

10. When Religion Gets in the Way

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Matthew 12:1-21

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I remember a particular day when I was in the 5th grade, and my teacher, Mr Burtenshaw, handed out a sheet of instructions to every child in the class.

“This is a very important quiz,” he said. “You need to read all the instructions very carefully before you start. You have 5 minutes total. Your time starts now.”

I started to read the instructions.

1. Read all the instructions carefully before you begin.
2. Put your name in the upper right-hand corner of this page.

The kid on my right started writing his name. And then the girl on my left did the same. So I quickly wrote my name, and then moved on to instruction 3.

The class was in a flurry. Pens were scratching, heads were turning, kids were counting on their fingers as they followed the next instructions...

3. Draw five small squares in the upper left-hand corner.
4. Put an “X” in each square.
5. Put a circle around each square.
6. Sign your name under the title of this paper.
7. On the back of this paper, multiply 703 by 66.

I joined the furious activity. My pride was on the line. I was a high achiever in 5th grade. I could see that the girl beside me was one question ahead... So I worked even faster.

17. If you are the first person to reach this point, LOUDLY, call out, I AM THE FIRST PERSON TO REACH THIS POINT, AND I AM THE LEADER IN FOLLOWING DIRECTIONS.”

“I AM THE FIRST PERSON TO REACH THIS POINT,” I yelled, “AND I AM THE LEADER IN FOLLOWING DIRECTIONS!”

There were a few giggles, but still the pens were working overtime. I completed the second to last instruction. I was going to win this thing! Then I read the final instruction.

20. Now that you have finished reading all the instructions, complete ONLY instructions 1 and 2! Note: Please be quiet and watch the others “follow directions.”

Mr Burtenshaw... You got me good!

Have you ever had one of those moments when you realize that you've been concentrating on the details so much, that you've missed the bigger picture?

Our Bible passage today is all about making sure that, when it comes to Christianity, we don't miss the bigger picture. It's all about getting the bigger picture right.

To find out exactly what that means for us, stick around as we open the Bible in just a few moments.

INTRO

Well good morning, and welcome to Yountville Community Church. My name is Dan Bidwell, Senior Pastor here. As always, we are so glad you've joined us as we pause from other activities, in order to refocus our hearts and minds on the bigger picture, to refocus on what is most important, to refocus on Jesus and all he has done for us. That's our goal each Sunday, to create space for us to connect with God and worship him as we hear his word, as we learn from him and as we join together in prayer. I pray you find that connection this morning.

I also pray that you will find connection with our church family. We are currently holding all our meetings online, but we are excited to be reopening our historic church building here in Yountville in just a few weeks' time. So make sure you are signed up to our mailing list so we can keep you up to date with all those plans. And please share our plans with other families and friends who might like to join us as we launch a fresh, new ministry here in the heart of the Napa Valley. If you yourself are new with us, welcome and I'd love the chance to get to know you in the lead up to the reopening.

Again, the best way to do that is go to our website [yountvillechurch.org] and fill in a connect card, and we'll be in touch really soon.

As we enter the final phase of our construction, thank you to everyone who is partnering with us financially. The building work is very exciting – and I'll be sending pictures with the weekly e-News emails, so make sure you sign up to those. But the building project has the sole aim of helping us to share the hope of Jesus with our friends and family in the Napa Valley and beyond. So thank you for your continued support and if you'd like to partner with us financially, you can find out how on the Give tab of our website.

But for now, will you join me in prayer as we prepare to hear from God's word...

Our heavenly Father, as we open your word at this time, help us to put aside all distractions. Help us to give these precious minutes to you. Help us to step back from our busyness, so that we see the bigger picture, and so that we can live lives that honor you, and make a difference in the world. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen

When Religion Gets in the Way

A young girl became a Christian in an exciting revival at her church and was baptized on the final Sunday morning. That afternoon, she ran through the house singing and dancing. Her sour grandfather rebuked her with these words, "You ought to be ashamed of yourself. You just joined the church and you're singing and dancing on the Lord's Day!"

I don't know if that's a true story, but it speaks volumes, doesn't it? A little girl expresses the *joy* of salvation, and that joy is crushed by a *religious* view of the sabbath.

And that juxtaposition raises the question that our passage addresses, which is: ***what happens when religion gets in the way (of the message)***? That is, what happens when religion becomes all about the details, all about the rules, all about the restrictions, so much so that it loses connection with its original purpose? What happens when religion loses sight of the bigger picture?

Because that seems to have been the problem for the religious leaders in Jesus' time, as our story today will show.

^{12:1} At that time Jesus went through the grainfields on the Sabbath. His disciples were hungry and began to pick some heads of grain and eat them.² When the Pharisees saw this, they said to him, "Look! Your disciples are doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath." (Matthew 12:1-2)

The Pharisees confront Jesus for (what they believe) is an action that goes against God's laws concerning the Sabbath.

The Sabbath, or the day of rest, goes right back to the creation story, where God created everything in six days, then rested on the seventh. God decrees the sabbath day to be 'holy' in just the second chapter of the Bible (Genesis 2:3). And then God reinforces the idea of sabbath in the Fourth Commandment:

⁸ "Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. ⁹ Six days you shall labor and do all your work, ¹⁰ but the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, nor your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns. ¹¹ For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy. (Exodus 20:8-11)

So come back to the story of Jesus and the disciples picking grain in the grainfield on the Sabbath. Could you call that 'work'?

Here is where the Pharisees got a little tangled in the details. The Pharisees genuinely wanted to do the right thing. They genuinely wanted to keep the Sabbath. And so they wrote a definition of 'work' – in fact they came up with a list of 39 activities that qualified as work. And as far as they could see, Jesus and the disciples could be accused of reaping, winnowing, threshing and preparing a meal. All because they picked a few heads of grain to chew on their journey, which by the way, was permitted in Old Testament law as God's way of providing for the poorest in society.

So you see the issue – Jesus and the disciples are doing something that is permitted under the letter of God's law, but prohibited by the Pharisees' interpretation of God's law. Who is in the right?

Two Examples

Jesus answers them with two examples from the Old Testament that show the law is not as black and white as the Pharisees believed.

First, Jesus reminds them of the story of the famed King David, who did something that was technically 'unlawful' when he was on the run from King Saul.

³ [Jesus] answered, "Haven't you read what David did when he and his companions were hungry? ⁴ He entered the house of God, and he and his companions ate the consecrated bread—which was not lawful for them to do, but only for the priests. (Matthew 12:3-4)

Normally only priests were permitted to eat the bread that had been offered to God. But by giving the bread to David when they did, it saved his life so that he could go on to fulfill God's purposes for him as the anointed King of Israel, which in turn led the country into a period of renewed zeal for God.¹

Jesus points to another example of the letter of the law being broken for the sake of something better, by pointing to the priesthood.

⁵ Or haven't you read in the Law that the priests on Sabbath duty in the temple desecrate the Sabbath and yet are innocent? ⁶ I tell you that something greater than the temple is here. (Matthew 12:5-6)

The priests in the temple worked double time on the Sabbath, preparing twice the number of offerings compared to the other days of the week.² But their 'work' is instrumental to the way that God's people find the ultimate sabbath rest, because we find our true sabbath in worshiping. But in order to worship, somebody has to work to make it happen.

¹ 1 Samuel 21:1-6

² Numbers 28:9

“Something greater than the temple is here,” says Jesus.

The Principle Behind the Law

Jesus takes the mechanical view of religion, the rigid rule-keeping view of religion and he teaches that there is a better way. A way where we find life, not in the letter of the law, but in the spirit of the law. Jesus is greater than great King David, and Jesus is greater than the temple. Jesus brings God’s purposes back into the center of our religious life, by reminding us what is more important:

⁷ If you had known what these words mean, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice,’^[a] you would not have condemned the innocent. ⁸ For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath.”
(Matthew 12:7-8)

Jesus teaches us the principle that stands behind God’s laws: the law ought to lead us to the heart of God. The law ought to teach us that mercy is more important than ritual. Doing what is upright and good and in line with the way that God shaped the universe – that is more important than keeping strict rules, especially when keeping the rule does more damage than breaking the rule.

And that’s where the second story in our passage comes in. It’s a test case that asks us which is more important – mercy or rule-keeping.

⁹ Going on from that place, [Jesus] went into their synagogue, ¹⁰ and a man with a shriveled hand was there. Looking for a reason to bring charges against Jesus, they asked him, “Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?” (Matthew 12:9-10)

This again was one of the points where the Pharisees had developed extra rules around God’s original commandments for what was permitted and what was not. In the Pharisee’s interpretation, it was lawful to give aid to someone in a life and death situation on the sabbath, but not to help someone with a non-lifethreatening condition, like the man with the shriveled hand.

But Jesus uses an example from the Pharisees’ so-called ‘laws’ to point out the flaw in their logic:

¹¹ He said to them, “If any of you has a sheep and it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will you not take hold of it and lift it out? ¹² How much more valuable is a person than a sheep! Therefore it is lawful to **do good** on the Sabbath.” (Matthew 12:11-12)

The point of the sabbath, Jesus says, is about sharing in the rest of God. The blessing of God’s rest. The life-giving refreshment of enjoying what God has given us.

The Pharisees had turned the day of ‘rest’ into a day filled with religious burdens.

And sadly that burden continues to today for many people who have confused 'religion' with living under the blessings of God. Like the grandfather in the story I read at the beginning – salvation loses its joy when religion is all about trying to make the grade, or trying to earn your good standing with God.

Instead Jesus shows us the 'greater' way – which is a life that reflects the good purposes God created us for, a life which reflects the heart and values of God. A life which is 'good.'

"How much more valuable is a person than a sheep!", says Jesus. And to show everybody what God values,

he said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." So he stretched it out and it was completely restored, just as sound as the other. (Matthew 12:13)

Jesus desires mercy, not sacrifice. Heart, not religion. Spirit-filled obedience, not sour religious observance. Compassion, not robotic compliance.

Jesus wants us to be transformed, to be more like him. And Jesus helps us to do that as he sends the Holy Spirit to do his work in us, taking our hearts of stone and making them into hearts of flesh.³

Two Responses To Jesus

Because this passage today is really about two different heart responses to Jesus. There is the hard heart of the Pharisees, the stony heart that lacks compassion, the stony heart that has forgotten the beating heart of God's message.

And then there are the hearts that have been brought back to life, as the life-blood of Jesus flows through them as they are filled with the Holy Spirit. Hearts that beat in tune with God's heart, hearts that share the same mercy and grace and goodness.

Those are the two responses we see in the passage, the two ways that our life can go according to where we stand with Jesus.

The Pharisees, in their hard-heartedness, reject Jesus and the transformation that he brings... Right after Jesus heals the man with the shriveled hand, this is the very next sentence:

But the Pharisees went out and plotted how they might kill Jesus. (Matthew 12:14)

How do people genuinely seeking to do the work of God become the kind of people who destroy the work of God?

³ Ezekiel 36:36; Romans 8:29

Because I believe the Pharisees had the best of intentions. But somewhere along the way, in their frenzy of fastidious law-keeping, it appears they lost touch with God. They lost sight of the bigger picture of God's plan. They stopped listening to God's voice and replaced it with their own traditions and their own wisdom and refused to receive God's correction.

We ought to hear the word of warning in this passage. Because with the best of intentions, some churches get caught up in their own version of the law as it relates to worship, and church style, and membership, and the version of the Bible we read. And I say this gently, but sometimes that overly rigid attitude leads to destroying the work of God.

And the evidence is there in black and white in Thom Rainer's sobering book, *Autopsy of a Deceased Church*. Rainer is a church researcher, and the book is all about identifying the factors that contributed to the slow death of a number of US churches.

The problem for the Pharisees, and the problem for the overly rigid church, is that they lose touch with the bigger picture of what God is doing. They get caught up in the practice, and forget the principles. Tradition trumps worshiping in spirit and truth. Religion gets in the way...

One of the things I love about church planting is that it forces you to rethink everything from first principles. Why do we do what we do in church? How do we determine what is core, and what is peripheral? And how do we bring the timeless truth of the gospel to a new generation?

Well, we go back to the heart of God, we listen to God in the Bible, and we make decisions that are in line with God's big plan for this world.

And actually, that's what each of us should do day by day as we follow the pathways that God has laid out for us. When our hearts are open to God, and open to the prompting of his Holy Spirit, God brings the kind of transformation and restoration and healing that is at the heart of his plan for the universe.

And we see that plan in action in the final section of our passage today. Jesus goes away from the confrontation with the Pharisees and heals many more. Jesus shows the crowds, and he shows us where history is headed.

Martin Luther King Jr once said:

The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice.

As Jesus heals the crowds, he shows that God's long-term plan is the healing of all things. Justice, and mercy, and hope are what Jesus brings.

And that's what we want to bring to the Napa Valley and beyond when our church reopens. We want to share the hope of God's plan to bring healing and transformation and restoration and

justice. We want to share God's heart of mercy and forgiveness through the story of the cross. And we want to share the absolute joy of salvation that we have in Jesus Christ...

Will you join me in praying that we would be that kind of church?

