

Wheelersburg Baptist Church 7/25/04 Brad Brandt

Mark 2:23-3:6 "The Problem with Being Religious" **

Main Idea: There are two common pitfalls that keep religious people from enjoying the wonder of God's salvation. Jesus confronted both in Mark 2:23-3:6.

I. Pitfall #1: Religious people can substitute rules for a relationship (2:23-28).

A. The Pharisees criticized Jesus' disciples (23-24).

B. Jesus corrected the Pharisees (25-28).

1. He pointed out their lack of Bible knowledge (25a).

2. He pointed out the example of David (25b-26).

3. He pointed out the intent of the Sabbath (27).

4. He pointed them to Himself (28).

II. Pitfall #2: Religious people can substitute a system for the Savior (3:1-6).

A. Jesus went to the synagogue (1-2).

1. He saw a man with a shriveled hand (1).

2. He saw people with shriveled hearts (2).

B. Jesus exposed empty religion (3-4).

1. God intended the Sabbath to be a day of rest, for man's good and His glory.

2. Man perverted the Sabbath to be a day of performance, resulting in man's bondage and God's dishonor.

C. Jesus healed the man (5).

1. Physical problems are cause for concern.

2. Heart problems are cause for emergency measures.

D. Jesus forced the religious to decide (6).

1. Will I reject my religion and follow Jesus?

2. Will I keep my religion and reject Jesus?

Make It Personal: What have you done with Jesus?

It's possible to have religion and not have a relationship with God.

I can speak from experience at this point. For the first part of my life I had "religion." My parents made sure our family attended church regularly. I can still visualize the high ceiling in the sanctuary, the pulpit, and the communion table up front. We were there on Sunday mornings with hundreds of other people. We sang the songs. We listened to the reading of the Bible. When I reached a certain age I was even given a Bible by the church.

Yes, we were religious. We engaged in pious activities. But I must confess something to you. For me, it was empty and meaningless. Not just because I was young, either, for I was still a young person when that all changed--when God moved our family to another church, and God brought me into a relationship with Himself through Jesus Christ.

And since then I've discovered that my story is not unique. The world is full of people--people who call themselves "Christian"--who are going through religious motions who truly do not know God. Indeed, it's possible to be very religious and very lost.

How do I know? It's not just my opinion nor is it based merely on my experience. Jesus said so. Indeed, Jesus Himself took to task the religious leaders of His day. For instance, in Matthew 23 He used words like "fools," "hypocrites," "blind guides," and "son of hell" to describe them. They were religious people, in fact the most religious people of His day, but they were lost.

I'm going to make a statement that may shock you, yet I believe it to be true. In church after church this morning, all across this country, there are people who are singing songs and offering prayers to God, listening to sermons (and preaching them), teaching Sunday School lessons, and serving as ushers, yet if they died today they would enter into a Christless eternity. What's the problem? They're just like the group of people Jesus confronted at the end of Mark 2 and beginning of Mark 3.

I nearly entitled this message, "How to Help a Religious Person Get Saved." It's one thing to evangelize people who are lost and *know* they're lost. But how do you present Christ to unregenerate people who are quite sure they're going to heaven? It's not easy to convince them. But then again, that's not our assignment anyway. We are called to be witnesses. Only the Spirit can change minds and open hearts.

There are two common pitfalls that keep religious people from enjoying the wonder of God's salvation. Jesus confronted both in Mark 2:23-3:6. By the way, it's possible for *regenerate* religious people to get sidetracked by these two pitfalls and miss the wonder of God's amazing salvation.

I. Pitfall #1: Religious people can substitute rules for a relationship (2:23-28).

Rules versus a real relationship with the Living God, that is. Case in point, the Pharisees. My aim isn't to give a mere history lesson today. We're going to look at some religious folks that lived centuries ago, but in so doing we have the opportunity to see ourselves more clearly.

Let's set the stage by noting the historical context. The writer of this account, Mark, penned this narrative for readers in Rome about thirty years after the fact. Mark was concerned for second generation Christians, particularly for Roman believers who were facing persecution. He wrote to encourage them, doing so by reminding them that opposition was nothing new. The Master Himself faced it, primarily from religious people. In chapters 2 & 3 Mark selects five controversy-stories from Jesus' life, five confrontations the Lord encountered with the Jewish leaders. We've already examined the first three and today we'll probe the final two.

Pitfall #1 again, religious people can substitute rules for a relationship. The Pharisees did. Here's what sparked the fourth controversy.

A. The Pharisees criticized Jesus' disciples (23-24). Note the first two words of verse 23, "One Sabbath." There are at least six instances of Sabbath controversy in the Gospels and both incidents we'll consider today occurred on the Sabbath. When you read Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John you get the sense that Jesus deliberately challenged the Jews' Sabbath policies. They called Him a Sabbath-breaker. The fact is, He was the true Sabbath-keeper.

May I remind you that the Sabbath is a good thing? God established it by working six days and resting on the seventh. God gave the Sabbath to mankind as a good gift. Indeed He "blessed the seventh day and made it holy" (Gen 2:3).

But as is so often the case, what God gives, man abuses. When God formed the nation of Israel He gave them His Law to govern their behavior. In His Law, He prohibited work on the Sabbath (Ex 20:10), a command He clarified elsewhere with a few specifics, such as: it was wrong to start a fire for cooking (Ex 35:3), to carry burdens (Jer 17:21ff), and to transact business (Neh 10:31; 13:15, 19). In time, however, the Jews said, "That's not clear enough." So they added to God's list and came up with 39 activities that were strictly forbidden on Sabbath day, such as specifying how far you could travel on the Sabbath (200 cubits). I'll give more examples later, but for now suffice it to say that by Jesus' day Judaism was filled with petty rules and regulations regarding Sabbath observance, dozens and dozens of rules.

Again, here's the situation. God gave *one* simple command about the Sabbath with a few basic explanatory

instructions. Man took God's command and added a host of non-inspired commands to it and gave those man-created commands inspired status.

That's the background for the Pharisees' criticism in verses 23-24: "One Sabbath Jesus was going through the grainfields, and as his disciples walked along, they began to pick some heads of grain. The Pharisees said to him, 'Look, why are they doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath?'"

There were times when Jesus' critics attacked Jesus directly. On this occasion they went after His disciples—and indirectly after Jesus, since a Rabbi is responsible for his followers. "Why are *they* doing what is *unlawful* on the Sabbath?"

Unlawful? What law had they broken? The Pharisees don't specify. Were they accusing the disciples of stealing? No. It may surprise you to know that the Law actually permitted people to pick grain in someone else's field. Deuteronomy 23:24-25 explains, "If you enter your neighbor's vineyard, you may eat all the grapes you want, but do not put any in your basket. If you enter your neighbor's grainfield, you may pick kernels with your hands, but you must not put a sickle to his standing grain."

It wasn't so much *what* the disciples did that was the problem. It's *when* they did it. "Why are they doing what is unlawful *on the Sabbath*?" According to Jewish tradition in the Mishnah, harvesting was forbidden on the Sabbath. Harvesting—and that's technically what the disciples were doing, picking heads of grain and rubbing them in their hands to separate the grain from the chaff. That's work, and that's a violation of the Law.

The whole thing makes you wonder what the Pharisees were doing out in the field on the Sabbath in the first place! Why don't you something about this serious crime, Jesus? Well, He did, but not as they expected...

B. Jesus corrected the Pharisees (25-28). Jesus didn't argue about whether His disciples broke the Sabbath laws. Technically, they did, yet Jesus defended them. In so doing He exposed the pharisaic folly of choosing rules over a relationship. He responded to His critics with four rebuttals.

1. *He pointed out their lack of Bible knowledge (25a)*. "He answered, 'Have you never read...?'" Now there's a great question for a religious person! *Have you never read?* Haven't you read your Bible? In this case Jesus is referring to the Old Testament. My friends, we get in trouble if we don't know the Scriptures. It's that simple. If you're not reading God's Word it means you are looking to other sources for answers to life's important questions.

2. *He pointed out the example of David (25b-26)*. "He answered, 'Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need?'"

A great way to diffuse a controversy is to cite an example of someone your critic respects. Show there's precedent for your actions in the life of that person. Jesus used David. Don't you remember what David did when he and his men were hungry?

Verse 26—"In the days of Abiathar the high priest, he entered the house of God and ate the consecrated bread, which is lawful only for priests to eat. And he also gave some to his companions."

If you had gone to the tabernacle in David's day you would have found twelve loaves baked of fine flour, arranged in two rows on the table in the Holy Place. Every Sabbath the priests replaced the loaves with fresh-baked ones, and then the priests—and *only the priests*—ate the older ones (Ex 25:30; 35:13; 39:36).

David actually broke God's Law. He went into the tabernacle and ate consecrated bread—and even shared the bread with other non-priests. But the Scriptures don't condemn David.

Note the parallels. David and his men were in need and hungry—so were Jesus and His men. David and his men found available food—so did Jesus and His men. A law prevented David and his men from eating that food—the same for Jesus and His men. David and his men bypassed that law—so did Jesus and His men. David shared the food with his men—Jesus let His men eat the grain.

Please note that Jesus doesn't deny that David technically violated the ceremonial Law. His point is that in certain situations such violations are warranted. The letter of the Law could be set aside if it imposed hardship on someone attempting to serve the Lord. Or to put it another way, "Human need is a higher law than religious ritualism."

3. *He pointed out the intent of the Sabbath (27)*. "Then he said [lit. "was saying"] to them, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath."

Here's why God gave the Sabbath in the first place. As a demonstration of His mercy God gave His creatures a day of rest. The Sabbath was to refresh, not simply restrict. The Sabbath was *for man*, not *visa versa*.

The Pharisees got it turned around. To them it was Sabbath first, man second. It was as if man existed for the purpose of keeping laws and rules. Jesus returned to the original order. It's man first, Sabbath second. J. D. Jones explains, "Man was not made in order to keep the Sabbath; but the Sabbath was made in order to meet man's needs. The Sabbath, that is to say, is not something which God exacts from man, it is a grace that He confers upon him."

Let this sink in. The Sabbath is something God instituted *for man*. It's not something men do *for God*, but something done by God *for man*.

And note the universal emphasis here. It's not simply for the Jews, but *for man everywhere*. The reason God gave this gift to all mankind is because He knows all mankind needs it.

The Pharisees struggled with a legalistic view of the Sabbath. In our day the pendulum has swung to the other extreme. Many today view the Sabbath as an interruption in the week, an obstacle, a hindrance to the good life. "Why can't I work on that day?" We'll have more to say momentarily about the relationship between the Sabbath and the Lord's Day, but for now consider this wise counsel from J. D. Jones: "The Sabbath is no vexatious 'interruption,' it is a gracious ministry. The reason for the weekly rest day is lodged deep in human nature. Physically, mentally, spiritually, man needs the Sabbath. And never was the Sabbath more needed than today, for never was the 'pace' of life so fast."

By the way, I should mention that Jones wrote those words in 1914!

Then came Jesus' fourth rebuttal. After pointing out His critics' lack of Bible knowledge, and after pointing out the example of David and the intent of the Sabbath...

4. *He pointed them to Himself (28)*. "So [here comes the punchline] the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath."

Jesus used this controversy to teach about Himself. Note His claim. Because of who He is, "the Son of Man," He asserts the right to overrule the Sabbath. After all, what is greater, the Law or the Law-Giver? Does not the One who gave the Law know best the intent of that Law?

There's something here that doesn't sit well with post-modern thinking. Jesus didn't claim merely to be a good teacher. He claimed to be the *final* Teacher with a capital "T." He didn't offer merely a good word, but *the final word* on any subject. Just before going back to heaven He announced (Matt 28:18), "*All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.*" Abraham Lincoln was a great leader but he never said, "All

authority in the universe is mine." Winston Churchill never said that. Mao might have said it, but he's dead and gone. From the lips of any other person, that claim is ludicrous.

But Jesus is unlike any other person. He is in a class all by Himself. He is the Son of Man, the Lord of the Sabbath and of everything else. For this reason you *can* believe Him. For this reason you *must* believe in Him and surrender your life to Him.

In point of fact, that's the problem with being religious. Religious people tend to substitute rules for a relationship. They think they're okay with God because of what *they do*—they keep the rules; they're good people. But God's Word says it's not what you do; it's *who you know*. It's true. To be right with God you must know Jesus Christ as your personal Savior and Lord. Beloved, if we are members of God's family today, it's because our hope is in Christ, not in the merit of our conduct. If you desire to enter God's family, you must receive Christ and place your trust in what He did for you at the cross.

That the first pitfall. Religious people can substitute rules for a relationship. The second, which Jesus confronted in the next episode, is related to the first.

II. Pitfall #2: Religious people can substitute a system for the Savior (3:1-6).

There are four movements in this second Sabbath confrontation.

A. Jesus went to the synagogue (1-2). "Another time he went into the synagogue, and a man with a shriveled hand was there. Some of them were looking for a reason to accuse Jesus, so they watched him closely to see if he would heal him on the Sabbath."

First of all, please note that Jesus didn't resist all Jewish ceremonial laws. Indeed, He willingly kept many of them. Here He went to the synagogue on the Sabbath even though the Old Testament didn't mandate it (as far as I can determine, laws regarding synagogue attendance came later). Jesus didn't buck tradition merely to buck tradition, but only if the tradition was keeping people from experiencing the reality God intended.

Jesus saw two things at the synagogue that day.

1. *He saw a man with a shriveled hand (1)*. Tradition says the man was a stone mason, as such, a man who needed both hands to do his work. His problem wasn't life-threatening, but it was life-restricting. Jesus saw that. And this...

2. *He saw people with shriveled hearts (2)*. From all appearances the man was planted there intentionally. It was a trap. Indeed, there were folks present [verse 6 indicates they were Pharisees] who loved their religious system more than the Savior.

Did you realize that the Pharisees had a faith of sorts? They did. They believed Jesus could heal this man. It's why they watched Him. For them it wasn't *could* He but *would* He?

Don't miss that. Here are people who believed Jesus could do the impossible. They had faith, but it wasn't saving faith. They were not saved people.

Take it a step further. Here were people who came to be with Jesus. A noble pursuit? Not in their case. They came to Jesus not to get to know Him better, but to get ammo to reject Him. It happens in church, too. And Jesus sees it.

B. Jesus exposed empty religion (3-4). Verse 3—"Jesus said to the man with the shriveled hand, 'Stand up in front of everyone.'" Jesus could easily have waited another day, or healed the man outside in private, but no. He made it a public matter. He took the occasion to expose the folly of empty religion.

Verse 4—"Then Jesus asked them, 'Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?'" Jesus was a master question-asker. With that rhetorical question He framed the issue perfectly, for all to see.

Which is lawful? Barclay's explanation is helpful: "The Jewish law was definite and detailed about this. Medical attention could be given only if a life was in danger. To take some examples—a woman in childbirth might be helped on the Sabbath; an infection of the throat might be treated; if a wall fell on anyone, enough might be cleared away to see whether he was dead or alive; if he was alive he might be helped, if he was dead the body must be left until the next day. A fracture could not be attended to. Cold water might not be poured on a sprained hand or foot. A cut finger might be bandaged with a plain bandage but not with ointment. That is to say, at the most an injury could be kept from getting worse; it must not be made better."

It may be hard for us to fathom this, but it's true. A strict Jew wouldn't even defend himself on the Sabbath. In the wars of the Maccabees, Syrian soldiers hemmed some Jews into a cave and invited them to surrender. The Jews said they wouldn't. The result? Josephus says the Syrians "fought against them on the Sabbath day, and they burned them as they were in caves, without resistance and without so much as stopping up the entrances of the caves."

When the Roman general Pompey besieged Jerusalem, he built a mound from which to bombard the Jews in the city, and knowing Jewish law he did so on the Sabbath. The Jews didn't lift a hand to stop him even though they knew their Sabbath inactivity meant certain death.

It's good to have conviction, but conviction must be grounded in truth. Jesus' question exposed the Pharisees' foundation: "Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?" With that question Jesus used the Sabbath controversy to expose the futility of empty religion.

When it comes to the Sabbath two things are true...

1. God intended the Sabbath to be a day of rest, for man's good and His glory. God set aside one day a week for rest and worship. It was for man's good and His glory.

2. Man perverted the Sabbath to be a day of performance, resulting in man's bondage and God's dishonor.

God's command was simple. Exodus 20:8, "Remember the Sabbath by keeping it holy." It's repeated in Deuteronomy 5:12, "Observe the Sabbath day by keeping it holy." It's very short and to the point—work six days and then cease from work on the seventh day; treat the seventh day every week as special.

But what God intended, man perverted. Instead of being a day of rest man turned Sabbath into a day of religious performance, a litmus test of one's spirituality. You proved how righteous you were by what you did (and didn't do) on the Sabbath. The Jews took God's good command and cluttered it with their commands.

By the way, I must repeat that some folks overreact to the Jews' additions to God's command and throw out the whole notion of Sabbath rest. They fail to see the God-created need for rest in their weekly schedule. May I remind you that the pattern for rest in the weekly schedule precedes the giving of the Law and is rooted in God's activity in creation? May I also remind you that according to the New Testament the need for rest is fulfilled in Christ, who is our Sabbath rest? Consider Hebrews 4:9-11, "There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God; for anyone who enters God's rest also rests from his own work, just as God did from his. Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one will fall by following their example of disobedience."

We need rest. We need Christ who is the source of that rest. This explains why the followers of Jesus, soon after His return to heaven, began to observe their rest on the first day of the week rather than the seventh, in honor of the One who did battle for us and won, coming out of the tomb on Sunday. In Revelation 1:10 the apostle John refers to Sunday as *the Lord's Day*.

So there's the question: "Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?" How did the critics respond? Verse 4 concludes, "But they remained silent." Indeed, the silence was deafening.

C. Jesus healed the man (5). "He looked around at them in anger and, deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts, said to the man, 'Stretch out your hand.' He stretched it out, and his hand was completely restored."

In the biblical record we don't see Jesus exhibiting anger towards prostitutes, tax collectors, and other (what we call) "big" sinners. In fact, in the Gospels anger is rarely attributed to Jesus. But there are times when anger is appropriate. Here we see His righteous indignation. When Jesus looked into the eyes of self-righteous folks who clung to a religious system and cared nothing for the needs of a hurting man, He was incensed.

By the way, the word that refers to Jesus' "anger" in verse 5 is in the aorist tense which suggests momentary anger. On the other hand, the Greek word for "distressed" [KJV, 'grieved'] is present tense, giving the sense of continuing distress or grief. Jesus couched His anger in compassion. In J. Vernon McGee's assessment, "What we find here is this: 'When He had looked round about on them with anger'—just a flash of anger, not a grudge or with malice aforethought. But 'being *grieved* for the hardness of their hearts' was something that He carried with Him. He always had that awful grief because of the hardness of their hearts."

We can learn two important lessons from Jesus' actions in the synagogue that day.

1. *Physical problems are cause for concern.* Yes, the Sabbath is a day of rest, but God never wants His people to take a vacation from meeting human needs. It's why Jesus healed the man. Physical problems are cause for concern. However...

2. *Heart problems are cause for emergency measures.* Right here is the first reference in Mark to the hardness of heart. To the Hebrew a hard-hearted person is one who resists the purpose of God. It's the very opposite of the humility and gentle teachableness God requires.

A heart problem is the worst kind of problem. You see the truth but refuse to see it. You know you need to change, but dig in your heels. The problem of stubborn hearts is causing marriages to crumble, work places to fragment, and worst of all, causing people to leave this world and enter eternity without Christ. "I'm right. I don't need to change!"

"It should be noted," as R. Alan Cole observes, "that this is a sin to which, to judge from Scripture, the theologian and the religiously-minded are more exposed than are the publican and sinner: and if any of us fears this sin, it is proof that we have not committed it."

D. Jesus forced the religious to decide (6). By healing the man Jesus forced the hand of the Pharisees. Which will it be, your system or the Savior? Here was their answer, verse 6—"Then the Pharisees went out and began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus."

It's unthinkable, yet true. They just saw Jesus heal a man and responded with a resolve to kill Him.

And the irony is the Pharisees chose to partner with the Herodians. The Herodians were influential Jews who befriended and backed the family of the Herods. They were supporters of Rome. Conversely, the Pharisees were separatists to the nth degree—it's why they criticized Jesus so much, for He wasn't separatistic

enough. Yet now they begin to plot with the Herodians. The Pharisees hated the Romans. The Herodians worked for the Romans. Here are two parties who were previously enemies, now working together motivated by their mutual hatred of Jesus.

The ministry of Jesus softened some hearts—and hardened others. It's no different today.

We've seen two pitfalls today. Religious people can substitute rules for a relationship and a system for the Savior. I invite you to take inventory. There are two options facing you today. They are the same two options the Pharisees faced that day.

1. Will I reject my religion and follow Jesus? Or...

2. Will I keep my religion and reject Jesus?

Make It Personal: What have you done with Jesus?