

Mark 3---The Pursuit of Self Interest

One of the interesting controversies in the Gospel accounts of the life of Jesus is the Sabbath controversies between Jesus and the Pharisees. In Mark's account found in Mark 2:23-3:6, Jesus does some good things that are strongly criticized by the Pharisees because Jesus did them on the Sabbath. The Pharisees with their traditions had set themselves up as interpreters of what work was unlawful to do on the Sabbath. We become aware that two seemingly benign but necessary activities are deemed illegal by the religious establishment. In Mark 2:23, Jesus and His disciples are passing through a field, and being hungry they stop and pick a few heads of grain to eat. Then in 3:1, they enter a synagogue on the Sabbath where Jesus has mercy on a man and heals his hand. You might expect them to wish the disciples well that they were able to get a small meal to fend off their hunger, and then certainly they should have been happy that the poor guy's hand was fixed---BUT NO.

At the end of these two confrontations with Jesus, the Pharisees are clearly not interested in the truth, instead they are totally sold out to self interest. Before Jesus, they were the only interpreters of the law, but now this man from Nazareth has totally threatened their power and position. The story about the confrontation in the synagogue ends with the Pharisees meeting with their arch enemies the Herodians. The Herodians were a political/religious group who supported Herod Antipas. They were anxious to maintain the status quo, meaning they desired no revolutionary or nationalistic activity against the Romans or Herod. The Pharisees were strictly religious separatists who wanted no part of Herod or the Romans. Therefore these were strange bedfellows who got together to plot against Jesus. Both groups had their own strict agenda that Jesus was threatening. While Jesus was doing the works of God and speaking the words of God in public, these fellows were meeting privately to determine "how they might destroy Jesus".

The Lord of the Sabbath

We don't think of Jesus as a confrontational character. We think of Him as meek and mild, and He was until it came to the determination of TRUTH. Jesus clearly did these works in public (along with many others) with the Pharisees watching, knowing that they would go nuts. Then Jesus very clearly refuted their nonsensical traditions with the truth. His four point argument in Mark 2:25-28 concisely explained why Jesus was not breaking the law. First, using David as a precedent in 1 Samuel 21:6, Jesus pointed out that human need is a higher moral obligation. The priest at the time gave David consecrated bread, which was set apart for the priests, because David was so hungry from fleeing from Saul. David's need superseded the ceremonial tradition.

Secondly, God created the Sabbath for the well being of people. It was a gift to God's people for their good. People were not created for the Sabbath, but the Sabbath was created for people. They needed time set apart for rest and worship of God. Third, and my favorite, Jesus told them that He is THE LORD OF THE SABBATH. Jesus wrote the law, and only He can interpret it perfectly. If I had been there I would have yelled out,

“Yeah baby! Tell them who wrote the law, who owns it, and that Jesus is the only one who can fulfill it—In Yo face, you self righteous so and so’s.” After the next story in the synagogue in Mark 3:4, Jesus added a fourth reason. The Sabbath is a time to do good. By trying to block Jesus from helping the man, they were the ones breaking the law. At this point the Pharisees were shut down, and the text says, “they kept silent” as He healed the man. Afterwards they continued their pursuit of self interest over truth by taking counsel with the Herodians as to how they could destroy Jesus.

Why should we look only to Jesus when it comes to absolute truth about God or God’s laws? Because as John 3:13 says, Jesus is the only one who has descended from Heaven with God’s word. Why does the world not receive Jesus as the only bearer of truth? Because as John 3:19 says, Jesus is the “light” who came into a dark world, but people loved the darkness because they did not want the light to shine on their greed, selfish ambitions, and general pursuit of self interest.

The Unforgivable Sin

In Mark 3:22-30, the religious leaders who had come from Jerusalem to the area of the Galilee to check Jesus out, cannot deny the supernatural acts that Jesus is doing. People are being healed, changed, and huge crowds have come from all over to see and hear Jesus. Therefore they must make a determination about who Jesus is, and where His power comes from. In their theology, there was two sources of power---God or Satan. Since in the pursuit of self interest they ruled out God, they attributed His miracles to “Beelzebul” (another name for Satan). They had rejected Jesus as the promised Messiah, but now they went a step further by outwardly opposing Jesus publicly, and speaking blasphemy (speaking profanely against God) against the Holy Spirit. The work of the Holy Spirit is to convict people of sin and their need for Jesus as their Savior, and to glorify Jesus as the Son of God. If someone persistently rejects Jesus, takes it to another level by working against Jesus, and then attributes to Satan what is accomplished by the Holy Spirit, then that person is in danger of never being forgiven. It is a defiant hostility toward God that rejects God’s saving plan for mankind expressed in the person and work of Jesus. The person who persists in hardening his heart against God and His provision of Jesus as Savior, is outside the reach of God’s provision of forgiveness.

Jesus’ objective miracles and authoritative teaching meant nothing to the scribes and Pharisees because their hearts were so hard. We as Christians need not worry about the “unforgivable sin” since our sins, even future sins, are paid for by the atoning work of Christ on the cross, as Paul wrote in Romans 8:1, “There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” This sin Jesus warned about relates to unbelievers only. Jesus responded two ways to their blasphemy. First He taught them using two parables which illustrated how illogical their assertion was. “How can Satan cast out Satan? If a kingdom is divided against itself, it cannot stand.” Then in the second parable about the strong man, Jesus was saying that by ruling over Satan and “plundering his house” it is obvious that someone (Jesus) greater than Satan is at work in the world. Secondly, Jesus issued to them the strong warning concerning forgiveness.

Close to Home

Now that we have learned why unbelievers reject the truth from God (the pursuit of self interest), what about disobedience of believers? Why is it that we as Christians struggle so much with living godly lives? There are three powers that seem to unnecessarily dominate us from time to time---the world, the flesh, and the devil. We are citizens of Heaven by position yet we still, for a time, have to live in this world which is fallen. God has temporarily allowed the people in the world to rule over their lives and live independently of God. Therefore the world is a dark place without meaning and purpose, and no future. The lies of the world dominate our thinking like, "If it feels good do it", or "The ends justify the means." Advertising and marketing is built on these kind of concepts. The second force is the flesh. This is the word the Bible uses for the desires people have in their physical body that dominates our thinking—hunger for sex, greed, food, drink, security, significance, or power, etc. Thirdly, there is a spiritual warfare going on that we cannot see, but is no less real. The adversary cannot make us sin, but is trying to influence us in order to foul up the plan of God.

C.S. Lewis focused on self examination as it applied to spiritual warfare in *THE SCREWTAPE LETTERS*. In this book, demons are discussing how to "mess with" believers. Instead of doing anything overt, they are scheming to help us rationalize that whatever we are doing is fine, so we become insensitive to sin or even unaware of it. Screwtape to Wormwood, "You must bring the chump to a condition in which he can practice self examination for an hour without discovering anything (sin) about himself which is perfectly clear to anyone who has ever lived in the same house with him or worked in the same office." This is very close to home for all of us. The people around us are aware of our imperfections, but we go on merrily about our business very pleased with ourselves. Some people think their problem or someone else's problem is demonic, but the adversary is just using our own PURSUIT OF SELF INTEREST against us.

The Irony

The irony of this human problem of the pursuit of self interest is that our real best self interest lies in an abiding relationship with Christ. The worldly things, the pleasures, the stuff, the personal accolades, the spotlight, and all our selfish ambitions will never fulfill us. We will never find meaning or purpose in this world apart from Christ. We struggle, we seek, and we desperately pursue personal glory that even if we attain our goals, it is fleeting and will pass away. Jesus was dead serious in John 15 when He said, "I am the true vine, you are the branches. Whoever abides in Me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing."

CHARLIE TAYLOR