

- Have you ever noticed the automated checkout system at the grocery store? You scan your item and instantly it yells at you 'Place your item in the bagging area.' And then, it takes 2 minutes to process the information before it will let you scan another item.
- Or an insurance company who penalizes you for being 30 seconds late with a payment. Yet, if you call them for a claim, they may not answer the phone.
- Sometimes our human nature is like that: quick to judge and slow to extend grace.
- In today's passage Jesus confronts the lack of grace and quick judgmental attitude of the Pharisees and reveals that he has authority over religious traditions. Sadly, sometimes we are like the Pharisees.

We are simply going through the book of Mark. Its key verse is: 'For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many (Mk 10:45 NIV).' This one verse gives the outline and purpose for Mark's biography of Jesus:

Prologue, Mk 1:1-13 - 'For the Son of Man'

Service, Mk 1:16-8:30 - 'Did not come to be served, but to serve,' This is where we are at today, looking at Jesus and his service to people.

Suffering, Mk 8:31-15:47 - 'And to give his life as a ransom for many.'

Epilogue, Mk 16:1-20.

Today, we look at the Mark 2:1-3:6, where Jesus breaks religious rules intentionally. He does not break Torah (God's Law), but reveals the hypocrisy of some manmade rules.

Breaking Religious Rules

Mark 2:1-3:6



1. Why Five Controversies?

Mark uses these five controversies as a method to reveal that Jesus has authority over manmade religious traditions. He reveals the true heart of God for people.

- There were various Jewish groups at that time, just like there are various denominations in America.
- Each of these ancient groups had a distinction to separate them from the other religious groups. Over time, these the minor differences caused people to actually miss out on God's intended plan and true worship.

These five short stories are a (literary) unit because ...

In Each Episode ...

- Jesus does something controversial. That is, controversial from the viewpoint of the Pharisees.
- The Pharisees / religious leaders respond with criticism.¹
- Jesus makes a statement that silences the Pharisees.

Overall ...

- It is unlikely that these happened in chronological order, rather Mark clumps them together because they contain controversy with Jewish religious leaders in Galilee.
- Later, Mark uses another five controversies when Jesus is in Jerusalem (11:27-12:37).
- These are fast paced stories, designed to make us to see the real Jesus. Knowing that Jesus has power and authority over oppressive religious structures helps us see Jesus' heart of compassion for us.

I will summarize some of episodes and only read the key portions. I encourage you to read Mark 2 today at home.

1st Controversy - Forgiving Sins, 2:1-12.

Jesus was preaching one day and there were great crowds around him. We know the content of Jesus' preaching: repent for the Kingdom of God is near; believe in the Good News (1:15). It was so crowded that four friends brought a sick man to be healed. They resorted to make a hole in the roof and lowering him down to Jesus.

'Seeing their faith, Jesus said to the paralyzed man, "My child, your sins are forgiven." ⁶But some of the teachers of religious law who were sitting there thought to themselves, ⁷"What is he saying? This is blasphemy! Only God can forgive sins (Mk 2:5-6 NLT)!"'

¹ The introduction of Jesus' new teaching 'provoked sustained conflict with the old' and prompted their 'decision that Jesus must be put to death', William L. Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark NICNT* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1974), p. 91.

When Jesus sees the faith of this man's friends, he pronounces that man's sins are forgiven. Here is the first controversy, the 'teacher of religious law' heard this as blasphemy; Jesus is worthy of death (Le 24:16).

In Mark's gospel, there are five different Jewish groups that oppose Jesus.

Five main groups of religious authorities.

- Pharisees – A group devoted to their unique observance of the Torah. They were resistant to Greek or Roman culture. Today's rabbis consider themselves to be the descendants of the Pharisees.
- Scribes – Professional class of experts in the Torah.
- Chief priests – The core membership of the ruling council, the Sanhedrin.
- Elders – Lay members of the Sanhedrin.
- Sadducees – An aristocratic group, religiously conservative, politically, and socially secular.² They were very open to Greek and Roman culture and tended to seek business opportunities with them.

'Jesus knew immediately what they were thinking, so he asked them, "Why do you question this in your hearts? ⁹ Is it easier to say to the paralyzed man 'Your sins are forgiven,' or 'Stand up, pick up your mat, and walk'? ¹⁰ So I will prove to you that the Son of Man has the authority on earth to forgive sins." Then Jesus turned to the paralyzed man and said, ¹¹ "Stand up, pick up your mat, and go home (Mk 2:8-11 NLT)!"'

- The Pharisees did not believe that the Messiah had power to forgive sins, he was merely a military ruler.
- Technically, Jesus does not break Torah, because 'A priest could pronounce the forgiveness of sins on the basis of repentance, restitution, and sacrifice (Lev. 4; 5; 16; 17:11).'³

'And the man jumped up, grabbed his mat, and walked out through the stunned onlookers. They were all amazed and praised God, exclaiming, "We've never seen anything like this before (Mk 2:12 NLT)!"'

- This man's deeper issue was forgiveness, but Jesus is making a point, so he tells the man to stand up and take his mat home. He was fully healed.
- The healing validated Jesus' power to forgive sins. God still forgives and heals today!

² Scott, *Jewish Backgrounds*, p. 208.

³ David Garland, *Mark - The NIV Application Commentary: From biblical text ... to contemporary life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), p. 94.

- Jesus' statement and action silenced his critics.

The religious leaders conclude that Jesus was a blasphemer, but the people are amazed at Jesus' power and authority.

2nd Controversy - Welcoming Sinners, 2:13-17.

One day Jesus was walking and asked Matthew, a tax collector, to become a disciple. 'So Levi got up and followed him. ¹⁵Later, Levi invited Jesus and his disciples to his home as dinner guests, along with many tax collectors and other disreputable sinners. (There were many people of this kind among Jesus' followers.)

¹⁶But when the teachers of religious law who were Pharisees saw him eating with tax collectors and other sinners, they asked his disciples, "Why does he eat with such scum (Mk 2:14-16 NLT)?"

The second controversy is that Jesus welcomed sinners.

Like a franchisee, Matthew had bid to collect taxes in this area for a set time period.

- He became an outcast from Jewish society because it was to his advantage to collect as much as he could while he had the contract.
- He was disqualified as a judge or witness; he was a non-person.
- He was ex-communicated from the synagogue.⁴

But Jesus extends grace to Matthew and his friends. The Pharisees built fences to keep 'rule keepers' in and 'rule breakers' out. The Pharisees liked labels and credentials.

Their criticism is that Jesus does not divide people into two groups: righteous / sinner.

Hear the divisiveness in their words, 'Why does he eat with such scum (v. 16)?'

- Jesus silences them: 'Healthy people don't need a doctor—sick people do. I have come to call not those who think they are righteous, but those who know they are sinners (v. 17 NLT).'
- This is irony: on the one hand, the supposed righteous don't even know they need to repent. On the other hand, the sinners were welcomed because of their repentant heart. This meal, and Jesus' welcome were an expression of grace to the repentant.
- Friends, what were you like when Jesus found you? It is difficult for someone with a religion to discover God's grace ... they want to work for righteousness ... they want to cling to religious institutions. But all we can do is humbly accept the grace that Jesus offer us.

⁴ Lane, *Mark NICNT*, pp. 101-02.

3rd Controversy - Not Fasting, 2:18-22.

The Pharisees initiated the next controversy by asking, “Why don’t your disciples fast like John’s disciples and the Pharisees do?”¹⁹ Jesus replied, “Do wedding guests fast while celebrating with the groom? Of course not. They can’t fast while the groom is with them.²⁰ But someday the groom will be taken away from them, and then they will fast (Mk 2:18-20 NLT).”

The controversy here is that Jesus’ disciples do not fast like John’s disciples or the Pharisees.

Fasting ...

- In the OT – an expression of grief, 1Sa 31:13.
- John’s disciples – hasten the coming of God’s kingdom.
- Pharisees – for piety and self-consecration.

Jesus’ wedding analogy says that now is a time for joy not grief (OT purpose).

Then he silences them: “Besides, who would patch old clothing with new cloth? For the new patch would shrink and rip away from the old cloth, leaving an even bigger tear than before.²² And no one puts new wine into old wineskins. For the wine would burst the wineskins, and the wine and the skins would both be lost. New wine calls for new wineskins (Mk 2:21-22 NLT).” The new must replace the old.

Pause the message: Regarding religious structures ...

- There are churches that wound and those that heal.
- There are churches that compromise truth and those that cling to God’s word.
- We seek to be a church that heals and holds to truth. We should welcome those who are broken by sin with tears in our eyes. In humility let’s ‘live in fear of the Lord and (be) encouraged by the Holy Spirit (Acts 9:31),’ as recipients of His grace.

4th Controversy - Dishonoring the Sabbath, 2:23-27.

The fourth controversy deals with work on the Sabbath. The disciples were walking through a field of grain and were hungry. They harvested the grain, threshed the grain, and then ate the grain. ‘But the Pharisees said to Jesus, “Look, why are they breaking the law by harvesting grain on the Sabbath Mk 2:24 NLT)?”’

Let’s go over Jewish writings for better understanding here.

Jewish Writings ...

- Law, Writings, & the Prophets (Torah, Nevi'im, & Ketuvim) – our OT. Jesus does not violate any OT law.
- 'Traditions of men' – the oral tradition of the Pharisees, Mk 7:8. Here is where Jesus confronts this oral tradition of rules. In Matthew, Jesus says 'you shut the door of the kingdom of heaven in people's faces ... you make them twice as much a child of hell as you are (Mt 23:13, 15 NIV).' For example, people neglected taking care of their aging parents to give money to the Pharisees.
- Mishnah – Jewish Laws to protect the OT (3rd c.). Over time, these oral 'traditions of men' were written down. They became fences to protect the Torah.⁵
- Talmud & Midrash – Interpretations of the OT & Mishnah (16th c.).

'Jesus said to them, "Haven't you ever read in the Scriptures what David did when he and his companions were hungry? ²⁶He went into the house of God ... and broke the law by eating the sacred loaves of bread that only the priests are allowed to eat (Mk 2:25-26 NLT)'"

Jesus appealed to an analogy of David and his men. But David relied on the real scriptures, not the traditions of men. The OT Law really says, 'If you enter your neighbor's grainfield, you may pick kernels with your hands, but you must not put a sickle to their standing grain (Dt 23:25 NIV).' The difference is a tool, and probably quantity.

Jesus then silences the religious hypocrites: 'The Sabbath was made to meet the needs of people, and not people to meet the requirements of the Sabbath. ²⁸So the Son of Man is Lord, even over the Sabbath (Mk 2:27-28 NLT)!' The day of rest was for man's enjoyment; it was not intended to be a straitjacket of rules.

5th Controversy – Dishonoring the Sabbath, 3:1-6.

One day Jesus went to the synagogue and there was a man with a deformed hand. Jesus takes the initiative in this case: 'Jesus said to the man with the deformed hand, "Come and stand in front of everyone." ⁴Then he turned to his critics and asked, "Does the law permit good deeds on the Sabbath, or is it a day for doing evil? Is this a day to save life or to destroy it (Mk 3:1-4a NLT)?"'

⁵ 'The Pharisees' distinctive lay in their own traditions, which, we have seen, included the fences or hedges around the written law (Mishnah *Aboth* 1:1), that body of interpretations, expansions, and application of the law which they came to regard as of divine origin. Most of these traditions, the oral law, dealt with matters of Levitical purity', J. Julius Scott, *Jewish Backgrounds of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1995), p. 205-06.

According to the OT Torah, one could save a life on the Sabbath, but healing something that is not life threatening is right on the edge; however, this was not about rules. This was about who has spiritual authority, this was about power.

- The Pharisees' livelihood was at stake! Their power resided in rules, traditions, cultural pressure, and healing through rudimentary medicine. They would lose everything if Jesus could heal people at will.
- Jesus' power to heal with a word, or a touch, or a distant command was more than they could tolerate – their power was at stake!

Here, they were silent before Jesus: 'But they wouldn't answer him (Mk 3:4b NLT).' They had forgotten God's mercy, grace, and the love for broken people. 'He looked around at them angrily and was deeply saddened by their hard hearts. Then he said to the man, "Hold out your hand." So the man held out his hand, and it was restored! ' At once the Pharisees went away and met with the supporters of Herod to plot how to kill Jesus (Mk 3:5-6 NLT).''

Ironically, the guardians of the Sabbath determine to kill.

- Instead of mercy, grace, and forgiveness, there are harsh man-made religious rules.
- The rules made the Pharisees look righteous and helped their careers and wealth.
- Jesus' harshest words to the pharisees, were, 'You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell (Mt 23:33 NIV)?' Why? They neglected the intention of God's Law, grace, in favor of unbearable manmade rules. Quick to judge and slow to extend grace.
- Friends, it is in our human nature to create rules. Do not misunderstand me today: there are Biblical rights and wrongs; however, like the pharisees, we tend to make new rules to protect the moral right. For example, when I was a child, I could not go roller skating or to a movie, because it might lead to sin.

Conclusion.

These five episodes are to prove that Jesus is the Messiah and he has all power and authority.

But Jesus said something frightening: 'Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven (Mt 5:20 NIV).'

- The Pharisees were rule followers. We cannot possibly follow all the rules, we fall short of God's rules and hopes for us each day – 'for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Ro 3:23 NIV).'

- How can our righteousness exceed the Pharisees? Grace alone. 'For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, ⁹ not a result of works, so that no one may boast (Ep 2:8-9 NIV).'

Leave your religiosity behind and embrace Jesus the Messiah, his arms are open and welcoming today.

- Jesus still pronounces 'your sins are forgiven' in a community of faith.
- Jesus sees faith and heals.
- Jesus still calls the outcast.
- Jesus still hates silly religious rules that keep hinder people from the true Good News.