

**“The Pharisees went out and immediately held counsel with the Herodians against Jesus, how to destroy him.”**

Perhaps you’ve noticed before that there are some people who like laws and rules, and there are others who don’t. Those who like laws and rules usually also like organization. They like to have their things in their proper places. They like to be on-time. Those are nice things that can be said about them. There are also negative things that can generally be said about them. They can be unimaginative and boring. They can be judgmental and rude. Those who don’t like laws and rules as much can be somewhat the opposite. They are often more flexible. They can be more fun. But they might not be as good at organization or getting tasks done.

Between the two, I think those people are more highly valued who like laws and rules. They often make better employees. They do as they’re told. And if the meaning of life is to have a job or to make money, then these folks are better. They’re more productive.

Among many of the Jews at Jesus’s time the purpose of life was to follow the laws of Moses. That can be hard for us to imagine in our money-soaked culture, but so it was. There were Jews whose stated ambition was to follow God’s Law carefully and zealously. That doesn’t sound like it should ever be a bad thing, but as we heard in our Gospel reading, these people became Jesus’s enemies. They hated him and wanted to destroy him. Why? Because he didn’t follow their rules.

The rules that were especially at issue in our reading had to do with the third commandment: **“Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy.”** God commanded the Israelites not to work on the seventh day of the week. The Jews were extremely careful about keeping this commandment. They came up with well-organized lists of things that ought not be done because such things would be “work.” No work was to be done on the Sabbath.

You heard in our reading how the disciples were walking through the grainfields on the Sabbath. What were they doing? Work—according to the Pharisees. They were plucking heads of grain, rubbing off the chaff, and popping them into their mouths. They were harvesting and threshing.

And you might think that this is no big deal. It was just a few kernels. But you’d be wrong. Anyone who knows anything about rules knows that if you let them take an inch they’ll take a mile. These disciples were just harvesting a few kernels, but what if somebody else started to take handfuls? What’s to stop someone from getting out the sickle? Before you know it, the whole field has been harvested on the Sabbath! No! Nip it in the bud. Not even a single kernel is to be harvested on the Sabbath.

Then, in the second half of the reading, Jesus came into a synagogue on the Sabbath. There was a man whose hand was withered. They wondered whether Jesus might do the work of healing on the Sabbath. Lo and behold, he did! Just as they suspected. Jesus was a Sabbath-breaker.

We might understandably be critical of these Pharisees and immediately come to Jesus’s defense, but I think we can learn some important things if we look at the situation from their perspective. They were fully convinced that they were right. They were doing what they’d always been doing, and what they’d

always been doing was to be extremely serious about the Sabbath. They liked to get things just right. They had read many books about it. They'd built up a vast knowledge of what was allowable, what was forbidden, and what might be in the middle. According to this vast knowledge they knew that Jesus was dead wrong.

This left them in a predicament—although it wasn't really a predicament. Either they could forsake all their learning and all their practices and follow Jesus, or they could reject Jesus. It wasn't a hard decision. Who was this Jesus anyway? Somebody from the sticks. Everybody knows that nothing good ever comes from Nazareth.

So the Pharisees were not troubled by their decision, but in point of fact they had made a terrible mistake. They believed that the world needed them and their organization. The world needed their books with all of their wisdom. They were wrong. The simplest Christian knows what the world needs. The world needs Jesus. Truth and goodness will only come through faith in him.

Jesus tried to help the Pharisees. He tried to show them that he was the Messiah, the Christ, the King. Jesus mentioned King David. King David and his disciples ate the showbread from the tabernacle that was supposed to be eaten only by the priests. The Jews had been waiting for someone like David, and here he was! Jesus and his disciples could take the liberty of plucking heads of grain just as David had taken liberty with the showbread.

Admittedly, that demonstration is a little subtle, but the other things Jesus said and did were not subtle at all. They were very direct. Jesus flat out said that he is the Son of Man—a messianic title. **“The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath,”** he said, referring to himself. And Jesus showed his power by healing the man's withered hand. He produced a miracle to validate what he had been saying.

But the Pharisees were blind. They weren't literally blind, but what they should have seen they didn't see. They should have seen that Jesus is the Christ, but they saw an enemy instead. They didn't see a miracle; they saw a Sabbath-breaker. It's like they were bewitched. Here Jesus was with all his grace and power, but all they care about are their stupid little rules. Their stupid little rules have never saved anyone, nor will they save anyone. There is only one Savior—Jesus of Nazareth. Everything else can and must be cast aside for this pearl of great price. There is no organization, no institution, no proud history that can stand in the way of the One whom God has sent. They were wrong.

Let's now consider how this might apply to us. We can learn important things from these Pharisees who rejected Jesus. Imagine if Jesus would have taken a different tack with the Pharisees. Imagine if he come up to them and spoken their language, so to speak. What if he would have talked about how they, as the most fastidious Jews, were the *real* Jews. The other Jews were Jews-in-name-only. Those ignorant people didn't even know what Rabbi Hillel had said about this or that... If Jesus would have talked with them like that, then Jesus would have been part of their club. They would have loved him as one of their own.

So it is with us. Imagine if Jesus were to sidle up to us and say, “I’ve been paying attention, and guess what? You’re the best. Yep. I love everything that you’ve been doing. Those other people—they just don’t get it. But you? You know what’s what. Keep up the good work!”

I think we might respond: “Well thanks Jesus! I always did think you were a pretty swell guy. I like how you think.”

Ridiculous! Jesus is God, not us. Jesus leads, Jesus teaches, and we follow; not the other way around. If we were to reverse this order it would be blindness and stupidity. If we were to reverse this order, then we would only agree with Jesus insofar as he already agrees with us. That is exactly what was going on with the Pharisees. They had no problem with Jesus except when he disagreed with them. When Jesus did disagree with them, they didn’t repent and change their minds. They went stubbornly ahead with their own thoughts and actions because they believed that they were right.

In our sad and decaying times the one thing that everybody has in common is that everybody believes they are right. The people on the right are completely convinced that they are right. The people on the left are completely convinced that they are right. The people in the middle are completely convinced that they are right. Everybody is completely right.

That isn’t surprising if you will think about yours. Nurturing the belief that we are so right and others are so wrong feels so good! We like that feeling. The Pharisees liked that feeling. It felt good to harrumph that Jesus was nothing but a lousy Sabbath-breaker. They enjoyed labeling Jesus as an evildoer. They enjoyed their hardness of heart.

Nobody has to force us into being blind and stupid, especially when it comes to the belief that we are right. We do that quite naturally. What is so unnatural that it requires a miracle of the Holy Spirit is for us to turn away from ourselves and the celebration of our own rightness, and to glorify, not ourselves, but the Son of God instead. That can be quite painful. These Pharisees would have needed to toss aside all those commentaries that they loved so much. They would have had to toss aside what made them most proud about themselves.

What beloved parts of your identity that you pride yourself upon need to be tossed aside?

Paul said that he regarded the best parts of himself to be a loss—the best parts of himself were garbage. These were not shameful things. They were things that others would admire, but Paul says they are garbage. Why? Why was Paul so hard on himself? Because knowing Jesus reveals that all that other stuff *is* garbage. Perhaps the things that we love best about ourselves are the exact things that we should most deeply repent. We aren’t prone to worship ourselves for the things we don’t like about ourselves. We are prone to worship the stuff we like. That makes us blind.

Open your eyes. The celebration of yourself will end badly. Glorify Jesus instead.

**Jesus Christ is Lord!** Amen.