

Jesus “Breaks” Religious Rules and Traditions

Luke 6:1-12

The ministry of Jesus was constantly about transformation and change in people’s lives. Wherever He went, He always sought opportunities to make a difference in people’s lives individually and in the community as a whole. As a result, Jesus’ ministry constantly challenged the status quo of the established religious leaders, and they often attacked Him because He was threatening to take away their power and influence among the people. One of the groups that Jesus often had confrontations with in the Bible was the Pharisees. They would often disagree with the methods that Jesus was using to do ministry because His approach went against many of the rules and traditions that they understood to be important. As a result, the Pharisees would often try to use the law and the traditions to block Jesus’ ministry, or at least discredit Him in the eyes of the people. They could not succeed though, because Jesus had greater wisdom than them, and He also understood the law and the traditions from God’s point of view, not man’s point of view.

There is a difference between God’s law and *man’s interpretation* of God’s law. When man interprets God’s law, we tend to add to it, mold it and shape it into ways that fit *our* understanding of the world that we live in. That’s what the Jews did. We know that God gave the 10 Commandments to Moses on Mt. Sinai; that was God’s law. But both cultural and scholarly history tell us that in addition to the 10 Commandments, Jewish religious scholars developed a whole other system of interpreting and communicating God’s law that was *man-made*. The *mishnah*, is a compilation of oral Jewish teachings about the law that was passed down from rabbinical teachers to their students. The *mishnah* was compiled over a period of 335 years and is grouped into 63 treatises that deal with all areas of Jewish life; legal, social, religious and theological. The *Talmud* is a more comprehensive commentary on the Jewish law that was written by Jewish rabbis over a 250 year period. The *Talmud* is essentially interpretation and commentary on the law contained in the *mishnah*. It took more than 2000 scholars to write the *Talmud* over those 250 years. There are two versions of the *Talmud*, the Jerusalem version and the Babylonian version. The Babylonian version is the most comprehensive, and it consists of 36 volumes and over 36,000 pages. It is divided into six major sections that deal with agriculture and crops, holidays and festivals, marriage and divorce, courts, the temple and sacrifices, and laws of ritual purity.

This is certainly a long way from the 10 Commandments! With this type of complexity in the interpretation and commentary on what God said, there is no wonder why there were constantly areas for the Pharisees and other religious leaders to disagree with Jesus whenever He did something new or different in His ministry. While it is commendable that Jewish scholars wanted to have a comprehensive knowledge of God’s word, their error seems to be that they allowed their commentary and interpretation to become more important than what God Himself actually meant and said initially. Jesus Himself reveals what God actually meant.

So in this biblical passage when the issue of what is okay or not okay to do on the Sabbath arises, it is a classic confrontation between how the Pharisees *interpret* the Sabbath versus what

God actually said about the Sabbath. We see in the text that the Pharisees approach Jesus with the intent of trying to trap Him in some infraction of their interpretation of the law. In the 10 Commandments, God said “*Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy*”. The interpretations of that commandment in the *mishnah* and the *Talmud* prohibited any form of work or manual labor except in extenuating circumstances. So when Jesus and the disciples are going through the field picking grain because they are hungry, and then rub it in their hands to get the kernels to eat, the Pharisees confront Jesus by saying it is *unlawful*. Jesus refutes this by citing an Old Testament story from the Bible in I Samuel 21:1-6 when David and his followers were permitted to eat the shewbread in the temple because they were hungry. The point here is that man’s rules can and should be broken when human needs are at stake. Traditions and rules have to give way to higher moral principles in God’s eyes.

The second story involves Jesus healing the man with the withered hand on the Sabbath. In the same way, Jesus tells them that a human need is more important than a traditional rule. Jesus actually lets them know that to not help somebody just because of a human rule is the equivalent of doing “evil” because we are ignoring the importance of “life” over “death”. Notice, the man did not ask to be healed. Jesus was proactive in seeking him out in order to bless him and to teach the Pharisees a lesson in the process. As we see at the end of the story, when Jesus heals the man they respond with anger and start plotting about what they might do to Jesus. Unfortunately, they still don’t get it! Their rules and traditions have become so important to them that they can’t celebrate the healing of the man. Instead they seek to plan to do harm to Jesus because He has broken one of *their* rules, not God’s. Perhaps they began to recognize that Jesus new approach to ministry signaled the beginning of the end for their obsolete, irrelevant ways of interpreting God’s real words.

Points for Practical Application

- 1) We have to be careful about adding our own preferences, opinions and interpretations to what God has said in His word. Where have we created our own *mishna* and *Talmud* in our lives, the community or the church?
- 2) When people cling to rules and traditions more than God’s word, it is sometimes an indication that some base of power is dying or changing. Rules and traditions are valuable when used properly. But when misused, they allow people to maintain their power and control over others.
- 3) Our laws and traditions are never more important than people, and they are often not what God really intended in the first place. God leans toward the side of Grace for people in their conditions.