

Jesus versus Religion

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[0 : 00] to Mark chapter 2 verse 18. Mark chapter 2 verse 18 and we're going to read to chapter 3 verse 6 and it's on page 1004 if you're using a church bible and there's pens in a box if you want to take notes. Peter has the pens so feel free to go and get one there and Kirsty is going to come and read. It's on page 1004 Mark chapter 2 verse 18 to chapter 3 verse 6.

Now John's disciples and the Pharisees were fasting. Some people came and asked Jesus how is it that John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees are fasting but yours are not? Jesus 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. 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 wine skins otherwise the wine will burst the skins and both the wine and the wine skins will be ruined. No they pour new wine into new wine skins. One Sabbath Jesus was going through the cornfields and as his disciples walked along they began to pick some ears of corn. The Pharisees said to him look why are they doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath? 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.

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.

Okay let's pray and ask for God's help as we get stuck into this passage together. Let's pray. Father again we thank you for this gospel of Mark. We thank you for this record about the life of Jesus Christ God's son who came into the world for us.

We pray that we would better understand the Jesus who is written about. That we would better understand the Jesus who interacts with people. That we may know who you are.

[3 : 49] What you have come to do. That we would understand what it is to follow you. And to orientate our lives around you.

So please speak to us afresh today. Please change us and transform us. Make us more like Christ as we study him and look at him.

We ask for your Holy Spirit in all that we do. Because without his power we have nothing. So be gracious to us and help us.

We ask this in Jesus name. Amen. So there are seven candidates.

Who are you going to be voting for as the next president of Ireland? Well if you haven't made up your mind like myself you can be sure that the media are going to be watching their every move.

[4 : 58] Cameras and notebooks will be at the ready. What do they stand for? What are they against? Their lives are going to be under careful observation as they meet and greet.

And our role is to watch and to listen and to make an informed choice. Now in Mark's gospel Jesus has come onto the scene claiming to be God's king.

If you like the president of the entire universe. And as Jesus goes walk about people are watching him closely. Particularly the religious leaders.

They are analysing his every move. Who he's with. What he says. What he's doing. It's like the paparazzi are on his tail.

Cameras are clicking at every opportunity. And as we follow Jesus the presidential candidate as he moves amongst the people we actually get a clearer picture of who Jesus is.

[6 : 05] And surprisingly we discover that Jesus is not into religion. In fact it seems he goes out of his way to confront religious people and to cause controversy with the church.

So as we watch and listen to Jesus we see that he is anti-religion and pro-himself. We have to watch and listen and make an informed choice about this person.

So what does Jesus offer that religion can't? Well first off Jesus offers a feast whereas religion offers a fast.

The media are on his trail watching his every move and as always they are ready with a question. Look at verse 18. Now John's disciples that's John the Baptist his disciples and the Pharisees were fasting.

So some people came and asked Jesus how is it that John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees are fasting but yours are not? What's your policy on fasting Jesus?

[7 : 23] Well fasting was seen as a way of getting God's attention and showing the seriousness of your commitment. In fact for the Jewish person it was a way of actually bringing in the kingdom of God.

It was a form of manipulation. It was kind of like well if we do this for God if we fast and we show how serious we are with God then God is going to do something in turn for us.

It was an attempt to force God to intervene and to send his restoring and redeeming king. Now the problem is Jesus isn't fasting like everybody else which leads us to two conclusions.

Either Jesus isn't into this religious thing and he's not taking religion very seriously at all or there is no need to fast because the king has already come.

Well quite clearly it's the latter. Jesus is not fasting, he's not participating in the religious stuff because the kingdom of God is already active and present among them in the person of Jesus.

[8 : 32] If only they had taken time to examine and to see what he was doing because Jesus had come into the world and he had come to restore the broken world as he went around healing the sick and casting out demons.

And he came to redeem mankind as he went reaching out to the margins of society, reaching out to those who are on the outside, bringing grace and offering forgiveness of sins.

So in effect he's saying to the crowds you're not waiting for the president to be elected, he's actually already here, it's me. Rather than a time to fast, he's saying it's actually a time to feast.

There should be a party atmosphere about us. In fact he says it's just like a wedding, verse 19. Jesus said how can the guests of the bridegroom fast while he is with them?

They cannot so long as they have them with them. Now in those days weddings lasted a whole week. We think the Irish are very good at weddings, kind of go from three o'clock until what?

[9 : 43] Three in the morning or something like that. These guys did it for the whole week. A continuous supply of food and wine as the people came out into the streets and singing and dancing.

The whole week was a week of celebration. And Jesus is saying because I am here with you, the wedding has begun. I am the bridegroom and you are the invited guest.

The king is here, the kingdom is on display and you're welcome to join in. So let's enjoy the feast. And Jesus is laying down a challenge to those who are religious.

To live our lives trying to get God's attention by our religious acts or trying to force God to intervene by our special prayers is actually to turn your back on Jesus.

To come here this morning thinking that, well, I've read my Bible this week and I'm here at church today, is somehow going to turn God's favour around to look on you with goodness, is actually to turn your back on Jesus.

[10 : 53] It's like going to a wedding to fast rather than to feast. He says, I'm already here. The feast is to begin. I'm already looking upon you in favour because I've come.

However, Jesus reminds us that the time is coming when he would actually have to leave the feast. He would have to leave the wedding, verse 20. The time will come when the bridegroom will be

taken away from them and on that day they will fast.

Being taken away is a reference to the coming death of Jesus and it's getting closer all the time.

The king will die and then the people will fast, particularly, or maybe I should only say only the women who are around the cross that we read about at the end.

They were the ones mourning for Jesus. They were fasting. But it's all part of his big plan. As Jesus goes to the cross, he will die for us, making it possible for us to enjoy the ultimate feast, the greater feast, the eternal feast in God's kingdom.

So Jesus offers a feast. Religion offers a fast. Second, Jesus offers something completely new, whereas religion offers something old.

[12:21] Listen to how Jesus speaks to the crowd. He's got the attention at this stage. Verse 21. No one sews a patch of untrunk cloth on an old garment.

Now I suppose this is a little bit foreign to us because we just go out and buy new clothes, don't we?

We don't tend to patch up, but if you get an untrunk or a new piece of cloth and you put it to an old piece of jeans or something, when it's washed, it shrinks and the old cloth will pull away.

That's the idea. He says if he does, the new piece will pull away from the old, making the tear worse. And no one pours new wine into old wineskins.

Again, as they made wine, over a process of time, the wine would ferment and it would expand.

And if the wineskins aren't right, they're going to burst.

He says if he does, the wine will burst the skins and both the wine and the wineskins will be ruined.

No, he pours new wine into new wineskins. Now, Jesus here is making a comparison between himself and the way of religion.

[13:29] He's saying just as you can't attach a new patch onto an old garment, so you can't attach Jesus to religion. And just as you can't put new wine into old wineskins, so you can't add Jesus onto religion.

We talk about this a la carte religion where you kind of pick a little bit of this and a little bit of that and you like this but you don't like that and you kind of form your own thing. Well, you can't mix Jesus and religion.

Trying to put Jesus and religion together is like trying to mix water and oil. You can put them in a jar, shake it up around the place, but it separates. Jesus is utterly and completely different.

He's not a continuation of the old system. He is coming to offer something else entirely. All religion does is offer you the old way and the old way is just full of rules which breaks you and destroys you and it's all about your performance and trying to get God's attention.

Jesus says, no, I've come to offer a new way. I have come to restore you and to redeem you and it's all based on his performance for us.

[14:41] God's love. So the challenge for us is, are we going to put aside our old way of thinking, to put aside our traditions, to put aside our religious acts and embrace this new radical way of Jesus who's come to offer something completely new?

One writer put it like this and I think it's very helpful. He says, in relation to pouring new wine into new wine skins, he says, will we become new vessels for the expanding fermentation of Jesus and the gospel in our lives?

It's like we're to empty ourselves completely of all the old stuff and get rid of it so we're completely empty so that we can be filled completely with the new Jesus, the gospel that it would expand and flow into every vessel of our lives.

So we offer something new. And third, Jesus offers rest, whereas religion just offers rules.

Now the campaign trail is hotting up and there's a bit of a media frenzy as they follow Jesus, verse 23. One Sabbath, Jesus was going through the cornfields and as his disciples walked along, they began to pick some ears of corn.

[16:11] And the Pharisee said to him, look, why are they doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath? Sabbath was all about a time of rest.

And the Pharisees who are watching with their high-powered zoom lenses following Jesus wherever he's going, they've picked up on something and they've come up with a question. They're the religious police and their job is to make sure that every single person rested on the Sabbath and did no work.

But to enforce this time of resting, it actually created a whole series of rules. Altogether, they had 39 restrictions that they built on to the law of no work on the Sabbath.

They added 39 other little rules onto it. things like you couldn't walk further than one kilometer on the Sabbath. That was work.

You couldn't tie a knot. That was work. You couldn't write more than one letter. That was considered work. Basically, you were not allowed to do anything that was not essential to live.

[17 : 24] You could breathe. That was okay. But that was about it. You could eat food, but you weren't allowed to pick food. food. So the emphasis had moved terribly from instead of time of rest to a time of rules.

But for the religious people, there was a theological reason for making sure that everybody rested. They believed that if all the people of Israel, if they could keep the law for two Sabbaths, if everybody could do it together for two Sabbaths, then they were going to be redeemed.

God was going to come, he was going to sort out everything and things would be put right again. So in their eyes, Jesus arrives on the scene with his disciples.

And they're not only ignoring the rules, they're actually an obstacle to God's redemption. Jesus is a barrier. He's actually stopping God's work from happening.

Jesus has an answer for them, as always, verse 25. Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need? Well, they all knew David, he was the greatest king that had ever lived.

[18 : 41] In the days of Abiathar, the high priest, and he certainly knew what the law was, David entered the house of God and he ate the consecrated bread, which is lawful only for priests to eat.

and David also gave some to his companions. Now, if you go back to that story, you discover it all happened on the Sabbath. So, at one level, Jesus is saying, look, guys, remember how there was an exemption for David and he could eat food and he could do something that was kind of considered unlawful.

Well, don't you think you could make an exception for other people too? But there's actually more to it than that. Jesus is going deeper. God had promised to his people that a new king was going to come from David's line.

This is what the prophet Jeremiah says, Jeremiah 23 verse 5. This is what God was looking forward to. He says, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will raise up to David a righteous branch.

So, there's a new king going to come. A king who will reign wisely and do what is right in the land. In his days, Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety.

[20 : 00] So, that was a great expectation. They were all looking forward for a new David, a better king, the ultimate king who was going to come and save and rescue Israel so they could live in safety.

And now Jesus arrives on the scene just walking through the cornfields and he begins to do things that David did. Jesus is saying, I am doing what David did because I am that promised king that you're waiting for.

So, Jesus' message is crystal clear to these religious people. He's saying, you don't have to keep rules to win God's favour. You don't have to be making up rules to be earning salvation.

Redemption is now here. It's me. I am the long awaited promised king. Verse 27, then he said to them, the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.

And so, the son of man is Lord even of the Sabbath. The Sabbath was to be a day of rest and renewal, not a day of impossible rule keeping.

[21 : 15] And the way to experience this rest, he was saying, was to come to Jesus. I am the king who has come to save you and redeem you. I have come to break that old legalistic way of living, to be rid of it forever.

And my way is a way of rest. Rather than striving for redemption, you simply receive redemption. Jesus has secured salvation for us so that we don't have to obey rules to achieve it.

And we don't have to think of keeping rules to maintain it. He's done it all for us. He lived the perfect life. He kept all the rules for us perfectly.

And he paid the penalty for all the times we've broken the rules. In effect, Jesus is saying, you celebrate the Sabbath. I am the ultimate Sabbath.

I am where you find true rest. And it's only in coming to me that you will receive salvation and redemption.

[22 : 23] So with great skill and wit, Jesus is exposing the emptiness of religious behavior. But he doesn't stop there.

He's not satisfied with what he's done. Jesus confronts religion head-on, forcing us to choose between Jesus or religion.

Look at verse 1 of chapter 3. Another time he went into the synagogue and a man with a shriveled hand was there.

Again, he would have been somebody who would have been considered on the outside, marginalized, not of any interest to anybody. And 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. And Jesus said to the man with the shriveled hand, stand up in front of everyone.

[23 : 23] You could imagine, couldn't you? Everybody's gathered for church. And all of a sudden it stops. What has been quiet whispering in the pews is now made crystal clear to everyone.

Jesus has been watching them taking notes in the shadows and now he forces it all out into the open. It's like the battle lines are being drawn between the religious leaders on one side and Jesus on the other.

And in the middle stands this poor man with a shriveled hand. He'd only come to church and now he's the centre of attention. What's Jesus going to do?

Well it's not just what is Jesus going to do, it's what would we do. Because we have to choose.

Verse 4. Jesus asked them, which is lawful on the Sabbath?

To do good or to do evil? To save life or to kill? You see the law required that there should be no healing done on the Sabbath.

[24 : 28] But what is the right response? Well the right response of course is to do good. To save life. No matter what religion says.

You see Jesus always moves in compassion to the needs of those who are weak, who are poor and who are vulnerable. Religion on the other hand is all concerned about being theologically correct.

holding to denominational lines and obeying house rules. That's what religion is. And the way we know if we are on the side of religion or if we are on the side of Jesus boils down to our response to the weakest and the most defenceless in society.

That's crucial, we get that. That's how we know whether we are a religious person or whether we are a Jesus person. It all boils down to our response to the weakest and most defenceless in society.

Look at religion. To the needs of the weak and the vulnerable, religion is always silent. Verse 4. Let's read verse 4 again.

[25 : 49] Jesus asked them, which is lawful on the Sabbath? To do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill. But they remain silent. Religion is too busy pointing out where others fail and mess up.

Rather than see needs, they see sinners who have rebelled against God and therefore, well, they deserve their lot in life. Are we religious?

Well, let me ask us all this question. What is our heart response to a young girl who happens to get pregnant and ends up living on her own?

Or walking down McCurtain Street or Patrick Street in Cork and you see an alcoholic sitting down in his mess? Or somebody who you know who's gone into debt because they've misused their money in the good times?

What's your response? What's your heart's response to those things? Do you see somebody in need? Or do you just see failures who are to be ignored?

[27 : 04] The only hope religion offers in cases like that is more rules. Do better. Try harder. Don't be like this. Be like that. You shouldn't have done that.

You should do this. It offers no forgiveness, no grace, and no mercy. Religion is always silent to the needs of the weak and the vulnerable.

Compare that to Jesus. To the needs of the poor and the defenseless, Jesus is compassionate.

Look at verse 5. He looked around at them in anger, making eye contact with all of the religious people as they sit in their church.

He looked around at them in anger and deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts. And he said to the man, stretch out your hand. And he stretched it out and his hand was completely restored.

You see, followers of Jesus do not sit in condemnation or in accusation of others. Rather than seeing faults and failures, they see people who need the love of Christ and the welcome of a saviour.

[28 : 28] Do you claim, do I claim to be on the side of Jesus? Well, let's ask another question. What is our heart response to those of other nationalities who we claim are taking the Irish people's jobs?

What's our heart response to those who live off social welfare and benefits while we do all the hard work? What do we think of those who have addiction and use up vital resources?

Do you look at those people and you see people like that and think, they're the cause of all the problems? or do we see people who are our primary concern needing our support and help?

The hope of Jesus is one of restoration and renewal. One where forgiveness is offered for the repentant, there is grace for the broken, there is mercy to all who ask, and there is a welcome for all who will come.

So as Jesus goes out on his campaign trail, he's putting it up to us all. Those who are on the side of religion cannot be on the side of Jesus.

[29 : 58] And those who claim to be on the side of Jesus can't be on the side of religion. They don't go together. They're two different lives entirely.

In fact, surprisingly, the religious are the first to oppose Jesus, verse 6. The religious people, the church people, the one who read their Bibles, verse 6.

Then the Pharisees went out and began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus. Jesus. You see, Jesus has been saying it very clearly to the religious.

He says, you are way off the mark. Your traditions of rules and codes have no value. Your religious acts and rituals are never going to save you or free you.

And that's what makes them so angry because their life is all centred around their own performance. And Jesus says it's never going to work. And they want to kill him and get rid of him.

[31 : 03] But to those who embrace Jesus, Jesus gives us a new way entirely. A completely new way. He gives us a new heart.

And into our heart he gives us a rule of love. And he gives us a law of compassion. And that is what is the true mark of a church that is on the side of Jesus.

And that is what we want for this church and for us individually and together. That here we are known as a church that welcomes sinners. That we welcome each other because we all mess up. And our performance is never good enough. And we give grace to the broken and those who are finding it difficult. And we reach across to the outsider.

But we will always confront the religious because there is no room for religious people in here. If we are going to go the way of Jesus, then we must be prepared for the response that Jesus got.

[32 : 18] They wanted to kill Jesus and get rid of Jesus. Jesus. And religious people won't want anything to do with grace. They won't want anything to do with those who welcome others.

We must be prepared. But let us think clearly, which side are we on? The side of the religious or the side of Jesus?

He confronts us head on to make that choice. us. Let's pray together. just going to read something from Isaiah.

Let's just reflect on this. Let's just reflect on this. Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke to set the oppressed free and break every yoke?

Is this not the kind of fasting I have chosen? Is it not to share your food with the hungry, to provide the poor wanderer with shelter, when you see the naked to clothe him and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?

[34 : 02] If you do away with the yoke of oppression, with the pointing finger and malicious talk, and if you spend yourselves on behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed, then your light will rise in the darkness and your night will become like the noonday.

Father, we firstly confess for the times where we go the religious route and we think it's about our performance and about our little rituals and we ignore those who are most in need.

Father, please forgive us. Please help us to go the way of Jesus, to embrace him, to go a completely new and different way, the way of Christ.

Christ, and I pray that you would enable us to live a life whereby we are shining the light in the darkness, reaching out to the weak, the poor and the vulnerable, welcoming in and offering grace. May we follow the way of Jesus and may we get rid of every hint of religion that is in our lives. We ask this in Jesus' name.

[35 : 44] Amen. The final song that we have this morning, it's a new song for some of us.

Others, I think, will know it. But it talks about the compassion of Jesus this morning, the name God who does you do