

What Makes Jesus Angry?

Mark 2:23-3:6

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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As most of you know, I spend my Mondays out at the jail where I serve as a part-time chaplain.

As you may also know—because I’ve referred to it several times—one of the things the guys are most fond of doing in our bible study/chapel times is to watch a show called *The Chosen*. This is the multi-season series about the life of Jesus that is quite popular these days.

(And when I say it’s popular, I’m not kidding. According to the Atlanta Journal-Constitution, the show has had 200 million viewers and 770 million episode views as of January 2024.)

The show is not for everyone, I know. It imaginatively fills in a lot of the gaps in the story. If you’re looking for chapter and verse rigid faithfulness to the four written gospels, you’ll be disappointed. Some think it’s too conservative, others too liberal, you know how it goes.

But the guys in the jail love it.

It gets them talking in ways that just reading the bible doesn’t. Many of them have very short attention spans. Some struggle to read. This gets them interested in the story of Jesus in a way that nothing else I have tried does.

Over the year or so that I’ve been watching this show with the guys, I have noticed that two things reliably get the guys excited.

The first, is when Jesus heals someone. Whether it’s a leper, the paralyzed man who is lowered through the roof, the man by the pool for over thirty years, each time, you can hear a pin drop as Jesus meets these people with compassion, as he notices them, as he talks to them, as he sees them as people.

And then, when Jesus heals them of their affliction, they sometimes audibly cheer. There are “yeahs” and “that’s rights” and “awesomes!” One of them even stood up once and gave Jesus a standing ovation. They love it when Jesus heals people.

The second thing that gets them going is when Jesus puts the Pharisees in their place. I think some of them think of Jesus as kind of the superhero of the story and the Pharisees are the evil villains.

They love it when the Pharisees interrupt a dinner with a room full of “sinners,” and Jesus tells them that it is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. Or when Jesus sneaks away when they want to interrogate him. Or when he baffles them with a response. Or when he exorcises a demon that they cannot. Things like this.

I must confess, that I’m not very different than the guys in jail. These are two of my favourite things Jesus does, too.

Well, in our gospel text today, we have a healing and Jesus putting the Pharisees in their place.

Let’s start with the latter. The disciples are plucking heads of grain on the Sabbath. This upsets the Pharisees. Strictly speaking, this counted as “work” and work was forbidden on the Sabbath.

Who were the Pharisees? I suspect most of us think of them as characters roughly analogous to the guys in the jail. They’re the evil villains of the story.

But this isn’t actually the case. They weren’t the religious police or the first century Jewish equivalent of the KGB. They were kind of like a sect or a branch of Judaism that formed just under two centuries before Jesus showed up on the scene.

They promoted the idea of priestly purity for all Jews, and taught that besides the commandments, oral law—explanations, expansions, interpretations of the law—was also passed down by Moses and binding.

Many of them were wise, devout, holy men. Theirs was one approach among others in the Jewish world of the time to the question of what being faithful to God under foreign

occupation looked like. Some chose violence. Others chose withdrawal. The Pharisees chose doubling down on the law.

And they had their eye on Jesus. They likely wouldn't have bothered with some ordinary people plucking a few heads of grain on some ordinary Sabbath. But Jesus and his followers weren't ordinary people.

Jesus had been turning heads. Even at this early stage of the story in Mark's gospel, Jesus had been demonstrating the power of God outside normal parameters. He had been doing amazing things and associating with unexpected people (tax-collectors and sinners). He had been blurring boundaries, and he needed watching.

So, they did.

Keeping the Sabbath was (and remains) a big deal for faithful Jews. It's one of the Ten Commandments, after all, and its faithful observance was reinforced by the prophets and subsequent Jewish teaching. It marked Jews out among the pagan nations.

It wasn't some eccentric, arbitrary commandment whose observance earned people good standing with God. It was a sign. A sign that they belonged to the God of heaven and earth, the God who himself rested on the seventh day.

So, here we have a clear case of Jesus' disciples treating the law casually. And the Pharisees want to know what's going on.

Jesus responds provocatively. He compares himself to David, who ate "the bread of the presence" while he and his men were starving on the run from the then-king Saul.

What is the "bread of the presence?" In the tabernacle, there were twelve loaves of ceremonial bread that stood for the twelve tribes of Israel. They were a kind of symbolic acknowledgment that God was the source of Israel's life.

On one level, Jesus might be making a "desperate times call for desperate measures" argument. David and his men were hungry and feeding the hungry should take precedence over symbolism or the law. Perhaps.

But it's not clear that Jesus' disciples were in desperate straits like David. The text doesn't say that they were starving. It just says that they were plucking heads of grain.

It seems more likely that Jesus is making a larger point. David was the king-in-waiting when this took place. Samuel had already anointed him, but he was not yet enthroned. Saul was still king and not eager to give up the throne. So, David was on the run, in hiding, waiting for his time to come.

The implication could be that Jesus, too, is the true king (anointed at his baptism) but not yet recognized or enthroned. He, too, can bypass the normal regulations. So, this sabbath-breaking act could be a sign—a sign that the king and his kingdom is breaking in.

Well, let's move on to the second scene. Jesus moves from the grainfield to the synagogue. There's a man with a withered hand here.

The Pharisees, perhaps with Jesus "the son of man is Lord of the Sabbath" still ringing in their ears and seeming not to have been impressed by Jesus' lesson from the Old Testament, watch. And wait.

Will he, or won't he? Healing is working, after all, and thus forbidden on the sabbath.

Jesus summons the man forward. You can imagine the tension and anticipation in the room. It's like a showdown from a movie or something.

And then Jesus' question which cuts right to the heart of the matter: "Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to kill?"

His question is met with silence. All of a sudden, nobody has anything to say.

(We so often have nothing to say when Jesus exposes our idolatry.)

My sermon title this morning is, "What makes Jesus angry?"

Here, it is the silence. It is the unwillingness to acknowledge the obvious. That doing good, bringing life, healing, restoration are more important than the law. That it shouldn't even be a question.

Jesus is grieved by their "hardness of heart." This is a term that also would have sent the Pharisees back into their Scriptures.

In the book of Exodus, Pharaoh is repeatedly described as having a “hardened heart” in refusing to let the people of Israel leave the slavery of Egypt.

Deuteronomy urges the Israelites thus: “If there is among you anyone in need, a member of your community in any of your towns within the land that the Lord your God is giving you, do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted towards your needy neighbour” (Deut. 15:7).

Israel’s enemies are often described as having hardened hearts as are Israel’s own terrible kings.

Over and over again, the Psalms and the prophets urge the people not to harden their hearts, to return to the Lord.

The irony is rich. In the very Scriptures that the Pharisees so zealously attempted to interpret and follow, hard heartedness was the sign of *breaking* the law. And now, it is the hard hearts of those *guarding* the law, that has the Pharisees hovering over Jesus to see if he’ll heal on the wrong day of the week, that grieves and angers Jesus.

Well, as we know, Jesus heals the man with the withered hand. Another beautiful instance of the kingdom of God encroaching upon the kingdom of this world. Maybe he got a standing ovation, who knows.

But not from everyone. The Pharisees hearts remain hard, it seems. They head off to try to figure out a way to kill this threat to what they hold most dear.

So, what do we do with these stories? I think it would be an error to do what we do easily do as human beings, which is to default to unhelpful binaries.

Either it’s the conservative legalism, the rules and regulations and restrictions of Pharisaical religion *or* it’s the liberal wide-open rule-breaking, freedom-bringing of Jesus.

Religion is bad, laws are bad, thank God Jesus came to set us free from all that. This is how some interpret stories like this.

I don’t think Jesus saw things this way. We easily forget that elsewhere in the gospels Jesus actually *intensified* the law.

We Mennonites often pride ourselves on being “Sermon on the Mount” people. The Sermon on the Mount contains the Beatitudes, all those beautiful “blessed are’s” that reveal the great reversal that God has in mind, where those on the bottom are revealed to be blessed. It contains memorable passages about being salt and light and a city on a hill. It contains the Lord’s Prayer and warnings about doing good deeds to be seen. All of this we tend to love.

But it also contains Jesus saying that he has not come to abolish the law but fulfill it. It contains a whole section with a series of teachings that begin with, “you have heard it said, but I say to you...” In each one, Jesus goes far beyond mere observance of the law to the heart that is behind it.

A few examples:

You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, “You shall not murder”; and “whoever murders shall be liable to judgement.” ²² But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgement; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, “You fool”, you will be liable to the hell of fire. (Mat 5:21-22).

You have heard that it was said, “You shall not commit adultery.” ²⁸ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. ²⁹ If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell (Mat. 5:27-29).

Jesus isn’t exactly flinging open the doors to a casual approach to the law. In both cases, he is taking an existing understanding of murder and sexual morality and taking it up a few notches.

Not just “don’t kill,” but “guard against the anger and insulting speech that corrodes your hearts and relationships! Not just, “don’t commit adultery” but “guard against the lust that objectifies human beings made in the image of God.”

So, I think it would be a mistake to read Jesus as just casually setting aside the Sabbath and its restrictions, whether here or in the other parts of the gospels where he gets in trouble on the Sabbath.

Rather, I think Jesus is being deliberately provocative to make a point.

It's not that the law doesn't matter; it was that it had begun to be used as a stick rather than as an instrument to cultivate human flourishing.

The Sabbath was supposed to be about creation and redemption, about honouring human life with the gift of rest. It had become a burden that was imposed upon weary people, an approach to God and faith that was incapable of seeing how life and goodness and healing could operate outside of its strictures.

As human beings, we need constraints. We need structure.

We do not automatically or even easily become the kinds of people God created us to be when we are given unrestricted individual autonomy.

I think even a casual glance at our world makes this plain. We have almost unparalleled individual freedoms, but we are not exactly a healthy culture of human flourishing.

But.

We must never allow our hearts to grow hard. We must never make idols out of our structures and our constraints. We must never close ourselves off to the possibility that Jesus might be working in surprising and unexpected, even provocative ways to bring life, and goodness, and healing, and restoration into our broken world and our broken lives.

Hard hearts make Jesus angry.

And so, perhaps a question we might leave today with is a simple one: "Where does my heart require softening?"

Where have I elevated my own understanding of where and how and when and with whom God is allowed to operate and where he would never...?

Where have I closed doors that should perhaps remain open, even if only a crack?

We live in very hard-hearted times. Many, many people are convinced that they and those who think like them are right and everyone else is not only wrong but dangerously wrong.

This is true in the world of politics. It is true in the domain of our public discourse. It is true in the church. Whether on the left or on the right, a great many people are convinced that they and those who agree with them know where and how and when and with whom God operates and where he would never...

I think we could all use the reminder. Hard hearts make Jesus angry.

Soft hearts can be shaped and molded. Soft hearts are required if Jesus is to heal us and put us in our place.

Jesus is always on the side of that which leads to life, and goodness, and healing, and human beings flourishing in all the ways in which they were created to flourish.

May God soften our hearts so that this is true of us as well.

Amen.

