

RTS Women's Study: The Gospel of Mark

#5: Mark 2:18-3:6: Fighting Legalism

Intro: The Three-Fold Problem of Legalism

I. Legalism Misses the Person Jesus (2:18-22)

A. This Sort of Fasting Was a Sign of Mourning

- In ancient Israel, fasting was an expression of sorrow and contrition that was looking forward to God's future deliverance
- The Pharisees fasted twice a week, more than was required, as a signal of their own piety and devotion, condemning others who didn't do the same (v.18)
- Clarification: Jesus is not condemning all fasting (it can still be done today), but rather a certain kind of self-righteous fasting that doesn't recognize the new age of redemption

B. But This Sort of Fasting Does Not Fit with a Time of Joy

- Now that the Messiah has come, fasting is no longer appropriate. Now the right response is rejoicing!
- Jesus illustrates this point with three illustrations:
 - Sorrow is not appropriate at a wedding, but instead Joy (v. 19-20)
 - New cloth is not appropriate to patch old cloth (v.21)
 - New wine is not appropriate for old wineskins (v.22)
- Imagery of weddings and wine are used in the OT for age of redemption

C. Key Point: Legalists Miss the Person of Jesus

- Pharisees did not see Jesus' identity, and the new age of redemption
- Thus, their main emotion is somberness/sorrow, not joy
- Note: legalists have a very *impersonal* connection to Jesus; they are more about principles than Jesus as a person

II. Legalism Misses the Importance of the Heart (2:23-28)

A. Pharisees Were Preoccupied with External rather than Internal Matters

- Legalists are concerned with outward things: ritual, ceremony, customs
- Therefore, they typically miss the bigger issues of the heart
- "Woe to you scribe and pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness . . . You blind guides, straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel!" (Matt 23:23-24)
- Why do you think legalists like to stress outward/external issues?

B. Thus, Pharisees Often Added Man-Made Rules to God's Law

- The Bible does call us to follow the Sabbath day and keep it holy (Ex 20:8)
- But the Pharisees had missed the heart of the law, and added their own man-made laws
- This they accused Jesus' disciples as "reaping" on the Sabbath (2:24)

C. But Jesus reminds us of the true purpose of the Law

- God is concerned about the posture of our heart as much as the external law keeping
- To prove this, Jesus appeals how David technically "broke" ceremonially laws in times of necessity (2:25-26)
- Elsewhere Jesus says something similar: "Which of you, having an ox that has fallen into a well on the Sabbath day, will not pull him immediately out?" (Luke 14:5)

Diagnostic question: Do you judge yourself (and others) by external conformity, or are you considering the disposition of your heart?

III. Legalism Misses the Value of People (3:1-6)

A. Legalists are marked by "watching" others for rule-breaking

- The Pharisees were intent on trapping Jesus (v.1-2)
- So, they watched Jesus, not in order to follow or obey him, but accuse him

B. As a result, Legalists miss the needs of people right in front of them

- The man with the withered hand must have suffered greatly because he couldn't work (v.3)
- Jesus exposes the hardness of their hearts by asking *the world's easiest question*: "Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to harm, to save life or to kill?" (v.4)
- Key point: People will do wicked things in order to defend themselves and their own righteous status

Diagnostic question: Do you let disputes over external matters keep you from loving and caring for people right in front of you?

Discussion Groups

1. Of the three problems in legalism—missing Jesus, heart, or people—which do you struggle the most with, and why?
2. Do you think people ever use the church's problem with legalism as an excuse for not following God's legitimate laws? Where do you see that happen, and how would you respond to that claim?
3. Do you see patterns of legalism in the broader evangelical church today? How does this passage help you see how we can resist that trend, without becoming legalists ourselves?