

Jesus is Better than Religion¹

Mark 2:23-3:6

Opening: Have you ever heard of the “nones”? Those who have no religious affiliation at all. Around 30% of Americans say they have no religious affiliation at all. In Collier County, 65% of our residents claim to be “nones.” (16% Catholic, 5% Baptist) Generation Z is the least religiously affiliated at 35%.² In 2021, a Gallup poll³ revealed that those who are members of a church in America are now less than 50% for the first time in US History; the SBC has lost over a million members in the past 3 years.⁴ There are various reasons for the rise of the nones in America: secularism, expressive individualism and scientism in American society, the polarization of politics, parents who are not discipling their children and the revelation of racism and sexual abuse within the church. One of the main reasons people do not want to have religious affiliation and are “deconstructing” the faith is because they don’t want to be religious, because religion is hypocritical and abusive. The heart of religion is attempting to be right in the eyes of God and/or others on the basis of what you do. Jesus did not come to start another religion, but He came to end all religion, so that we can rest from religion forever.

Context: Mark continues to show us the conflict between Jesus and the religious establishment. These two stories are the fourth and fifth story of the religious leaders challenging Jesus’ authority. They have challenged his authority to forgive sin, who he eats with, how much he fasts and now they challenge him over how he keeps the Sabbath. **In these challenges, Jesus exposes the cruelty of religion so what we can see the beauty of His gospel. Jesus is better than religion.**

I. The Cruelty of Religion

- **VS. 23: One Sabbath he and his disciples were going through a grainfield:** On Saturday, Jesus and his disciples were outside of Capernaum walking through a grainfield and according to the law of Moses (Deut. 23:25) the poor and the sojourner could pluck grain from the field to eat. It was a way that God provided for those who lacked food.
- **VS. 24: The disciples began to pluck heads of grain and the Pharisees challenge Jesus over it:** out of the middle of nowhere (Hee-Haw). No one had told them what happened, they were stalking Jesus; *every move you make, every step you take, I’ll be watching you.* They threw a flag on the field and charged the disciples with breaking the Sabbath.
- **The Sabbath: to cease:** God put into the rhythm of creation six days of work and one day to rest. It was given to humanity as a gift. The Sabbath was meant to refresh and reorient God’s people on God. It was a day of restoration, healing, and celebration. *It was a weekly reminder that we not loved based on what we do but who we are.*
- **There were two external badges that separated Israel from the other nations: circumcision and Sabbath keeping.** One is obvious and the other has grey areas. One of the reasons that God sent Israel into exile was that they did not keep the Sabbath. The Pharisees were **scared** that if Israel repeated that and continued to break the Sabbath that God would send them back to exile. They also believed that if Israel could keep the law and were obedient enough that God would send the Messiah to deliver them from Rome and re-establish God’s reign.
- **The Pharisees were the Sabbath police:** “*Why are they doing what is unlawful?*” They made the Sabbath a list of rules of what you can and cannot do; what constitutes work and what does not. The list of rules for Sabbath were found in the Talmud and the Mishnah. These opinions of the Rabbis were codified into a second law. They created a list of over 1500 rules called the “Halakah” (to walk) to make sure that people walked in the way of obedience.
- **Chapter 7 of the Mishnah: 39 acts of work on the Sabbath that were forbidden:⁵ (Melachot)** Can’t cook; couldn’t pick things up anything. Can’t throw anything; can’t pick your teeth. Can’t light any fire. **Shabbot Elevators:** to push a button would “light a fire.” The elevators go up every floor without pressing button very slowly. In Israel, they have Gentile elevators on the Sabbath that work normal. *So, when I got on, Jews followed and had me push the buttons.*
- **The Mishnah says in Hagigah 1:8: The rules about the Sabbath are as mountains hanging by a hair. The scripture is scanty, but the rules are many.⁶** They took what God said about the Sabbath and put a hedge around it. They stacked rules on top of rules. They took their personal “applications” on keeping the Sabbath and made them “absolutes.”

¹ Works consulted: Jason Meyer. *Mark for You*. Pp. 54-58; Kevin DeYoung. *The Lord of the Sabbath* (message on Dec. 20, 2009); Timothy Keller. *The King’s Cross*. Pp. 37-48.

² [Generation Z and the Future of Faith in America - The Survey Center on American Life \(americansurveycenter.org\)](https://www.americansurveycenter.org/generation-z-and-the-future-of-faith-in-america/)

³ [U.S. Church Membership Falls Below Majority for First Time \(gallup.com\)](https://www.gallup.com/2021/05/11/u-s-church-membership-falls-below-majority-for-first-time/)

⁴ <https://theconversation.com/think-us-evangelicals-are-dying-out-well-define-evangelicalism-152640>

⁵ [The Thirty-Nine Categories of Sabbath Work Prohibited By Law \(ou.org\)](https://www.ou.org/39-categories-of-sabbath-work-prohibited-by-law/)

⁶ This is from the Mishnah in English translated by Tzvee Zahavy.

- **Thou Shalt Not Drink Milk:** To keep the law, do not drink milk. But to make sure we do not drink milk; we will not walk down the dairy aisle in the grocery store. To make sure we do not walk down the dairy aisle, we will stay 3 aisles away from the dairy aisle at all times. To make sure we stay three aisles away, we will not go to a store that sales dairy.
- **VS. 25: Jesus responds with a question: *Have you not read?*** These were experts in Torah. This was a sarcastic dig. These Pharisees were challenging Jesus over the traditions of the Rabbis not over the Word of God. Jesus brings them back to the Bible and takes them to an obscure text in 1 Samuel 21.
- **1 Samuel 21:** David (God's anointed) and his men were on the run from Saul, they were tired and hungry. There was no food. They go to the city of Nob and the High Priest Ahimelech. They asked for food and all he had was the bread of presence (show bread) that was only to be eaten by the priests. Ahimelech gives David and his men the bread. God did not condemn David for eating that bread even though it was only to be eaten by the priest. (An exception)
- **Jesus was telling the Pharisees that there is precedence of an exception:** This is a grey area in the law, and I am not bound by your interpretation of it. I have just as much authority as Ahimelech and David. This is not a Sabbath violation. You guys have a lot of rules, but your rules don't agree with the Bible. *Do you keep your rules and disobey the Bible, or do you keep the Bible and repent of your rules? What are you going to do?*
- **VS. 27: The Sabbath was made for man (to enjoy), not man for the Sabbath (to endure).** God made the Sabbath to be a blessing, not a burden. The Sabbath is not meant to enslave but to liberate. *You got it backwards: they took what was good and made it evil. Ice Cream: Kids, let's go get ice cream; but you can't get chocolate, only vanilla. You can't get sprinkles or whip cream. You have to eat it with a spoon in your right hand. You can't get any on your face or your clothes; if you do I will throw it away. You have to eat it in 2 minutes and if you don't I will throw it away. Enjoy!*
- **3:1: Again, he entered the synagogue:** perhaps right after this incident; they all go to church; **There was a man with a withered hand:** *right hand:* maybe by sin, at birth or severe arthritis; it was a problem but not life threatening.
- **VS. 2: They watched Jesus:** Jesus has healed people before on the Sabbath: cast out demons and healed people; But now they are just looking for something to criticize. Takes no size to criticize. ***We need to be careful not to come to worship looking for something to criticize.*** Honestly, it doesn't take much to find something to criticize around here, but the fact that you can find something to criticize is not a sign of great spirituality (but great spiritual pride.)
- **Jesus tells the man to come here:** this guy has something that was embarrassing. Jesus has him stand up: now they got him; they know what he is going to do; this was not an emergency, so they think they can nail him. Matthew says that they asked him, *"Is it lawful to do this on the Sabbath?"* They wanted to make sure Jesus knew.
- **VS. 4: Jesus asks, "Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm? To save life or kill?"** Everyone knew that the law is about doing good and saving life. The law is the expression of doing good and condemning evil. The law never condemns doing good. Jesus is teaching them the very heart and purpose behind the law: to do good and save life.
- **What was their answer? They were silent:** they didn't say a word because they did not care. He exposes them as being the frauds that they were. They don't care about people. They do not have a heart for doing good or saving life. They had no sympathy for the hungry nor compassion for the hurting.
- **VS. 5: Jesus looked around at them with anger, grieved at their hardness of heart:** Jesus was good and angry. These experts in the law totally missed the point of the law and were looking for a way to accuse the law giver. They were more concerned about their regulations than this man's restoration.
- **Jesus does not care if you get all the small details right, if you get the big things wrong:** going to church, tithing on the gross, reading your Bible are great things. But if you are a self-righteous, jerk, then it doesn't matter. In Matthew 12, in a parallel account, Jesus quotes Hosea 6:6, where God said, *"I desire mercy rather than sacrifice."*
- **Stretch out your hand and his hand was restored:** in front of everyone this man's hand was completely restored. What he had been hiding for years, Jesus made him put out in the open and he healed him. The Sabbath was about restoring what is broken and replenishing what is drained. It is not about oppressing people. **Rikk Watts: *The Torah, which offered life and good, is perverted to keep a man crippled, to turn the synagogue into a house of bondage, and so it makes them mortal foes of the one who himself gives the life and does the good that the Torah promised.***⁷
- **VS. 6: Instead of a party for this man, the Pharisees left mad and started to plot Jesus' murder:** who did they plot murder with? The Herodians. The Pharisees and Herodians were sworn enemies. The Herodians were not devout Jews but were Hellenist who were loyal to the evil Herods. The Herodians did not keep kosher, they were pro-Rome, and they were progressives. But they both had one thing in common: their hatred of Jesus. Jesus was a threat to them.

⁷ Rikk Watts. *Commentary on the New Testament use of the Old Testament*. Pg. 144.

- **The irony is how they ultimately responded to Jesus' question: *Is it lawful to do harm and kill?* By plotting to do harm and kill Jesus on the SABBATH.** They were hiding behind the smokescreen of religion to do the most cruel and horrible things. On the outside, they looked pious and holy, but on the inside they were evil and dirty.
- **Phariseeism is alive and well in the church today.** In Jesus' day, no one would have ever thought of them as being the bad guys, they were well thought of, admired and respected. The same is true today, we can use religion as a mask to do all kinds of evil and harmful things. Sadly, history is filled with those who do harm to others in the name of religion.
- **10 Signs you may be a Pharisee⁸:** (From a recovering Pharisee) 1) You like rules (a lot). 2) You say a person is not a Christian if they do not agree with you. 3) You think of yourself as the guardian of right and wrong. 4) You are quick to criticize and slow to complement. 5) You see only the bad, not good enough and ugly in things but miss out on the good. 6) You think people should be more like you. 7) You do not hang out with people that you think are far from God. 8) The rule is more important than the reality and the process is more important than the person. 9) You care more about people's opinions of you than God's and you want people to notice what you do. 10) You hold yourself and others to a standard that is higher than Jesus. (Phariseeism always kills joy, love and peace.)

II. The Beauty of Jesus

- **These two stories give us a comparison between the way of Jesus and the way of religion:** The Kingdom of God versus the kingdom of man; gospel versus religion. To the Pharisees, the Sabbath was a rule, it was rigid and unbending; it was a burden to bear rather than a blessing to enjoy; death rather than life.
- **The heart of religion is motivated by fear:** remember, the Pharisees started out of a desire for holiness for the nation, but that morphed into fear of exile and a desire to be free from Roman occupation; not a love for God or people. The fear of exile made them religious. The fear of hell is often what makes people religious.
- **Religion is about filling a hole in my life:** It is our inner insecurity before God, we know that we are not right, even if we do not believe in God. That inner insecurity is constantly and relentlessly trying to prove and justify itself. This often manifests itself in feelings of superiority and pride. We must feel like we are better than other people.
- **Two kinds of religion: Pharisees (moralism) and the Herodians (individualism):** *Moralism is about being good and following the rules. It is trying to prove to God, ourselves, and others that we are good people and worthy of going to heaven. Expressive individualism is about you decide who you want to be, what is right and what is wrong.*
- **Both religions teach that you become your own savior and lord.** Both find identity and meaning in what they do or what they want to do. Both are hostile towards Jesus. Neither one gives you rest or satisfaction.
- **VS. 28: The Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath:** Jesus does not say, He is the "Lord over" but "Lord of" the Sabbath: He is the Lord of Rest. He is the One who can give you rest. **(Matthew 11:28)** Keller: *In religion, you never really rest because we are always trying to prove and justify ourselves to God, others, and ourselves that we are good enough. But in Christ, you can truly rest because Jesus did the work for us and makes us right with God.*⁹
- **At the end of creation, the Lord said, "It is good. It is finished," and He rested. On the Cross, at the end of his great act of redemption Jesus said, "It is finished," and now we can rest.** On the Cross, Jesus completed the work for us. He has lived the life you should have lived, has died the death you should have died. If we rely on Jesus' finished work, we can leave it alone and know that God is satisfied with you. **Jesus is the END OF RELIGION!**
- **Religion says, "If I obey, God will love me." Jesus says, "Because I love you, you can obey." Religion says, "There are good people and bad people." The Jesus says, "There are only those who repent and those who don't." Religion says, "Your value is dependent on what you do." Jesus says, "Your value is seen in what I have done for you." Religion says, "Be good to get from God." Jesus says, "The best is found in God alone." Religion says, "Hardships and suffering are punishment for sin." Jesus says, "Suffering just prepares you for a greater glory." Religion says, "It is all about me." Jesus says, "It is all about God." Religion says, "You will never know your standing before God." Jesus says, "You will never be separated from my love." Religion ends in pride and despair. Jesus gives your joy and rest.¹⁰**

Application: VS. 4: Is it lawful to do good or to do harm, to save life or to kill? Jesus calls them and us to choose: do we want life or death? The question was, "Whose side are you on? Are you for me or against me?"

⁸ I created this list a few years ago and have tweaked it for this message. I do not claim complete originality on it but have gotten ideas from various speakers and articles on the topic.

⁹ Tim Keller. The King's Cross. Pg. 46-47.

¹⁰ [Religion vs. Gospel \(thegospelcoalition.org\)](http://thegospelcoalition.org) I modified this list of Religion vs. Gospel.

The Pharisees didn't say a word. But as soon as they left church they went to plot to kill Jesus. Those essentially chose death (to kill). They chose dead religion which lead to death. As a matter of fact, no one said anything in response to Jesus; the whole church said NOTHING! Their silence said volumes about their unbelief.

One man stuck out his hand to Jesus in faith. He chose life and Jesus gave it to him. He chose Jesus over religion.

Whose side are you on? Religion where you try to be your own savior or Jesus where He is your ONLY Savior?