skins—and the wine is destroyed, and so are the skins. But new wine is for fresh wineskins.”

²³ One Sabbath he was going through the grainfields, and as they made their way, his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. ²⁴ And the Pharisees were saying to him, “Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?” ²⁵ 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: ²⁶ how he entered the house of God, in the time of Abiathar the 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?” ²⁷ And 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.”

3 Again he entered the synagogue, and a man was there with a withered hand. ² And they watched Jesus, to see whether he would heal him on the Sabbath, so that they might accuse him. ³ And he said to the man with the withered hand, “Come here.” ⁴ 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. ⁵ 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. ⁶ The Pharisees went out and immediately held counsel with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him.

Mark begins by telling us that John the Baptist’s disciples and the Pharisee’s were fasting. The Pharisees were this group within Judaism that took God’s Word seriously. They would be like evangelical pastors and church leaders today. They earnestly tried to figure out how the common people could actually go about their lives in obedience to God’s law.

They were so serious about this that some of their key leaders or rabbis wrote commentaries on the law in an attempt to make things clearer. But it seems that many of them kept their eye so focused on law keeping that they forgot other important aspects of the faith. These included loving God and loving people with compassion.

So the disciples of John and the Pharisees are fasting. But Jesus' disciples weren't. It makes you wonder how people knew the Pharisees were fasting. Did they do it to be seen by others and get some praise for it? There is some debate about what the law actually commanded regarding fasting. Some say it only commands fasting on the Day of Atonement, once a year. Others point out that the Jews practiced a fast 4 times a year after the exile. But we know from the New Testament that the Pharisees fasted twice a week. So they come to Jesus and ask him why His disciples don't do the same thing.

Jesus responds with three short answers that seem to dodge the question. First, he answers their question with a question. "Can the wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them?" When you go to a wedding, you don't expect to fast. You expect to eat a banquet. Jesus identifies Himself as the bridegroom and his disciples as the wedding guests. While He's with them, His disciples need not fast or mourn. They need to celebrate. After all, He will one day be taken from them violently and die. Then they will fast.

Then he talks about sewing an unshrunk patch of cloth on an old garment. They wouldn't put a new patch of cloth on an old garment because when they washed it, the new patch would shrink pulling the garment apart. Nor would they pour new wine into old wineskins. New wine might expand as it fermented. Then it would burst the old wine skin which would have no more room to expand. So the container and the wine would be lost.

The scene ends. Notice, Jesus does not agree that His disciples should fast as the Pharisees do. He points to their need to be joyful in His coming. With patch and wine illustration, He shows that this new kingdom that He's building will not just be patched onto the Judaism that they practice. It will be a brand new undertaking.

The next scene occurs on the Sabbath day which would be our Saturday. This was a day of rest in the Jewish community as laid out in the 10 commandments. They were supposed to cease from their regular work so they could focus on the Lord, rest up and be renewed for the next 6 day cycle. On this Sabbath, Jesus disciples walk through grain fields that are ready to harvest. So they pick some heads of the grain and get the seeds out to eat them. You were allowed to do this according to the law. Deuteronomy 23:25 – "If you go into your neighbor's standing grain, you may

pluck the ears with your hand but you shall not put a sickle to your neighbor's standing grain." But it was the Sabbath day. The Pharisees defined plucking grain heads as work. So they concluded the disciples worked on the Sabbath. They bring this to Jesus' attention.

"Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?" Jesus answers in shocking smack talk. "Have you never read the Scriptures?" These were the experts in the Scriptures. Certainly they had read them. But they had missed things in them. Jesus reminds them of an account found back in 1st Samuel 21:1-6. It is the time before David becomes king over Israel. The current king Saul wants David dead. So David and his men are on the run and they come to the tabernacle or holy tent of God. It seems like they are near starving. So they ask the priests there for food. The priests don't have any food except the bread of the presence. This was bread that was placed on a table outside the Holy Place. After it sat there for its prescribed time the only people allowed to eat it were the priests. But the priest, seeing David and his men's need, gives them the bread of the presence.

Now technically, that was a breach of the law. But nowhere in Scripture is David or the priest condemned for this act. So Jesus uses this to kind of set a precedent. In the case of real and desperate need, actions are allowed that would otherwise not be permitted. So with respect to His disciples, they were legitimately hungry. Therefore Jesus pronounces it permissible to go beyond that basic rule of not plucking grain on Sabbath to look after real human need. Then he declares "The Sabbath was made for man not man for the Sabbath." In other words, God intended the Sabbath to be a gift for His people – not a burden. But the Pharisees had made it into a burden to the point that people almost hated the Sabbath for fear of getting condemned for violating a law. Then Jesus goes on to make the wildly provocative statement "So even the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath." That's a claim for divinity. Only God is over the Sabbath.

It could be that this next scene happens immediately after this grain field incident. Since it is the Sabbath day, people go to synagogue. There was a man with a withered hand. Maybe it was paralyzed from some accident or illness. Or maybe it was deformed from birth. But note Mark 3:2 "And they (the Pharisees) watched Jesus to see whether he would heal him on the Sabbath, so that they might accuse him." So two items to note. This seems absolutely ridiculous to us because we think healing should automatically be part of any God centered worship time. But they may have been focused on the practice of healing like the work of a doctor. We don't have doctors come in and practice in the middle of our worship services. The rabbis stated that in cases of life or death, the physician could do his work on Sabbath. And

this man with the withered hand is not in a life threatening situation. So their concern is not as far out there as it first seems.

But there's something more sinister going on here. Mark tells us they watched Jesus not to simply observe but as examiners. The word translated watch means "to watch closely for the purpose of accusation". This was not just so they could accuse him in conversation but so they could bring charges against him in one of their courts.

Jesus invites the man to come before him and then asks the Pharisees another question. "Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to kill?" The answer seems pretty obvious. Of course you would do good on God's Sabbath Day. Of course you would save life on the day where everyone stops to think about God. But they remain silent. They seem more concerned with trapping Jesus in a Sabbath violation than helping a man in need.

Then in verse 5 Mark reveals to us Jesus' emotional response. "And he looked around at them with anger, grieved at their hardness of heart." Maybe he was angry because of their lack of compassion. But he's also grieved at their hardness of heart. When we think of a hard heart, we're usually think of a callous or cruel person. That's because we think of the heart as the center of emotions. But remember in our Proverbs study we learned that the Hebrew mind considered heart the center from which everything flowed – emotions, decisions, thoughts and beliefs. So hard-hearted in this context means unbelief. They had a hard heart towards God. They showed a stubborn resistance to the purposes of God. One commentator puts it like this "It seems that nothing Jesus can say or do will pierce the thick armor of moral insensitivity that encases the Pharisee's minds. The withered hand of the man is nothing compared to the withered souls of these religious examiners."

Then Jesus heals the man with the withered hand. You would think that maybe the joy on his face would snap the Pharisees out of their stupor. But Mark tells us in verse 6, "The Pharisees went out and immediately held counsel with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him." So is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to kill? The Pharisees walk out of the synagogue and meet this other group of people with an intention to harm and possibly kill Jesus. They go to the Herodians of all people – the supporters of Herod. They wanted to maintain the social and political status quo. They were royalty who didn't care much about common people and practiced religion when it was culturally beneficial to them. The Pharisees were supposed to be devoted to God's Word and leading the people in

faithfulness. But they're actions just revealed hearts full of hate, envy and vengeance. This incident exposes the reality that religious people can be far from God.

As we look back over these scenes, I think we can discover several symptoms of a person who lives religiously without faith.

Symptoms of Living Religiously Without Faith

One is a **lack of joy in Christ and the new life He brings**. Jesus said that while He, the bridegroom was with his disciples, they needed to rejoice. If we're Christians, we have Jesus in our lives. So that means our ordinary lives should normally ooze a joy because of Jesus' presence. Of course, we mourn when bereaved and moan when we're sick. But overall, the joy of the Lord needs to saturate our lives. So if it's not, maybe we've been practicing religion without faith.

Another symptom is **Resistance to God's new ways or fresh approaches in our lives**. We might be willing to receive Christ into our lives only if He fits into our patterns. Or we refuse to let Him lead us or change us into someone renewed. With Jesus' coming, the kingdom of God inaugurated a new age of salvation. Jesus continues His saving work in our lives every day. But resistance to such work means we're at odds with God's purposes.

A third symptom of living religiously without faith is **an emphasis on rule-keeping over people's real needs**. The Pharisees criticized the hungry disciples for taking a few heads of grain on the Sabbath. They had no compassion for the man with the withered hand. They just wanted their Sabbath rules observed. We sometimes face challenges to our normal practices. For example, we baptism by complete immersion or going under the water in this church family. But what if someone comes to us who lives with a tracheotomy – a breathing device in a hole in their throat. They want to be baptized. Immersion might be fatal for them. Do we insist on them being immersed or do we recognize that we need to find some other way to address their need in a way that glorifies God.

A fourth symptom is **a readiness to accuse others who don't hold the same interpretation of God's Word**. The Pharisees did not go into the synagogue that day to worship God and hear from the law. They went in watching for the purpose of accusation. If we regularly jump on other Christians for their errors or conclusions that we disagree with, then that might indicate this Pharisee like tendency. I'm not saying that we deny the fundamental differences between other religions. But I am talking about fellow Christians who may have a different interpretation or hold a different view on something that is not a core salvation issue.

The last symptom is **hard heartedness towards God**. We might have grown up in the church. We might be very involved in the church. We might go to all the religious services. But that is no guarantee of saving faith in God. These Pharisees were the most religious people in Jesus' day. But Jesus discerns resistance to God's ways and lostness in their hearts.

So is any of this creeping into our lives? Let's ponder this with some questions. Question 1 – When life is ordinary, do you find joy mostly in things apart from Christ? Or despite what's going on, are you still filled with a deep joy because of who Christ is and all He has done for you? If you lack Christ-centered joy, ask God to restore to you the joy of your salvation.

Question 2 – Are you resisting a new work that God wants to do in your life? Or are you willing to let Jesus take you in this new direction? Will you stop insisting that He sew His new patch onto your old garment or pour His new wine into your old wine skin? And will we collectively open ourselves up as a church to Jesus' new work among us?

Question 3 – Do you tend to put rule keeping above the needs of people? Are you quick to get annoyed when people don't follow rules important to you? If so, ask God to give you His heart of compassion for others.

Question 4 – Do you have a tendency to quickly judge and accuse others? It might be their doctrinal position; It might be the way they worship – we don't like how they lift their hands – we don't like how they don't lift their hands. It may be the way they parent. It may involve the way they talk or look. We certainly need to be a people who watches and guards the faith and Godly practices. But if we have become a people that just watches others so we might accuse them, we need to confess that.

Question 5 – Has the Holy Spirit revealed hard heartedness towards God in your heart? Our unbelief might have been covered up by our religious lifestyle. But instead of doing good and saving lives, you're all about destruction – maybe destroying people's reputations or tearing them down with accusations. Or we may have a hard heartedness because we have resisted actually giving the totality of our lives to Christ. But today He calls you to let all that go and come to Him. Place the trust of your life upon Him and receive Him as Savior and Lord.

Jesus reveals that living religiously without faith can threaten our souls and salvation. So we must repent and receive Him and the life He brings. When religious living without faith is stripped down to its core, it's just another form of works salvation. The Bible tells us there's only one way to God, through Christ – not through religious activity – not

through rule keeping that will in some way obligate God to save us. We must come humbly and acknowledge our spiritual poverty. Then we will see more clearly our need to throw our trust onto God to save us from our self-sufficiency. God could only deliver us from the depth of our self-focused salvation by Christ's death. He died even for the Pharisees. Some of them received Him and become his followers at great cost to themselves. I pray that as we continue to trust Christ and depend on Him to lead and empower us to live Christianly, those who don't Christ might see God forming a different community. I pray they will see His work in moving us away from being judgmental, hypocritical and rule-keepers, to humble, honest and compassionate followers who proclaim the Lord and His salvation.