

Religion Versus Jesus

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- [0 : 0 0] Okay, so let's look at Mark chapter 2, verse 23 through to chapter 3, verse 6. A few years ago, Oxford University was in the news because of a change in its theology faculty.
- One headline read, Oxford theology students can skip Christianity lessons. And then the article went on to say that theology students at Oxford will no longer be required to study Christianity throughout the course for the first time in 800 years after undergraduates complained about lack of diversity.
- So the changes to the degree were to be minor shifts because of minor shifts in religious belief in the culture of the United Kingdom. And so basically you can graduate from Oxford University with a theology degree without having studied Christianity at any great depth.
- And it does sound rather odd, but the reality is that religion is a very different thing from Christianity. In fact, Jesus has got nothing to do with religion.
- And we see this in Mark chapters 2 and into chapter 3 where Jesus once again clashes with the religious authorities. A number of times, the religious teachers, the Pharisees have encountered Jesus and they have not been happy with what Jesus has been doing.
- [1 : 2 7] And so the tension has been building to such an extent that if you look down at chapter 3, verse 6, you'll see that the Pharisees actually want to kill Jesus. They want him dead. So what's happening here is that it's a contest of Jesus versus religion.
- Jesus is declaring that he is the end of religion and he is here to replace it. And so what I'd like us to do is to look at three points as we work our way through this passage this afternoon.
- The first is the danger of religion. And then the second, the difference of Christianity. And then thirdly, the decision on Jesus. The danger of religion, the difference of Christianity, and the decision on Jesus.
- So first of all, the danger of religion. You notice that Jesus just doesn't fit into the religion of the day, which was the Jewish religion. That's why the Pharisees are so offended, basically, by everything that Jesus was saying and by everything that Jesus was doing.
- Now, the Pharisees were a strict group of religious teachers. And so they emphasised the importance of the Old Testament law, as well as many other traditions that they had made up.
- [2 : 3 8] And so Jesus clashes with them. If you look down, you'll see in chapter 2 of Mark, verse 1 to 12, Jesus clashes with them because Jesus claims he's got the power to forgive sin.
- And following on, chapter 2, verse 13 to 17, Jesus clashes with them because Jesus eats with tax collectors and sinners. And this annoys the Pharisees. Chapter 2, verse 18 to 22, Jesus clashes with them because Jesus' disciples weren't fasting.
- And then now here we've got another clash and it's over what you can and can do on the Sabbath. Sabbath, it's not a word that is common today, but Sabbath essentially means to cease or to rest.

And so the Sabbath was a holy day of rest, a day free from work. And it comes in the Bible, way back at the very beginning in Genesis, where God ceased and rested from his work on the seventh day.

And so God gives a Sabbath. God gave the Sabbath at the very beginning of time. And that's why observing the Sabbath is one of the Ten Commandments, the Fourth Commandment.

[3 : 48] And so God's people were commanded to keep the Sabbath holy and were not permitted to do any work on it. And so here the conflict kicks off because the Pharisees weren't happy with what Jesus' disciples were doing.

So look at verse 23 and 24. One Sabbath, Jesus was going through the cornfields and his disciples walked along. They began to pick some ears of corn.

The Pharisees said to him, look, why are they doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath? So the Pharisees accused Jesus' disciples of being unlawful.

Actually, they weren't breaking the law because God's law said that you had to rest your work one day in seven on the Sabbath. But because the Pharisees were so strict about obeying God's law, they had added all these laws of their own man-made human rules.

In fact, they had 39 specific types of activity that you couldn't do on the Sabbath. And so the Mishnah, which was like their oral tradition, they gave in addition to the Old Testament, said this.

[4 : 59] Let me just read at the Mishnah chapter 7, Shabbat, which is the Jewish word for Sabbath. So they say the primary labours are 40 less 1. Sewing, ploughing, reaping, binding sheaves, threshing, winnowing, sorting, grinding, sifting, kneading, baking, shearing wool, whitening it, combing it, dyeing it, spinning, weaving, making two loops, weaving two threads, separating two threads, tying a knot, untying a knot, sewing two stitches, tearing for the purpose of sewing two stitches, hunting a deer, slaughtering it, skinning it, salting it, curing its height, scraping it, cutting it, writing two letters, erasing for the purpose of writing two letters, building, demolishing, extinguishing a flame, lighting a flame, striking with a hammer, carrying from one domain to another.

Those were their extra rules for what you couldn't do on the Sabbath. Basically, you couldn't do anything. And so on the Sabbath, you couldn't pluck grain because it was a form of reaping.

And reaping was considered to be a form of work. And so by the Pharisees, it was considered to be unlawful. And so what Jesus does here is basically the Pharisees come to Jesus, but Jesus takes the game to them, and then he beats them at their own game.

So Jesus takes them back to the scriptures to answer their question. And he answers their question with a question of his own, which Jesus does often. So let's look at verse 25 and 26.

He answered, Have you never read what David did when he was with his companions, when he and his companions were hungry and in need? 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.

[6 : 52] And he also gave some to his companions. So Jesus says to them, these Old Testament scholars who knew their Bibles, he says, have you never read?

He's criticising their religion by asking what the scriptures actually say. And so Jesus gives them this knockout punch, because he uses David, the great king of Israel, to remind them that when David did something similar, David didn't do anything wrong.

So in the time of Abiathar, when David and his men were hungry, they ate the consecrated bread, which was reserved for the priests. But David wasn't condemned for his actions.

And so too here are Jesus and his disciples. They're hungry. And so they ate the grain. And Jesus is saying, so they shouldn't be condemned for their actions either. Now what Jesus is saying here is not that you can break God's law whenever there's an emergency.

He's showing the Pharisees how they're wrong, because they completely missed the point. And that is the danger of religion. It completely misses the point.

[7 : 59] And it's damaging because it assumes that religious performance, that what you do is what matters. And because of that, it misses the real and true nature of Christianity.

And so the Pharisees here were building their identity on their moral and spiritual performance as a kind of CV that they could show to God and show to the world, to the people around them.

And yet it only led to self-righteous criticism of those who didn't follow their man-made practices. And you know, the same Pharisaic religion is still alive and well in our world today.

And yet it is the enemy of the gospel of Jesus Christ, because it says that your religious performance or my religious performance is what counts before God.

That's what God is really interested in, is how you spend your Sundays. It's whether you go to church or not. Yet, it isn't our good works and it isn't our morality that matters before God.

[9 : 09] So while these Pharisees are arguing about the Sabbath, Jesus points to a far deeper issue. It's a far deeper issue of the heart, not just the outward performance.

And it's a problem because the Pharisees had no room for Jesus in their religion. And that's why Jesus turns the focus onto himself and away from the Sabbath.

So see what he says, verse 27. Then he said to them, the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So Jesus is clarifying what the Sabbath was made for, was made for man.

So Jesus is not doing away with the Sabbath. He's saying that we need it. We need the Sabbath. Not just Jews or Christians, but everybody needs the Sabbath. Because it's how God has wired us as human beings.

We're not machines who can just keep going 24-7. We're people who need to stop and we need to rest. And so while this isn't the main point of this passage, it's clear by way of application that we need Sabbath rest, isn't it?

[10 : 18] God never meant us to be overworked or overburdened. That's why he set the Sabbath into the very fabric of our existence. The Sabbath is God's gift to us.

And it's for our blessing. And so we know what happens, don't we, when people don't keep the Sabbath. We end up being forced to take Sabbath rest by being burnt out or in hospital or both.

And so Jesus here isn't minimising the Sabbath or saying it doesn't matter what you do on the Sabbath or on a Sunday. What he's doing is he's affirming the principle of the Sabbath.

But he's rejecting the unnecessary rules the Pharisees had made up surrounding the Sabbath. Because it was never intended by God to be burdened with all these restrictions that they'd given it.

It was meant to be a blessing for us to enjoy. That's why Jesus has no problem with his disciples picking grain and then eating it on the Sabbath.

[11 : 25] Because their hunger mattered more than the Pharisees' stupid rules. So the Pharisees had lost all joy and all pleasure in the Sabbath that God had given to them as a gift.

You have to say there was no fun in their fundamentalism. Sinclair Ferguson, who has got a little book on Mark, says this. He says, Some of us always play our shots from the rough grass at the side anyway.

But golf courses, he says, like Sabbaths are meant to be enjoyed, not preserved as living museums. Tragically, the Pharisees were turning the day of blessing into a burden.

And so we need to beware of the danger of religion, don't we? Because religion will always turn God's blessings into burdens. We'll always turn what God has designed for our good and our joy and our pleasure into something that becomes a burden.

Because religion makes it all about what we must do and ignores what God has already done. So that's the first point, the danger of religion.

[12 : 45] But secondly, what we see is the difference of Christianity. Because Jesus makes it clear what the Sabbath is for by pointing to his own identity.

Verse 28, he says, So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath. Those words were shocking in the ears of the Pharisees. Because Jesus is claiming he has got the authority to say what the Sabbath is for.

Why? Because he's the Lord of the Sabbath. He created it. He designed it. And so by calling himself the Son of Man, in verse 28, Jesus is associating himself with the heavenly Son of Man, this great figure in Daniel chapter 7, and the one to whom God gives authority and glory and sovereign power over all peoples.

Jesus is essentially putting himself in the place of God. And he's declaring, It's not about religion. It is about me.

Because Jesus came to end religion and to replace it with himself. And so the Pharisees thought that they were in charge of the Sabbath. They were the ones who could tell people what you can do and what you can't do.

[13 : 58] But Jesus makes it clear that the Sabbath is under new management. We've probably all seen that sign up when we own a restaurant once in a while, under new management. And we know exactly what it means.

It means that the old management were useless. They cooked bad food. It was terrible. The restaurant was run badly. And the service was poor.

But under new management is a sign of hope. Under the new management, much better food, much better service, and a nicer restaurant to go to. And Jesus is saying something similar here.

It's not that the Sabbath is bad, but the way the Pharisees managed the Sabbath was bad. And here is the Lord of the Sabbath saying, This is how the Sabbath is to be used. This is what the Sabbath is for.

And so Jesus is claiming the authority to do whatever he wants, because he is the Lord of the Sabbath. And he proves it by this next incident in chapter 3, verse 1 to 6.

[14 : 56] And he shows, as he proves that he's Lord of the Sabbath, just how dangerous the religion of the Pharisees had to come. So let's look at verse 1 to 3 of chapter 3. Stop there.

So the Pharisees, they did teach that if somebody's life was at risk on the Sabbath, then it was acceptable to help them. If they were going to die, then you could do some work to heal them or help them.

But a man with a shriveled hand clearly didn't qualify for being an urgent necessity. His life wasn't at risk. And that's why they used this as a chance to catch Jesus out.

And of course, Jesus knows what they're up to. And so he gets to the heart of what the Sabbath is about. Verse 4 and 5. Then Jesus asked them, Which is lawful on the Sabbath, to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?

But they remained silent. He looked around at them in anger and, deeply disturbed, at their stubborn hearts, said to the man, Stretch out your hand.

[16 : 14] He stretched it out, and his hand was completely restored. This is brilliant. What Jesus is doing here is he's showing them what obeying God's law for the Sabbath really means.

Does it mean doing good or does it mean doing evil? Does it mean saving life or killing it? And it's a no-brainer question. Of course it means doing good and saving life.

What else could it mean if God gave the Sabbath for the blessing and flourishing of humanity? What could be better for that man on that particular Sabbath, whilst the Lord of the Sabbath was there, than for his hand to be healed and restored?

That's in keeping with the spirit in which God gave the Sabbath in the first place. The Sabbath is about restoring. It's about replenishing. It's about repairing.

It's about renewing. And so to heal this man on the Sabbath is exactly what the Sabbath is all about. And yet because these religious leaders were so obsessed by all the rules about the Sabbath, they don't even want Jesus to heal this poor guy with his shriveled hand.

[17 : 27] They completely missed the forest for the trees. In fact, their hearts were more shriveled than the man's hand. And that's the difference of Christianity compared to the danger of religion.

Religion is more concerned about silly rules than it is about suffering people. So for all their religious talk, it didn't lead them towards loving people.

What it did lead was it led them away from Jesus. And so it's no wonder that Jesus here was angry and distressed. Because despite their outward show of religious rule keeping, and they must have looked good, on the inside it's clear that their hearts were just hard.

And isn't that the hypocritical nature of religion? On the outside, you can look fantastic. You can look super spiritual, super holy. You can go to all the church meetings and prayer meetings and everything else.

And everybody thinks you're super spiritual and you're great. And yet, on the inside, your heart can be stubborn towards God. It can be hard towards other people.

[18 : 38] And it can lack the compassion that Jesus gives. And it just proves, ultimately, that you love yourself more than you love God and you love other people. And so religion avoids Jesus because it pretends to be for God, when really, it's all about me.

It's all about how I look. So that's the difference of Christianity. First, the danger of religion. Second, the difference of Christianity. And then thirdly, the decision on Jesus. So when it comes to Jesus, we're forced to make a decision, whether we consider ourselves to be religious or even irreligious.

And that's what happens here in verse 6. Then the Pharisees went out and began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus. So you see, religion only works at a surface level, but doesn't change our hearts.

Because the Pharisees here, the most religious people around, reject Jesus and want him dead. And so we see their true colours are shining through, as well as the dangerous nature of their religion.

And there's such a deep irony here, because for all their supposed strict Sabbath observance, they were really worried about people picking grain on the Sabbath because they were hungry.

[20 : 04] The disciples of Jesus, the Lord of the universe, that was a big deal and an issue for them. Yet, here they were on the Sabbath, the special day, plotting to kill Jesus.

It's so hypocritical. And that's ultimately where religion leads. It leads people away from Jesus Christ. And it wants people to be rid of Jesus from their lives.

And so what they do then is the Pharisees plot with the Herodians, and they form this unholy alliance. And so here are the Pharisees, the ultimate in religion, the ultimate in religious people, strict religious people, and here are the Herodians, the ultimate in secular, non-religious people, liberal, secular people, who would never get on, who would never speak to each other.

But here they come, and they join forces against Jesus. Why? Well, because Jesus is a threat to both groups, the religious and the irreligious. Because real Christianity, genuine Christianity, that isn't religion, offends both religious and irreligious people.

And so until you see how the gospel of Jesus Christ is an offence to both religion and irreligion, you don't quite understand Christianity. And so the religious approach, taken by the Pharisees, is that you must lead a very good life, you should follow all the rules, and that will earn you your salvation.

[21 : 39] Whereas the irreligious approach, is embodied by the Herodians, and it is, do whatever you like, live whatever kind of life you want to, you decide what's right or wrong for you, you choose your own path of self-discovery, and that will, in the end, bring you salvation, happiness, fulfilment, joy.

And yet both of these ways, are ways of being your own Lord, and your own saviour. Because you're making yourself the Lord, of all you do, hoping to find fulfilment in your works, whatever they are, religious works or irreligious works.

And yet both these ways, religious and irreligious, are both hostile to the message of Jesus, true Christianity. Because both say, we don't need Jesus, we can do it ourselves.

And both are really dangerous, because they both lead to self-righteousness. So the religious say, we're better than these irreligious people, because we keep the rules, we follow the rules, these people don't.

Whereas the irreligious people say, we hate those religious types, who look down on other people, we are far better than those people, who look down on other people. Not that we are doing that, but we are better than them.

[22 : 54] And so both are wrong, because both make you think, that you're better than other people, because of what you do. Which means both avoid the fact, that it's our hearts, that are the problem.

It's not the outward things we do. And so the religious avoid Jesus, thinking they're good enough for him, without following him, because they keep the rules.

And the irreligious avoid Jesus, because they don't want to be told, that they're a sinner who needs help. And so you can see, there's a massive difference here, between the understanding, that God accepts us, because of our own efforts, and understanding that God accepts us, because of what Jesus has done.

And that's why we need to see, the danger of avoiding Jesus Christ, by deciding to go our own way, and live life the way we think is best. Because in Jesus Christ, we can be accepted by grace, not despite our failures, but because we're willing to admit them.

Because we're honest enough to say, I'm not coping with life. I'm not doing what I should do. I fail to do what God wants me to do. We may as well admit them, because God knows anyway, admit our failures.

[24 : 12] And the good news of Jesus is that, I'm so flawed, that Jesus had to die for me, and yet I'm so loved, and so valued, that Jesus was glad to die for me.

And this smashes through, all the self-righteousness, because we can't feel superior to anybody, and yet we've got nothing to prove, to anybody either, because our worth, and our value, doesn't come from what we do.

Because it comes from Jesus, and what he has done for us, through his death on the cross. And so as Jesus looked around, at these guys on the Sabbath, distressed at their stubborn hearts, Jesus was well aware of their intentions.

And so verse four, when Jesus asked, and this is where we'll close, when Jesus asked, which is lawful on the Sabbath, to do good or to do evil, to save or to kill, Jesus wasn't just referring, to the man with the strupled hand, but Jesus was referring to himself.

He wasn't just talking about the man's fate, he was talking about his own fate. Because it's only through his death, on the cross, that we can be saved. So we can't save ourselves, by what we do.

[25 : 25] That's why religion is such a waste of time, and why irreligion is also such a waste of time, because it will never satisfy. And yet Jesus came to do for us, what we can do for ourselves.

And so Christianity is that we're saved, not by what we have done, but by what Jesus Christ has done. Remember what Sabbath means? Sabbath means rest.

Deep, satisfying rest. And Jesus is the source of that deep rest, that we all need, in such a busy world, that's what we crave for.

And we can experience it right now, and we can enjoy it forever more. And so that's why it depends on how we respond to Jesus Christ.

Will we accept his authority, or will we avoid him altogether? But avoiding Jesus now, doesn't mean that we can avoid him forever.

[26 : 21] Because if Jesus is Lord, even of the Sabbath, means that Jesus is Lord of everything. And that's why, one day, every knee will bow, and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.

So far better to live your life for this Lord, who gave his life for us, who forgives us when we fail, who knows our best is never going to be good enough, but accepts us anyway.

Not because we try hard and do well, but because he has done everything through his death. Thank you.