



Mark 2:18-28
What Good is Religion?

Summary: Sometimes religion gets in the way of our relationship with God.

One thing I find surprising is how much conflict Jesus experienced with religious people. From the scribes to the Pharisees, the Sadducees and High Priests, Jesus engaged with a lot of religious people. And they were almost all Jews or people like the Samaritans who had branched off from the Jews, but all would say they worshiped the God of Creation, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God of Moses and David, the LORD God. And yet these were the people who resisted Jesus most - they questioned Him, harassed Him, and eventually conspired to arrange His death.

Why? Wouldn't you think Jesus would experience the greatest conflict with non-religious people? Or with people from other religions? Wouldn't you think the greatest opposition would come from the people He had the least in common with? What happened?

The answer may surprise you, but it's religion. Religion is what got between Jesus and these people. And religion may be what's keeping you and me and the people we know and love from getting closer to Jesus today.

What do I mean? Well one thing that is often said about Christianity is that it's not about religion, it's about relationship. So, what's the difference?

Well, religion is essentially a set of beliefs that also provides a set of rules – things you should do and things you should not do. And then, much like a competition or game, the goal is to win – to score more points than you lose and make god or the gods happy so you get a nice spiritual trophy, or at least do enough to receive a participation ribbon at the end of season party.

The problem with religion though, is that it focuses almost entirely on you – you're the one playing the game. You're the one putting in the effort. You're the one breaking or keeping the rules, and you're the one scoring the points. "God" is often just a referee or scorekeeper grading from a distance while you're on the field.

That's not much of a relationship, is it? And yet at Christmas we saw Jesus announced by what name? Immanuel – God with us. God with us. Not God at a distance. Not God on the sideline evaluating performance. Not God up in Heaven keeping score and tracking stats. God with us. God seeking relationship, not enforcing the rules of religion.

And this was the source of the persistent conflict between Jesus and religious people. They wanted to keep rules, He wanted a relationship.

So, if I may ask – which are you seeking today? Which are you more comfortable with? Rules you can keep, or a relationship with the living God, here and now and continuing forever? It's something to consider as we look at our text. Read with me:

Mark 2:18 The disciples of John and of the Pharisees were fasting. Then they came and said to Him, “Why do the disciples of John and of the Pharisees fast, but Your disciples do not fast?”

Now if you don't know a disciple is a student, someone learning from someone else and to fast is to go without something, often food. So, look at the question: Jesus, why don't Your followers keep all the religious rules, why aren't You teaching them to do what we do?

He gives them a three-part answer.

19 And Jesus said to them, “Can the friends of the bridegroom fast while the bridegroom is with them? As long as they have the bridegroom with them they cannot fast. 20 But the days will come when the bridegroom will be taken away from them, and then they will fast in those days. 21 No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old garment; or else the new piece pulls away from the old, and the tear is made worse. 22 And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; or else the new wine bursts the wineskins, the wine is spilled, and the wineskins are ruined. But new wine must be put into new wineskins.”

I know some of that seems a little strange to you because of the distance between our modern lives and the ancient world. but it all boils down to this – new things don't integrate well with old things. They're not always compatible and we'll talk about why in just a minute.

But first, we need to take note of something very important: the disciples of John and of the Pharisees wanted to be 'good people' so they were doing the things they thought they were supposed to do in order to earn that label, they were following the religious rules. The problem was their ideas of religion had been shaped and defined more by human beings than by God.

For example, if you read the Old Testament – everything from Genesis to Malachi – all the Scriptures these people would have had access to, you find people fasting occasionally for various reasons and in various ways. *But* you only find *one* fast actually *commanded by God* – and that was each year on the Day of Atonement (Lev 16:24) when Israel, as a nation, paused to remember and grieve over their sins. You could fast more often than, *but this was all God commanded.*

Over time though, religion crept in. Religion said if one day is good, another day would be good too. And a few more days would be even better. And a fast each week would be the best of all. Until it wasn't. By the time Jesus was questioned here the standard was to fast twice a week, on Monday and Thursday from 6AM to 6PM. If you wanted to make the travel

team for the sport of religion, that was the performance standard. These are the rules they had made for themselves.

But here's something interesting, when there was a wedding, you were exempt from fasting, you got a bye that week if we want to continue our sporting analogy.

Today most people get married with a brief ceremony, then hold a reception and take off for their honeymoon. That's not how it worked in the ancient world. Back then you would have the ceremony and stay at home hosting a week-long party for family, friends, and community. For most people, it was the single best week of their lives.

So, Jesus used it as an example and the disciples of John at least should have been familiar with it, because the last time Jesus had been in Jerusalem there was an issue over baptism – John was famous for it, and his disciples were upset that Jesus' disciples were doing it too but John told them – we're not in competition – He's like the groom, I'm just the best man. He must increase and I must decrease (John 3).

So now Jesus reminds them of that imagery and says something new is happening, it's time to celebrate, to feast, and not to fast. And then He went on to give the example of sewing a new patch on an old garment.

Now, you've probably never sewn a patch on a piece of clothing, if something wears out, you just buy something new. Or, you buy something new with holes already and call it "fashion." It was "fashionable" to have holes in your jeans 30 years ago and it's fashionable again now. But if you go back to the 70s, to the days of the hippies, it was super fashionable to sew decorated patches on your jeans or your vest. But when you did, you always wanted to use old material that had already shrunk because if you tried to use a piece of new material it would shrink when it got wet and it would pull apart when it dried. New doesn't work well with old.

And so too with wine and wineskins. Now, I know most of you have only ever seen wine in a bottle or a box but that's not the way it's always been. Long ago they would use large ceramic pots to store wine, but they were too heavy to transport, so they would also use skins. They would take the hide of a goat and sew it up in such a way that it could hold the liquid. You've actually seen something like this, but smaller, if you've ever watched a movie set in the past – the characters would have a canteen made from leather and squeeze the last drops of water into their mouths. They didn't have Hydroflasks or Yetis, so they had to use the technology of their day.

But here's the problem – when you crush grapes, the yeast on their skin combines with the sugar of the fruit and starts to ferment creating wine. That fermentation causes gas and the gas has to have some place to go. In fact, you might be surprised by the force it can generate as the pressure builds.

We like food in our house and we like to get creative, so we've learned some things about the power of fermentation. There was the time we opened a bottle of homemade kombucha

that exploded everywhere and left blueberry stains on the ceiling of our kitchen. And then there was the time when we heard a loud bang at night and thought a branch had fallen on our roof only to discover in the morning the kimchi we were making had been sealed too tightly. The gas could not escape and it actually blew apart the glass bottle we were using so we had kimchi running down the cabinets and pooling on the floor.

Skin stretches though – more than you might like, but it does. So, if you put new wine in a goatskin bag, the skin can stretch as it ferments. But if you pour that out and try to do it again without refreshing the bag, it's already stretched as much as it can. New fermentation is going to cause it to crack and split making a mess. You're going to lose both the bag and the wine.

Now, that's a lot of fun stories and analogies, but here's what I need you to see: the disciples of John and the Pharisees *wanted to be religious, they wanted to be spiritual*, but they were going about it the wrong way.

The problem in each example involved trying to hold onto to something old and add something new to it. But you can't add a patch of Jesus to your old religious clothes. You can't add the new wine of the gospel to your already used religious wineskin. You need to pitch the old and receive something new.

You see, Jesus doesn't fit well with our man-made ideas of religion. And that's exactly what these people were trying to hold onto – their own ideas and traditions which they added to what God had said. I wonder, *how much of what you think of as religion is something that was created and developed by people* and how much actually comes from God?

Well, this tension between what God said and what people added to it, was a major theme of Jesus' life and ministry as we see in the next verses:

Mark 2:23 Now it happened that He went through the grainfields on the Sabbath; and as they went His disciples began to pluck the heads of grain. 24 And the Pharisees said to Him, "Look, why do they do what is not lawful on the Sabbath?"

You need to know – what Jesus and the disciples were doing was completely legal. According to Jewish Law, which God established, if you were walking along and you were hungry, you could grab a little grain or a fruit or two from what was growing along the road, *even if it wasn't your land*. But you could only take enough to satisfy your present need – you couldn't stuff your backpack full. The Pharisees knew that – they had no problem with *what* was happening, they had a problem with *when* it was happening because the Sabbath, which is Saturday, was meant to be a day of rest.

This idea is anchored all the way back in the account of Creation – God created the world and everything in it in six days and on the seventh, He rested. Then, when God gave the Law to Moses for how the people of Israel were to live, this became one of the Ten Commandments – Honor the Sabbath and keep it holy. God wanted His people to have a day of rest every week. A day when every man, woman and child, along with every donkey

and bull that was used to pull a cart or a plow, everyone and everything, could rest their body and strengthen their soul through worship.

If you want to think about it this way, God was into labor laws before unions were ever invented.

Friends, you have to see and understand this – God gave the Sabbath, as a gift to enable their relationship with Him and simply to make their lives better. It was meant to force them to slow down. It was meant to counter the ever-present temptation to optimize, to work a little harder to get a little more. It was meant to help them see, they could actually work a little less and watch God provide for their needs. Look at the modern example of Chick Fil A – closed every Sunday so that their employees have time for worship, rest, and family. Does it seem like it's hurting them? Nope, not at all.

But, somewhere along the way, religion crept in for these ancient people and said, well we need to make sure we're doing this right. So, let's make a bunch of rules that help us know exactly when the Sabbath starts so we know when to stop working. And when exactly does it stop so we know when we can get back to work. And let's determine what, exactly, work is so that we know what we can and can't do on the Sabbath.

Over the years they came up with 39 different categories of work including four that were violated by Jesus' disciples: reaping – or plucking the heads of grain; winnowing – which they would do as they separated the head of grain from the rest of the plant; threshing which they would do as they rolled the grain in the hands to separate it from the chaff, and preparing a meal because they were eating the grain they had just picked and prepared.

So, that's four separate violations of the rules and *it was only because it happened on the Sabbath* – if they had done it the day before or after, there would be no issue.

You tell me, does that sound like religion, or relationship – is this a concern about performance or connection?

25 But He said to them, "Have you never read what David did when he was in need and hungry, he and those with him: 26 how he went into the house of God *in the days* of Abiathar the high priest, and ate the showbread, which is not lawful to eat except for the priests, and also gave some to those who were with him?"

Since these men are trying to be good Jews by following all their rules, Jesus points them back to an event that happened in the life of King David, the greatest of all the kings of Israel. Jesus reminds them of the time when David, who had been chosen and appointed by God as the next king of Israel, was being hunted by the current king – a man named Saul.

Saul and David had some conflict and David needed to get out of town quickly. He had no time to prepare, there weren't any drive thrus he could stop at and it wasn't like he could call for UberEats or Doordash to bring something. So, he runs over to the tabernacle and

asks the priests if they have anything and they say all we have is last week's showbread. David says I'll take it.

The showbread, as those of you doing the Exodus study will learn next week, was actual bread placed in the Tabernacle. There were twelve loaves, each representing one of the twelve tribes of Israel. They were meant as a symbolic reminder of our dependence on God, that man does not live by bread alone. Think of it as an Old Testament version of the line in the Lord's Prayer: "Give us this day our daily bread."

Each week new loaves were baked and the old bread was given to the priests to eat. Since this was the only food available when David showed up in an emergency it was all they had to give him and he took it.

Jesus reminds the Pharisees of all this as His explanation for why what His disciples are doing is OK. And there's actually more happening here than they understand, for Jesus is also God's anointed king, just like David, waiting to take the throne, just like David, while He's resisted by the current leadership, just like David.

So after defending the actions of His disciples with a historical example, Jesus then explains something more foundational:

[27 And He said to them, "The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath. 28 Therefore the Son of Man is also Lord of the Sabbath."](#)

Jesus used the term Son of Man to refer to Himself more often than any other title and so He's saying since the Sabbath is meant to be a blessing to men, then it is all the more under My authority and I am not under it. If the Sabbath gets in the way of Me serving God, completing the tasks He has given Me to do, there is nothing wrong with the Sabbath flexing a little bit so God's ultimate purpose can be accomplished.

Friends, if I could get you to understand just one thing this morning – this might it because so much flows from understanding [The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath](#).

It doesn't matter how religious or non-religious you are, you need to know this. Jesus is saying, God made the Sabbath for you, as a gift, you were not made to serve the Sabbath, you were not put on this earth so that there would be someone to follow religious rules as if the rules were what's most important. As if the Sabbath needed people to keep it more than you needed the Sabbath to be refreshed.

The Sabbath, like all instruments of true religion, was intended to make our lives and our relationship with God better, not to make them more complicated, but the tool became twisted over time. This happens whenever we lose sight of the principle and focus on the practice instead. We shortcut the why and fixate on how because rules are almost always easier than relationships.

The problem is, God wants relationship with you more than He wants you to keep rules, because, and this is super important to understand: when you experience the blessings of being in relationship with Him, you find that you want to do things that make it seem like you're keeping the rules because those are the things that keep the relationship going. But you're not motivated by keeping an eye on your religious stats and performance records, you're motivated by the relationship and all of its blessings.

So here's the problem – Jesus offers these very religious people the results they said they wanted, but they're stuck on the way He's going about it. They think they need to follow all the rules and He's offering them the relationship. They've got a system they're comfortable with and yet they see Him doing something new. They can't deny the power of His message or the proof of His miracles but they also can't bring themselves to let go of their rules and come to Him in relationship.

And that's a big problem. It's the problem we continue to face today – you can't decide you like the wine of Jesus and try to add it to your old wineskin of religious ideas. You can't decide you like the wedding feast of Jesus and try to keep your schedule for fasting twice a week. You can't make a patchwork quilt of all your own ideas and try to sew some Jesus in there too. You have to let go of all your religious rules, robes, and rituals and come into relationship with Him.

My friends, it doesn't matter how religious or non-religious you are. We all seem to intuitively know this truth: there is more to life than just what we see, and there's something else after this. The question is: what do you do about it? Are there a bunch of rules we need to keep, is there some level of performance we need to achieve – is there a score we need to earn in order to make the cut off?

I'm so happy to tell you, it's none of those things. The answer is Jesus.

He was super clear when He said

John 14:6 “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.”

For two thousand years the message of the church has been:

Acts 4:12 “there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.”

You see the message of the gospel is: we could never keep enough rules on our own, so Jesus came down and kept them all for us. And then, He suffered death on the cross. He was absolutely perfect, but became a sacrifice for us. He takes our failures, our impurities, all the ways we mess up and blow it intentionally or accidentally, He takes it all and says, here, take My perfection instead.

He reaches out to us and invites into relationship with Him when we let go of all our ideas and agendas and ask Him to lead us. The message of the cross is: you're in worse condition than you think you are spiritually, and yet you're more loved by God than you can imagine – both are true at the same time.

So, on this Palm Sunday – a day when we remember Jesus' final entry into Jerusalem and the week leading up to His death - we're going to remember what God has done for us as we rehearse our common faith through the Apostle's Creed and receive communion.

If you believe the things we're about to declare, you're welcome to come forward and take a cup and a cracker – reminders of the broken body and shed blood of Jesus – reminders of His sacrifice. Reminders that we're not able to keep enough rules of religion, but He's still reaching out to us in relationship. Hold on to the elements and we'll receive them together in just a moment.

Apostle's Creed

Pray – thank you that this is not about that rules we've kept but about the relationship You want.

Doxology

Let's pray.



Sermon Application and Discussion Questions

Mark 2:18-28 What Good is Religion?

Summary: Sometimes religion gets in the way of our relationship with God.

- Icebreaker for groups: Are you more likely to try to patch and repair things or replace them? Why?
- Jesus interacted with the disciples of John the Baptist and the Pharisees. Who are you a disciple of? Who has influenced your spiritual life?
 - o What have you learned from them?
- How would you define religion?
 - o Are there good aspects?
 - o Bad?
- What aspects of your life feel more like ritual than relationship?
- What's the difference between a rule and principle? Which would you rather have? (Example: keeping the Sabbath is a principle. Not picking grain on it is a rule.)
- When have you seen people blindly keeping rules while missing or ignoring the principle behind them?
- What are your own criteria for when it's OK to break or bend a rule?
- Jesus fasted for 40 days in the wilderness before being tempted by Satan. How would you explain this in light of Mark 2:18-22?
- What do you like to do to Sabbath or rest? What helps you rest/recharge? NOTE - you may have different answers for each category:
 - o Physically
 - o Mentally
 - o Spiritually
 - o Emotionally