

Mark 2:23-3:5 “Not That Kind of Christian”

Have you ever uttered the words, “I’m not that kind of Christian?” I find myself doing that a lot. And part of me feels bad for saying that, but sometimes I just can’t help it. A few years ago, Joe Rogers called me and said, “Do you have time to come down to campus for a bit? I have something you need to see down by the library.” I said, “Sure” and walked down to the campus. When I arrived, Joe was standing on the edge of a small crowd gathered around a man wearing a long-sleeve purple shirt literally telling people that they’re going to hell. He seemed especially interested in targeting young women suggesting that they only reason they go to college is to party and have sex. There was another guy there too. He didn’t have the oratory skill of the first guy. Maybe he was in training and was there to give the other guy a break to get a drink of water and catch his breath. Either way, it wasn’t long until the other guy was back at it. I don’t know. Some students were trying to engage him, but he just shouted them down. A faculty member walked by and was told the crowd, “Quit giving this guy an audience!” I thought, “Yeah, no kidding” and then realized I was a part of the audience. But it’s like watching a train wreck. You don’t want to, but there it is. Joe said, “This is why a lot of people hate Christians.” And I said, “Yeah, but we aren’t that kind of Christian.”

It’s frustrating when I utter those words. The guy was out exercising his first amendment rights. He was speaking his truth. He reads the same Bible we do. King James translation sure ... but still the same 66 books that are in my Bible. The scriptures he was quoting are in my Bible ... the same Bible that I consider the inspiration and guide to my faith and practice. My *opinion* is that he’s cherry picking these verses and quoting them out of context for maximum shock value, but I’m sure he’d say the same thing about me. And what’s funny is that the media loves to turn their cameras on folks like this. When Westboro Baptist Church was picketing funerals for soldiers that died in battle or for LGBTQ folks or whoever else might be in their crosshairs, there were the cameras giving them an audience. Talk Show hosts would invite them as guests and try

to debate with them. The Westboro folks would just smile and spew some of the most hateful, un-Christian things you could imagine all the while thinking, “I’m loving this free publicity!” Gallup, Pew, and Alban Institute polls have all indicated that the public perception of Christians is that we’re into guilt, division and legalism. Again, I say ... “No wait, I’m not *that* kind of Christian! I’m not like *those* guys!” So how is it that two groups of people who both claim the Bible as their sacred scriptures and who both call Jesus “Lord” be so different? Let’s see if our passage from Mark this morning can give us a clue.

My Bible calls the first part of this passage, “Pronouncement on the Sabbath” and the second as, “The Man with the Withered Hand.” I think this whole section should be called, “Lookin’ for Trouble on the Sabbath,” because that’s exactly what’s going on here. Jesus and his disciples *on the Sabbath* were walking through a corn field and they were plucking heads of the grain. Now this is significant because there are very strict rules in Jewish Law concerning what you can and can’t do on the Sabbath. And picking grain was a big “can’t.” And of course there was a group of Pharisees there making snide remarks about how Jesus and his disciples were breaking the Law. Jesus comes back with a snide remark of his own. “Haven’t you read about what David did when he and his companions were hungry?” Well of course they’ve read about David. These folks are famous for being familiar with every little detail of scripture. “Have you not read?” Of *course* they’ve read it. See, Jesus had a wry sense of humor. Don’t let anyone tell you he didn’t. So Jesus said, “David and his companions needed food, and on the Sabbath, they went to the House of God and in the presence of the High Priest ate the Bread of the Presence.” The greatest King of Israel, before he was even King, the hero and prime example of what a Man of God is ate bread that only the high priest can eat! You want to talk about breaking the Law! And here was Jesus and his disciples walking along pulling grain off corn stalks in a random field. Jesus said, “Listen, y’all. The Sabbath? The Sabbath was *made* for humankind. Humankind was not made for the Sabbath.” In other words, “Chill out guys. Don’t be *that* kind of Pharisee.”

And notice how I said, “*that* kind of Pharisee.” Not all Pharisees were like “that.” We’ve got to be careful of passages in the gospels that make it sound like *all* Pharisees are legalists. There were plenty of examples of Pharisees who “got it.” I say this because the mainstream Judaism that is practiced today is Pharisaic Judaism. When you start reading the New Testament with the idea that all Pharisees are bad, you start treading into the same interpretive territory that a lot of German Theologians at the turn of the century walked when they started referring to all Jews as “Christ-killers.” The national leaders picked up on that real quick and started using it to rally the troops around their nationalist agenda. That turned into a global-scale crisis by the 30s and 40s. Funny how the attitudes and actions of *some* Pharisees who questioned or opposed Jesus became the stereotype for *all* Jews in all times and places. Kind of like how the attitudes and actions of some Christians today have become the stereotype for all Christians.

We’re not done with the story yet. Then Jesus goes into a synagogue where he saw a man with a withered hand. Even this early in his ministry, Jesus had gained quite a reputation as a healer. And an unconventional one at that. So there were a lot of eyes in that synagogue watching Jesus to see if he was going to heal this guy on the Sabbath. Sure enough he does. Right there in front of everyone. Jesus knew this was going to cause a ruckus. So he took the opportunity to present a teaching moment. He said, “Listen ... is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath ... to save life or kill?” One of the beautiful things about Judaism is their love of debating over scriptures and interpretation of the Law. They can’t help themselves! They’ll be alone in a room reading scripture and they’ll argue with themselves about the interpretation! So when Jesus presents this either/or question ... this opportunity for debate, the people just sat there in silence. This made Jesus *angry*. And yes, Jesus got angry too. See what you learn in church? Jesus had a sense of humor and he got angry! Like us! He was also grieved that these people who loved to talk about the Law were just sitting there with blank looks on their faces. So he heals this guy, which is a *good* thing right? No, because the Pharisees who were there went to

the Herodians and told on him which started the ball rolling for Jesus being on their “most wanted” list. Again, it wasn’t “the Jews” or even “the Pharisees” who had it out for Jesus. It was *some* Pharisees. Which brings us back to how this all relates to the times when we find ourselves defending our “brand” of Christianity. Jesus wasn’t condemning the Pharisees as a whole. Jesus was simply saying, “No” to those who would place law above grace.

Mark Davis, a Bible scholar who wrote a book called *Left Behind and Loving It* had something to say about this passage – He said, “I consider this one of the key texts in all the gospel to understanding Jesus’ relationship to his tradition, particularly The Law.” Jesus’ operating principle is that the Sabbath, along with all the rituals of holiness that go along with it, were created for humanity and not the other way around. And yet the idea that humanity was made for the Sabbath *continues* to be a wildly popular theology! “God created the Law, and humanity needs to live up to it or else we’re lost.” In that theology God is chiefly known as Holy and humans have to achieve a certain level of holiness through following laws or practicing purity rituals in order to be found acceptable. The alternative theology which Jesus poses here is that the Sabbath was made for humanity. That means, God is chiefly known as LOVE and all those laws and purity rituals are for *humanity’s own good*. Or even better – they offer ways in which humanity can *respond* to God’s grace with *gratitude*.”

A lot of folks will tell you that faith begins when we realize that we’re sinners in need of salvation. And I’m okay with that. But for a lot of folks, faith begins when they realize that they are loved unconditionally and can actually respond to that love. At the very heart of it, this is what Jesus is preaching here. It’s not that in order to be a follower of Christ you have to realize that you’re in need of grace because of how *worthless* you are. Any time you put a barrier up between the sinner and grace then we start getting into trouble. But that’s what we want to do! We as humans are obsessed with building barriers and fences and figuring out who’s in and who’s out based on things that we can’t even

get our heads wrapped around. Face it -- we can't get our heads wrapped around God's grace! We don't get it! It runs contrary to our lizard brain. It takes a lot of effort! So then why not let the lizard loose? Let's go with what comes easy to us. Let's build those walls.

“Oh, this is all easy for you to say Pastor Bleeding Heart. You're patient. It's not hard for you to say, 'grace over law' because that's just the way you are.” No! It is *not* the way I am! Sure, those are qualities that I demonstrate from time to time, but in my lizard brain core, I am a horrible, impatient, intolerant jerk. Tex Sample, one of my favorite “redneck theologians” was being lambasted at a conference for being a pacifist. His accuser was calling him all sorts of derogative names relating to his loyalty and his manhood. Finally Tex said, “Let me make this clear – I'm *not* a pacifist because it comes naturally to me. I'm a pacifist because I'm a violent sumbitch. But Jesus compels me to be different. Jesus compels me to change. Jesus demands that I walk a different path ... a path that runs contrary to my violence and prejudice. And to be honest with you, a lot of time I'm *mad* at Jesus for leading me down that path. See, right now I'd love to punch you in the face, but the only reason I haven't is that I made a decision to follow Jesus, and Jesus demands that I love you instead.”

Ever been there before? Some people just can't do it. They can't suppress the lizard. What kind of Christian am I? One who struggles with what Jesus calls me to do. Honestly, there are times when I want to be “one of those kind of Christians” who stand on the street corner and yell at folks about what's wrong with them. But Jesus calls me to be someone who values mercy over guilt. Who values acceptance over exclusion. Who values freedom over fundamentalism. Who values life over law. And sometimes that's not the kind of Christian I am. But it is the kind that we're called to be.