

Discipleship According to Mark

The End of Religion (Mark 2:18-3:12)

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn at HCC on February 1, 2026

Introduction

- ❖ So far in our study of Mark's Gospel, we've been introduced to Jesus, to some of his disciples, and to many who have been blessed by his ministry. Which has led to great crowds traveling from all around to be in the presence of this man.
 - **But along with his followers and fans, we've seen a growing band of opposition.** They were initially introduced as "*the scribes*." (1:22; 2:6) The experts in OT Law who were the regular teachers in the synagogue. Then, they were described as "*the scribes of the Pharisees*," (2:16) which tells us these scribes are members of a particular Jewish sect. **The Pharisees were respected teachers who emphasized a strict obedience to the Law of Moses.** They were all about preserving the traditions of old and maintaining a distinct Jewish identity.
 - So by our passage, the Pharisees appear multiple times. They're contrasted with Jesus. They question him. They watch him. And eventually plot against him. **What sets them off – what drives them to silence Jesus by any means necessary – are their deep differences with Jesus over how to interpret and practice the Law of Moses.** How to read it and live it out.
- ❖ **The presenting issues are the OT-prescribed practices of fasting and Sabbath-keeping.** The Pharisees have a detailed and rigid interpretation of what it looks like to fast and to keep Sabbath. And as they keep an eye on Jesus, they rightly recognize that he's proclaiming the end of fasting, the end of Sabbath-keeping, and the end of religion altogether.
 - But here's where semantics really matter. **I'm being intentional in using that phrase "the end of religion," because there are two ways you can take that.** By proclaiming the *end* of religion, Jesus could be talking about the abolishment of religion. To put an end to religion or to religious practices like fasting or Sabbath-keeping. That's how the Pharisees were interpreting his words and actions.
- ❖ But there's another way to use that word. **By the end of religion, we could mean the chief end of religion.** The ultimate purpose. Like when the historic catechism asks, "What is the chief end of man? To glorify God and enjoy him forever." That's the ultimate purpose for mankind. Well, that's Jesus's focus when he talks about fasting, Sabbath-keeping, or religion altogether. **Over against the Pharisees and their traditions, he's trying to recover the chief end of religion.** And to reframe these religious practices in light of his coming.
 - **So Jesus is *not* here to oppose or to abolish fasting or Sabbath-keeping.** But that's what the Pharisees fear he's doing. So they conclude that they need to destroy him before he destroys their traditions, their systems, their ways of worshipping God.
- ❖ That's what's happening in our text. So I know I'm being a little cute with the sermon title and the header for each of my three points: (1) the end of fasting, (2) the end of Sabbath-keeping, and (3) the end of religion. I hope it doesn't confuse you. **I'm *not* suggesting that Jesus has come to do away with any of those things.** I'm saying he's come to reframe them. To redefine them according to God's intent when he enshrined them in Law. Which, by Jesus's day, had been misconstrued by religious leaders – Pharisees being the most egregious.

The End of Fasting

- ❖ So let's start by considering the end of fasting – that is, the chief end, the main purpose for why we fast. **Our passage begins with the people – not his opponents at this point – asking questions as to why Jesus and his disciples behave so differently compared to other faith leaders and their followers.** Specifically their being contrasted with John the Baptist's disciples and with the Pharisees and their followers. Listen to v18, *“Now John's disciples and the Pharisees were fasting. And people came and said to him, “Why do John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?””*
- ❖ You can imagine this being the natural question after witnessing Jesus and his disciples at Levi's house, feasting with *“sinners and tax collectors.”* **Their demeanor, their vibe, seems very different from what people were used to when they encountered religious people.** All the religious people they knew were somber, grim, and gloomy. Always mournful.
 - And not without reason. When we were introduced to John the Baptist in the beginning of chapter 1, he was preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. **So understandably, the tone of his ministry was somber and lamentful. He was trying to get people to grieve their sins.**
 - And when the Pharisees urged people to fast, they explained it as a way to express a corporate repentance for the sins of their forebears, which resulted in their current state of subjugation under Roman rule. **So by regularly fasting, they were seeking the salvation of Israel in terms of liberation from foreign rule.** Like in the book of Judges, let's fast and mourn. And cry out to God to send a deliverer, a messiah, to liberate us from the Romans.
- ❖ So you can see why, from the people's perspective, John the Baptist and the Pharisees were so often associated with fasting. With a more austere, ascetic lifestyle. **Their ministries were certainly characterized by fasting much more than by feasting.**
 - The OT only required fasting one day of the year on the Day of Atonement. But scholars tell us that the Pharisees fasted twice a week, on Mondays and Thursdays (Lk 18:12). They'd make it obvious that they were on a fast. Purposefully looking gloomy and disfiguring their faces (Mt 6:16). **They treated fasting as a joyless religious practice.** Each of them trying to look more pitiful than the other.
- ❖ If that's what they're used to, you can see why people were astonished by Jesus and his disciples. **They were better known for feasting than fasting.** That's strange. You're a religious leader and your disciples are religious people, so why are you guys so joyful? **Why aren't you more somber and mournful like all the other religious people we know?**
 - Listen to Jesus's answer in v19, *“And Jesus said to them, “Can the wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them? As long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast.””* **I love how Jesus frames his mission and ministry in terms of a feast.** And not just any feast – a wedding feast! Which, in those days, was a week-long event with lots of eating, drinking, and celebrating each day.

- ❖ **Jesus is suggesting that he's come to bring life and joy in abundance.** Where his followers will feast like they do at a wedding. That comparison, in itself, is extraordinary, and you can see why the people were drawn to him.
 - **But his specific point is that it would be strange to attend a wedding reception – where the bride and groom have arrived – and no one is eating.** Where everyone is fasting. Just sitting around empty tables without food or drink. What kind of wedding is that? No eating? That sounds like what you do at a funeral.
- ❖ Which is what Jesus alludes to in the next verse. Look at v20, *“The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast in that day.”* **This is Jesus's first of many veiled references in Mark to his impending death.** The day will come – which at this point in Jesus's ministry is still a few years away – when he will be taken away. Nailed to a cross. And then his disciples will fast. **Their demeanor will be more characterized by fasting rather than feasting. They'll be somber and mournful. But even that will be temporary.** Their weeping may tarry for a couple nights; but their joy comes with the third morning (Ps 30:5) – when Jesus rises from the grave.
- ❖ The point is this: **Jesus's disciples, in the days of his earthly ministry, had no reason to fast.** Which makes sense when you understand the end of fasting – the chief end for why God's people fast. **On one hand, John and the Pharisees were right.** Fasting is a way to express your repentance for sin, or your longing for liberation, or your deep desire for the kingdom to come. Those are all legitimate reasons to fast.
 - But Jesus's point is that he's come to fulfill those desires. As long as he's physically present among them, there is no need to fast. **Because the most basic reason – the end for which we fast – is to draw nearer to God.** You do it because you want more of God in your life. By abstaining from food, you're making more room for God.
 - If that's the chief end of fasting – if it's ultimately a way to express a deep desire and dependence on God – **then as long as the Son of God is present among them, Jesus's disciples don't have to fast as a means to express those inner realities.** They can just be near him and enjoy the bridegroom's presence. That's why, during his earthly ministry, his disciples had no need to fast. **Because Jesus himself is the chief end of fasting.**
- ❖ But what does that mean for us – for his disciples who live today? Since he has been taken away from us. **Well, on one hand, our discipleship to Christ should involve some fasting.** Occasionally going without food – or without some other basic human need – is a fitting way to express our grief that the kingdom has not yet come in all its fullness. This world and our lives are still marked by sin and sadness. **So when Christians fast today, we're expressing our deep longing for Jesus's return.** For him to be bodily present once again.
- ❖ **But Christians don't fast like we're at a funeral.** Because the tomb is empty. Christ is risen. He's alive and on his throne. And he promised to return soon. So even when we fast, it's more than an expression of grief. **It's an expression of faith – of our hopeful anticipation of Jesus's return and the pure joy of his presence.**

- ❖ **Because of the Resurrection, Christians are the kind of religious people who can adopt the practice of fasting while preserving the joy of feasting.** That's a rare combination. To have empty stomachs but hearts full of God's joy.
- ❖ The takeaway is to ask ourselves this: **As a follower of Jesus, which posture has been dominate in my life – fasting or feasting?** Now there's definitely a place for fasting in the Christian life since our Bridegroom has yet to return. **But I think there's biblical warrant to say that feasting should be the dominate posture in the Christian life.**
 - I realize, on this side of heaven, sadness and mourning are ever present realities. **But for Christians, our lives should be primarily characterized by gladness and joy.** I like how the Pixar movie *Inside Out* stresses the importance of Sadness and how you can't sustain Joy in your life without Sadness. But even the creators still placed Joy in position as the dominant emotion. One of the lessons of the film was the importance of letting Sadness get behind that control board every so often, but it was only so that Joy could eventually get back behind the wheel and take over.
- ❖ So what's been your impression of the Christian life? **Have you been under the impression that Christianity is about the strict abidance of countless rules?** The onerous suppression of your joy and happiness in order to live a life of scarcity and sacrifice. **Does being a Christian feel to you like one long fast from everything fun and enjoyable?**
 - If that's your impression of Christianity, you're probably just as surprised that Jesus and his disciples are feasting all the time instead of fasting. Perhaps you've had the wrong impression of Jesus all this time? Perhaps your view of discipleship is skewed? Perhaps you need to reassess and pay closer attention to Jesus, especially when he describes himself as a Bridegroom and compares his mission to a wedding feast.

The End of Sabbath-Keeping

- ❖ Now let's get back into our text. I'll skip vv21-22 and save it for our next point. Let's start back up in v23 and see two instances where Jesus is confronted by the Pharisees over his practice of the Sabbath. **And like with fasting, we'll see Jesus proclaim the end of Sabbath-keeping.** Not its irrelevance or its abolishment. But its true meaning. Its chief end.
 - We're told that on one particular Sabbath day, Jesus and his disciples were walking through a grain field. And his disciples were observed plucking heads of grain. They were plucking the heads, rubbing it in their hands until the chaff came off, so they could eat the grain. That wasn't considered stealing. It was permitted by Mosaic Law (Deut 23:25). The Pharisees weren't criticizing the disciples for the plucking, rubbing, or eating of the grain. But for doing it on Saturday, on the Sabbath.
 - **By Jesus's day, the Pharisees had developed a detailed definition for what constituted "work" on the Sabbath.** They spelled out in detail 39 types of activities considered work. Which included this action of plucking and rolling the head of grain in your hands.
- ❖ Now it's easy to roll our eyes at the Pharisees. But let's take a moment to consider how they arrived at their legalistic position on the Sabbath and how similar our own thinking can be. **Give them the benefit of doubt that they started off with the best of intentions.**

- ❖ The Pharisees took God's Word seriously and were extremely careful to obey it. They were so concerned about breaking the Fourth Commandment (Ex 20:8) that they constructed these comprehensive guardrails around it. **If you just mind the guardrails and steer clear of them, then there's no chance of breaking the Fourth Commandment.**
 - That seems to make sense. **But the problem is that, in every case, our flesh will begin to fixate – not on the biblical command – but on the manmade guardrail.** We grow so concerned with the traditions of men that we abandon the Word of God. And that's how you end up with legalism.
- ❖ Let me give you an example of how we do this fairly often. How we easily fall into legalism. **Back in the day, when I was leading the youth group in this church, the youth workers and I would often give students the advice not to date until they were Juniors in college.** There was wisdom in that because we were trying to help youth obey God's Word, especially when it came to their sanctification and their sexual purity (1 Thess 4:3).
 - It was meant to be good advice. But what inevitably happened is that the students began treating it as a hard and fast rule. Judging each other if someone started dating too early. And assuming that – come first day of classes in your Junior year – your suddenly mature enough and ready to date. **God's Word as it pertains to their sanctification was no longer the focus. It was this guardrail of not dating until Junior year of college.** That's what they fixated on. And that's how you get legalism.
- ❖ **Friends, my point is that we all have Pharisaical tendencies in us.** And the best way to address them is to fix our focus back on the Word of God and not the guardrails. That's what Jesus tries to do for the Pharisees. After they accuse his disciples, in v24, of doing what's not lawful, Jesus immediately points them to the Word of God. **His point is they're so fixated on their own guardrails that they're unaware of what the Word actually teaches.**
- ❖ **He mentions this instance in 1 Samuel 21 where David and his men were on the run and found themselves in a needy situation.** And in that story, they were permitted to eat the Bread of the Presence, which was a holy item in the tabernacle that was reserved for only priests, according to Mosaic Law (Lev 24:5-9).
 - Look, Jesus would agree that the Law of God is to be taken seriously. You can't just ignore it when it becomes inconvenient. **But his point is that even the Word of God says the holiness laws regarding holy foods and holy days are important but not absolute.** There are exceptions, and these particular laws have an expiration date.
- ❖ **Jesus's point is that the end of these holiness laws – their chief end – can be summarized by love of God and love of neighbor.** A point he makes later in chapter 12:28-34. So in David's case, love of God and neighbor permitted God's Anointed and his followers to consume what was normally off limits.
 - **So in Jesus's case, how much more would love of God and neighbor permit God's Anointed and his followers to pluck these heads of grain when they're hungry?** Especially since their actions didn't even violate the Fourth Commandment. But merely the manmade guardrails constructed around it.

- ❖ These guardrails may have started with good intentions. They may have been put up initially to help people keep God's Law. **But once our focus has shifted from the Law to the guardrails – once it turns into legalism – those very guardrails turn into heavy burdens that crush people.** At that point, we've twisted the end of the Law.
 - That's Jesus's point in v27, "*And he said to them, 'The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.'*" His point is that the Sabbath wasn't given to humanity to burden us. It was given to bless us. God established in Genesis 1, within creation order, a pattern of 6+1. Six days of work; one day of rest. That command to rest is for our good. It shouldn't be used to harm or oppress.
- ❖ Jesus makes that very point in the next episode, starting in chapter 3. We're told that he entered the synagogue, and there was a man there with a withered hand. The Pharisees were watching to see what Jesus would do because it was on the Sabbath. **And another guardrail they put up to avoid the remotest chance of breaking the Sabbath was the prohibition of healing anyone on that day.** They counted that as "work."
 - The Pharisees probably thought it was sensible. "If this man wants healing, he can come back tomorrow. Is that so bad? His hand has probably been withered for years. What's one more day to wait?" The same cold logic would apply to the disciples earlier. "If you guys didn't have the foresight or discipline to prepare a meal in advance of the Sabbath, then that's on you. The best recourse is to fast for that one day. And let that hunger you feel be a lesson and reminder not to forget next time."
- ❖ Do you see where they're coming from? And how it kind of even makes a little sense. **But that's only if our focus has fixated on rules and not on love.** Where we're so concerned with the letter of the law that we've lost sight of the end of the law (its spirit). Where we're so busy asking, "How can I avoid breaking the Law?," that we fail to ask the more fundamental question, "What's the point of the Law?"
 - That's the question Jesus raises. Look at v3, "*3And he said to the man with the withered hand, 'Come here.'*" *4And he said to them, 'Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to kill?'*" *But they were silent.*"
 - **The silence of the Pharisees spoke volumes.** The right answer was obvious. Clearly the Sabbath was not given by God to harm. It's not opposed to the preservation or protection of life. And his opponents ultimately understood that and agreed.
- ❖ They just couldn't admit it. Because admitting the truth would shatter all the guardrails they put up. **Their identity as religious leaders had been built upon a reputation as guardians of the guardrails.** They stayed silent because they cared more about their reputation in the eyes of the people than the basic needs of those very people. And that made Jesus angry.
 - V5, "*And he looked around at them with anger, grieved at their hardness of heart, and said to the man, 'Stretch out your hand.'*" *He stretched it out, and his hand was restored.*" **The man had a withered hand, but the Pharisees had withered hearts.**

- ❖ They don't care about the man and his suffering. They just care that Jesus had the audacity to heal someone on a holy day. While failing to see the irony in the fact that they *"went out and immediately held counsel with the Herodians,"* to plot Jesus's destruction – on the very same holy day! **Apparently, they think its lawful to plot someone's death on the Sabbath but not to do good and heal someone's life.**
- ❖ The Pharisees misconstrued the point of Sabbath-keeping. Instead of it being a day of worshipping God and blessing your neighbor. **They treated Sabbath-keeping as a competition over who could do nothing the best.** Who's the best at not working and doing nothing even when there's an opportunity in front of you to do good and save life.
 - The Pharisees don't recognize that Jesus's presence changes things. Because he's not just an authoritative teacher or miracle worker. **He is the Lord of the Sabbath.** That's his claim in v28, *"So the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath."*
 - And by that claim, he's not just suggesting he has authority to define what is lawful to do on the Sabbath. **Jesus is claiming to be the Sabbath. To be its fulfillment. Its chief end.** The spiritual rest that the Sabbath is meant to provide is ultimately found in a relationship with him.

The End of Religion

- ❖ Jesus is the end of the Law. He's the end of religion. That's what his opponents don't grasp. They interpret his words and his actions as a threat to the Law and religion. As if he's trying to bring it all to an end. **But he's trying to reframe the Law – to reframe true religion – as finding its chief end in him.** Let's return to chapter 2:21-22 and consider the end of religion.
- ❖ After explaining why his disciples aren't fasting like the Pharisees, Jesus offers two analogies for why his very presence requires a new approach to these old religious practices. *"²¹No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old garment. If he does, the patch tears away from it, the new from the old, and a worse tear is made. ²²And no one puts new wine into old wineskins. If he does, the wine will burst the skins—and the wine is destroyed, and so are the skins. But new wine is for fresh wineskins."*
 - **So in both analogies, there's something old that's incompatible with something new.** In the first, you have an old garment with a tear in it. You shouldn't patch it with a new piece of unshrunk cloth. After the next wash, that patch will shrink and cause a bigger tear in the garment. In the second analogy, there's an old, brittle, stretched-out wineskin. Don't fill it with new wine. Because new wine ferments and expands, so it will burst the old wineskin, destroying both the wine and the skin.
- ❖ Those are memorable analogies. But what do they mean? Here's how they're commonly understood. **The old garment and old wineskin represent the teaching and practices of the Pharisees.** The traditions of men. They may have started off well-intentioned. But a legalistic spirit quickly ossified these practices, and they became stiff and brittle.
 - **The point is that you can't just add Jesus to this approach to religion – to this way of relating to God.** He's incompatible. Like unshrunk cloth or new wine, Jesus will eventually tear a hole in such man-centered approaches to religion.

- ❖ The Pharisees kept trying to fit Jesus within their system. To pour him in their wineskins. To sew him on their garments. But it never worked. It just led to tearing. **In fact, the sound of tearing reverberates throughout Mark's Gospel.**
 - You hear heaven torn open by a voice at his baptism (1:10). You hear the high priest tear his garment at Jesus's claim to be the Son of God (14:63). And you hear the temple veil tear, from top to bottom, when Jesus dies on the cross (15:38).
- ❖ **A tearing like that signifies that something fundamental has changed.** Something new is here. We can't keep relating to God like the world does in most religions, including the religion of the Pharisees. They basically teach that you relate to God by being good. By regularly fasting and strictly keeping Sabbath. **If I observe God's rules, then I'm accepted.**
 - But the gospel that Jesus gave us teaches the opposite. **It says I'm accepted, therefore I strive to observe God's rules.** I try to fast. I keep Sabbath. Not *for* acceptance. But *from* acceptance. From a secure place of acceptance by God.
- ❖ That changes things. Not our behavior per se. We can fast. We can keep Sabbath. But not as means to prove our worth or to earn our acceptance. **But as a means to express our love.** Our desire to draw closer to the God – who already accepts us, by his grace, because of his Son and his cross. That's true religion. Where we obey the Law out of faith in Christ, the chief end of Law and religion.