

Tensions With Rules

Mark 2:18-3:6

Introduction

Do you know how to tell a vegan? Don't worry, they'll tell you. Any person who thinks that food rituals and requirements are a thing of the past only needs to listen to the proponents (or converts) to the latest diets which come and go with regularity. It seems that for certain people being on a particular diet is not about your preference or personal health but rather becomes something of religious fervour demarcating 'us' from 'them.' There are the enlightened practitioners of a particular diet who are morally superior to the uneducated masses who don't know or don't care.

This morning we're going to consider how Jesus engaged with people who didn't know the right place for religious rules and traditions, who elevated obedience to rules above consideration of people and who actually used rules to manipulate people and to cause harm.

This section is a part of a series of five controversies between Jesus and the teachers of the law. Starting at the beginning of chapter 2, there is the controversy of Jesus' authority to forgive sins, followed by the controversy about kind of people who Jesus hung out with. We've dealt with those two controversies in the past couple of weeks and now we're going to look at controversies to do with fasting, the role of the Sabbath and then whether healing was permitted on the Sabbath.

Jesus' Radical Newness (Mark 2:18-22)

So then, let us begin with Jesus being asked why his disciples didn't fast when the Pharisees and John's disciples did? Jesus' answer to the question appears to be strongly focused upon himself when "[He] answered, 'How can the guests of the bridegroom fast while he is with them? They cannot, so long as they have him with them. But the time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them, and on that day they will fast.'"

Jesus doesn't deny that there is an appropriate place for fasting but states that this isn't the time. Fasting in the Old Testament is a sign of disaster, or penitence or mourning, or voluntary humbling. When Jesus is taken from the disciples, then it will be time for them to fast in sorrow, etc.¹ The core issue is that at that time, in the presence of Jesus, it was a time of joyful celebration for the in-breaking of the Kingdom of God into this world.

If people recognised who Jesus was then they wouldn't ask why the disciples weren't fasting, they would have happily joined those who were enjoying God's Kingdom being present in Jesus. This change which Jesus brings is also connected to Jesus' next statement, "No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment. Otherwise, the new piece will pull away from the old, making the tear worse. And no one pours new wine into old wineskins. Otherwise, the wine will burst the skins, and both the wine and the wineskins will be ruined. No, they pour new wine into new wineskins." There is a radical newness which comes with the person of Jesus which will mean that the old rules and rituals, to do with things like fasting, are going to have to be re-thought. The nature of the Kingdom of God coming in Jesus is so new and different (even though it is the fulfilment of the promises of Yahweh recorded in the Old Testament) that it was essentially incompatible to apply the previous rituals and traditions to this new expression of Yahweh.

For us today, we need to consider what connection our traditions, rituals and religious rules have to Jesus. Most of our traditions in the church do indeed go back to Jesus and the early church's proclamation of the kingdom and new life found in Jesus. However, we should continue to evaluate whether traditions have grown to such an extent that they actually obscure who Jesus is and the importance of us growing in him.

I went to a Catholic school for eight years and almost every day going to school I had to stop at the top of the hill at a statue of Mary and pray before going to class. Is the idea of getting school students to pause and engage with the spiritual reality of life

¹ R. A. Cole, *Mark - Tyndale New Testament Commentaries*, Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1989, p. 126.

before joining the hustle and bustle of class a good thing? Of course it is, but I think that for many of the young men who attended St Laurence's College that tradition became meaningless and the use of Mary possibly served as a distraction from actually focusing on Christ.

What are the traditions in the Methodist or Uniting Church, or what specific traditions might you see at Laidley or Hatton Vale, which actually can distract people from Christ and the Kingdom he brings?

The Sabbath is For People (Mark 2:23-28)

The next controversy which people had with Jesus was when Jesus' disciples picked some heads of grain on the Sabbath. Interestingly, there wasn't a problem with the disciples just picking a few heads as they walked through the grainfields, under the Mosaic law that was allowed, but they wouldn't have been allowed to run a sickle through someone else's grain (I'm not sure if I should try that thinking when I'm out visiting people in the area, "It's ok if I walk off with a pumpkin or two, I'm not using a sickle!").

The Pharisees took exception to this because they accused the disciples of working on the day they should have resting, the Sabbath. "The Pharisees said to [Jesus], 'Look, why are they doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath?'" While it's easy for us to look at the Pharisees and be quick to criticise them, we have to remember that the Pharisees were actually very faithful and religious people. Many of the rules which the Pharisees made explicit were clearly derived from God's instructions given in the Law of Moses. On this occasion the Pharisees had wanted to make clear what was meant by God's command for people to rest on the Sabbath (which involved a prohibition from work) and so the Pharisees had determined that any harvesting and husking of any amount was in violation of the rules.

How did Jesus answer their argument? "He answered, 'Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need? In the days of Abiathar the

high priest, he entered the house of God and ate the consecrated bread, which is lawful only for priests to eat. And he also gave some to his companions.’

Then he said to them, ‘The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath.’”

It’s interesting that Jesus doesn’t really engage with whether the Sabbath was technically being broken or not. Rather, Jesus wants the Pharisees to see the bigger issue at stake. Jesus raises the importance of human need and how human need was a greater concern than obedience to ritual or religious rules. David broke religious rules by he and his men eating bread which was set apart to God, sanctified, and which should only have been eaten by the priests. Because of who David is and because there is no explicit condemnation of the actions recorded in 1 Samuel 21, it is generally regarded that David did not sin in his actions.

Jesus’ critical, summary is that the intent of the Sabbath was for the benefit of humanity, it is not that humanity was made for the purpose of keeping the Sabbath. This is something which the Pharisees would likely to have agreed with but the way Jesus worked that out, emphasising the needs of people above sheer rule keeping, would still have caused many Pharisees to have concerns.

It is also interesting that just as earlier when Jesus gives meaning to whether people should fast or not, so Jesus hints at his authority here too by saying, “So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath.” Will the listeners allow Jesus to help them understand the law and where their priorities should lie?”

And what about for us, are we willing for Jesus to do the same thing for us? Will we allow Jesus to understand the intent of the law and priority of people? To answer this we not only need to think about rules which impact people and the way they live but we also need to consider our attitude to rule-keeping. Are we inclined to think, “if only people obeyed the rules properly then that would create heaven on earth?” Yes, if everyone obeyed the road rules the roads would be safer, if everyone (including companies) obeyed the tax rules our economy would be better, if students obeyed their teachers our schools would be more polite and productive, etc., etc., etc. Yes, I

understand all that, but we are at risk of having a Pharisaical attitude if we believe that we can bring heaven to earth through the external compliance to and enforcement of rules. Jesus here is challenging us to examine the heart of the matter and engage with actual people (who are always far messier than simple rules).

For me personally I've been wrestling with this question for a while. Perhaps arrogantly, I don't actually think that many of my beliefs, the laws, guidelines and commands which I follow are faulty or in need of correction. However, what I have been challenged by is whether I genuinely care for people when I am explaining God's ways to them. Do I communicate in a way that shows that I am genuinely interested in the other person or group? If I am speaking against a behaviour, do I understand why a person does something differently and do I communicate in a way that shows that I desire the best for them.

Do I say to the person struggling with a drug addiction, "Drugs are bad! Just say no to drugs! Listen you druggo, stop ruining our town!" etc. I hate narcotics and the damage they do to people and our communities, but do I care enough about the person to find out why they may be on drugs? Am I willing to find out what pain possibly caused them to turn to drugs in the first place? If I'm speaking to people will they just hear me as someone telling them to obey rules or will they hear my genuine interest in them and my desire to seek their best? Perhaps you're aware that you need to work on this too?

Using Rules to Hurt (Mark 3:1-6)

So then, we started with a controversy about fasting and how Jesus is required to understand the rightful place of religious rituals and rules. Next, we considered the controversy about what the disciples were doing on the Sabbath and how Jesus directed people to consider the intent of rules and the priority of people. We now come to the final controversy, that of whether it is right for Jesus to heal on the Sabbath.

Another time Jesus went into the synagogue, and a man with a shrivelled hand was there. Some of them were looking for a reason to accuse Jesus, so they watched him closely to see if he would heal him on the Sabbath. Jesus said to the man with the shrivelled hand, ‘Stand up in front of everyone.’

Then Jesus asked them, ‘Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?’ But they remained silent.

He looked around at them in anger and, deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts, said to the man, ‘Stretch out your hand.’ He stretched it out, and his hand was completely restored. Then the Pharisees went out and began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus.

It’s possible that Jesus is walking into a trap here. Some people know that Jesus has healed on the Sabbath before in a synagogue and so maybe they can get him to do the same thing and this time catch him out. The teachers of the law of Jesus’ time held that you were allowed to save a person or animal if life was in danger but here is a man with a crippled hand (and as such his life is not in danger). If Jesus heals a man whose life is not in danger, then he will have broken the Sabbath according to their thinking.

Jesus, seems to know the thinking going on of the people watching him. Jesus again looks to the heart of the law and makes its breadth explicit, “Then Jesus asked them, ‘Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?’” The teachers on the law would have been willing to say, “to do good if life was in danger” but here Jesus is raising the issue that where it is in his power to do good and yet he refuses to do so, then that would be an act of evil. The people simply won’t engage with Jesus and so remain silent.

The next line is a powerful challenge to any of us who only like to think of cute Jesus born in a stable or suffering Jesus on the cross. Here we see the leader Jesus who expresses God’s righteous anger at people who are hard-hearted and yet still make the courageous decision to heal despite the risk it poses. “[Jesus] looked around at them in anger and, deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts, said to the man, ‘Stretch out your hand.’ He stretched it out, and his hand was completely restored.”

The irony of course is that Jesus was willing to save life on the Sabbath despite the fact that people were looking to accuse him, and yet the Pharisees, despite thinking that they were really keeping the law, will start on the Sabbath to plan to kill. “Then the Pharisees went out and began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus.”

Where are we inclined to be so stubborn that we spurn the Lord to anger? Where are we at risk of seeing the Holy Spirit at work and yet refusing to partner with him? I pray that this would not be the case for us as followers of Jesus but I have seen it before in Christians. When I was in Indonesia I was part of a Church Planting Movement ministry where we taught Christians to share Christ in groups settings which would form into a group of believers and would continue to be able to be easily multiplied. I was shocked at the push-back that such a simple method for evangelism received, even when it was shown to be powerfully effective. We are at the point today where more Muslims are coming to faith in Christ in the last 50 years than in all the centuries before it.

It is not that this method of evangelism was beyond criticism (we were always learning from each other and from the Scriptures) but much of the criticism appears to have stemmed from people simply being too invested in their established methods of church and church governance. “You can’t call that a church, we haven’t ordained the pastor.” “You can’t call that person a leader, they’ve never been to our Bible college.” I would tentatively say that this refusal to engage with a movement of the Holy Spirit for very worldly reasons is an example of the hardness of heart which so angered Jesus.

May it be one of our prayers that we would always be sensitive to the leading of the Holy Spirit and responsive to what the Lord is doing in our midsts and in our communities.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I wonder if there is a negative progression in the controversies that have been recorded here. We started with people needing to understand who Jesus is to correctly understand rituals and laws, then Jesus needed to show that

rules were there for the sake of people and not the other way around (which really should have been grasped at a human level) and now we have the deliberate use (or misuse) of a law for the purpose of accusing Jesus and ultimately seeing him killed. This is a deliberate affront to the intention of the law of the Sabbath.

This little section should challenge us to make sure that we have a right understanding of who Jesus is and how he brings light and understanding to the commandments of God and how we should follow his example. As we have a right understanding of Jesus and relationship with him then we will, like him, emphasise people and how laws are to emphasise relationships and we will know that rules and laws should never be manipulated to cause harm to people.

[Pray to close]