

Mark 2:18-3:6 – Jesus and the Pharisees.

Introduction

Have you ever believed that something would be good for you only to find out it's harmful?

Maybe a relationship, or a job?

If you have, you're not alone. Most of us have done this in little or big ways. In fact, history is replete with people believing something to be good when in fact it was bad. For example, you might be interested to know that:

- Heroin was once used as a cough medicine.
- Asbestos was once sold in a box to create fake snow. All that snow in the Wizard of Oz... Asbestos.
- Radium-based facial cremes were used in the 30's to reduce wrinkles and produce a healthy glow.

Humanity has a long history of embracing ideas that turn out to be terrible.

Well, in our passage tonight, we're going to think about another idea that many people today buy into but is ultimately terrible for them.

And that is the belief that God accepts you because of your good works.

- If you be a good person, keep the rules, do your religious duties, you'll be fine with God. He'll give you the tick of approval and one day let you into His kingdom.

This particular view of things has often been referred to as works-based righteousness. We believe we are righteous based on the good works we do.

This a common view in our society as it was in Jesus' day. But as we'll see tonight, it is a view that is riddled with problems and real eternal consequences if we embrace it.

In tonight's passage Jesus engages with people who were thoroughly entrenched in this way of thinking, and were critical of His new teaching which said that it's not about what you do for God but what Jesus does for you.

Tonight, I want to highlight three big problems of the works-based mindset that we see going on in this passage. I want to do that so that we see how wrong and harmful it actually is, and why Jesus' way of faith in Him is so much better.

Here are three problems of think God accepts us on the basis of our good works:

1. It's incompatible with God's actual way of faith in Jesus.
2. Is that it creates burden not blessing.
3. That it ultimately poisons our soul and keeps us from God's saviour if we fully embrace it.

1. Incompatible with God's new way.

So, the first problem with a works-based righteousness is that it is incompatible with God's way of faith in Jesus. As we saw last week, people are not made right with God because of their own righteousness but because of the forgiveness that Jesus graciously gives to us through his death for sin. Remember what Jesus said: "I didn't come to call the righteous, but sinners" [2:17].

But the Pharisees had rejected this notion that they too were among the spiritually sick. From their works-based righteousness point of view, they didn't need Jesus to heal them. They

were doing fine! If anything, this guy who was claiming to some great spiritual doctor, well, he might need a bit of check-up himself! After all, he seems pretty lax when it comes the religious ritual of fasting.

And that's the note our passage starts on. A critique of Jesus' attitude towards fasting.

I wonder if you've ever had that moment where someone deliberately draws attention to other people's achievements in order to highlight a some kind of deficiency in you.

"I've noticed all the other employees here wear ties, except for you?"

Parent's often do it with their kids at meal times:

"Isn't it great to see the way your sisters have eaten all the food on *their* plates."

It's this kind of implicit rebuke that Jesus gets thrown at him and his disciples at the start of our passage. Look at verse 18:

18 Now John's disciples and the Pharisees^[a] were fasting. People came and asked him, "Why do John's disciples and the Pharisees' disciples fast, but your disciples do not fast?"

We know from Luke 18 that the Pharisees had made a habit of fasting twice a week. John's disciples may have been fasting in line with the repentance John had been preaching. Fasting was often associated with mourning and lament.

But do you hear the implicit criticism? "Why aren't you guys as devout as those guys?"

Aren't you supposed to be some kind of Holy teacher Jesus?

Now Jesus could have defended the actions of his disciples by pointing out that the only specific fast day mentioned in the law was on the Day of Atonement (lev 16:29-34). He could have responded by saying: “why are you expecting my guys to do something that God has not commanded?”

But Jesus doesn't go down that line does He? Instead, he speaks about how inappropriate it would be for his disciples to fast while He is with them. Verse 19:

19 Jesus said to them, “The wedding guests cannot fast while the groom is with them, can they? As long as they have the groom with them, they cannot fast.

Jesus is saying that this isn't the time for fasting but festivity!

Who here has ever been to a wedding reception where the MC announces the arrival of the bride and groom and then says to everyone: “please join with the bride and groom in a somber fast for the next two hours.” It's crazy!

We feast at weddings. We don't fast! It's a joyous moment where we celebrate a new beginning for the married couple.

Jesus is saying that it's like that with His arrival on the scene. The One the world has been waiting for – God's saviour and Messiah – has arrived. This is a joyous moment of good news (1:1) – the sick are being healed, demons cast out, sins forgiven. This is a glorious new a beginning in which God's Kingdom was bursting into our world.

A day of fasting for Jesus' disciples *will* come when he is taken away from them (which I take as a reference to his arrest and crucifixion) but that Day is not today.

But it's not just the ritual of fasting that Jesus speaks into at this point. In verses 21-22 he starts to explain (through two parables) that the whole religious world view common in his was being superseded by His new and better way.

But it's important for us at this point to really understand what the religious world view of the religious class was in Jesus' day. In a nut shell they had a works-based righteousness mindset. They believed God's salvation would come to them and the people of Israel only the basis of strict observance of the Jewish Law and all of the traditions that they developed (but more about that soon).

So, the prevailing religious message of Jesus' day was: you follow all the religious rules (both in the Law and in our tradition) and God will reward you. You do for God and God will do for you.

And isn't that often the prevailing world view of most religions in our world today? If I'm a good enough person, if I do the right rituals, God or the god's will hopefully accept me, reward me, protect me.

Jesus is saying that *this* way of works is totally incompatible with *His* way of faith – where we put our trust in Him rather than ourselves. It's like sewing a patch of unshrunk cloth on

an old garment (v.21) – it doesn't work. It will tear away from the old cloth and ruin everything. It's like putting new wine into old wineskins (v.22), as it ferments and expands, it will burst open the old and stiff leather. It doesn't work – the two things are incompatible.

In both these parables Jesus is showing how the *new* (His way) cannot be confined in the *old* (their way). More than that, how the new, destroys the old!

And that's exactly what Jesus' message was starting to do already – we saw that last week.

They preached salvation through rules. He preached salvation through Himself.

They said keep our traditions. He said receive my forgiveness.

They kept away from sinners. Jesus welcomed them.

They thought they were healthy, Jesus said they were sick.

Jesus is showing us here that new His way trumps their old way. We must not think that the way to God is through our good works and religious rule-keeping. If you think that, you are as misguided as someone who uses radium facial cream for a healthy glow. It's nuts.

I think that even as Christians we can lose sight of how radically different Jesus is to the do-better religion of our world. Sometimes, in subtle ways, we can speak about him or think about him as someone who still plays by the pharisees handbook.

I reflect on this every time I go into the city and walk past the big heritage listed Pressie Church on Collins Street that I occasionally have meetings in. Outside, on the gates, there is plaque that has a picture of Jesus speaking with the thief on the cross. And below the title reads: "Jesus speaks with the good thief."

Do you see the subtle way the radical nature of Jesus' way has been softened. It's not that Jesus is just speaking with a thief, it's the *good* thief. And this always gets to me, because it suggests, that really, at the end of the day, this thief was a good guy, and that's why Jesus speaks with him. No, he was a bad guy! A sinner. And he was the first to admit it! And that's what makes it so radical and awesome that Jesus speaks with Him, listens to him and welcomes him into paradise.

The way of Jesus is incompatible with the way of works and religious rule-keeping.

2. It creates burden not blessing.

Second, works-based righteousness is bad because it creates burden, not blessing. That's what we see in the two accounts that follow – both of which concern the Jewish Sabbath.

Now, if we have any hope of understanding what is going on in these accounts and why Jesus is gets so much hostility, we need to understand a little bit about this particular day of the week.

The Sabbath Day was part of the way of life for most Jews (and still is). Any Jew in Jesus day could tell you that God had from creation blessed the seventh day of the week (Sat) and declared it holy (Gen 2:3). It was also enshrined in the 10 commandments as a day of rest in which Israel was to remember that their God was the creator God as well as the saviour God (Deut 5:12-15).

Now, at one level that all sounds pretty straightforward right? It's a day where you take a break from working, rest and remember God.

But if you've got a rule-keeping world view like the Pharisees – it's not so simple. When they read the words: "you must not do any work" their natural question was, "What does it mean to work?" I want to know exactly what I can do and what I can't do."

And so to solve this problem the Pharisees had created 39 sub categories of "Sabbath law" which outlined and unpacked all the various activities they deemed to be "work" and therefore prohibited.

One of these categories was "reaping" which was defined as "the severing of a plant from its source of growth." This meant that plucking a wild flower was forbidden. Climbing a tree was forbidden – in case you accidentally knocked off a branch. And yes, picking some heads of grain was forbidden.

Remember where the Pharisees had taken things: 'Rest Day to remember God' 'to you cannot pick a daisy.' This is legalism (WBR) at it's finest.

So that's a bit about the Sabbath which stands as the context behind what happens next. Read with me from verse 23:

²³ On the Sabbath he was going through the grainfields, and his disciples began to make their way, picking some heads of grain. ²⁴ The Pharisees said to him, "Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?"

What would you have said if you were in Jesus shoes?

"Give me a break! Are you seriously going to be that ridiculously pedantic!?"

But, as always keeps his cool, acts with patience, and goes back to God's word. And in this case to an instance in the life of David, that is applicable to the moment. Look at verse 25:

²⁵ He said to them, "Have you never read what David and those who were with him did when he was in need and hungry — ²⁶ how he entered the house of God in the time of Abiathar the high priest and ate the bread of the Presence — which is not lawful for anyone to eat except the priests — and also gave some to his companions?"

Now you can go and read that instance in 1 Sam 21:1-6 – it. But what is interesting in that case is that God does not condemn David for his actions nor the Priest who gave the bread to him. And the Pharisees would have known this. Which, I think is why Jesus puts it to them. He wants them to mull on why God would not have condemned David in that moment.

And the why, I believe, was to show them that in God's eyes, human need was more important than ritual requirement. The disciples were hungry (we know that from Matthew's account), and Jesus allows them to have their basic human need met. The Sabbath was supposed to be received as a day of blessing or, in the words of Isaiah, a delight.

This is why Jesus tells them (v.27):

²⁷ Then he told them, "The Sabbath was made for man and not man for the Sabbath."

The Pharisees had become like the Park Keeper in Mary Poppins Returns which my kids watched the other night. In the movie this guy is in charge of taking care of this wonderful

grassy park, but he's so wrapped up in preserving the pristine grass that he won't let the kids anywhere near it. They're not allowed to run on it or play near it. He continually tells them off and reminds them of to keep off the grass. But you see, grassy parks, just like Sabbath's were meant to be enjoyed.

The Pharisees had turned the day of blessing into a day of burden.

Now, at this point in the conversation, you can imagine the Pharisees protesting: "These rules have been around for generations! They were passed down to us from some of the wisest Rabbis in history. How dare you challenge their authority and mess with our most holy day!" How do you think Jesus might answer such a remark. Well, I think verse 28 gives us the answer.

28 So then, the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath."

"You say you are the interpreters of the Sabbath. Well, says Jesus, I'm the Lord of the Sabbath and I have authority to speak about what God does and does not desire in this realm. I have authority, as the Lord, to speak about what the Sabbath was made for, what it means, how it should be observed and enjoyed.

You guys are making it a burden, not the blessing it should be.

And it's the same in the following incident with the man who has the withered hand. Healing Him in their minds was a form of work, and thus was prohibited. Again, burden over blessing. Read it with me. 3:1ff:

3 Jesus entered the synagogue again, and a man was there who had a shriveled hand. 2 In order to accuse him, they were watching him closely to see whether he would heal him on the Sabbath.

3 He told the man with the shriveled hand, "Stand before us." 4 Then he said to them, "Is it lawful to do good on the Sabbath or to do evil, to save life or to kill?"

The answer of course was to do good and to save life – but how could they admit it!? That would green light Jesus' activity. Instead, we read that:

they were silent. 5 After looking around at them with anger, he was grieved at the hardness of their hearts and told the man, "Stretch out your hand." So he stretched it out, and his hand was restored.

This incident, together with the heads of grain episode before it, demonstrates the contrast between the burden of rule-keeping religion and the blessing of knowing the way of Jesus.

I wonder whether you feel burdened or blessed in your relationship with God.

I think it's easy to have your experience of being a Christian become more of a burden or a blessing?

Sometimes it happens when we create extra rules for ourselves. Like the Pharisees, we come up with things to help us “stay on track” or to give ourselves a sense of control. I remember as a child, I made a rule for myself that I *had* to say my nightly prayers in the exact order, with the exact right words. I became convinced that if I didn’t do this every night God wouldn’t be pleased. But it just became burdensome – the prayer was quite long, I was often tired, and I actually started to hate going to bed and having to go through this whole routine. Isn’t it sad that the blessing of communion with God, gets turned into the burden of a box that needs to be ticked.

Where do you turn blessing into burden?

Maybe it’s your daily bible reading, or church attendance, or evangelism or your roster service. Have those things which God gives for your blessing and the blessing of others become burdens?

To help figure that out, I might be worth asking yourself: “do you feel more accepted by God if you do them well and less accepted if I struggle? – i.e. struggling to read the bible and pray, keeping quiet when opportunities to share Christ come up, not serving at church?

If the answer is yes, it may be that the harmful works-based mindset of the Pharisee is starting to creep in. It may be that you need to go back to the way of Christ who assures us that we are always wholly accepted by God on the basis of our faith in his work, not our work. God has credited us with His righteousness. We need to be like Paul who, despite his life of good works and religious rule-keeping, rejoiced in the blessing, the surpassing value of knowing Christ (Phil 3:7-9):

⁷ But everything that was a gain to me, I have considered to be a loss because of Christ. ⁸ More than that, I also consider everything to be a loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. Because of him I have suffered the loss of all things and consider them as dung, so that I may gain Christ ⁹ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own from the law, but one that is through faith in Christ^[a]—the righteousness from God based on faith

Our natural instinct as humans is to revert to a works-based mindset when it comes to God. But if we buy into that, which many people do, we do ourselves harm. We create burden not blessing.

3. It poisons the souls

Finally, a works-based approach to righteousness will ultimately poison the soul. If we do not stop believing that it's me and my good life rather than Jesus and his good work on the cross which justifies, we will be in serious spiritual trouble.

It's like that radium-based facial cream. If you keep using it, it will just end up poisoning you.

This is what happens to the Pharisees, their rule-keeping world-view poisoned them against the true source of life in Jesus. Jesus, we are told in verse 5, is “grieved” by the hardness of their hearts.

And in fact they are so poisoned by their misguided world view that they actually believe *they* are the good guys in this passage and *Jesus* is the bad guy. It doesn't matter that he just miraculously brought life and healing to a man with a withered hand... He broke one of *their* rules! And that's why they seek to kill him – they see him and his message of grace to

sinner, rather than reward for the rule-keepers as a huge threat to their world view. The new wine of Jesus is bursting apart the old wineskins of the Pharisees and they don't like it. Look at verse 6:

⁶ Immediately the Pharisees went out and started plotting with the Herodians against him, how they might kill him.

The Pharisees had been poisoned by self-righteousness. And as a result, they had come to the devastating conclusion that it was right to reject Jesus. But in coming to that conclusion, they had:

- Cut themselves off from God's doctor who has the power to heal their sin problem (as we saw last week).
- They had attempted to fix the bullet hole wound of sin with a band aid of "religious rituals."
- They had made themselves enemies with God by rejecting His saviour.

If we think we are good enough for God, we will get annoyed, frustrated and hostile towards Jesus when hear him telling us otherwise. We'll want him out of our lives and disrupting our cherished view of ourselves.

Don't let your soul be poisoned like these guys. Don't reject the Lord who saves.

Maybe, you're here tonight and you're not yet a Christian. Maybe you currently believe that your good life, your rule-keeping will earn you God's favour. Maybe you, like the Pharisees aren't convinced you are a sinner - someone who has rejected and ignored God and stands

under his judgment. Don't be like them. There is no one who is truly righteous. Even the pharisees, who were considered the moral, good guys of Jesus day had this problem of sin – you see that, they were willing to put to Jesus to death. We all, like them, had that insidious sin problem that lay buried beneath all out outward good works. Maybe, if you're truly honest with yourself, you know this, and you know God would not be okay with it.

Don't try and remedy the problem with more good works, more religion like the pharisees. That will not work. You need Jesus. He promises to save you by living the life you should have lived and then dying the death you should have died. Jesus takes away the guilt of sin. He brings you forgiveness. You are declared righteous in God's sight through faith in Him. You are saved by God's grace, not your works.

Don't go another day embracing a misguided world view that does you harm – both in this life and the life to come. Embrace the true way, the better way, God's way of faith in Jesus.

Conclusion

Tonight we've seen Jesus dismantle the religious world-view of the Pharisees who were critical of him. We've seen him highlight three key problems associated with a works-based mindset.

- It's not compatible with God's way of faith in Jesus.
- It creates burden not blessing.
- It poisons the soul, and leads people to reject God's saviour.

We need the way of Jesus, not the way of works.

I was reminded of this eight years ago when my Pop was dying in hospital. My mother asked him if He was ready to die. He apparently replied to her that he just wasn't sure if he had lived a good enough life.

Imagine how disconcerting that would be in your final days. Worrying as to whether God would accept you. Unsure if you had lived a good enough life and done enough religious things – my Pop had actually gone to church for his entire life. It's easy to go through life with a works-based mindset when it comes to God. But when we are face with the stark reality of our death, it's a mindset that leaves most of us uncertain and unsatisfied.

But you need that certainty, you need that satisfaction. And it comes through faith in Jesus – not your works. In him you find forgiveness of sin. In Him you are credited with the righteousness you need. My mum reassured my Pop with that message of faith in Jesus. I pray, that we will leave here tonight reassured by it too. Let's pray.