

Splitting Hairs

Mark 2:18 - 3:6

Introduction

Let us begin today, by reading Mark 2:18 – 3:6.

John’s disciples and the Pharisees were fasting; and they came and said to Him, “Why do John’s disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but Your disciples do not fast?”

And Jesus said to them, “While the bridegroom is with them, the attendants of the bridegroom cannot fast, can they? So long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast.

“But the days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast in that day.

“No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment; otherwise the patch pulls away from it, the new from the old, and a worse tear results.

No one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise the wine will burst the skins, and the wine is lost and the skins as well; but one puts new wine into fresh wineskins.”

And it happened that He was passing through the grain fields on the Sabbath, and His disciples began to make their way along while picking the heads of grain.

The Pharisees were saying to Him, “Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?”

And He said to them, “Have you never read what David did when he was in need and he and his companions became hungry;

“how he entered the house of God in the time of Abiathar the high priest, and ate the consecrated bread, which is not lawful for anyone to eat except the priests, and he also gave it to those who were with him?”

Jesus said to them, “The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath.

“So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath.”

He entered again into a synagogue; and a man was there whose hand was withered.

They were watching Him to see if He would heal him on the Sabbath, so that they might accuse Him.

He said to the man with the withered hand, “Get up and come forward!”

And He said to them, “Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save a life or to kill?” But they kept silent.

After looking around at them with anger, grieved at their hardness of heart, He said to the man, “Stretch out your hand.” And he stretched it out, and his hand was restored.

The Pharisees went out and immediately began conspiring with the Herodians against Him, as to how they might destroy Him.

The Pharisees were professional “hair splitters”. They had been doing it for centuries. As a matter of fact, they had taken the clear cut presentation of the

Mosaic law and developed from that, what they called, generations of laws. As a result, the Mosaic system had become a prison house with bars of traditions and jail cells of regulations that had put the Jewish people in bondage.

We have been studying through the Gospel of Mark and today, we come to this passage that is nothing short of hand-to-hand combat between Christ and the Pharisees. Jesus was an individual who was a revolutionary and He was presenting the Jewish people with a declaration of their independence. The Pharisees were not going to take that lying down.

Now, this passage raises several problems, as Jesus begins to write for these people, their independence. Let us look at these problems.

The Problem With Piety

The first problem was, what I call, the problem with piety. Let us look again at Mark 2:18.

John's disciples and the Pharisees were fasting; and they came and said to Him, "Why do John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but Your disciples do not fast?"

The Pharisees raised this question as they were observing the disciples. The disciples were not fasting and that created a tremendous problem in their minds. So they said to Jesus, "Look, the disciples of John and the disciples of the Pharisees are fasting, but Your disciples aren't. Now, why aren't You conforming to the status quo?"

Jesus Christ answers by giving a fascinating illustration to explain it. He says, "Can the children of the bride chamber fast while the bridegroom is with them? No! As long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast."

Now, according to the Mosaic structure, fasting was required only one day a year and that was on the day of atonement. The Pharisees, however, began to embellish this until finally, by the time of Christ, they were fasting every Monday and every Thursday. And, they would make it obvious, so that everyone could see that they were pious. They would put white dust on their faces, wear old clothing, and mope around, as if to say, "You see, I am fasting." It was impressive.

It was as impressive as it would be for someone to tell you that they rise at 4 a.m. to pray. That is impressive.

However, there is a difference between piety and intimacy – and the Pharisees had missed the boat. They came across Jesus Christ, and His disciples were not fasting. They could not figure this out. So, Jesus goes back to the Old Testament economy and the Jewish marriage system and gives a powerful illustration.

Understand that in this economy, when a man married, he had a week of feasting. The newly married couple would not go on a honeymoon, like we do today, but would stay at home for a week. The bridegroom would invite his closest male companions to celebrate with him in a week of feasting. In their hard lives, filled with work and toil, this was a week when they all rejoiced and feasted.

So Jesus Christ says, "Look, I am the Bridegroom. As long as I am here, why should there be anything but feasting? Why should anyone mope around? Christianity is joyful."

This was a totally new revelation to the Pharisees. To drive the point home, Jesus gives two additional thoughts.

Look at Mark 2:21.

No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment; otherwise the patch pulls away from it, the new from the old, and a worse tear results.

In that day, it would have been foolish to take an old garment that needed a patch and sew a piece of unshrunk cloth, or a piece of wet cloth that had not yet dried, onto the garment. As soon as it was washed, the new cloth would shrink and tear away from the old clothing. The old garment would then be worse than before. The patch that was supposed to create a solution would make an even more difficult problem.

Jesus then gives a second illustration. He says, in Mark 2:22,

No one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise the wine will burst the skins and the wine is lost and the skins as well; but one puts new wine into fresh wineskins.

Wineskins were made of goatskin. They were sewed at the edges and along the top to make a water tight bag. As fresh wine that was not yet fermented, was put into the bag, it would begin to expand as it aged, giving off gasses. New wineskins were flexible and would expand and give with the aging wine. It would have been foolish to take an old wineskin that had become hard and brittle, and put new wine into it.

As soon as the new wine began to expand, the old wineskin would not be able to handle the expansion and would just explode. The wine and the skin would be lost.

So Jesus Christ, I think, is making a clear point for us to nail down in our minds. The point is that Jesus does not want to dress up the old system. He wants instead, to create an entirely new system. He is not coming along to patch up the old garment – the old covenant. He is coming along to present a new garment – a new covenant.

The Pharisees would probably have accepted a few of Christ's teachings. They would most likely have thought, "Yea, I like that one. Oh, that's a good one. And, here's a good one over here." They would have incorporated these into their old garments.

However, Jesus Christ was saying, in effect, "No way. With Me, it's an entirely new system."

Because these men were so pious; because they had the people under so much bondage, they could not handle the newness of His message.

The Problem With Regulations

There was another problem. Not only was there the problem with piety, but there was the problem with regulations. Notice Mark 2:23.

And it happened that He was passing through the grain fields on the Sabbath, and His disciples began to make their way along while picking the heads of grain.

In that day, there was a welfare system which would take care of the poor. The system was to allow the poor to come to the edge of a field, as they traveled, and pick as much as they could eat. There was a rule, however, that they could not bring a bucket or a sickle to the field, but they could take whatever they could hold in their hands.

So the disciples were not breaking, necessarily, a civil law. They were hungry and they picked some grain.

Continue to Mark 2:24.

The Pharisees were saying to Him, "Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?"

The issue was not whether or not they could take the grain. The issue was whether or not they could do it on the Sabbath.

Understand that to the Pharisee, to the religious world, the Sabbath had become the thing that they worshiped. Then, Jesus Christ comes along and acts as if He does not care by doing many different things – although they have a purpose. So the Pharisees come to Him and ask this question.

The problem is that the Pharisees had added to the Sabbath laws. This picking of grain was not unlawful. Look at Mark 2:25.

And He said to them, "Have you never read what David did when he was in need and he and his companions became hungry;"

I could just hear them saying, "Ouch."

David was their hero. He was the one that they idolized. If you wanted to make a point with the Pharisees, you used David as an illustration. Note, in Mark 2:26, what David did.

how he entered the house of God in the time of Abiathar the high priest, and ate the consecrated bread . . .

This was near blasphemy. The consecrated bread or the showbread was in the holy place. It would be in the form of twelve loaves of bread. Every sabbath day, they would replace the old loaves with twelve fresh loaves and the priests, only the priests, would eat the old loaves of bread. No one touched this – it was holy stuff.

So, when David and his men were hungry, they took those twelve consecrated loaves of bread and devoured them. However, God did not, "Boom," strike them dead.

The point is that David violated a divinely ordained ceremonial provision. Because he had the need, it was tolerable. Now, Jesus Christ is violating a manmade regulation. He is telling the Pharisees, "If David could do *that* – wake up! – there is nothing wrong with this."

The problem is, the Pharisees had developed so many regulations. In fact, I was looking at a few commentaries that talked of some of these additional Sabbath laws. Let me give an example.

The Mosaic system said, "Don't work on the sabbath day." That was a protection. They were able to stop work. A man could not work, in that economy, seven days a week. It is not advisable for you to do so either, by the way – you need time off. These people would work constantly, but when the Sabbath came, they took time off. So, it protected

them physically. It protected them from greed, as well.

However, the Pharisees came along and added thirty-nine categories to this no work law. No work meant then, that you could not plow. That was kind of the son law. Then, they called it the grandson law, that if you could not plow because you could not work, then you could not create a furrow in the ground. Then, a great grandson law said that you could not drag a chair across the ground because the legs of it would make a furrow in the dirt and that would be digging, and that would be plowing.

You could not carry a burden. So they developed a grandson and great grandson tradition, until finally, a tailor could not carry his needle and a scribe could not carry a pen.

The people were in bondage. Jesus Christ is coming along to refocus their perspective on the essentials.

Now, let me say something before continuing. This is, I think, a very difficult thing to understand, so I will illustrate it. Jesus Christ is not being sacrilegious; He is not coming with a hammer and smashing the Mosaic system. It is time for the Mosaic system to die, but there are several ways that something can be killed. You can either smash it or, as in the case of Christ, you can allow it to fulfill itself. Let me illustrate this.

You can take an acorn and kill it in two ways. One way is to take a hammer and smash it. Another way is to plant it in the ground and allow it to grow into an oak tree. In this way, by its death, it is fulfilled in something far more wonderful than an acorn.

The Pharisees were worshiping the acorn. Jesus Christ was coming along and saying, “Look, I’m going to present something far more wonderful. It’s called *grace*. Don’t gather around an acorn; law. Let it die. Let it fulfill itself into the beautiful, strong, shady, protecting oak tree.”

The Pharisees could not handle this, so they rejected it.

The Problem With Traditions

There was a third problem. This was the problem with traditions. Look at Mark 3:1-2a.

He entered again into a synagogue; and a man was there whose hand had withered. They were watching Him . . .

The word “watching,” in the original language, means, “to slyly look through the corner of the eye.”

Here are all these long bearded, robed men sitting in the synagogue. They knew Jesus was coming. They began to watch Him – ready to accuse. Look at Mark 3:3.

He said to the man with the withered hand, “Get up and come forward!”

This is fascinating. I just wish we could go back and see this, but let us try to recreate what happened. A man with a withered hand, of course, would be considered very sinful. He would worship, but he would have the back seat, if he were allowed into the synagogue at all. The chief seats, of course, were given to these pious men who wore the long robes and were the scribes and the Pharisees of that day.

Now they had concocted these grandson laws so that, on the Sabbath, you could not apply any kind of medicine to anyone, unless it was life or death. They said, for example, that you could not apply any cold thing to perhaps, a sprained ankle. You, in fact, had to bear it until the next day. So no medicine could be applied on the Sabbath – that was against their law.

Now they are looking at Jesus, thinking, “Is He going to break our traditional regulation?”

Jesus, of course, notices this man with the withered hand. It is almost as if they planted the man by the door. Jesus gets out in the middle, and says to him, literally, “Come to the center stage. Come forward – right in the middle of all of these men.”

It is as if Jesus does not want anyone to miss this. He does not want this to be passed by – by these doctors of the law or by the people who have come to worship. So He brings this poor man right in the middle of everyone.

The man’s hand is curled and he is not able to use it. In fact, an extra biblical writing, called The Gospel to the Hebrews, that has not survived time except for a few fragments, records that this man was a stone mason and his hands were his livelihood. So, with his hand being withered, he could not work. Thus, he was reduced to being a beggar. We are not sure if that is true, but Jesus Christ calls him forward.

Jesus then pauses, with this man right in the middle of the floor. He turns to all of these men and asks them, in Mark 3:4,

. . . “Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath . . .?”

They are now stumped. They cannot say, “It’s lawful to do good,” because Jesus would then say, “Great! You agree with this.” – and He would heal the man. If they said, “Well, it’s not lawful to do good on the Sabbath,” then they would be agreeing that it was lawful to do harm on the Sabbath.

Jesus asks,

... *“Is it lawful . . . to save a life or to kill?”*

The fascinating thing with this is that Jesus knew, in their hearts, they were plotting His death. He exposed them; He ripped their masks off. I can just imagine the commotion. They are probably fidgeting and gathering their cloaks about them – just wishing they could take off. He pinned them to the wall. After doing that, we are told in Mark 3:5,

After looking around at them with anger, grieved . . .

The tense of the word “anger” is temporary. However, the tense for the word “grieved” is permanent. Jesus Christ was temporarily angry, but His overall feeling was one of grief. These men were bound – and they were worshipping their chains. Jesus was,

... *grieved at their hardness of hearts . . .*

The word “hardness,” in Greek, is “poros,” which was a word used for marble. Marble is impressive; finely polished; expensive. These men were all of these things. And, they were hard like marble.

Jesus then, turns back to the man, who is probably trembling and embarrassed about being on center stage, and He says,

... *“Stretch out your hand.” . . .*

The man extended his hand and it is at that very moment, as if energy pulsed into his fingers, and he opened his hand for all to see. He probably moved it around a couple of times and looked at it in amazement and then, rejoicing.

Now, the problem was the traditions that had been developed would not even allow Jesus Christ to do this tremendous work of healing. They had, I think, a motto over the synagogue door, for all to look up and see when they came in. It read, “We’ve always done it this way.” I think that was their church logo.

The problem was that the traditions had blinded them to such a degree that they could not see a man who had just been healed. Their traditions had blinded them so that they could not see, in this act, the

power of Jesus. They could not see that He was who He said He was.

So, in Mark 3:6, they left. They were furious! They were bound to the past; to the way it always was. This was sapping the life right out of them.

I understand this a little better because I was in a church, as a college student, that was bound to its past. There was a tragic situation in that little chapel on one of the hills in Tennessee. The name of the hill, or the mountain, was Jump Off Mountain, and the name of the church was Jump Off Baptist Church. I would drive up there, which took about forty-five minutes, in a borrowed car, and I would preach to about fifteen people who would come. My goal, for that sermon, was to keep everyone awake. If I could keep, especially one man, awake, it was an accomplishment.

I will never forget one older man in that church who had been there for twenty-five years. He taught the adult class and he basically, ran everything. His wife played the piano. I would soon learn that this man was kind of, the head; the titular head, with a clenched fist.

Over the choir loft, which I think, held about six people, there was a banner. The banner was decrepit, having become frayed, yellowed, and crinkled; in fact, cracked. It looked like it had been up there for a long time. So I came up with a clever idea to give this church some momentum. We would change the banner; the logo and put up a fresh one.

I contacted an artist and we began working on the new banner. I did not realize, in my brashness, that there were proper procedures to go through. I took the old banner down before church one Sunday morning, and was getting ready to put up the new, beautiful banner with the new logo. I cannot even remember what it was. I was putting the thing up, leaning on one of the choir pews pounding a nail, and in walked this man.

The man walked about halfway in and stopped. I turned around to look at him and his face was red as a beet. He looked at me and said, “Young man, that’s been up there for twenty-two years.”

He stormed out of that church and slammed the door behind him. I wanted to say, “It looks like it’s been up here for a hundred years.”

Change was not a part of that church, but I learned a valuable lesson. The valuable lesson is that if you worship the past, you forfeit the future.

The Response of the Pharisees

Now, let us look at the reaction of the Pharisees. They responded in three ways.

1. First, they left and were furiously angry.

You could translate this, “They left in a huff.” They were so mad that Jesus Christ had exposed them and their ridiculous traditions that they left angrily.

2. Secondly, they began to organize a death plot.

We are told in Mark 3:6,

The Pharisees went out and immediately began conspiring with the Herodians against Him, as to how they might destroy Him.

3. Thirdly, they formed an alliance.

It is fascinating, as you study, that the Herodians were bitter enemies of the Pharisees. They did not like each other; in fact, they could not stand each other. Yet, we find the Pharisees forming an alliance with this politically zealous group.

The Herodians wanted Herod back on the throne, so they were called the Herodians. The Pharisees wanted to get rid of Jesus, so they probably presented the thought that Jesus was a political threat. As a result, they joined forces to destroy Christ.

How sad that they missed the point that Jesus Christ had made.

Application

Now, by way of application, what should we learn today? We will look at what we should learn from the Pharisees and then, what we should learn from Christ’s teaching.

From the Pharisees

1. First, we should learn from the Pharisees that piety is never a substitute for spirituality.

Piety is what you do when others are watching. Spirituality is what you *are*, regardless of who is watching.

Piety could never substitute for intimacy with God. You cannot earn intimacy; you do not work for spiritual growth.

2. Secondly, the Pharisees taught us that regulations can be protective, but are never productive.

Now do not jump off the end of the peer – regulations can be protective. In fact, God had given

this nation the Sabbath Law to protect them. There are regulations that we should follow to protect us. Understand, however, so that you do not fall into the same Pharisaical trap, that the regulation, though protecting, can never produce spirituality.

From Christ’s teaching

1. From Christ’s teaching we learn first that Christianity is a replacement, not an addition.

Christianity replaces fear with freedom. In this case, it replaces fasting with feasting; a permanent melancholy with a permanent joy.

Christianity is intended to replace, as we are told in II Corinthians 5:17,

Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things [are continually] passed away; behold new things have [continually] come.

Do not add Christ to your life. Do not tack Christianity on to the end, “I’ve got all of these things *and* I go to church.”

Christianity is a replacement, not something to be added to. It is life itself.

2. Secondly, Christianity never lives in the past; it lives for the future.

I thank God for Martin Luther, who, one day, came up with a brand new idea that was considered heresy – congregational singing in four part harmony.

I thank God for William Carey, who came up with a brand new idea – foreign missions. He went to India, without any support from the religious world.

I thank God for William Tyndale and John Wycliffe, who gave their lives for a new idea – translating the Bible into an understandable version so that the plowboy, as they put it, could understand.

I thank God for C. T. Studd, who shook the complacent moorings of the Anglican church when he wrote, “Some wish to live within the sound of church or chapel bell; I want to run a rescue shop within a yard of hell.”

I am thankful for new ideas – not new doctrines; not a vacillation where it is important – but for the ability to live for the future without worshiping the past.

Today, I want you to evaluate your own walk with Christ. Let me ask a question of you, in closing. Would you say, “I used to be close to the Lord. The

Bible used to be alive. I can remember a day when I would study the word and it was great. I used to tell people about Jesus Christ, but it seems like I just don't do it anymore."

My friend, you are bound to your experiences in the past, while Jesus Christ wants your experience to be in the present and for the future. However, to have

that, He cannot be added on to your life; He must *be* your life.

Jesus Christ offered these people freedom, forgiveness, and fulfillment – and they rejected Him. He is offering the same thing to you today – freedom, forgiveness, fulfillment – I trust you have accepted Him.

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