

# THE PRIORITY OF PEOPLE OVER RELIGIOUS TRADITION

*SERIES: THE POWER OF THE GOSPEL*

**By Doug Goins**

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Probably most of us believe that if one must choose between people and religious tradition, people should get priority. But when we try to live out our Christian lives, such decisions are not always clear-cut. Following are three case studies, real-life conflicts from my own experience, in which the needs of people and the requirements of Christian tradition ended up at cross-purposes.

The first case study comes out of my years of serving students in this church as the college pastor. There was a wonderful young man who attended PBC and who was also very involved in a successful on-campus evangelical ministry. Because of his gifts and influence he was asked to become a Bible study leader, which he did, and he really loved that ministry. Within a year he began dating a young Christian woman who was involved in that organization. But that ministry did not consider social dating godly and strongly discouraged dating for its leaders. This young man's conscience and understanding of Scripture really didn't line up with that, so he came to me for counsel. If you were in my position, what would you have told him?

The second case study comes out of an experience some of our pastoral staff had once. They were visiting a Christian college for spiritual emphasis week, speaking in chapel each morning and being involved in dorm Bible studies and discussion groups. It was a great time of spiritual renewal on campus. In personal counseling and prayer, students were coming to a place of brokenness and repentance before the Lord. One evening there was a wonderful prayer meeting in the lounge of the largest dorm on campus. More than 150 students were there. But at eleven o'clock, the dorm mother came in and shut the meeting down. Eleven o'clock curfews are a thing of the past, but in those days that was the rule. It was defined by the leadership of the college out of loving concern that the students get plenty of sleep at night so they could study during the day. But the Spirit of God was sovereignly at work in that meeting, and one of the PBC pastors argued with this dear lady, but to no avail. In her mind the rule was non-negotiable. She wasn't one to violate the requirements. Now if you had been in that setting, what would you have said to the frustrated PBC pastors, who saw God's work being limited?

The third case study again goes back to my years as a college pastor. There was a young Christian woman who was a student at a local university, and who attended our church's worship services on Sunday mornings. She was very actively involved in an evangelical campus ministry. We were planning a campus-wide evangelistic effort, and she wanted to be a part of a worship team that I was in charge of. It was comprised of students from about four different campus ministry organizations. She really felt God was leading her to sing with this team, and she had the blessing of her group's leadership--until they heard what the rehearsal schedule was. There were only three rehearsals, a couple of hours each, on different nights of the week. But she called me back and told me that she would have to miss one rehearsal completely and would probably be an hour and a half late to the second rehearsal, because she was involved in a small accountability group in this organization, and she was not allowed to miss any of the meetings. She would have been asked to leave the group if she weren't there. She was in a quandary, not knowing what to do. What would you have told her if you had been in my position?

We're going to come back to those after we look at our text.

In Mark's gospel Jesus is embroiled in similar conflicts with institutional religious leaders, the Pharisees, at the end of chapter 2 and the beginning of chapter 3. In the Pharisees' ongoing attacks on Jesus, the most consistent issue is observance of the Sabbath. Mark 2:23-24 says, "And it happened that He was passing through the grainfields 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?'" Jumping ahead to 3:1-2 we read, "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."

These are two of six different incidents recorded in the gospels in which Jesus and his disciples are charged with violating the Sabbath. The account here in Mark 2 is the only time the disciples are censured. Basically they are charged with eating on the run. Every time Jesus himself is accused of sacrilege regarding the Sabbath, he is miraculously healing a sick person.

Let me explain briefly just what the Sabbath is, before we look at this text in detail.

## What the Sabbath is

God gave Sabbath rest in the Ten Commandments. Exodus 20:8-11:

“Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a sabbath of the LORD your God; in it you shall not do any work, you or your son or your daughter, your male or female servant or your cattle or your sojourner who stays with you. For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and made it holy.”

That is the first reason given for observing the Sabbath. The second reason given is in Deuteronomy, the second giving of the Law. After an instruction that is very similar to the Exodus 20 passage, it adds in 5:15:

“You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out of there by a mighty hand and by an outstretched arm; therefore the LORD your God commanded you to observe the sabbath day.”

The Sabbath is tied to two things: the creation of the world, and the exodus from Egypt when God saved his people. Sabbath, the Hebrew word *shabbath*, literally means rest. These two passages teach us two wonderful lessons, respectively, about Sabbath rest.

Exodus 20 reminds us that on the seventh day of creation, God sat back to rest. He wanted to observe his finished work of creative perfection and enjoy it. The people of Israel were called to rest on the seventh day of each week because God wanted them to reflect on him as the giver and sustainer of life. Sabbath rest was to provide refreshment, enjoyment, and renewal for God’s people. It was a time for them to remember that all of their physical needs were ultimately supplied, not because of their own work, but because God loved them and loved to meet their needs, to give them good gifts.

Deuteronomy 5 makes clear that what is true of physical, material life is also true of spiritual, eternal life. God saved them out of Egyptian bondage because they couldn’t save themselves. They were helpless as slaves under the pharaohs of Egypt. When God redeemed them he promised to give them a new life of joy and blessing in Canaan.

To summarize, observance of the Sabbath was to help Israel remember that all of life, physical and spiritual, comes from God as a gift, so the result for God’s people ought to be joy, gratitude, celebration, worship, rest, merriment, freedom, praise, and renewal. Perhaps the best one-word summary of what God really desires for his people in the Sabbath is recreation--“re-creation”--in every way: spiritually, physically, mentally, emotionally, and relationally. There ought to be a rhythm of rest in life so there can be this wonderful refreshment and renewal.

But these two encounters in Mark show us how far away first-century Judaism had gotten from the clarity and simplicity of Biblical teaching about Sabbath, the gift of rest.

## Complicated rules

Look at Mark 2:23-28:

**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.”**

The disciples’ plucking heads of grain, rolling them between their hands to get rid of the husk, and eating the grain was work, according to the religious rules. It violated the Sabbath rest.

I have a copy of the book called the *Mishnah*, a compilation of interpretation of and commentary on the Old Testament, written by many different rabbis, scribes, and Pharisees between about 200 BC and about 200 AD. There are thirty-six pages on keeping the Sabbath. Here is one short paragraph entitled, “The Main Classes of Work Forbidden on the Sabbath”:

“The main classes of work are forty save one: Sowing, plowing, reaping, binding sheaves, threshing, winnowing, cleansing crops, grinding, sifting, kneading, baking. Shearing wool, washing or beating or dyeing it, spinning, weaving. Making two loops, weaving two threads, separating two threads, tying a knot, loosening a knot, sewing two stitches, tearing in order to sew two stitches. Hunting a gazelle, slaughtering or flaying or salting it or curing its skin, scraping it or cutting it up. Writing two letters, erasing in order to write two letters, building, pulling down, putting out a fire, lighting a fire, striking with a hammer, and taking out aught from one domain into another [carrying something, say, from inside your house to outside].” (P. 106)

Each of these thirty-nine classes of work has a section where it is expanded and explained point by point. According to the rabbis, Jesus and his disciples are guilty of at least four of these thirty-nine classes of work: reaping, threshing, winnowing, and food preparation.

None of this rabbinical commentary has any Biblical authority. It is human tradition that was carefully worked out over centuries, piously, prayerfully, probably with pure hearts and very sincere motives. The rationale for a book like this was probably to protect the Law and control irreligious behavior on the part of people who were trying to keep the Law. Having these rules meant that they wouldn’t have to think about it. Legalism always sees itself as protecting and defending. The problem is that it is extra-Biblical.

Jesus responds very directly to these astringent religious rules.

## Jesus’ concern for people

In verses 25-26 he appeals to Old-Testament history. I think there is a sarcastic note when he asks, “Have you never read the Bible story about David and the show bread?” Of course they should have read the story. In 1 Samuel 21 David is on the run from Saul’s army, and there is no food available, so he goes to the Tabernacle and takes twelve freshly baked loaves from the holy place. Now God’s Law about the ceremonial worship life of the nation was very clear. Exodus 29:32-33:

“Aaron and his sons [the Aaronic priesthood] shall eat the flesh of the ram and the bread that is in the basket, at the doorway of the tent of meeting. Thus they shall eat those things by which atonement was made at their ordination and consecration; but a layman shall not eat them, because they are holy.”

Leviticus 24:5, 8-9:

“Then you shall take fine flour and bake twelve cakes with it...Every sabbath day he shall set it in order before the Lord continually...It shall be for Aaron and his sons, and they shall eat it in a holy place; for it is most holy to him from the LORD’s offerings by fire, his portion forever.”

David chooses to disregard this ceremonial law, and he feeds his men with the showbread.

The Pharisees are not impressed by this Biblical reference. The same is true today for people who elevate religious tradition over the needs of people. What they do is confuse the means with the ends. The ultimate end of the Sabbath, we saw, was to make spiritual reality clear, to enable people to enjoy spiritual rest. But legalism loses sight of that end and subordinates it to the means of religious rules, of performance expectation.

In verses 27-28 Jesus speaks clearly: human need always takes precedence over religious regulations. He identifies himself as the Lord of life who has the right to interpret religion in its relationship to need. He says, “The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of man is Lord even of the Sabbath.” He is the sovereign over religious regulation and ritual. The *Mishnah*, as I said, had thirty-six pages defining Sabbath observance, interpreting the Law. But Jesus announces that *he* is the final interpreter and the authority over the Law. The Pharisees didn’t buy Jesus’ argument then, and legalists today are also reluctant to allow Jesus his lordship over rules, regulations, and the Law in relationship to the life of the individual.

Now let’s look at the second conflict over the Sabbath.

## The opposition of legalism to Jesus

Mark 3:1-6:

**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.**

Jesus is challenging the Pharisees’ pride, sense of religious superiority, and zeal for all things of the Law. The Pharisees don’t see this disabled man as a real person. They don’t see his very real need. They see him as an object. They put him there to set Jesus up. They want Jesus to heal him so that they can drag Jesus into ecclesiastical court with this living proof that he healed somebody on the Sabbath in violation of the law. Can you imagine going to church hoping that something wonderfully miraculous will happen, just so you can nail the person God used to do it?

Listen to the *Mishnah* again. There is a long section about what you can and can’t do on the Sabbath in regard to sick people. (This sounds random, by the way, because the *Mishnah* is a compendium of regulations from different rabbis.)

“If a pregnant woman smells food and craves it, they may give her food until she recovers herself. So he that is sick may be given food at the word of a skilled person [medical doctor]. And if no skilled persons are there he may be given food at his own wish until he says, “Enough.” If ravenous hunger seize the man, he may be given even unclean things to eat until his eyes are enlightened. If a mad dog bit him, he may not be given the lobe of its liver to eat, but Rabbi Mattathiah Ben Harish permits that. Moreover, Rabbi Mattathiah Ben Harish said if a man has a pain in his throat they may drop medicine into his mouth on the Sabbath, since there is doubt whether life is in danger. And wherever there is doubt whether life is in danger, this overrides the Sabbath. If a building fell down upon a man and there is doubt whether he is there or not, or whether he is alive or dead, or whether he is a Gentile or an Israelite, they may clear away the ruin from him. If they find him alive they may clear it away still more from above him, but if dead they leave him until after the Sabbath.” (P. 172)

Healing was supposed to be done by a physician and was only allowed on the Sabbath if the illness was life-threatening, or if one wasn't sure if the person would live or die. Again, the religious tradition had become more important than the people it was supposed to serve.

It is clear in verse 3-5 that Jesus knows exactly what is going on. He knows the motives of the Pharisees. They want to use this disabled man to serve their destructive purposes, and on the Sabbath, no less. Talk about losing sight of spiritual reality! The Sabbath is supposed to connect people more with the God of life and health, and they have subverted it. In verse 4 Jesus bores in on that issue: “I want to heal this man, and you are thinking about killing me! Which of us is more in line with the spirit of keeping the Sabbath?”

At the end of verse 4 the Pharisees are silent. That silence just amplifies their murderous intent toward Jesus. In contrast, in verse 5 Jesus restores wellness to this man's arm and dignifies his personhood. Verse 6 is the first time in Mark's gospel that he says the Pharisees are going to kill Jesus. It is crystal-clear now. Throughout the rest of the gospel, one of the undercurrents will be the machinations of these religious authorities to kill Jesus. Luke describes their response in 6:11 as rage, an insane fury. The Lord Jesus has flatly contradicted their self-designated spiritual superiority, challenged them directly, so now he's got to die. In our lives we may not see those with zealous, self-defined, religious pride go to the extent of wanting their opponents dead. But I think the situation always turns pretty ugly when they're exposed for what they are in the face of God's revelation.

## **Freedom from legalism**

In this message and the last (Discovery Paper 4796) we've seen Jesus in three different confrontations with the leaders of entrenched institutional religion. He has challenged them on issues of godly lifestyle, spiritual motivation, and their relationship to religious rules and pride. In all three of these stories there has been a confident certainty in Jesus. He never compromises. He is fearless in the face of public conflict. How does he live that way and interact the way he does? The answer is that he never violates the principles that control his actions, but is always true to God's revelation, no more and no less. Manmade religious rules, regulations, traditions, even sincere religious zeal never sway the Lord Jesus. His ultimate concern is for people and their individual needs, and he calls people in need into personal relationship with him.

That relationship has been defined in a couple of ways. In 2:13-22 he called people into a love relationship with him that is like that of a good friend of the bridegroom at a wedding. The friend delights in the presence and the place of the bridegroom. In 2:23-3:6 Jesus has called people into a relationship with him as the one who stands over, fulfills, and interprets God's Law to them.

Now let's return to those case studies of religious tradition: the young man who was going to be removed from leadership for dating his girlfriend, the legalistic dorm mother at the Christian college who wouldn't allow the prayer meeting to continue, and the young woman who was forced to make a choice between her accountability group and an opportunity to minister campus-wide.

I had a great time talking with the first young man. I felt my responsibility was to help him examine his own heart. We talked about his view of his call to leadership and his gifting, the ministry opportunities he had been given. We talked about his understanding of the responsibility of being a Bible study leader. We talked about what he understood from the Lord about dating and romantic relationships. And finally, we talked at length about his attitude toward people whom God had placed in authority in his life and what it means to submit to spiritual authority. We looked at Scriptures and prayed together. I didn't tell him what to do. I didn't think I had that right. But I was able to entrust him and his decision to the loving authority and sovereignty of Jesus. I encouraged him to walk by faith. I said, "In a sense, what you do is not as important as why you do it. The issue is hearing Jesus speak to you." (I don't remember what his choice was, but it doesn't really matter.)

What about the well-meaning dorm mother? Well, sometimes in the face of legalism you just walk away. Our pastors did nothing, because they were guests on that campus and they didn't feel it was right to make a huge issue of it. But God moved in sovereignly. There were some student leaders who found a dorm parent the next morning who had spiritually discerned what was happening. She had been there that evening. So they moved to her dorm the next evening, because she was willing to be flexible. She saw that the work of the Spirit of God that week really did take precedence over the rules of the college, as well-thought-through as they were.

Finally, there was the case of the young woman who wanted to sing on our worship team, but her Christian accountability group had put her under law. They believed that spiritual life grew out of religious discipline, commitment, and performance. It struck me that the common good of that group was much more important to them than campus-wide spiritual community. There was inflexibility in that religious tradition. The joy God gave me with this young woman was to extend grace to her, because her group wouldn't do so. I allowed her to participate on the worship team even though she could only attend one-and-a-half of the three rehearsals. I wanted her to experience the freedom and exhilaration that only the gift of grace can impart.

Jesus stood firmly against legalism. He stood consistently for the physical, emotional, and spiritual needs of people over religious tradition. Jesus is still the Lord of the Sabbath. As we walk into difficult, confusing circumstances, we have to make calls like this. Do we love him enough, trust his lordship over our lives enough, to stand with him against legalism and then to follow him, listen to him, hang on to him, and move into freedom? It's exciting, but it's scary. With legalism you don't have to think. Following Jesus requires that you think, process, pray, listen to the word of God. But I'm figuring out more and more that's it's really the only way to live.

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Catalog No. 4797  
Mark 2:23-3:6  
Seventh Message  
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July 14, 2002

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