

## ***“Who is This Man? Jesus in the Gospel of Mark—Problems with the Religious Establishment”***

Today we’re going to wrap up this series of messages where we’ve been looking at Jesus through the eyes of the Gospel writer Mark. The whole concept in this has been to ask and answer two questions: **Who is Jesus and how does his life affect our lives?** Those are the questions that Mark is asking and answering as he tells about some of what Jesus said and did in the three years of his public ministry.

Today we’re going to look at the opposition that Jesus faced from the Pharisees-- the religious leaders of his day. Because after all that he taught and all the good that he did, the religious leaders get to a place where they hated him and plotted to kill him. Today, we look at the opposition that built up against Jesus from the Pharisees that would eventually lead up to Jesus’ arrest, crucifixion, and resurrection.

Now, we have to ask, “Who are the Pharisees and why did they get such a bee in their bonnet?” The Pharisees were one of the three religious groups in the Jewish faith at that time. The other two were the Sadducees and the Essenes. **The Sadducees were mostly a group of priests.** They ran the Temple Jerusalem and could trace their family line to the tribe of Levi. They believed that the Temple was the center of Judaism and that when you came to the Temple you were coming to God. They were the most traditional of the Jewish groups. The Sadducees tended to be the upper class, and the most educated people in Jewish culture.

Now on the other side of the spectrum were the Essenes. The Essenes were a small group within Judaism but they had a big influence. **The Essenes were aesthetics**, that means they wanted to remove themselves from the world as much as possible. They lived in remote areas in small communities away from the cities. They didn’t believe in marriage, or commerce, or sexual intercourse. They were deeply concerned with religious purity and would baptize themselves several times a day as a way to purify themselves. The idea was to stay as holy and clean in God’s eyes as possible and the only way to do that was to separate from civilization at large.

Now somewhere between the Sadducees and the Essenes were the Pharisees. They were the most prominent of the religious groups in Jesus’ day. They were the leaders of the synagogues. While the Sadducees believed you had to go to the Temple in Jerusalem to truly worship, the Pharisees believed that you went to the synagogue, your local neighborhood place of worship, to worship. They called people to go to the synagogue on the Sabbath days to worship, to learn, to study.

**Pharisees were teachers of the Law.** They were well educated, mostly middle class. The word Pharisees means set apart, or called out, from the world. They believed in being holy, and being clean, and being set apart from the rest of the world by living out the law of Moses in the most minute details. They didn’t go live in isolated communities like the Essenes. They worked normal jobs, but the emphasis for them was daily holiness in the world.

Now, it’s really important for us to know that the Pharisees had this idea that you take the Law of Moses, which was 600 plus laws, and what you want to do is make sure that nobody accidentally violates one of those laws. So they tried to look at every possible scenario of each law and describe how to handle it.

Like the Sabbath. One of the Ten Commandments is to honor the Sabbath and keep it holy. That means not working on the Sabbath. The Pharisees said, “We have to clearly define what work is.” So over the course of several hundred years they developed an elaborate system of rules about what constituted work so that you would not violate that law. They came up with 39 different categories of work and within each of those categories there were dozens of rules.

One specific example of these rules is about tailors. A tailor was not allowed to carry a needle in their belt because it was a tool used for work and carrying it on the Sabbath would be working on the Sabbath. Another was the regulation that you could not walk more than 3,000 feet on the Sabbath because that would be work. You could not cook on the Sabbath.

Then there were the food laws, and laws about cleanliness, and laws about the use of God’s name. So there were the laws, then there were the rules around the laws so that you knew what the violations were. So now instead of there being 600 laws of Moses, there are thousands of laws. It was all about religious purity.

That was the focus of the Pharisees and, you know what, they had the right idea at first. They wanted to please God, they wanted to be holy, they wanted to call all people to holiness. But somewhere in there, they went too far—at least in Jesus' eyes. And that was the source of conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees.

In Mark chapter 2 we see the growing conflict, this growing animosity, between Jesus and the Pharisees. There are 5 or 6 stories where Jesus and the Pharisees have conflicts. Now you're wondering, why is all this important? Why do I need to know any of this? I'm glad you asked. Let's take a look at Mark chapter 2. At the beginning of this chapter Jesus is speaking in a home, some people hear that Jesus is a healer so they bring their friend to Jesus. There's such a crowd that they actually go up on the roof of the house, break open a big hole and lower the man down in front of Jesus to be healed. The text says, **“When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralyzed man, ‘Son, your sins are forgiven.’ Now some teachers of the law were sitting there, thinking to themselves, ‘Why does this fellow talk like that? He's blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?’” (Mark 2:6-7, TNIV).**

That was a good question. Christians believe that in Jesus, God walked in the flesh here on earth. Jesus heals the man, the guy stands up and walks away. The Pharisees are unnerved by this. That's scene one.

Scene two: Jesus is calling disciples—he's building his team. We looked at this three weeks ago. Jesus goes up to the tax collector, Levi, and says, come follow me. Later that day Levi invites Jesus to his home for dinner that night.

Remember, the Pharisees were deeply into ritual purity. Clean meant holy; unclean meant unholy. To eat with somebody who was a sinner made you unclean and unholy. The Pharisees washed their hands and utensils with special rituals. Levi is unclean, he doesn't practice the rituals of cleanliness, and Jesus goes to eat with him. And Levi has invited his friends--other sinners and tax collectors. Check this out, the Bible says, **“When the teachers of the law who were Pharisees saw him eating with the sinners and tax collectors, they asked his disciples: “Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?”**

They wanted to stuff Jesus into their religious mold. They wanted him to be like them. He was a teacher, people were drawn to him in large crowds, and he was breaking all the rules. This unnerved the Pharisees.

Scene three: People came to Jesus and they wanted to know, “Jesus, why are your disciples and you not fasting like the Pharisees' disciples? You're supposed to fast at these times and you're not. Why?” Jesus says, “There will come a time for them to fast, but not right now.” The Pharisees were unnerved, “Why is Jesus not obeying the rules? Why is he not on board with the program?”

Scene four: In Mark 2:23 Jesus and the disciples are walking through a field one Sabbath day, they're hungry, and as they walk through the field they pluck some of the grain from the stalks, rub it together in their hands to clean off the husk, and eat the grain. By the way, they weren't stealing. That was allowed by Jewish law. But what wasn't allowed was rubbing the grain in their hands to remove the husk on the Sabbath. That was considered work.

The Pharisees must have been watching Jesus like a hawk everywhere he went! They come up to Jesus and say, “Why are you letting the disciples do what is unlawful on the Sabbath?” The tension keeps building. They're unnerved because Jesus keeps breaking their laws. Jesus keeps violating and challenging their understanding of what holiness looks like, who's in and who's out. Jesus is challenging all of it.

And then finally we have this passage when it all comes to a head. Mark chapter 3. **“Another time Jesus went into the synagogue, and a man with a shriveled 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 shriveled 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” (Mark 3:1-6, TNIV).**

It’s like they set Jesus up, because at this point, from what they’ve already seen in Jesus, they know he can’t resist healing people even on the Sabbath when it’s against the law to heal. The law clearly said that unless it’s a life or death situation, healing cannot be done on the Sabbath.

This man wants to be healed, but his withered hand is not a life or death situation. It sure does look like a setup. Because they’re there, watching to see what Jesus would do. Will he violate their Sabbath law in their synagogue? Jesus seems to be thinking, “What better day to restore this man’s hand than on the Sabbath.”

Now if I were in Jesus shoes and I knew the implications, I’d probably go sit down next to him and discretely heal him and then say, “Shhhh. Keep that one to yourself. OK?” Not Jesus. He’s making a statement. It’s like, “Pharisees, we’re going to have it out, right here, right now.” So he tells the man to stand up in the front of everybody. And then Jesus asks the Pharisees, “Which is lawful on the Sabbath to do good, or do evil, to save life or to kill?” Jesus is describing the difference between what he wants to do, and what they want to do! He wants to heal this man without delay, they want to kill Jesus without delay. He knows that in a few moments they’re going to leave and start plotting to kill him. Jesus is healing, they’re planning to kill. He’s saying, “Which of these two things is more in keeping with God’s will?”

He looks at them and they’re silent. Then we read that really interesting part. We only see this a few times in the New Testament. It says that Jesus became angry and deeply distressed. He became deeply distressed because of their stubborn hearts.

He turns to the man and says, “Stretch out your hand.” Can you see it? And as he stretches out that hand it is restored—it’s healed.

This is what Jesus does. This is what God is about. He’s about restoring broken things, and broken people. And he gets so distressed when people are so stubborn. He wants to say, “This is what it’s all about. It’s not about your rules. You’ve missed the forest for the trees. You’ve failed to understand that the Sabbath was made for the restoration of people, not people made for the Sabbath. So of course I’m going to restore this man on the Sabbath. It’s a day meant for restoring people. It’s not about all your little laws.” He’s angry because he’s come up against a system of following God that’s shut the door on most people. Their system has given them a spiritual pride, and arrogance, and critical spirit to the point that they can’t see what God’s looking for.

In Matthew chapter 23 we read the harshest criticism Jesus has for the Pharisees. It’s called the seven woes. Seven times Jesus says to the Pharisees, “Woe to you, you hypocrites. You’re like whitewashed tombs. You look so good on the outside but inside you’re full of decay and filth.” He said, “You make all these rules and regulations and in the process you slam the door on ordinary people and don’t even offer to help them know God.”

Jesus said, “You’ve got the law nailed down, but you’ve forgotten the weightier matters, which are justice, and mercy. Do those things without neglecting the other things.” Jesus is angry with them because they’ve missed the point.

Here’s what we need to learn from these stories. We need to learn that Jesus has a very different picture of what it means to seek God, than the Pharisees had. The Pharisees are very interested in clean. You read it over and over and over again. In Mark chapter 7 it talks about all their concern with things being clean. But do you know what Jesus is always doing? He’s constantly spending time with, and touching people who are unclean.

Like the leper who cried out to Jesus for him to heal him. By law lepers had to stay away from all other people and warn anybody who came close that they were unclean. Jesus touches him to heal him.

There was the man filled with demons. He was a Gentile and Gentiles were unclean and demon possessed people were unclean and he touches him and he’s healed. There’s a woman with an unclean spirit and Jesus sends that spirit away. There’s a woman who’s been bleeding for 12 years, and she’s unclean because of that bleeding, she reaches out and touches him and she’s made clean.

He goes into homes of people who were unclean and eats with them. Jesus is saying, "This is what it's about. It's not about taking yourself away from the world. It's about being involved and engaged in the world and loving unclean people until they become clean. This is what it's about."

So we learn a lot about Jesus in his conflict with the religious leaders. But we also learn something about ourselves. Here's what I know. Today's Pharisees are not Jewish. Today's Pharisees are Christians. I have a confession to make to you. I am a Pharisee. I am a Pharisee who is trying hard not to be one. I am one who finds it easy to judge other people and be critical of them. I find myself to be self-righteous. I am a Pharisee who finds it easy to put on a show of being holy long enough to impress you, but I know what's inside here. I'm a Pharisee who sometimes gets caught up in the minutia, in the details, and forgets what it's really all about. I am a recovering Pharisee.

In Jr. High or high school I remember going to a big rally where speaker got up and railed against rock music. How it was of the devil and if you had rock music in your home you were letting the devil in the door. I remember going home and getting my cassette tapes and a few albums that I had and it wasn't enough to throw them away because somebody else could find them and open the door to the devil. I took them back into my dad's garden and burned them. I don't even remember what they were, I think ELO and one KISS tape. My brother swears I said that Eric Clapton was of the devil.

Now, some music is stuff that degrading, and violent, worships sex, and we don't need that stuff in our heads. But the day I spent all that time burning my tapes and albums in my dad's garden, 40,000 children died of malnutrition and related diseases around the world. And I was burning an ELO tape. What's wrong with that picture? "You've forgotten the weightier matters of justice and mercy."

We've got to wonder, if Jesus came to Joplin, what would he do? And what would say? And who would he hang out with? And would I recognize him? Would you? Or would we be scared by him, and offended by what he said, and turn our backs on him if we met him face to face?

If Jesus came to Joplin, I think he might come to our churches here, he went to the synagogues in Galilee. But what would he talk about if he stood up to speak in our churches in Joplin? I would bet that a lot of churches would only invite Jesus to speak once, and then not want him back.

And when he was hanging out with people here in Joplin, I'm pretty sure he'd be on Main Street, on Joplin Street, at the bars. He'd be down at Souls Harbor, and Watered Gardens, he might even show up at a gay bar. All along saying to people, "You know, all that stuff that people who use my name say to you, let me just tell you what my Father is like. Really like."

I'm a recovering Pharisee. What about you?

Yes, God's given humanity laws, standards to live by. But Jesus came to clearly demonstrate God's grace; to remind humanity that God's laws are about his love; that God's not out to trap people, he's out to save them and give them the life that really is life; that God's grace is even bigger than God's law. That's how he's called us to live. And that is the Good News. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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