

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. It’s possible to 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. It’s possible to 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 make a decision (6).
 1. Will I reject my religion and follow Jesus?
 2. Will I keep my religion and reject Jesus?

This morning, we’re opening our Bibles to the end of Mark 2 in our series, “*The Servant in Action*.” I’ve entitled this message, “*The Danger of Being Religious*.” To be sure, there’s tremendous danger in *not* being religious too, in other words, to talk without walk, but that’s not in today’s text. In today’s passage Jesus has something convicting to say to people who take their religion seriously.²

Scripture Reading: Mark 2:23-3:6

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.

So yes, we were religious. We engaged in good and proper activities. But I must confess something to you that 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 brought me into a relationship with Himself through Jesus Christ.

Since then, I've discovered that my story is not unique. The world is full of people who engage in a lot of religious activity who in reality do not know God. They know about Him. They talk about Him. They insist others do the same. But something’s missing. It’s true. 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

^{**}Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

¹ For a previous look at this passage, see the Mark series in 2004.

² Most quotes in this message come from the NIV.

"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 doing a lot of other significant ministries, 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 might have 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 the gospel to unregenerate people who are quite sure they're on their way to heaven? It's not easy to convince them otherwise. But then again, that's not our assignment. We are called to be witnesses. Only the Spirit can open their 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. The first is substituting rules for a relationship. The second is substituting a system for the Savior. Those two pitfalls keep people out of heaven. In some cases, they also keep people who are on their way to heaven from experiencing the joy of that reality. So whether we're a lost religious person or a truly saved one, Jesus has something important to say to us.

I. It's possible to substitute rules for a relationship (2:23-28).

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, but the fact is, He was the true Sabbath-keeper.³

May I remind you that the Sabbath is a good thing? God Himself 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). There's more to life than being productive.

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, some of 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

³ Observation by J. D. Jones, p. 57.

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 backdrop for the Pharisees' criticism in verses 23-24 (NIV): "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?'"⁴

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 *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.

It sort of makes you wonder what the Pharisees were doing out in the field on the Sabbath in the first place! They are the checking squad, and every religious group has them. They believe they're honoring God by making sure others toe the line.

Why don't you do 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. Essentially, He conceded they had, yet He 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 to ask a religious person! *Have you never read?* Haven't you read your Bible? Of course, they've read! They pride themselves in being well read. But they're selective readers.

In this case Jesus points their attention to the Hebrew Scriptures. My friends, we get in trouble if we don't know God's Word, and none of us know it as well as we ought. It's that simple. If we're not reading God's Word it means we 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 that there's precedent for your position in the life of that person. Jesus used David. Don't you remember what David did when he and his men were hungry?

⁴ The KJV uses the term "corn." The Greek is *sporima* meaning sown fields of grain. It could have been barley or wheat.

And what was that? Verse 26 says, “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.”⁵

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. He even shared the bread with other non-priests. So he was in violation of the Law, but the Scriptures don’t condemn him.

Do you remember, asks Jesus? What do you think about that account?

It’s significant how Jesus lets the Word of God be the authority in this debate. His critics had to concede that there were indeed some 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, and Jesus let His men eat the grain.

Please note that Jesus doesn’t deny that David technically violated this 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.”⁶

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.”⁷

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*. It’s a demonstration of grace, and it’s by grace that sinners are restored to God, not works. Always by divine grace.

And note the universal emphasis here. This wasn’t simply for the Jews, but *for man everywhere*. The Sabbath was made *for man*. The reason God gave the gift of Sabbath to all mankind is because He knows all mankind needs it, this weekly reminder that everything we have has come from Him, and is for Him.

The Pharisees, of course, were legalists, and it showed up in their very legalistic view of the Sabbath. If I do what’s right on this day, I earn favor with God. Not so. Favor with God is always unmerited, always by grace.

It’s worth noting, however, that 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

⁵ Though Jesus mentions Abiathar, 1 Samuel 21 mentions that Abimelech, Abiathar’s father, was actually the priest. See Wiersbe, p. 118 for a helpful explanation of this so-called discrepancy. “It is possible that father and son each had both names... Also it is likely that our Lord used ‘Abiathar’ to refer to the OT passage about Abiathar rather than to the man...”

⁶ In Wessel, p. 638.

⁷ J. D. Jones, p. 58.

hindrance to the good life. “Why can’t I work on that day (or do anything else I want, for that matter)?”

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.”⁸ 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 in today’s world. 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 Lord of everything else too. For this reason, we *can* believe Him. For this reason, we *must* believe in Him and surrender our lives 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 achieve merit. They have turned themselves into good people. And for this, God commends them and accepts them.

But then along comes Jesus, and He says, no, it’s not what you do. It’s *who you know*. To be right with God you must know the One who truly is right with God, the One God sent into the world to save those who have transgressed His Law, the Son of Man who indeed is lord of the Sabbath, and of everything else.

It’s true. To be right with God, my religious friend, you must come to see your religious obedience as God sees it, as selective obedience, as pride-motivated obedience, which are filthy rags to God. What you need is the perfect obedience of the Person who kept every law of God, and who paid for every violation of that law by dying in the place of every law-breaker who would ever put their total trust in Him.

O my religious friend, this is why I say it’s dangerous to be religious! Your religion is fooling you. It’s promising you something it can’t produce. Indeed, it’s a prison cell, and it’s holding you captive. What you need is what every sinner needs. You need true righteousness, and forgiveness of your sins. You need to come to know Jesus Christ as your Savior and Lord, and place your trust in what He did for you at the cross and empty tomb.

And here’s what’s most amazing of all. What you need, He offers you freely right now. Even though you’ve deceived yourself hundreds of times before with that wicked self-talk, “I’m okay. Look at all I’ve done with my good and religious life,” He still

⁸ J. D. Jones, p. 59.

offers you a full and complete pardon. He will accept you on the basis of His grace...if you will but acknowledge your need and *ask Him*. Ask and you shall receive.

There's the first pitfall. It's possible to substitute rules for a relationship. There's a second, and Jesus confronts in the next episode.

II. It's possible to substitute a system for the Savior (3:1-6).

In this second Sabbath confrontation, we see Jesus take action in four ways.

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 sights at the synagogue that day that produced a response.

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 religious, but lost.

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). In 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.

In 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."⁹

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?

⁹ Barclay, p. 67.

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.¹⁰

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.

Specifically, when it comes to the Sabbath, we can be sure of the following.

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 quite straightforward. He took the creation mandate and told the Israelites in Exodus 20:8, “Remember the Sabbath by keeping it holy.” He repeated that command 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 for good, the people perverted. Instead of being a day of rest, Israel eventually turned Sabbath into a day of religious duty, sort of a litmus test of one’s spirituality. And so you proved how righteous you were by what you did (and didn’t do) on the Sabbath. In time, the Jews took God’s good command and cluttered it with their own commands.

Some folks overreact to what the Jews did to God’s command and throw out the whole notion of Sabbath rest. That’s unwise, and it ignores the God-intended need for rest in the weekly schedules of His image-bearers.

May I remind you that the pattern of working six days and resting one day in our weekly schedule precedes the giving of the Law? It does. This pattern is rooted in God’s own activity in creation.

And may I also remind you that according to the New Testament, our need for rest is actually fulfilled in Christ, who is our Sabbath rest? Listen to this explanation in 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.”

So 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*.

Now back to Jesus’ 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.”

¹⁰ Barclay, p. 68.

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 their vain religious system and cared nothing for the needs of a hurting man, He was incensed.

The tense of the verb connected with Jesus' "anger" in verse 5 suggests this was momentary anger. The anger is real, and intense, but it doesn't linger. On the other hand, the Greek word for "grieved" [NIV "distressed"] is present tense, giving the sense of a continuing, ongoing distress or grief. In other words, Jesus couched His anger in His amazing compassion.

As J. Vernon McGee explains, "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."¹¹

We learn a couple of important lessons from Jesus' actions in the synagogue.

1. *Physical problems are cause for concern.* The Sabbath is a day of rest, but God never intended for 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. It's when you see the truth but refuse to *see* it. Indeed, you can't see what you see. You're blind to it. You sense you need to change, but dig in your heels instead.

The heart of the problem is the problem of the stubborn heart. The problem of the stubborn heart is right now causing marriages to crumble. It's destroying friendships. It's keeping children from talking to their parents, and parents from talking to their children.

But worst of all, the problem of the stubborn heart is causing people to leave this world and enter an eternal hell without Christ, insisting all the way there, "I'm right. I don't need to change. Look how religious I am. You're wrong about me."

"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."¹²

How do you help the person who loves their system? We're seeing how Jesus did it. First, He went to them. See His love in that act of going. Next, He exposed them, gently, but firmly, and intentionally. This too is an act of His love. Then He healed the man. Yes, it's a trap and He knows it. But this man is in need, and the need trumps the system. Finally...

D. Jesus forced the religious to make a decision (6). By healing the man Jesus forced the hand of the Pharisees. Which will it be, your system, or Me, the Savior? And here was their answer. Verse 6 says, "Then the Pharisees went out and began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus."

¹¹ J. Vernon McGee, p. 45.

¹² R. Alan Cole, p. 132.

It's really unthinkable, yet it's precisely what happened. These good, upstanding religious people just saw Jesus heal a man and responded with a resolve to kill Him.

And to make it worse, the irony is *with whom?* These Pharisees actually chose to partner with the Herodians. Unthinkable.

Who were the Herodians? They were influential Jews who befriended and backed the notorious family of the Herods. They were supporters of Rome.

The Pharisees, on the other hand, were separatists to the nth degree. It's why they criticized Jesus so much, for He wasn't separatistic enough. Yet now they're plotting with the Herodians. Impossible. The Pharisees hated the Romans. The Herodians worked for the Romans. Yet now the Pharisees, who moments earlier were enemies of the Herodians, are working together with them. And what motivated them to do so? Their mutual hatred of Jesus.

That's how powerful a system can be. It can keep you from Jesus. It can reveal your heart's hatred for Jesus. It can bring you into a partnership with others who have no room for Jesus.

Perhaps this is what's going on in your life. Your system is keeping you from Jesus.

You say, "What do you mean by my 'system'?" By system, I mean some man-made construct that governs your life, to which you have given your allegiance. It could be a denomination, or an ideology, or a political party, or even a sports team.

Have you ever had this conversation? I have. You ask a person, "Are you a Christian?" "No," they say. "I'm a Catholic." They just told you what their system is. They're Catholic. That's their identity. It's the basis of their hope in this life and the next.

Here's another version of it. "Are you a Christian?" "No, but I do belong to the Lodge." End of conversation.

Your system could be a particular religion, or the insistence that you don't any religion, and your prideful "non-religion" becomes your system.

My friend, listen carefully. Jesus Christ does not fit into any man-made system. He just said He's new wine that destroys old wineskins. He indeed is Lord of all, and if He is not Lord of all, then He is not our Lord at all. And when He intersects our system, either we repent, or He must go. There is no middle ground.

And so, we've seen two pitfalls of the religious today. We've seen how people can substitute rules for a relationship, and a system for the Savior.

So there are two options facing us today. They are the same two options the Pharisees faced on that Sabbath day so long ago.

1. *Will I reject my religion (my "system") and follow Jesus? Or...*
2. *Will I keep my religion and reject Jesus?* It's all about Jesus. What am I doing with Jesus? Back in 1865 Elvina Hall penned these helpful words, which describe the heart cry of a person who truly knows Jesus.

*I hear the Savior say,
Thy strength indeed is small;
Child of weakness, watch and pray,
Find in Me thine all in all.*

*Jesus paid it all,
All to Him I owe;
Sin had left a crimson stain,
He washed it white as snow.*

Closing Song: #210 "Jesus Paid It All" (all four verses)