

Mark 2.23 – 3.6:

Breaking the rules

If you want to understand why religion is so often a force for evil in the world, a toxic phenomenon, you could do worse than read this passage. The religious establishment, represented here by the Pharisees, are so angry with Jesus that, as our story ends, they are conniving with the political leaders, the Herodians, to do away with him.

How come? Well, the Pharisees challenge Jesus over his interpretation of the religious law, long established in Israel, whose origins go back to Moses, over a thousand years before. The disciples were gathering food to eat, plucking heads of grain. The problem was that they were doing so on the Sabbath; a day of rest, commanded by God at the dawn of creation. Jesus pointed out that there are exceptions to every rule; hadn't the revered King David given his hungry troops food that was consecrated to be eaten only by priests?

On another Sabbath day, Pharisees watched Jesus enter a synagogue cure a man who had a withered hand. As he did so, Jesus, sensing their disapproval, asked them pointedly what the religious law said about doing good or harm, saving life or killing. They were embarrassed, maybe even ashamed, but wouldn't budge from their views.

Lots of religious people in today's world, Jews and Christians and Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists, others too, are like these Pharisees. Rules matter. Things should be clear cut. There should be no uncertainty, ever. And so, the letter of the law trumps its spirit.

These Pharisees held hardline views. Many Jewish religious leaders knew full well that, although it was lawful to keep the Sabbath holy as a day of rest, emergencies change things. If, for example, you need to pull a bullock out of ditch, you do it if waiting to the following day could mean the animal's death, and its owner and his family going forever hungry. There's compassion here, missing from extremists who follow the letter of the law.

Jesus wasn't against the religious law. In fact, he was mostly a law-abiding Jew but his interpretation of it was, so to speak, at the opposite end of the spectrum from that of these Pharisees. Sure, his followers could have prepared food the day before, but they hadn't, so why not pluck grain on the Sabbath rather than go hungry. Rules shouldn't be an end in themselves but rather a way to enable human flourishing. Jesus could have healed that man a day later but why delay an act of kindness and goodness when you can show it now. Doesn't delaying kindness once again foolishly make the law an end in itself? As Jesus said: "The Sabbath law was made for humankind, not humankind for the law".

This intra-Jewish debate between Jesus and some Jewish religious leaders may seem long ago and far away to us, irrelevant, of interest only to crazy people like me who enjoy exploring ancient documents and think that they might still have something to teach us today.

Pharisees are long gone, but the views they held are still a force to be reckoned with in twenty-first century religion. Preachers in many churches today will condemn Pharisees for their opposition to Jesus, but also tell their congregations that abortion is always wrong, women have a fixed and unalterable status in relation to men, capitalism is good and socialism bad. In other words, there must be clear cut rules, and laws eternally laid down and unalterable in any

circumstances. God has told us what is so, and who are we to question him. Not just Christian preachers, but imams in Iran and Hindu pujaris in India will also be sticklers for the rules. This vision of religion as a system of immutable laws is probably the majority view. But majorities aren't always right.

You may think that I'm mocking such a view of religion. And you would be right. In doing so, I'm following Jesus who scorned those extremist religious leaders whose purpose in life was to entrap him and make him known as a law breaker. He tells them: if David can feed his troops, so can I and, in effect, yah, sucks, boo to you. He's angry too. When the Pharisees show their displeasure when he seems about to heal a man on the sabbath, St. Mark tells us that Jesus "was grieved at their hardness of heart".

Perhaps Jesus wasn't quite fair to his opponents when he said to them: "Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save life or to kill?" The man's withered arm could have waited another day, after all, before Jesus healed it. But Jesus would have none of this nit-picking, The religious law's purpose is to encourage human flourishing and it provides its best and only purpose when it does just that. It gives a day off work to people who spent exhausting, physically challenging lives making a living from farming and other occupations in a pre-modern world. Its rules condemning stealing and adultery and murder strengthen society and prevent violence and other social ills. All to the good. But when these rules become an end in themselves, when they destroy lives instead of improving them, then the law becomes an unnecessary burden. For Jesus, kindness and goodness win out and should guide our interpretation of religious law. He could wait until another day to feed the hungry or help the

afflicted, but why would he? Why defer kindness, goodness, hope, joy, and other signs of God's love breaking into our mundane lives?

Many religious people fall into the common trap of mistaking the means for the end. The law exists to the end that humans should be holy. Instead, so often it becomes a means of condemning them.

The very end of today's reading shows Pharisees and Herodians ganging up to destroy Jesus. The irony of these religious people, certain of the rightness of their cause, ready to destroy Jesus, a man who talked of kindness and goodness and holiness.

Years ago, I spied an American tourist in a Cambridge seminary wearing a t-shirt that said: Jesus would vote Republican. It's always foolish to make a statement like that. As if God's loving-kindness, undeserved grace, and desire for the flourishing of all humans are embedded in the values of one political party. I suppose that, if the Republican Jesus voted for had empathy, compassion, holiness, and righteous anger in his arsenal of gifts, then... But I'm guessing that young man had a series of rules to live by for which he needed Jesus's approval: including, maybe, no abortion, Islamophobia, smaller government, and tax cuts. If so, how far he is from the kingdom of God.

So, if we are to accept God's kingly rule in our lives, we should respect the religious rules that keep religious and community life together. But always prioritize justice and kindness, and be prepared, when necessary, to bend or break them.