

The Danger of Rules

Mark 2:23-3:6

- We are in the middle of a series of conflicts that Jesus is having with various religious leaders.
- Last week, we saw Him challenge the good things we do, causing us to examine our attitude and our patterns to make sure they are based in the Gospel and not just our ideas of what's best.

- This week, we are going to dive deeper into that idea.
- Know that I am asking God to give us all ears to not only hear but listen to what He is saying through these passages.
- Open up to **Mark 2:23-3:6**, where we will see two connected accounts of Jesus' fight with the Pharisees.
- We have talked about them over the last few weeks. These were the religious leaders who took what God said and added all kinds of laws and regulations to it, making sure that every 'i' was dotted and every 't' crossed.
- Here, Jesus is going to confront that tendency head on, proving that their rules conflicted with God's desire.

- As He rebukes the Pharisees, He is also challenging us.
- You see, we have our own tendency to add rules on top of what God's Word says.
- When we add our rules on top of God's Word, we will find ourselves in conflict with God's desire.
- Usually, I want you to have one statement to walk out of here with every Sunday.
- This morning, however, that statement is a question: What rules have you put higher than God's Word?
- As we will see, our rules conflict with God's desires.

- I am praying that God will make that clear as we go over the passage at hand.
- Read with me, starting in **Mark 2:23**. Again, there are some pictures and things in this that may be completely unfamiliar to you. Just hang tight; we'll go back and talk through it.
- From these two accounts, I want to make two observations about our rules.
- I cannot know what is in your heart, so I am praying God will give you insight into where you have put rules in place that go beyond His word.
- **Why? Two reasons. First:**

1) Our rules restrict what God allows.

- Let's go back to **verses 23-28**.
- This whole thing may be confusing, so let me take some time to go over it, piece by piece.
- First, what were the disciples doing?
- They were a traveling group who didn't always have the time and supplies they needed.
- When God gave the Jews His Law, He included several items that were to encourage generosity. One of them was that it was totally acceptable to pick grain that grew next to the roadside as you walked along, just so long as you weren't going crazy with it and cutting it with a sickle and all.
- The disciples were grabbing the heads of grain as they walked, rolling them in their hands to separate the chaff, tossing it around to let the wind carry off the chaff, and then eating the good parts.
- The Pharisees weren't upset about them taking the grain, they were upset because they were doing it on the Sabbath.

- You see, one of the commandments God gave was that His people would set aside one day a week for rest and worship.
- You were not supposed to do work on the Sabbath, and in the eyes of the Pharisees, that was work.
- Over time, they had asked the question, “What defines work?”
- Well, the Pharisees and other Jewish leaders set up all kinds of rules about what was and wasn’t work on the Sabbath.
- I am going to read you a lengthy summary from one Biblical commentator, just to give you an idea of how restrictive and oppressive these rules became:

“One section of the Talmud, the major compilation of Jewish tradition, has twenty-four chapters listing Sabbath laws. One law specified that the basic limit for travel was 3,000 feet from one’s house; but various exceptions were provided. If you had placed some food within 3,000 feet of your house, you could go there to eat it; and because the food was considered an extension of the house, you could then go another 3,000 feet beyond the food...”

Under Sabbath regulations, a Jew could not carry a load heavier than a dried fig; but if an object weighed half that amount he could carry it twice...You could eat nothing larger than an olive; and even if you tasted half an olive, found it to be rotten and spit it out, that half was considered to have been eaten...

Throwing an object into the air with one hand and catching it with the other was prohibited...

Tailors did not carry a needle with them on the Sabbath for fear they might be tempted to mend a garment and thereby perform work...

Baths could not be taken for fear some of the water might spill out onto the floor and “wash” it. Chairs could not be moved because dragging them might make a furrow in the

ground, and a woman was not to look in a mirror lest she see a gray hair and be tempted to pull it out. You could carry ink enough to draw only two letters of the alphabet, and false teeth could not be worn because they exceeded the weight limit for burdens.”¹

- Sounds like lots of fun, doesn't it?
- What a great way to rest and focus on God by having to obsess over whether or not that thing you picked up weighs more than a dried fig!
- The Pharisees took God's command to rest on the Sabbath and added their own rules to it to the point that it completely destroyed the purpose of the Sabbath.
- They thought it was about their own righteousness, missing entirely God's design, which was that we rest in His grace.
- Although it served many purposes, one of the great things about the Sabbath was that it reminded us every week that God could handle the world without us for a day!
- It brought about resting in His grace, not a rigorously adhering to rules we made up.

- Listen: living a holy life is hard enough without adding a bunch of rules that God didn't intend.
- By doing this, they were keeping people from doing things that were completely acceptable.

- Jesus confronts them head-on with the fact that they have missed the very nature of the Sabbath.
- He refers them back to a story in the Old Testament about David. He was running from Saul, who was the king at the time, and he had to flee without food, so he stops by the

¹ MacArthur, John Jr., *Matthew 8-15, The MacArthur New Testament Commentary*, Chicago: Moody Press (1987). 281-282.

Tabernacle and asks the priest for help. Knowing that it was a matter of life and death, the priest gives David and his men bread that they shouldn't have been allowed to eat.

- That actually was a command of God and not just tradition, yet Jesus points to it to remind the Pharisees that God's concern is for life, not just for us to keep the rules.
- We use the term "legalism" to describe when we add our own rules and treat them as if they were God's.
- We've been doing it since the very beginning of time!
- If you go back to the Garden of Eden, God gave Adam a command:

The LORD God commanded the man, saying, "From any tree of the garden you may eat freely; but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat from it you will surely die." (Genesis 2:16-17, NASB95)

- He said not to do what with the fruit of the tree? Eat it.
- Adam had to tell Eve the rule, and when she is asked what God said, here is her reply:

"The woman said to the serpent, "From the fruit of the trees of the garden we may eat; but from the fruit of the tree which is in the middle of the garden, God has said, 'You shall not eat from it or touch it, or you will die.' " (Genesis 3:2-3, NASB95)

- Did God say they couldn't touch it? No; somewhere along the line, they had added that rule to God's rule.
- If Adam and Eve did it, and the Pharisees did it, what do you think that means for us?
- We do it too. All of us.

- In an effort to do the right thing, we do the wrong thing by setting our own rules and boundaries up, and that restricts us from relying on God to lead, guide, and direct us.
- Often, it comes in setting boundaries. If this is sin, then I'll draw the line way back here to make sure I don't fall into sin.
- Then, we get upset because others don't draw the line the same way we do, and we miss out on opportunities to enjoy what God does and creates.
- We'll talk more about specific examples in a minute.
- Can you think of places where you put rules in place that go beyond God's Word?
- Those rules aren't helpful because you can't keep them!
- No one has ever been able to keep either their rules or God's Law, which is why we desperately needed a Savior.
- Before we get specific, there's a reason I used the word "rules" here. I was tempted to use the word "traditions", because Jesus was specifically addressing the Pharisaic traditions.
- However, when we hear that, we immediately think traditions that have gone on for a long time.
- Younger pastors and younger adults then use that as a club to beat up older adults for being legalistic, not realizing that we can be just as legalistic as the generations before.
- Listen: new rules are just as bad as old ones!
- When we allow our ideas to go above God's commands, we miss out on some of the great things God has in store for us.
- We lose the joy of following Him and knowing Him and seeing Him work because we are so consumed with keeping up appearances and playing by the rules instead of allowing His

Holy Spirit to work in and through our lives, both to bring us joy and enable us to live holy, God-honoring lives.

- **However, as we see in the next part of this passage, it isn't just that our rules make us miss out on some things...**

2) Our rules hurt those God wants to heal.

- Go back and reread the first part of **chapter 3**.
- Part of their rules meant that the only thing you could do medically on the Sabbath was give them enough care that the person wouldn't die. Anything more than that was work.
- The Pharisees set a trap, just waiting to see what Jesus was going to do.
- A man with a crippled hand was there. That's a difficult thing, especially in Jesus' day, but it isn't life or death.
- Jesus calls the man to Him and poses a question to the Pharisees...**verse 4**.
- They wouldn't answer, because they couldn't.
- Their rules contradicted the heart of God, and it put them in a place where whatever they said was wrong.

- I want you to make sure you don't miss **verse 5**. What does it say about Jesus?
- He was angry because their hearts were so hardened by their ideas and their rules that they couldn't see the needs around them.
- Don't let any book, movie, or anything else sell you a soft version of Jesus—He loved them, but their sin grieved His heart and angered Him.

- If you say, “Well, my God is loving and never angry,” then your god is not the God of the Bible.
- Shouldn’t He be angry? This man needed help, and Jesus had the power to heal him and change his life, and the Pharisees were so caught up in their rules that they couldn’t see this man’s need.
- Shouldn’t that make us angry, or do we want to ignore it because we might be on the other side of that angry look?
- Whether we want to acknowledge it or not, we have preferences and prejudices that lead us to make up rules, and those rules can keep people from Jesus.
- Our preferences lead us to have rules about which sins are worse than others, which ones we will and won’t talk about, so we allow some people to live in sin without ever addressing it while we condemn others to the point that they believe there is no chance that Jesus could save them from it.
- We have rules about whether or not you need this kind of music or that kind of music or this instrument or that, so we turn our focus off exalting Christ and on to pleasing our own ears, which deadens our testimony to those who don’t know Christ.
- We say in our hearts, “There is no way you could come to church in a suit and tie and be authentic before God,” while others say, “I can’t believe they would dress so disrespectfully towards the Lord,” and guess what? We’re both wrong, because the Bible never prescribes our attire for worship.
- Our prejudices lead us to live and act like there are certain groups of people that God doesn’t love as much as others. Ask yourself: does God desire the people of Iran to be saved,

just like the people of the United States of America? Does Jesus come to offer salvation through saving faith in His shed blood to the ISIS fighter as well as the Wall Street executive and the mechanic and good, honest plumber?

- Did He not die for whites and blacks and Hispanics and Muslims?
- Have you made rules about who God does and does not love, or who He can and cannot save?
- Last I checked, **John 3:16** still said that God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, not that He loved white Americans more.
- If we allow our prejudices to keep us from sharing the Gospel with and lovingly coming alongside any person of any race, nationality, or socio-economic standing into this church, then we have sinned and are just like the Pharisees, keeping people who need His healing away from Him.
- Jesus was angry and grieved over the Pharisees rules that kept people from the help He alone can give. Do you think His feelings on the matter have changed?
- Here's the challenge, then: these rules can be so deeply ingrained in our hearts and minds that we don't even know we have them.
- Thankfully, the Bible teaches us how to pray about things like this. David gave us this example as he prayed:
Search me, O God, and know my heart; Try me and know my anxious thoughts; And see if there be any hurtful way in me, And lead me in the everlasting way. (Psalm 139:23-24, NASB95)
- Will you be open and honest with the Lord enough today to allow Him to search your heart and show you where you have

put your rules above His Word?

- Maybe your entire religious life has been like this. You have been trusting that you could figure it out on your own and be good enough that you could save yourself. Stop making up your rules and turn to Christ.
- If you're saved, and you see in your life that you have put your own rules on God, ask Him to pull those things up like weeds and replace them with an understanding of what Jesus has done.
- He satisfied every requirement of the Law and died in your place to take your sinfulness.