

Rules are Rules by Jeff Strite

Mark 2:13-3:6

(Before reading the text I noted that the stories in this section of Mark detailed the conflict between Jesus and a religious group known as the Pharisees... and I emphasized the word "Pharisees" as I read through the text)

OPEN: Back in the 1980's, the Minnesota Twins had this description of the game of baseball in their program:

"You have two sides, one out in the field and one in.
Each man that's on the side that's in goes out
and when he's OUT he comes in
and the next man goes in until he's out.
When 3 men are out, the side that's out comes in
and the side that's been in goes out and tries to get those coming in... out.
Sometimes you get men still in and not out.
When both sides have been in and out 9 times including the not outs,
that's the end of the game."

Baseball can be a confusing game. There are so many rules to understand that it can be hard on new players. One man shared how this especially can affect kids that play in Little Leagues

"There are always new players who do not know or understand the rules and the game becomes confusing and frustrating for them.
If you don't hit the ball you are out.
Unless you get 4 bad pitches before you get 3 good ones.
And you need to run really fast if you hit the ball.
Unless you hit it on the wrong side of the white line.
Or unless they catch it.
But they have to catch it before it hits the ground.
You can run past first base and home plate, but not 2nd or 3rd base.
And if you've got the ball, you need to step on the base to get someone out.
Unless you have to tag them.

He observed: "If children only see baseball as a bunch of rules that everyone knows but them it is easy for them to get discouraged and just quit. When they get confused and do the wrong thing, everyone seems to get mad and and upset. It is easier to just not play.
But with patience and teaching, children learn to love the game of baseball. They learn that the rules make sense and that those rules even make the game more fun."
(Steve Ridgell)

Now, that brings us to our text this morning.
As Christians we have "rules" God expects us to follow.
And where do we find these rules? What is our "rulebook?"

(The Bible)

That's right; the Bible is our rule book.

The Bible tells us everything we need to know about what God wants from us and what is right and wrong for His people to do. We have no other rulebook. We have to Creeds, no Catechisms, no books of Doctrine. It's the Bible and the Bible alone.

What is found in this book are the rules of our "game" of Christianity.

Now in our text this morning, we're introduced to the Pharisees. The Pharisees were men who knew the rules of the game. They had less Bible to work with than we do (the New Testament wasn't written yet), but they loved the Scriptures and studied the Bible intently to discover God's will for their lives. But the Bible was never quite enough for them. The Bible didn't have enough rules. They felt that God wasn't explicit enough on certain matters. They felt He didn't spell out how His people were intended to behave in any and every situation.

So the Pharisees decided to help God out a little bit. If there wasn't a rule for something in Scripture ... they made one up.

They weren't in this religious thing for the fun of it. For them everything had to be played by the book. That is - played by THEIR book. And their "rulebook" (the rules they added to the Scriptures) had a benchmark to measure how successful their rules were. The way they knew their religion was successful was if they succeeded in making sure that everyone didn't smile too much during church.

ILLUS: Erma Bombeck tells about a little boy at church with his mother. He was a good little boy, quiet and well behaved. He didn't cause any problems. But every once in a while he would stand up in the pew, turn around look at the people behind him and smile at them. His smile was infectious, and soon everybody behind him was starting to smile back at him, too.

It was all going fine until the mother realized what the little boy was doing. When she did, she grabbed him by his ear and twisted it a bit told him to sit down and remember that he was in church. Then he started sniffing and crying, and she turned to him and said, "That's better."

Now that scenario would have pleased the Pharisees of Jesus' day.

One scholar noted: "The Pharisees' attitude (was) derived from... the false assumption that true religion was a solemn, joyless affair..." (Hughes 1:77).

In our text this morning, this Pharisaical attitude (that religion should be solemn and joyless) showed up in at least 4 rules they tried to impose on Jesus and His disciples. Those 4 rules were:

Rule #1 – you can't eat with sinners

Rule #2 – you can't eat food when we (the Pharisees) say you should fast

Rule #3 – you can't pick grain out of the field to chew on during the Sabbath

Rule #4 – you can't help someone who's hurting on the Sabbath

Now ALL of these rules were manmade.

Not one of them was based directly out of Scripture

For example there was one day of the year that God demanded a fast – the Day of Atonement. Over the years, there were another 5 days of fasting added by Scripture, but as far I can tell these extra days of fasting were not demanded. These extra fasting days were optional, but held as important ways of

pleasing God.

But now for the Pharisees, fasting was the ultimately religious experience. And they established rules requiring people to fast 2 days a week – Monday and Thursday. And that's what they were complaining that Jesus' disciples didn't do.

Then there was the issue of working on the Sabbath.

God's Law DID say you shouldn't work on the Sabbath day, but the Pharisees were uncomfortable with the fact that God's Law didn't spell out what "work" was to their satisfaction. So they came up with their own personal list of 1521 ways you would be breaking the Sabbath:

- If a person walked more than 750 yards, he broke the Sabbath.
- A Jew couldn't tie a knot or kill fleas or flies.
- He couldn't wear a heavy coat because if he took it off and had to carry it, he was working.
- A woman wasn't allowed to look in the mirror because she might see a gray hair and pull it out – which would have been reaping.

But the Bible didn't make those commands... the Pharisees did. And this type of thing made Jesus angry. At one point Jesus condemned this practice by saying:

"This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men." Matthew 15:8-9 (ESV)

For the Pharisee... religion and worship was all about what THEY FELT it ought to be. They didn't need a "thus saith the Lord". All they needed was a majority vote. If they all agreed... that was all that was needed for them to tack on a few more rules to the end of the Book.

Now the Pharisees are all dead.

Their sect doesn't exist anymore.

But their spirit lives on in churches all across the land. In fact, if you or I aren't careful we might end up being card-carrying Pharisees in our own right.

So, how can I tell if I've fallen into the spirit of the Pharisee?

What would warn us of that kind of attitude in our own hearts?

Well, in these verses are a few characteristics of Pharisees we need to watch out for.

1st – the Pharisees didn't care about other people... especially people who aren't "like them".

The Pharisees of Jesus day became upset that Jesus was eating with Tax Collectors/Sinners. And in the story about the man with shriveled hand, they cared nothing for that man. As far as they were concerned, he could die with that way – as long as Jesus didn't heal him on the Sabbath.

2nd – the Pharisees despised anyone who didn't do religion like they did.

Mark 3:1-2 tells us "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 wasn't following their rules so they looked for any excuse to discredit or destroy Him.

Mark 3:6 says "the Pharisees went out and began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus."

A true Pharisee gets really upset when you don't follow their rules.

ILLUS: Years ago someone told me the true story of a church that had a problem. This congregation had a Young Couples class in the church basement, and it always ran about 5 or 6 people... that is, until a new couple came to church and took over the class. In a matter of months the Sunday School class had grown to 25 or 30 people and there were several decisions for Christ that came out of the class.

But then somebody noted that they were... eating donuts in that classroom.

There was rule in that church that no one was to eat anything in the church building. It was not acceptable. So a committee of the concerned brought their complaints to the preacher and demanded he tell this class how things ought to be done in their church.

The preacher prayed and thought about that all week long. Then on Sunday he got up in the pulpit and addressed the congregation.

"It's been brought to my attention that there's a problem in the young couples' class. I'm told you've been eating donuts down there in your class."

Asking the teacher to stand the preacher asked him "John is this true?"

(John said that it was true)

"John tell me – how many people were in that class when you starting teaching it"

(5 or 6)

How many are attending now?"

(25 or 30)

But you've been eating donuts down there... and that's a terrible thing."

"John, tell me – how many people have made decisions for Christ out of that class since you began teaching?"

(7 or 8).

But you've been eating donuts down in your class... and the rules say you can't eat down there.

Then preacher paused for a moment and then called the servers to the front of the sanctuary. And he said: "I'm going have the servers take the collection plates and pass them down the aisles. And I want every pack of gum and every mint and every package of tic-tac's put in those plates."

And when the plates were brought back to the front, the preacher declared: "I don't ever want to hear another complaint about the young couples' class eating donuts EVER again."

Now, what was the problem?

What were these people so upset about?

They were upset about... donuts.

Now correct me if I'm wrong (but I'm not):

Is there anything in the Bible about eating donuts?

Is there anything in the Bible about eating food during a Bible study?

Is there anything in the Bible about eating food in the church building?

No! There is nothing about that in the Bible is there?

But sometime in the church's history, somebody had created a rule about eating in class.

And the rule was more important than people being brought to Church.

And the rule was more important than new people coming to Christ.

The nature of the Pharisee is that they get unhappy when THEIR rules are ignored.

- The rules can deal with donuts in class.
- Or with the order of service during the worship hour.
- Or whether there's an organ on stage or if there's a guitar and drums.
- The rules can deal with whether the preacher wears a tie when he preaches or not.

The Bible does not say one word about any of those things. But people will get upset anyway about such things because they get more concerned with their personal preferences than they are with God's Word.

So now, how did Jesus respond to this issue of the Pharisaical attitude?

1st Jesus pointed out that worship was to be a joyful thing.

He said "How can the guests of the bridegroom fast while he is with them? They cannot, so long as they have him with them." Mark 2:19

Whenever the bridegroom is present there should be joy, and the bridegroom is Jesus.

Whenever He's present there should be joy in worship.

So, is Jesus here?

If He IS here ... then this is to be like being at a wedding party.

It should be a time of joy and pleasure.

But if there's no joy... He's not here.

Billy Sunday once said "If there is no joy in your Christianity, there's a leak somewhere in your faith."

ILLUS: Just last weekend there were a bunch of us out at the campground at Mississinewa. It's become a tradition to build a big campfire and gather our camp chairs in a circle and Chuck (our song leader at church) passes out booklets of songs we sing here each Sunday. For the next hour or so, there's people playing guitars, tambourines and such. And Jonathan always brings a box that's built to act like a drum so he can keep the beat. And everybody just sings for all they're worth.

And people stop and listen.

And do you know why they stop and listen?

Not because we're all a bunch of great singers, but because of the pure joy they can sense about our worship around that campfire.

Jesus is there... and we're filled with joy because we're singing His praises.

2ndly Jesus pointed out that He wasn't into a rigid religion.

Jesus said "no one pours new wine into old wineskins. If he does, the wine will burst the skins, and both the wine and the wineskins will be ruined. No, he pours new wine into new wineskins." Mark 2:22

Why can't you pour new wine into old wineskins? New wine hasn't fermented yet, and as it ages it ferments and expands. But old wineskins don't expand. They aren't as flexible as they used to be. They've grown rigid with age.

Christianity is at its best when God's people learn to be a little flexible. A church should NEVER change the message of Christ, but it might be wise to change its methods periodically.

- Churches have met in cathedrals, chapels, movie theatres, hotels, and individual homes.
- Worship has had acapella music, organs and pianos, and guitars and drums
- People have sung praises from hymnals, print outs and overhead projections.
- And folks have read out of paperback Bibles, hardback Bibles, and Bibles on their iPods and cellphones.

How many of you here have your Bibles on your ipods or cellphones? (several raised their hands). As you can see, our culture has changed and our methods need to change with them. Flexible churches learn to present the UNCHANGING message of Jesus in various and changing ways.

It's NOT the METHOD that's important.

It's all about the MESSAGE of Jesus Christ and Him crucified (Can I have an "Amen!")

3rd - Jesus said worship was all about Him.

It's not about you and it's not about me.

Jesus said "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath." Mark 2:27-28

One of the things we have to accept in order to become a Christian is that Jesus is our LORD. Calling Him Lord means we accept the fact that He know owns everything.

Does Jesus own ME?

Does He own you?

Does He own your family? Your house? Your Car?

Does He own this church building?

Does He own this worship time?

You better believe it!!!!

The moment you hear someone say "This is MY church" Or "This is OUR church" you ought to feel an icy chill go up and down your back. Once it's YOUR church or MY church... it doesn't belong to Jesus anymore. And that's a dangerous place to be.

One last thing.

(Pause) Jesus taught that worship was all about bringing others to Him.

In Matthew 9:13 we read a slightly different take on part of the story we read today. The Pharisees had complained about Jesus going to Matthew's house to eat with him. And Jesus told them "go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."

God desires mercy, not sacrifice.

Now God still expected the regular sacrifices, but He was telling the folks in Hosea's day (from which Jesus quoted this verse) that they could go all through the motions and obey all the "RULES" and pretend God was pleased... but if they failed to show mercy and love to the struggling the fallen – God wasn't interested.

And since I began this sermon with illustrations about baseball, I wanted to close with this true story about some people who understood this basic truth.

CLOSE: Back in March of 2009 a girl's college softball game made the news. It was a critical game with both teams fighting for the conference championship. Western Oregon was at bat and there were two runners on base.

Then Sara came to bat.

Sara was not a power hitter. That season she'd only gotten on base 4 out 34 times at bat, she had a lifetime hitting average of .153, and she had NEVER hit a homerun.

Then something changed for her. It was the top of the 2nd inning and the 2nd pitch came across the plate... and Sara connected. The ball sailed over the fence for a 3 run homer.

Sara was understandably excited and she ran for all she was worth around 1st base headed for 2nd.

Then she realized, in her excitement, she had failed to touch 1st base. Suddenly she stopped and turned to run back to 1st... and crumpled to the ground. She'd torn her ACL and writhed in pain as she crawled back to 1st.

The entire ballpark went silent.

Everyone was in shock.

People in the stands began to cry for her.

There was no way Sara would ever make it to home plate on her own.

And the RULES dictated that none of her teammates could touch her to help or she'd be called out.

That's when Mallory Holtman (a girl from the other team and who had a record of more homeruns than any other player in that conference's history) went to the home plate umpire and asked if it would be acceptable for HER team to pick Sara up and carry her around the bases.

The umpire thought for a moment and said there was nothing in the RULES that said they couldn't. So Mallory and Liz Wallace (another player from the opposing team) gently picked Sara up – making a seat with their hands for her to sit in - and carried her around the bases allowing her to tap each base along the way with her uninjured left foot.

After reaching home plate, these two girls handed Sara off to her own teammates.

(Pause) Sara's team won the game that day... 4 to 2. If Mallory and Liz's team had stuck to the rules they might have actually taken the championship. But they didn't stick to the rules. They were made of better stuff than that. Instinctively they understood what Jesus was teaching – winning the game isn't as important to God as doing what is necessary to help the fallen and struggling of this world.

And that's why this church exists... to help those who struggle in this world.

INVITATION

FOOTNOTE: For a detailed description of the softball game described in the last illustration you can listen to the news report on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ttkBP2XDZvE>