

True Religion

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- [0 : 0 0] Okay, a Yale professor, Yale University, and he was a scholar and he was a professor of the history of Christianity, a man called Yaroslav Pelikan.
- He gave a series of lectures called The Vindication of Tradition, Yaroslav Pelikan. And this series of lectures, The Vindication of Tradition, were later published as a book.
- And in them he said, in those lectures he said, tradition is the living faith of the dead, traditionalism is the dead faith of the living. And I suppose I should add, it is traditionalism that gives tradition a bad name.
- So let me just say that again, tradition is the living faith of the dead, traditionalism is the dead faith of the living. What he's saying is basically that there's a difference between tradition on the one hand and traditionalism on the other.
- So he's not saying that traditions are bad, but he's saying that if traditionalism takes over, then people can so easily and quickly lose sight of why those traditions are there in the first place, what they're there for.
- [1 : 0 7] And so it's important that we recognize the distinction between traditionalism and tradition. Because when it comes to Christianity, the danger is that religious practices can become more important than living faith.
- Practices can become more important than what those practices are meant to be for in the first place. And you can just tell when this happens. For example, take any church, if you try and change a ritual or a tradition or a practice and adapt it or change it in any way, it won't be long before you'll see how upset people get.
- Because they've lost sight of what that tradition was for. And so as we look through Mark's gospel, we come to chapter 2. And what we see is Jesus is in conflict with these people called the Pharisees.
- And the Pharisees were Jewish religious teachers. And so they thought they knew how people should relate to God. And along comes Jesus and they're unhappy with what Jesus is doing.
- And so here they challenge Jesus on his practice of fasting. And through this, Jesus forces them to make a choice. So what we've got is a religious conflict.
- [2 : 2 4] And then we've got a revealing correction by Jesus. And then we've got a real choice that needs to be made. Not just for the Pharisees or Mark's readers at the time, but for every single one of us.
- So those are my three points this afternoon. First, religious conflict. Second, a revealing correction. And third, a real choice. So first of all, a religious conflict.
- That's what this is. Verse 18, the conflict is about fasting. So we read, now John's disciples and the Pharisees were fasting. Some people came and asked Jesus, How is it that John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees are fasting?
- But yours are not. So John's disciples were fasting. The disciples of the Pharisees were fasting. Sounds like everybody was fasting. But Jesus' disciples weren't fasting.

And so the question that the Pharisees ask Jesus is meant to be a criticism of Jesus and what he does. Now remember, fasting was a religious practice. Fasting essentially is to go without food for a particular reason for a certain period of time.

[3 : 32] And it could express extreme repentance or sorrow or mourning. Or it could be the preparation for some big event. And so in the Old Testament part of the Bible, it spoke about fasting.

Because fasting was something that God had established for his people. Something he wanted his people to do. But God's law required to fast only once in the year.

Only on a certain day. It was a day called the Day of Atonement. And so it was mandatory for all Israel, all God's people, to fast on that one day.

And there were other fasts. But they were only occasional. And so as we look at this incident, John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees, they were probably fasting for different reasons.

John the Baptist's message centered on repentance. And so it's possible their fasting was connected with this. The Pharisees, they apparently fasted twice a week.

[4 : 34] On Mondays and on Thursdays. And so it had become the custom of the Pharisees to go beyond what God had said. So they had made up their own custom.

God says, do it once a year. But they say, no, we're going to do it far more. And there's no reason why they would need to do it more. Unless, of course, they wanted to prove themselves by being more spiritual or more religious.

And so they see Jesus. And for them, Jesus has failed to take this religious practice seriously. Jesus is the liberal and they're the conservatives. And so basically, in the league table of spirituality, you had John's disciples and you had the Pharisees in the number one and number two spots.

So thinking like Champions League up there. Whereas Jesus and his disciples, they're more like in the relegation zone. And just like in football, any team that's in the relegation zone, you never take them seriously.

They're so bad and they're at the bottom. And so it was with Jesus and his disciples. The Pharisees didn't take them seriously because of what they weren't doing. Which was this ritual of fasting.

[5 : 49] So the fasting of the Pharisees had become for the Pharisees, it was mere traditionalism. The law of God didn't require it.

But for them, it had become probably even more important than God's law. That's why they were so insistent that they do it and that other people do it.

And if the other people weren't doing it, then they weren't as spiritual as they were. So they were making their own spiritual code of conduct, if you like.

And they were down on those who didn't measure up to their standards. And so Jesus and his disciples were those who didn't measure up to the standards of the Pharisees. And so while we might get stuck into the Pharisees, I guess we need to be careful that their attitude doesn't exist in churches or in Christians today.

And I guess it's probably still alive and well in most places. Where traditionalism takes over and certain rules or certain practices must be followed.

[6 : 55] And if anything is done differently within that body of church, then people do get upset. There was a church I was pastor of. And the first Christmas in that church, every year the Christmas tree would come out.

And so I suggested that the Christmas tree come down to the front of the church. It would be a good place to be because people could see it. But the tradition had been that the Christmas tree was always at the back of the church where nobody could see it.

Let's say the eyes in the back of their heads. And so on the suggestion that we put it down to the front, instead of being at the back, it would be nicer for everybody to see. No way. We can't do that.

The tradition is that it's got to be at the back. Why? It just has to be. It's always been there. So why would we change it now? And so you can just see how traditions turn into traditionalism and upset people.

And the very reason for being there in a church to worship God, to do things in a way that honors him. People so quickly and so easily lose what it's all about.

[8 : 03] And so this kind of, I guess we could call it sanctimonious phariseism that we see here, it can rear its ugly head when some people just look down on other people because they're not practicing Christianity as they think they should.

They're not keeping the rules and the rules and the regulations that they think they should. Because schools or churches can so easily become institutionalized and develop a certain traditionalism that says things have got to be done in this certain way at this certain time.

Because, you know, fasting in principle wasn't wrong. And so Jesus does say, if you look down at verse 20, he does say his followers will fast.

He's not against fasting. But to insist that it should be done twice a week so that you look spiritual just misses the point. And today, of course, there's going to be all kinds of different things.

For example, I said the principle of church is to worship God. And so to come along and insist it must be done in a certain way or at a certain time or in a certain place or with a certain style of music or certain types of songs is just to miss the point.

[9 : 24] And so we can see how easily traditionalism can take over when certain issues are elevated to the extent that we lose sight of what should be at the very heart of them, which is the worship of God.

So Jesus here isn't just making a point about fasting. That's the presenting issue, you could say. But Jesus uses this issue of fasting to make a point about himself.

So that's what we need to see. So the first point is it's a religious conflict. The second point is it's a revealing correction. Jesus has to correct them because they're wrong.

So verse 19 says, Jesus answered, So Jesus is referring to himself here as the bridegroom and his disciples are the guests.

So it's a picture of a wedding, isn't it? And so Jesus is saying that fasting is inappropriate at a wedding. When the bridegroom is there, his guests don't fast.

[10 : 32] It would be wrong to behave at a wedding as if it were a funeral by fasting. So a wedding should be feasting and joy instead of sorrow.

Feasting is the order of the day. Although I guess I'm the father of a daughter. And one day I'm sure I'll be paying for her wedding if she were to be married.

So I actually don't think fasting is that bad a thing at a wedding. It needs to feel a bit cheaper. From Aberdeen. So we've got long pockets and short arms.

Don't like to spend money. Anyway, basically, when Jesus is present, he's saying it's the time for joy. It's not the time for sorrow. It's the time for feasting instead of fasting.

But what Jesus is saying here is actually stunning. Because what he says has got a far deeper significance. And Jesus' comment here is slightly veiled.

[11 : 31] And it's unlikely that those at the time would have grasped the significance of what he's saying. Because when Jesus is referring to himself as the bridegroom, he's saying something astounding.

Because in the Old Testament part of the Bible, God is referred to as a husband on a number of occasions. So just listen to this.

For example, in Isaiah chapter 54, verse 5, we read, For your maker is your husband. The Lord Almighty is his name. The Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer.

He is called the God of all the earth. And then again in Isaiah, God is described as a husband. His relationship to his people is described as being like a marriage.

So Isaiah chapter 62, verse 5 says, As a bridegroom rejoices over his bride, so your God will rejoice over you. And then again in Hosea chapter 2, verse 16, we read, And that day declares the Lord, you will call me my husband.

[12 : 37] And so here comes Jesus, and he's using this bridegroom imagery, essentially to reveal his identity. He's using this conflict to say that God, God, the Lord Almighty, God in human flesh, is present with them, is talking to them.

And so that's why it should be a time of celebration. If God, who made the universe, steps into the world, shrinks himself down, as it were, becomes a man, and walks on this earth, that's a time for feasting, not fasting.

And yet Jesus goes even further in what he says. So let's read verse 20. But the time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them, and on that day they will fast.

Again, Jesus is revealing something astounding about himself here. He's just revealed his identity, the bridegroom, God, and human flesh. But now he's revealing his mission.

And again, it's in a veiled way. But see what Jesus says. Jesus knows that he will be, and the works are, taken from them. He'll be taken from them.

[13 : 52] And that's surely a reference to the strength of Jesus. Because it wasn't long before the Pharisees were plotting to kill him. So just look down, same page, chapter 3, verse 6.

The Pharisees are there, and they want to kill Jesus. So along with the other religious leaders, they would eventually have Jesus crucified. So Jesus knew he would be taken away.

Jesus knew he would suffer and die. And so the shadow of the cross of Jesus Christ is hanging over everything that Jesus says and everything that Jesus does.

And perhaps there's an echo here of a famous chapter in the Bible, Isaiah chapter 53, an important prophecy about Jesus. Because it speaks of Jesus.

It calls him the suffering servant who dies. And it even refers to Jesus being taken away. Which is what Jesus is saying is going to happen here. And so while Jesus is with his people, it isn't time for fasting.

[14 : 53] But when he's taken away, Jesus says, when he is killed, fasting will be appropriate during that time of mourning and sorrow. Because the disciples, if you know the story, they experienced that mourning and sorrow.

Those hours that Jesus was stuck inside the tomb dead. So what Jesus does here is he takes this religious conflict about fasting and he turns it into a revealing correction.

So he can point to his identity and then point to his mission as son of God and as saviour. Now, last weekend we were through in Edinburgh.

And we met with some of our friends who we knew when we lived in Edinburgh. And we heard about their four new chickens. And even met their four new chickens. These are their names.

Jemima, Bonnie, Claudia and Sparkles. I'm not even making that up. They are the names of their four chickens. And apparently each chicken will lay approximately 280 eggs every year.

[15 : 59] Which I think is excellent to get so many eggs each year. But my friend had decided with his children, without his wife's consent, that he would get these chickens for their family.

They had a big garden so they had plenty of space for a chicken run or whatever it's called. I have no idea. But they decided to let his wife know that they were getting these chickens.

That they would go around the house and they would post clues in different places that would form up the word chickens. And so she'd have to go around and she spent a day apparently going around the house, finding these different clues, coming to the evening and then being able to lay out on the table the word chickens.

And that's how she discovered that they were going to have chickens. Now, there's something similar happening here with the identity and mission of Jesus. So there are various clues throughout the Gospel of Mark and Jesus mentions them and they're slightly unveiled, maybe even opaque.

But in the light of the death and resurrection of Jesus, we see how all of these pieces, all of these clues fit together to tell us about him. And so Jesus is forcing his listeners, the Pharisees, he's forcing us as we read Mark to make up our minds about him.

[17 : 19] Because all the clues are here and they come together. His death and resurrection make sense of him and the meaning of life. And so we've got to figure out what are we going to do about the person of Jesus.

It leaves us with a real choice. And that's my third point. So there's a religious conflict, first of all. There's a revealing connection, secondly. And thirdly, there's a real choice. Verse 21 and 22.

And Jesus forces his listeners to make this choice by using these two illustrations. Let me read 21 and 22. No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment.

Otherwise, the new piece will pull away from the old, making the tear worse. And no one pours new wine into old wineskins. Otherwise, the wine will burst the skins and both the wine and the wineskins will be ruined.

No, they pour new wine into new wineskins. So what Jesus says here goes much further than fasting, which was the main issue to begin with.

[18 : 21] What Jesus does is he highlights the mistake of trying to make new things fit into or onto old, worn out things.

Because his coming as the bridegroom signifies the passing of the old and the coming of the new. Where the new can be harmonized with the old.

So a new patch can't be stuck onto an old piece of clothing because a new patch will tear away from the old. And similarly, new wine can't be poured into old wineskins because it will burst the old wineskins.

Wineskins will be spoiled. Wine will be spoiled as well. And so what point is Jesus making here to his critics, the Pharisees? What he's doing is he's saying they can't carry on with their old religious traditions now that Jesus has arrived.

So Jesus is like the new patch that tears away from the old garment. Jesus is like the new wine that burst the old wineskins. So Jesus is saying he is not an add-on to Judaism.

[19 : 28] They were Jewish religious teachers. So Jesus can't be squeezed into the customs and the practices, the rules and the rituals of Jewish life.

Jesus didn't come to fit into their traditionalism of Phariseeism and follow all their man-made human practices. So the kingdom of God coming in Jesus Christ bursts through this old way of religion with all its man-made rules and rituals.

Because what we're seeing here in the Gospel of Mark is that now the king is present. Now he's here. Now he's arrived in this world. The promised blessings of his kingdom are breaking out in him.

And so Jesus is emphasising the incompatibility between the old structures of Judaism and this new gospel of the kingdom which comes in his arrival.

In other words, the coming of Jesus into this world and its happen changes everything for everybody, including you and me. Because Jesus came to bring us into a living relationship with our loving creator God.

[20 : 43] And that's a relationship that can't come from obeying laws, from obeying God's law, because we can never do it. We try to obey the Ten Commandments.

We can't. Which means we're under God's judgment. And being in a relationship with God doesn't mean obeying all kinds of religious practices and rituals and traditions.

The only way we can enter into a relationship with God is through Jesus Christ. And that's why keeping the rules and the regulations like the Pharisees just can't be harmonised with this gospel of grace.

Of what God does for us. Not what we try to do by ourselves. And so throughout the ministry of Jesus, he just keeps coming into conflict with the Pharisees.

Because he doesn't go along with their religious traditionalism. He says it's a waste of time. It misses the point. Jesus makes it clear to the Pharisees, they are going in the wrong direction.

[21 : 47] They are going in the wrong way. And so the implication and the application for us today is that people are going the wrong way if they try to get to God by bypassing Jesus Christ.

Just try to imagine Judaism as being like a road. And it's going in one direction. And it's moving towards Jesus Christ. Here are the Pharisees.

And they aren't helping people get to Jesus. They are taking people on a different road. A different route altogether. Which is the wrong road. And the wrong route.

Or right. So Jesus doesn't travel the way the Pharisees are expecting him to. And Jesus makes it clear that their way isn't the way to God. So let's be clear.

Jesus wasn't rejecting God's law here. But Jesus was rejecting a false religion that said you get to God by your good works.

[22 : 43] You get to God by the things you do. You get to God by your religious practices. By looking super spiritual. Jesus is saying no you don't. The only way you get to God is through Jesus Christ.

Because Jesus is the one who fulfills the Old Testament law for us. We can't keep it. But he kept it for us. And so the old patterns of relating to God must give way now that Jesus Christ has come.

Jesus is the way to know God. And so while the Pharisees were caught up with their dead religion. They missed the very one their whole religion was pointing to.

And that was Jesus. He was standing right there in front of them. And they missed him. So as we close. The real choice for the Pharisees.

The real choice for Mark's readers. The real choice for us. Is whether we are going to see Jesus for who he is. And follow him. Or are we going to choose our own way.

[23 : 49] Of getting to God. Our own method of spirituality. Our own self salvation. Because it's never going to work. We can't get to God on our own terms.

Which is what the Pharisees were trying to do. You know people think that there are lots of religions in our world. Actually when you think about it.

There are only two religions in our world. And there always have been. One religion is a false religion of works. Where it's all about me.

And what I do to get to God or be saved. A false religion of works. The other is a true religion. A religion of grace.

Where we get to God by what Jesus Christ has done for us. Because we can never do it ourselves. And so one of these religions is represented by the Pharisees. And every other belief system that says God will accept me on the basis of the things I do.

[24 : 55] If I live a good life. If I keep all these rules. Surely I'll be acceptable to God. What we're reading here is that's wrong. Because it goes against the grace which is at the very heart of Christianity.

It's grace. Because despite our sin, my sin and your sin. God accepts us through what Jesus Christ has done.

Through his death on a cross. So Jesus came to live the life that we could never live. A life in full obedience to God. Obeying God perfectly.

So that Jesus could then die a death that we deserve to die. A death for our sin against God. And so it's only through the death and resurrection of Jesus that we can experience a right relationship with God.

And it's so radical because we don't deserve it. I know I don't. And we can never earn it. But it comes to us as a gift. A gift of grace in Jesus Christ.

[26 : 02] So false religion says if I obey God will love me and accept me. True religion. The religion of the gospel of Jesus Christ says I'm loved and accepted.

Therefore I obey. And that's the choice that Jesus forces us to make. So which is it for you? If you wouldn't call yourself a Christian, don't think that you can get to God without Jesus Christ.

But even if we would call ourselves a Christian, we can still become obsessed with the kind of traditionalism that misses the point. That makes us think that certain customs, certain rules, certain practices will make us more acceptable to God.

Or more loved by God. But the grace of Jesus Christ is all we need. Jesus has done the work for us so that we don't have to.

The best phrase, four words to remember when you're on holiday is four words you need to know. In any language, wherever you are, my friend will pay.

[27 : 15] My friend will pay. Say that in any restaurant. And that's what Jesus Christ came to do for us. Because we can never pay the debt we owe to God for our sin ourselves.

But Jesus came and he took that debt on the cross. So that we don't need to pay it. It's been done for us. So let's never let this mere traditionalism push out a saving faith in Jesus Christ.

And when we are saved in Jesus Christ, let's live for him. Let's obey him. Let's follow him. Not because that's how we get to God. But because of what God has done for us.

Let's pray together. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.