

Irreligious: Forsaking Religion and Finding Jesus' Sabbath (Mk. 3:1-6)

Chris Altrock – June 13, 2010

During the first half of this year, newspapers and newscasts were filled with reports about potential abuse occurring within the Catholic Church. Allegations have poured in from half a dozen countries, including 300 accusations from Germany, the home of the current Pope. Many Catholics and non-Catholics are fed up with the Catholic Church.

Many more people are fed up with church in general. Dan Kimball has written a book entitled They Like Jesus But Not the Church.¹ In it, Kimball reports that many today find Jesus attractive but not the church. They feel that the church is too politically motivated.

And, in his book God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything Christopher Hitchens writes about the ills of all institutional religion.² He states that religion is "*violent, irrational, intolerant, allied to racism and tribalism and bigotry, invested in ignorance and hostile to free inquiry, contemptuous of women and coercive toward children.*"

There's a lot of hostility these days toward religion in general and toward the church in particular.

This is nothing new, of course. Even in Jesus' day there was ill-will toward religion. Mark, one of the four biographers of Jesus' life, focuses on this ill-will. His Gospel includes 10 occasions during which Jesus and religious leaders got into conflict. This summer, we're using these 10 conflicts to reflect on the difference between being religious and following Jesus.

Our series begins with conflict #5 in Mk. 3:1-6: *1 Again he entered the synagogue, and a man was there with a withered hand. 2 And they watched Jesus, to see whether he would heal him on the Sabbath, so that they might accuse him. 3 And he said to the man with the withered hand, "Come here." 4 And he said to them, "Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to kill?" But they were silent. 5 And he looked around at them with anger, grieved at their hardness of heart, and said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He stretched it out, and his hand was restored. 6 The Pharisees went out and immediately held counsel with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him.* (ESV)

Mark reveals in verse 1 that this conflict takes place in "*the synagogue.*" Jews believed that synagogues were miniature versions of the Temple. Like the Temple, the synagogue was a physical place where Jews gathered to meet God. Unlike the Temple, the synagogue had no altar for animal sacrifices. Like the Temple, the synagogue had an ark or a sacred container. Unlike the Temple, the ark in the synagogue contained only scrolls on which were written the Old Testament law. The synagogue likely came into existence when the Jews were forced from Israel and dragged into exile in Babylon. Without access to their Temple, the Jews were forced to create substitutes. Thus, the synagogue was born.³ And it is in one of these synagogues that this conflict takes place between Jesus and the religious leaders.

Mark tells us in verse 1 that *“Again he entered the synagogue.”* The word “Again” tells us that Jesus has previously been in a synagogue. This isn’t Jesus’ first visit. The word “Again” points back to Mk. 1:21: *“And they went into Capernaum, and immediately on the Sabbath he entered the synagogue and was teaching.”* It appears that in chapter 3 Jesus has returned to the synagogue he first visited in chapter 1.⁴ And during both visits to this synagogue, Jesus encounters people in need. When Jesus showed up, the synagogue was a place where people in need also showed up. They knew that if Jesus was in the synagogue, there was the hope of getting help. We might pray for the same to be true of Highland—that it be a place where Jesus shows up and where people in need can truly find help. In chapter 1, the man in need in the synagogue has an “unclean spirit.” In chapter 3, Mark tells us that the man in need in the synagogue has a “withered hand.”

“Withered hand” probably refers to a disease common in the ancient Near East in which parts of the spinal cord would become inflamed and paralysis would occur in one or more groups of muscles. Here, apparently, the man’s hand has become paralyzed and withered or atrophied.⁵

Someone else is also in the synagogue that day: the Pharisees. According to verse 2, the Pharisees watch Jesus *“to see whether he would heal on the Sabbath...”* Notice that Jesus’ enemies do not doubt that Jesus can heal. Ultimately, these religious leaders believe Jesus’ ability to heal came from Satan (Mk. 3:22,20).⁶ The debate will be whether Jesus is permitted to heal on the Sabbath.

The word “Sabbath” comes from a Hebrew word meaning “to cease” or “to desist.” The Sabbath day was rooted in the fact that on the 7th day of creation, God “ceased” from his labor (Gen. 2:2). The Sabbath is mentioned in all five of the books of the Pentateuch—Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. That shows just how central the Sabbath was to Jewish law.

And by Jesus’ day, the Sabbath was even more central, especially to the Pharisees. The Pharisees determined that the Torah contained 613 commandments (248 positive and 365 negative). Having identified these 613 commandments, their next step was to “make a hedge” around these commandments. That is, the Pharisees wrote additional commandments that would keep Jews from even getting close to violating the actual commandments of the Torah. One of the best known examples of this was the 39 acts which the Pharisees decided would be prohibited on the Sabbath.⁷ They were not satisfied with the Bible’s generic commandment to do no work on the Sabbath. They created a list of 39 specific things you could not do on the Sabbath. And clearly, they believed that healing a man’s withered hand fell into the category of acts not permitted.

Jesus is aware of all of this. He knows the Pharisee’s legalistic views on the Sabbath. He knows, according to verse 2, that they are collecting evidence against him so that they might *“accuse him.”* This phrase is a technical legal term. The Pharisees are gathering evidence so that they might take Jesus to religious court. But rather than play it safe, Jesus asks the man with the withered hand to get up and *“come here.”* Literally, Jesus tells the man to *“rise in the midst,”* or

“stand in the middle.” People in the synagogue would have been seated on stone benches around the walls or on lying on mats on the floor. Jesus asks the man with the withered hand to stand up in the middle of everyone.⁸ Jesus wants all eyes to be on this man and on what he’s about to do for this man.

With all attention riveted on him, Jesus then asks the religious leaders: *“Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to kill?”* Jesus says that there are only two options lying before everyone in that synagogue: *“do good/ save life”* or *“do harm/ kill.”* The words *“save life”* are code words in the Jewish debate about the Sabbath. Almost all Jewish groups, including the Pharisees, believed that the prohibition against work on the Sabbath could be set aside if a person’s life was in danger. In other words, *“saving life”* was always permitted on the Sabbath. But notice what Jesus does with the phrase *“save life.”* Jesus equates *“save life”* and *“do good”*: *“Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to kill?”* Jesus seeks to reframe what it means to *“save life.”* The Pharisees would argue that the man with the withered hand was in no mortal danger. His life was not being threatened by his withered hand. Therefore, they believed Jesus should wait until the Sabbath was over before healing the hand.⁹ *The Pharisees downplay the man’s condition.* His withered hand is a small thing. It doesn’t endanger the man’s life. In the mind of the religious leaders, this situation doesn’t count as a situation of *“saving life.”* It might be *“doing good.”* But it’s not *“saving life.”* They downplay the man’s condition and the need for Jesus to heal the hand.

But Jesus magnifies the man’s condition and his act of healing the hand. In *“doing”* this *“good”* thing—in healing the withered hand—Jesus believes he is *“saving life.”*¹⁰ In the mind of Jesus, *“doing good”* is *“saving life.”* Jesus magnifies the impact of this healing. Jesus is not merely restoring a hand. He is saving a life. What the Pharisees view as insignificant and as something that can wait, Jesus views as significant and as something that cannot wait. In healing the hand, Jesus believes he is saving a life.

This statement of Jesus’ in verse 4 is probably intended as a reference to the way in which Jesus viewed his entire ministry. In Mk. 1:14-15 Jesus proclaims that *“the kingdom of God is at hand.”* What Jesus is doing with this man and with his withered hand is not merely restoring physical health. When Jesus heals the hand, he is helping usher in the kingdom of God.¹¹

In contrast, Jesus implies that it’s the Pharisees who are violating the Sabbath because they are about to *“do harm”* and *“kill.”* Here’s what the Pharisees do on the Sabbath according to verse 6: *The Pharisees went out and immediately held counsel with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him.* The Herodians were simply people who supported the Herodian Dynasty. The New Testament is full of the Herod family. For example, there was Herod the Great. Herod the Ethnarch, or Archelaus, was his elder son. Herod the tetrarch, or Antipas was the younger son. Herod the king, or Agrippa, was the grandson. The Herodians were supporters of this Herodian dynasty.¹² Normally, the Pharisees and the Herodians would be enemies. But today, on the Sabbath, they conspire against Jesus, one who threatens the power, prestige, and position of both groups. On the Sabbath, they begin working to kill Jesus. They violate the Sabbath.

I'd like to apply this text by contrasting two types of photography. The first type is one you may be familiar with: telescopic photography. *Telescopic photography makes small things appear big.* For example, telescopic photography allows us to take things in the night sky that are very small and enlarge them. Here are three examples:

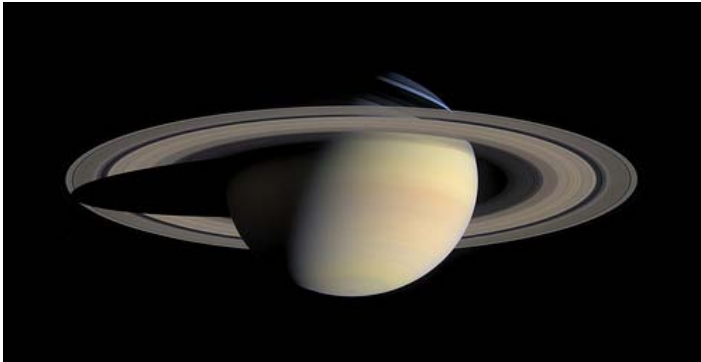
- This is an image of a spiral galaxy called M51. It is 30 million light years from the earth. It's so small that we cannot see it in the night sky with our eyes alone. Yet telescopic photography makes that small thing appear big.



- This is an image of two emerging galaxies called NGC 2207 and IC 2163. Though light years away and infinitely small to our eyes, telescopic photography has made these galaxies appear large.



- Finally, this is an image of the planet Saturn. Using just your eyes, you'd be hard pressed to find this tiny dot in the sky at night. But telescopic photography makes small things like this appear large.



There is another type of photography, however, which does the opposite. It is called Tilt-Shift photography. Telescopic photography makes small things appear big. *But tilt-shift photography makes big things appear small.* It uses changes in focus and lens position to make something life-size appear miniature. Here are three examples:

- This is an image of the football stadium where the Nebraska Cornhuskers play. It's a massive stadium filled with thousands of people. Yet this immense arena has been made to look like a miniature model through tilt-shift photography.



- This is an image of ancient pyramids at Tikal National Park in Guatemala. They are several stories tall. But through tilt-shift photography, these pyramids appear to be a miniature plaything.



- Finally, this is an image of the San Francisco skyline. But tilt-shift photography has made this massive city look miniature.



Telescopic photography makes small things appear big. Tilt-Shift photography makes big things appear small. And the difference between these two photographic methods is the same difference between Jesus and religion in this morning's text. *Religion makes big things appear small. Jesus makes small things appear big.* The "thing" at issue is the healing of the man's withered hand. The Pharisees make the thing appear small. To them, it's something that can wait. It's not big enough to warrant setting aside their religious traditions. Jesus, however, makes the thing appear large. To Jesus, this *is* about saving life, because doing good is the same as saving life. To Jesus this one healing is an example of the entire kingdom of God breaking into human life and the beginning of the transformation and re-creation of everything and every person. The Pharisees take this truly immense thing, and through distortion and shifting of position, make it appear small. But Jesus takes what they view as small, and magnifies it, and shows it for the enormous thing it truly is. Jesus allows us to see the genuine scale of the healing. It's about saving life. It's about the in-breaking of the kingdom of God.

Religion always magnifies this question: What is legal? And it always minimizes this question: What is loving? For the Pharisees, love only trumps law when a human life is in mortal danger. Otherwise, law always triumphs love.

And that is the real danger of religion. Because you can excel at being legal while at the same time fail at being loving. Author John Ortberg writes about this.¹³ Ortberg says that most Christians today measure spirituality in ways that make the Pharisees the winners. Here's what I think he means: we emphasize the legal issues. We magnify getting people to know the right rules and to obey the right rules. Getting the right name on the church. Teaching the right doctrine in the pulpit. Doing the right things in the worship service. Wearing the right clothes. Memorizing the right passages. Voting for the right people. Listening to the right music. Yet, we can do all of this and still wind up being arrogant and prideful. We often treat spirituality in ways that make the Pharisees the winner. The question is almost always "What is legal? What is orthodox? What is acceptable? What is prudent? What is safe?" And in so doing, we minimize the other question: "What is loving?" We take this big thing—showing love—and make it appear small.

Jesus, on the other hand, seemed to almost always ask this question: What is loving? Love was the fulfillment of the law. Love was the true intent of God's teaching. In fact, love was the true meaning of the Sabbath. What the Pharisees viewed as small and insignificant, Jesus made enormous and larger than life-sized. For Jesus, the spiritual life is always about love. In Jesus' eyes, you're not mature if you know and do everything legal. You're mature when you know and do everything loving.

It's like we are walking around with tilt-shift glasses on. And when we look at the thing—doing the loving thing—through our glasses that big thing appears miniature. It's not that important to us. It's insignificant to us. But Jesus swipes off our tilt-shift glasses and replaces them with telescopic glasses. Suddenly, that small thing—doing the loving thing—appears enormous. We can't see anything but that. Now, simply doing good, simply doing an act of love, becomes tantamount to saving a life. It becomes tantamount to ushering in the kingdom of God.

I glimpsed this the other day when an email arrived. It was from Marka Bennett, a Highland member. The email told of a boy named Matthew. Matthew had lost his leg in an auto accident in Memphis in 1998. He was treated for a long time at LeBonheur. The Close Encounters Sunday School class at Highland met and adopted Matthew and his family during this difficult time. The class couldn't do much. They prayed for Matthew and his family. They took Matthew's family some meals and some snacks. They'd sit with Matthew or his family in the hospital. Small stuff. Little things. These things were so small that when a letter from Matthew's mom arrived recently at Marka's house, Marka didn't even recognize the name. She sorted through the graduation pictures in the envelope and was mystified: who is this and why did they mail *me* these graduation photos? Then, Marka found the letter inside. It read, "*Hello, Mrs. Bennett: I didn't know if you would remember Matthew or not. He was the little boy that lost his leg in an auto accident back in 1998. He stayed for a long time at LeBonheur...and Highland Street Church of Christ and you[r class] kind of adopted us because we were stuck*

there for so long. I just thought you'd like know that he is graduating high school with a GPA of 3.8! He is a pretty smart guy. We often think of you. Sincerely, Deana Jones." At the time, it seemed like a small thing. Some prayers. Some food. Some company. But twelve years later, this letter arrives. Matthew's a high school senior. He's got a 3.8 GPA. He's graduating. And besides the aunts and the uncles and the grandparents to whom Matthew's mom mailed graduation letters, Matthew's mom just had to send Highland a note. Because to her and to Matthew, what Marka and Close Encounters did was no small thing. They didn't just do some good. They saved a life.

In the big scheme of things, our teens and many adults this week did a lot of small things at Work Camp. It was just paint. It was just carpentry. It was just some home repair. USA Today won't carry that story. CNN won't lead with that news item. But you ask the homeowners. They'll you truth. I learned of one who just wept with joy when a crew arrived at her house. What those teens did this week was no small thing. They didn't just do some good. They saved lives. They ushered in the kingdom of God.

I don't know about you. But that's enough to make me want to become irreligious—to forsake religion and just follow Jesus.

¹ Dan Kimball, [They Like Jesus But Not the Church](#) (Zondervan, 2007).

² Christopher Hitchens, [God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything](#) (Twelve, 2009).

³ "Synagogue," [New Bible Dictionary](#) Second Edition (Edited by J. D. Douglas et.al) (IVP, 1962), 1153-1155.

⁴ Robert H. Gundry [Mark: A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross](#) (Eerdmans, 1993), 149.

⁵ R. K. Harrison, "Disease," [The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia](#) Fully Revised, Volume One: A-D (Eerdmans, 1979), 958.

⁶ Gundry, 153.

⁷ "Pharisees," [New Bible Dictionary](#), 924-925.

⁸ Guelich, 134.

⁹ Gundry, 150.

¹⁰ Gundry, 153.

¹¹ Guelich, 136.

¹² Gundry, 154.

¹³ John Ortberg, "Your Spiritual Growth Plan," [Leadership](#) (Winter, 2010), 78-83.