

How Religious Rules were used against Jesus

Introduction: The gospel reading today is part of a section where Jesus comes into conflict with religious leaders over his attitude to their religious rules. They pressed a literal interpretation; Jesus was more concerned with the principles behind the rules.

For example, in Mark 2:1-12, Jesus said that his healing power demonstrated that he had power to *forgive* sins, but the teachers of the law accused him of blasphemy. In Mark 2:13-17, the Pharisees objected to Jesus mixing with non-religious people such as tax collectors. Jesus said he had not come to call the 'righteous' but sinners. Even though God's law called on them to love their neighbor as themselves, they despised people they thought were inferior to them.

In Mark 2:18-22, he answered criticism that his disciples did not fast like those of John the Baptist and the Pharisees. By means of two difficult little parables he pointed out that he was not about patching up old religious customs but introducing a whole new relationship with God.

The two events in today's reading follow a similar pattern. The key point of contention in both was about Jesus' more relaxed approach to keeping Sabbath laws.

Taking the first case; in Deuteronomy 23:25, Israelites were allowed to pick grain from someone's field, as long as they didn't take it away from where they plucked it. In Mark 2:23 the Pharisees objected to the disciples doing this on the Sabbath Day. In reply, Jesus reminded them of what David did when he was an outlaw and he and his men ate the sacred bread in the Tabernacle. Essentially what Jesus said was that if

How Religious Rules were used against Jesus

it was good enough for David and his men to relieve their hunger in that way, even though it broke a law to the contrary, why not his disciples?

What Jesus is doing is laying down three important principles. First, that legitimate needs take priority over ritual rules. Second, that the Sabbath was designed to be a benefit, not a burden. It was to be a day of refreshment, not an excuse to try to build-up points with God. Third, in any case, Jesus himself was Lord of all things, even the law of the Sabbath. So if he says it's alright to put genuine needs before religious rules, then it is. In other words, Jesus is claiming authority over the Law of Moses.

Who has the right to do that? Only God!

Just as Jesus took upon himself the authority to forgive sins, so in this section, he is taking on the role of modifying God's law. Only God himself can do that, so clearly, he is making a massive claim about himself which ultimately came to be spelt out in what we call the doctrine of the Trinity.

The Lord's response in all these cases outraged the religious leaders, but more was to come. In the second event recorded in today's passage these leaders try to set a trap for Jesus in order to bring a charge against him; Mark 3:1-3:

How Religious Rules were used against Jesus

Another time he went into the synagogue, and a man with a shriveled hand was there. 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. Jesus said to the man with the shriveled hand, 'Stand up in front of everyone.'

Obviously Jesus is aware of the trap but instead of calming things down, he takes the initiative by bringing the man forward so that everyone will see the miracle he is about to do.

Then, to put his enemies on the spot, in verse 4; he asks them publicly, 'which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?' What could they say? Were they going to say that it was better to do evil on God's holy day than to do good? Obviously not. So they remained silent.

Mark 3:5-6:

He looked around at them in anger and deep distress at their stubborn hearts, he said to the man, 'stretch out your hand.' He stretched it out and his hand was completely healed. Then the Pharisees went out and began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus.

When we look at these two episodes, plus the others in Chapter Two, we can draw a number of important conclusions that should strengthen our faith and confidence in Jesus.

How Religious Rules were used against Jesus

We see his intense desire to forgive, as in the case of the cripple. We see his love for the outcast and sinners, as in the case of Levi and his friends. We see his intention is not to patch up a failing system but to bring in a new order; new wine in new wineskins. This new order is what we know of as new life in the Spirit and eternal life with him in heaven.

We also see that Jesus is fully aware of what lies ahead of him. He, like a bridegroom taken away from the party; he will be taken away in death on a cross, then for a while his disciples will be sad, but then will come resurrection. Then they will rejoice.

Another thing we see in each of these episodes is the priority of common sense and compassion over against the need to keep religious rules, which are always a means to an end, and never the end themselves.

Most importantly, this series of hostile encounters point to the true identity of Jesus as ***the Lord***, not only of the Sabbath but of all creation, as illustrated by his power to do miracles and to forgive sins.

It remains for all of us today, above everything else, to focus on our great Lord and Saviour, not only as the model for 'doing good' but as the source of our own salvation and the strength that we need to follow him in this world.