

## The Real Jesus, Mark 2:21-3:6, Jesus the Agitator, 1/23/22

On Monday this past week, our nation observed the remarkable person and work of **Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.** Among the many contributions he has made in our world, he understood his calling to shake up a nation from their apathy toward the plight of African Americans, he was called to disrupt the contentment with the status quo of segregation and racism. Dr. King went into the very communities that needed the most change, peacefully, but not quietly, confronting the injustice. For that reason, he was given a label meant to denigrate him, an agitator. A label that was even picked up by some fellow pastors in the Southern Baptist Convention. At a Christian Leadership Conference Dr. King responded to this label. "They call me an agitator, well, they're right. I am an agitator. Do you know what an agitator is?" For a moment or two, he let the question hang in the air. "Well, look inside your washing machine. There's an agitator in there. That agitator is in there, stirring up the water, knocking the dirt out of your clothes. Well, that's what I'm doing. I'm agitating to knock the dirt out of our society – discrimination, Jim Crow, segregation, racism. So they're right. I am agitating – agitating to clean up our democracy. To agitate for a better America, a freer America, a fairer America."<sup>1</sup>

Dr. King was following in the footsteps of another agitator...his Lord, Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus was the ultimate agitator. He was called to confront religion. To shake up the spiritual status quo, to confront those content with their empty, corrupted religion and to awaken the world to the true condition of their hearts and need for redemption. He came to not merely to knock out dirt from our society, he came to knock out our sin through the cleansing power of his blood.

Throughout Jesus ministry he was in constant conflict with the religious authorities, the pharisees. In our passage today in Mark 3:1-6, we are going to see the conflict between Jesus and the religious leaders come to a tipping point after a series of 5 conflicts that Mark records in chapters 2-3. Let me give you a quick flyby. **Conflict over the Authority of Religion. Mark 2:1-12.** Pastor Matthew covered that last week. Jesus claims to have the authority to forgive sins, beginning to dismantle the authority of the religious sacrificial system to forgive sin. **Conflict over the Exclusivity of Religion. Mark 2:13-17.** Instead of the popular religious notion that the good people are in with God and the bad people are out- Jesus says, no that his gospel is for all people, even those most marginalized...it's all-inclusive. **Conflict over the Rituals of Religion (Fasting) Mark 2:19-22.** That it's not about religious rituals to earn favor with God, it's not about how strict and observant you are, Jesus has come like a groom for his bride- so a relationship with him should be more like a feast than a fast.

So the agitation level is rising and you understand why. Jesus is dismantling the efficacy of their religion and their power, opening the doors of access to God for sinners, bad people, he's refuses to participate in the religious theater like the pharisees. And now Jesus is going to agitate what they held most sacred, **the Sabbath.** Observance of the Sabbath was the defining attribute of the Jewish people. That is true even to this day in Israel, of all the Mosaic laws, this

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<sup>1</sup> <https://ourfuture.org/20160119/the-message-from-mlk-be-an-agitator>

is the one they take most seriously. Have you ever noticed how often in the Gospels the writers record Jesus in conflict on the Sabbath? That isn't a coincidence, and we are about to see why.

Now the Sabbath is really a wonderful biblical concept. Patterned off of God's creative work of the universe, his people were to work six days, but this seventh day they were to rest, you lay down your work, you spend unhurried time, reflection, enjoyment with God, with family. It was a day about restoration and renewal. This is a great word for those of us who are workaholics. Some people even brag about this, "Oh I work every day, I'm always working, never unplug from your phone." But ask their spouse, ask their kids whether that is something to brag about. Before you know it you will be 90...Did you enjoy your family, did you know them, did they know you? Sabbath is a beautiful, God-ordained idea. I'm prone to this if I'm not intentional. We have built some Sabbath principles in our lives. I take off Saturdays. I rest from my sermon, I rest from emails, I take physical rest, emotional rest, we spend time as a family. But this is also a word for those of us drawn to laziness. Notice that the Mosaic law said work 6 days and then rest one. The assumption is that you are productive the other days, you are a net contributor whether that is by cultivating your home and developing your children, contributing toward society through your occupation, serving in the community, or for our context contributing through the work of the great commission. God expects us to produce. There is no retirement in the Bible. You may not continue earning a paycheck, and you may not have the same ability, but all of us are called to produce, that may be through the ministry of prayer, phone calls and letter writing. So for those who are prone toward workaholism and those who live on Netflix and the couch...The Sabbath principle is a word of exhortation. The Sabbath is a good practice. But a principle in the hands of these religious leaders becomes a problem. Let's read on.

Mark 3:1-2

*Another time Jesus went into the synagogue, and a man with a shriveled hand was there. <sup>2</sup> Some of them were looking for a reason to accuse Jesus, so they watched him closely to see if he would heal him on the Sabbath.*

That sentence should make us say, "Wait a second, how could they accuse Jesus for doing something good?" The religious leaders took a gift from God designed for our joy and benefit and turned it into a man-made burden to bear. **[Conflict the Burden of Religion Slide]** At the time of Jesus there were 39 types of activities that you could not do on the Sabbath. One of those man-made laws was healing on the Sabbath. Now to be clear, you were allowed to heal someone of a life-threatening illness on the Sabbath, but if it wasn't life threatening, you would have to wait until a non-Sabbath day. And so there was a man there, likely who had paralysis, or severe arthritis and his hand was locked up. Well the pharisees are waiting to catch Jesus breaking the Sabbath laws. They also knew that Jesus had broken their Sabbath laws before. If you turn back to chapter 2:23-28, Jesus had a conflict with them over the Sabbath because he and the disciples were walking through a field and picking wheat off the stalks and eating them. This would have technically been considered reaping, which again was illegal on the Sabbath. In response Jesus said to them <sup>27</sup> *"The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath."* <sup>28</sup> *So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath."* Now we will come back to that statement because it is key to understanding what Jesus is claiming about himself. But the first part is clear- Jesus

says you have made man slave to the Sabbath, but it was intended to be a gift to mankind. And so here again in Chapter 3 they are just waiting for him to do it again, and Jesus doesn't disappoint.

<sup>3</sup>Jesus said to the man with the shriveled hand, "Stand up in front of everyone." <sup>4</sup>Then Jesus asked them, "Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?" But they remained silent.

<sup>5</sup>He looked around at them in anger and, deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts, said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He stretched it out, and his hand was completely restored.

Did you know that Jesus got angry? Do you know there is anger that is not sinful? A righteous anger directed toward sin, but that anger doesn't drive Jesus to make a bad, emotional decision like much of anger does, where we are left with regret. But he wasn't only angry, he was deeply grieved. You only feel this way when it's about someone you love that is breaking your heart. It's the mix of emotions you feel toward an addict in your life, or a child who is train wrecking their lives with bad decisions. What was it that made him so angry and grieved? Their stubborn hearted religion.

These religious leaders of all people should have known the whole point of the Sabbath. It's about restoring what is diminished. It's about replenishing what is drained. It is about repairing what is broken. It is to echo the words of God after his creative work, "It is good." That is true rest. To heal the man's shriveled hand is to do exactly what the Sabbath is all about. Yet, because these leaders are focused on justifying their religious system and trapping Jesus, they miss are self-absorbed, blind and callous. As one commentator says, "Their hearts are as shriveled as the man's hand once was."

At the end of this section, the religious leaders have had it, they are so agitated, so threatened, so fearful of what Jesus might do to their religious system. <sup>6</sup>Then the Pharisees went out and began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus. Here's what is so shocking about this- The Herodians were Jewish supporters of Herod who ruled Israel and represented the Roman occupying power, its political system as well as its pagan culture and way of life. The Pharisees and the Herodians were mortal enemies and didn't agree on anything, except one thing- getting rid of Jesus.

What was it about Jesus that was so threatening to these pharisees that it brought out their tribalism, their judgmentalism that made them so angry that they would start plotting his murder? Jesus was not just offering some variation or reinterpretation of Judaism, Sabbath laws, or religious practices. This wouldn't have been met with such fierce opposition. He came to dismantle their religion and make it obsolete. He claimed to be the Messiah who was coming to bring something completely new.

What is it about religion that Jesus was determined to dismantle? Well religion and the Gospel are actually opposites. Let me try to get at it this way...If you believe in God, if you consider

yourself religious, **why do you try to obey God?** Why do you do things like go to church, give money, pray, fast, conform to certain moral ideals. Why do avoid cursing, stay away from drugs, live within certain sexual boundaries? Most God-believing people, religious people in the world from the time of the pharisees to the present day, think that being good and doing religious activity is the way that we get right with God, that we relate to God and stay on his good side. That there is a **ladder to God**[Picture] and religious activity is the way we climb it. And all religions are based on that paradigm though there are hundreds of different variations on it. There are law-based religions that say that you climb up God's ladder by conforming to certain moral, societal and familial expectations. Other religions are spiritualistic in that you climb God's ladder through certain rituals, meditations, incantations that move you to levels of consciousness or access to God. But they all have the same logic- if I perform, if I obey, the higher I climb, the more I am accepted by God. So how does Jesus offer a completely different paradigm? Well he hints at it profoundly in his statement on Sabbath that we read earlier. **28 So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath."**

But what in the world does he mean that he is Lord of the Sabbath? Jesus is making an important statement about his identity. He is not just a Rabbi, a prophet, a teacher... that he is actually the **Creator of the Sabbath**. Statement of his divinity. But he is also saying He is the **source of true Sabbath**, the deep, soul level rest that we need.

At the end of God's creative act of the cosmos, he rested. Not because he was tired, but because the work was finished and it was good. He was satisfied with what he had done. Jesus came to humanity to do another creative work, this time the work of redemption through his sacrifice on the cross. At the end of Jesus' great work on the cross he said those famous words, "It is finished." The work of redemption was done. What Jesus is saying is that he is the true Sabbath for humanity at the soul level, to rest from our endless ladder climbing and enter into his Sabbath rest that we long for.

**Religion Leads to Restless Duty.** In religion you want to know exactly what you need to do to climb the ladder. You won't gravitate towards seeking out the intent of the laws, moral codes, activities rather you tend to write into them all sorts of details so that you can assure yourself that you're climbing it. This is at the heart of legalism, an endless ladder to climb, never knowing how good is good enough. It's bondage to a system of works and good deeds that can never truly change our hearts and never give us rest for our souls.

But **The Gospel Leads to Restful Delight.** St. Francis of Assisi famously said, "Our souls are restless until they find their rest in thee." We can stop climbing the never-ending ladder of religious duty and drudgery because Jesus came down the ladder from heaven to us. He performed perfectly in our place, he gives us the deep rest our soul needs knowing that we are right with God. And so our desire to obey him is not out of duty but delight. Do you see the difference?

It is the difference between a performance-based relationship vs. an unconditional relationship. If you constantly feel the pressure to perform in order to get your significant other to show you

love or accept you, if you worry that when you fail that you will be rejected, there is no rest, no security and little delight. But when you are in a healthy relationship, like a marriage covenant, you can rest in the unconditional love and acceptance of your spouse. You know that when you fail it might be hurtful, but it won't threaten your relationship. You can take deep breaths and have the freedom to be yourself, be vulnerable, give and receive love. And you desire to please the other, not out of duty but from the delight pleasing one who knows you so well and loves you anyway.

This is why on the surface you could have two people obeying God but from two completely different paradigms- one out of restless duty and the other out of restful delight. One could be giving financially, even generously- out of a fearful hope that it will earn him favor with God, maybe doing it begrudgingly. While another is giving generously with delight, knowing Jesus gave himself generously to us, and so giving is an act of worship for what he has already done. In other words it's the difference between please, please, please... and thank you.

So I go back to the question- **Why do you obey?** Out of restless duty? Or out of restful delight?

And so the Real Jesus that we are seeking to encounter through Mark again confronts us with his true identity. Jesus was the ultimate agitator. And he came to offer the true living water that would eternally clean our sin-stained hearts. He is not just a good teacher, a religious reformer or an inspiration. He says "I am the Lord of the Sabbath." He's the one who created the world and said it is finished, and he's the one who died on the cross and said it is finished. You either have to say you don't want anything to do with him, or that he's your whole life and everything has to revolve around him. NT Wright, "Most people unable to cope with either of those responses condemn ourselves to live in the shallow world of the in between."

**Matthew 11:28-30**

<sup>28</sup> "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. <sup>29</sup> Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. <sup>30</sup> For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."