

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

So there they were, Jesus and His disciples, strolling along and minding their own business. Sure, it was the Sabbath, the day of rest, but they had somewhere to be, and also, they were hungry! They plucked some grain from the stalks as they passed through, only to be stopped in their tracks by a bunch of scolds. The Pharisees, it seems, were practically lying in wait for the disciples. Like a bunch of uptight hall monitors, eager to slap Jesus and His followers with a demerit for disobeying the rules.

My text for this morning, our reading from the Gospel of Mark, often serves as a pretext for talking about the Sabbath and what it means for Christians. And that is an important topic, but today, I want to talk about the Pharisees themselves. Why are they such sticklers about Sabbath observance and fasting and other religious practices? Why is Jesus always arguing with them? What does the argument at the heart of today's Gospel lesson tell us about what Jesus wants for us?

Oh, those Pharisees! Is there any group in the whole New Testament with a worse reputation than the poor Pharisees?

Their reputation is so bad that their name has become an insult. If you call someone a pharisee, you are calling them an insufferably sanctimonious bigot, or worse, a fraud who doesn't even practice what they preach. The adjective pharisaical is defined as hypocritically self-righteous. Although the original Pharisees were Jews, the term is now applied to anyone we regard as excessively judgmental or small-minded. It is used to label people whose moral codes we find rigid or petty, who focus on others' wrongdoing more than their own, or who put more emphasis on the outward rituals of religious observance than on forgiveness and personal transformation.

The ultimate putdown in Jesus's day was to call someone a tax collector or a sinner. Today, one of the worst things one Christian can call another is a pharisee. And there's some merit to this, as we will see, but it doesn't tell the whole story. There's more here we need to unpack in order to understand the point of today's Gospel lesson.

There is no getting around the fact that the Pharisees in Mark and the other Gospels are not, on the whole, a likeable lot. Their reputation is well-deserved in this context. They are eager to trap Jesus and turn the people against Him. At the end of today's passage, they even stoop so low as to conspire with the Herodians to destroy Jesus. This is remarkable because the Herodians and the Pharisees are about as unlikely an alliance as one could imagine. The Herodians, in the eyes of the Pharisees, were collaborators with Rome and traitors to Judaism. But neither group wanted the people believing that Jesus was the Messiah, so they joined forces against their common enemy and the Pharisees in particular went down in history as the scum of the earth.

Not so fast, though!

Jesus is merciful to sinners, including Pharisees, so let's give them their due!

The word Pharisee comes from the Aramaic for separate. The original Pharisees were called such because they strove to separate themselves from ritual impurity in order to observe the law with the highest possible level of integrity. But they were not elitists. They did not come from the wealthy or aristocratic classes, like the Sadducees. Instead, they primarily represented artisans and small farmers, and they served the villages of the countryside. They did not scorn the poor or lowly; they exhorted Jews of every class to be faithful to the Torah and all the laws and customs of the Jewish religion. They considered themselves the keepers of the traditions of the Fathers, and like Jesus, they had utmost respect for the Scriptures.

Nor is every portrayal of Pharisees in the New Testament negative. Paul identifies himself as a Pharisee and presents it as a simple fact about his education and formation, not as something to be repudiated or ashamed of. And in Acts chapter 5, the respected Pharisee Rabbi Gamaliel steps in to save the apostles from the wrath of the Sanhedrin by urging the council to consider the possibility that the apostles might be doing the work of God.

We dare not condemn the Pharisees en masse. The Bible does not give us grounds to do so.

But Jesus calls them out in today's Gospel, and for good reason.

Let's back up a little bit and look at the two stories that precede today's lesson. In the first, Jesus calls Levi the tax collector to follow Him, and the Pharisees are

outraged that Jesus is consorting with tax collectors in the first place, for they were notorious for cooperating with and personally benefitting from the Roman occupation. In the next story, the Pharisees and the disciples of John are all fasting, but the disciples of Jesus are not, and this offends the Pharisees' piety.

In today's lesson, they are up in arms over the fact that Jesus and His disciples are working on the Sabbath, both by being on the road and by plucking heads of grain to snack on. In their interpretation of Sabbath observance, the thing to do would have been to prepare food the day before and stay put for the day. They follow Jesus all the way to the synagogue, to see what other outrages He will commit. When a man with a withered hand comes forward, Jesus heals the man just to stick it to the Pharisees and further His point, and that pushes them over the edge into conspiracy against Him.

You might get the impression then that Jesus and the Pharisees were diametrically opposed. That they stood for dramatically different interpretations of Judaism. That is not the case, however. Of all the different sects and schools of thought that existed in Jesus's day, the Pharisees were the ones He had the most in common with. They preached an ethics that was most like that of Jesus. They held the Scripture in the highest esteem. They also preached final judgment and final resurrection, unlike the Sadducees. When Jesus criticizes the Pharisees, He is correcting people who were very close to Him on many points, which may explain why He seemed to be more frustrated with them than with any other group.

When he opposes the Pharisees in the four instances that I just listed, Jesus is not saying that they are wrong in their zeal for the law of God. He is reminding them of the purpose of God's law and reinforcing its essential role in the wellbeing of His creatures.

Have you ever come across one of those lists of crazy laws people can't believe are still on the books? They can be pretty entertaining. For instance, did you know that in Acworth, Georgia, it is illegal not to own a rake? In Lee County, Alabama, it is illegal to sell peanuts after sundown. In Arizona, it is illegal for donkeys to sleep in bathtubs. Google crazy laws like I did, and you can find all kinds of examples. People find these lists entertaining because the laws seem so random, it's hard to imagine what prompted their being passed in the first place. They seem absurd because they seem to have no purpose. But there was usually a reason. For instance, the reason it's illegal to let your donkey sleep in a bathtub in Arizona is because in 1924, a dam broke and washed a bathtub with a donkey

in it into a river, prompting hundreds of people to spend hours trying to rescue it.

Now, these are silly examples, and the Ten Commandments are deadly serious. But indulge me for a moment and imagine this. If someone took it upon themselves to start enforcing these crazy laws without understanding the purpose of the laws, without taking into account the reason those laws were first put into place, we would find that odd. We might be so put off by the attempt to enforce these laws that we might question the whole idea of having laws at all.

In a less extreme way, that is what some people take away from Jesus's disputes with the Pharisees. They imagine that what Jesus is saying is that laws don't matter, rules don't matter, religious observances don't matter; all that matters is what is in your heart. But what Jesus is doing in these scenes is not cancelling the custom of fasting or the commandment to observe the Sabbath; He is reminding the people and the Pharisees of the true purpose of these laws.

When the Pharisees object to Jesus eating with tax collectors and sinners, Jesus reminds them, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners." (Mark 2:17)

When the Pharisees criticize Jesus and His disciples for not keeping the customary fast, He does not retort that fasting is wrong or useless. He says that wedding guests do not fast when the bridegroom is with them. In other words, you don't fast for fasting's sake, you fast when you have a spiritual reason to do so.

When the Pharisees criticize Jesus and the disciples for gleaning grain on the Sabbath, He reminds them of a principle that is not new to them, that the Sabbath was made for man and not man for the Sabbath. And he uses Scripture to make His point. Now, the command to observe the Sabbath is more fundamental than customs of fasting, so the Pharisees seize on this supposed indiscretion of Jesus to try to trap Him further. It seems almost that they bait Him in the synagogue with a man with a withered hand, so they can accuse Him of healing (doing work) on the Sabbath. At this point, Jesus has really had it with them. He asks, "Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or kill?" He heals the man and grieves at the hardness of the Pharisees' hearts.

The truth of the matter is, it is Jesus who is more in alignment with the Jewish Scriptures than this group of Pharisees. The proper function of the Sabbath and all the commandments is to promote life and give praise to God as the Life Giver.

In Deuteronomy, the book of the Law, God tells His people that obeying His commandments will bring them blessings. In urging their obedience, He urges them to choose “life and good,” instead of “death and evil.” (Deut 30:15) It is as though the Pharisees have lost sight of the whole purpose of the law as blessing and the love and joy that should be integral to its observance. Jesus is frustrated with the Pharisees for remembering the letter of the law and neglecting its spirit. In some ways, He is promoting even greater adherence to the law of God than the Pharisees are, which really pains the Pharisees who pride themselves on being the ones to most righteously uphold the law.

The other problem with how the Pharisees approach the law is that they see it almost purely as a preventative measure. The law for them is a way to stay pure and stay right with God, so that they seem to have no room in their system for those who have fallen short. They have no room for forgiveness. They object to Jesus associating with sinners because they rightly disapprove of sin but wrongly write off those who have sinned as irredeemable.

Sometimes, you will hear modern Christians imply that Jesus consorted with tax collectors and prostitutes and other disreputable folks because, unlike those bigoted Pharisees, He wasn't prissy and judgmental, and He accepted people as they are.

Yes and no.

Jesus reached out to sinners because He knew that He could reclaim them. He wanted them to understand the purpose of God's law just as He wanted the Pharisees to understand it. Just as the Sabbath was made for the good of people and so they could use it as an occasion to give glory to God, so were the rest of the Ten Commandments. Now yes, there are some differences between laws that were specific to the Jews and those universal to mankind, and details about that must wait for another time, but the bottom line is that God's law, His rules for human conduct, are not burdensome, they are not simply there for their own sake, and they are certainly not obsolete. Jesus was a stickler for the law too, but in a very different way. Jesus came to fulfill the law, to be its culmination, and to pay the penalties for the law with His death. In fact, He makes the Pharisees look downright wishy washy about keeping the law.

What does this mean for us?

For one, although it might not be fair to condemn all the Pharisees in history, we definitely do not want to be like the Pharisees in Mark's gospel. We dare not take self-righteous pride in our works or our religious observances. We know that we are sinners. We delight in the fact that Jesus does not hesitate to invite us to His table, just as He supped at table with the sinners and outcasts of old. He would have dined with the Pharisees too, if they had accepted Him. He came to seek and save the lost, including Pharisees and everyone else.

Jesus does not want our mere outward obedience, either. A good track record might have impressed the Pharisees, but Jesus wants so much more from us. He wipes our track records clean, but that is just the beginning. He wants to set us on the path again. And He wants to be our Bridegroom. He loves us with such completeness that He wants His virtues to rub off on us. More than that, He means to transform us from the inside out.

At the same time, we should be cautious when considering the example of the Pharisees. Cautious in the sense that we should not be too quick to try to identify and condemn modern day pharisees. The thing that stands out about the Pharisees in Mark is how very un-self aware they are. They spend so much time criticizing the flaws of others that they do not take note of the plank in their own eyes. It would be the height of bitter irony if, in going out of our way to avoid pharisaical behavior we actually judge and condemn other Christians the way Pharisees condemned fellow Jews.

Lastly, we should also be careful not to go too far in the other direction. There is indeed a sense in which the Pharisees are held up in the gospels as warning so that we will do our best not to be like them. Not to be obsessed with rules and hypercritical about the people who transgress them, not to be caught up in sorting people into labels of good or bad, not to write people off as hopeless and irredeemable. But that does not mean that the rules are wrong to begin with! It does not mean that in our desperation to not be a Pharisee we overcorrect and become antinomian instead.

At every step of the way, Jesus affirms the goodness of the law. God's rules for us, all the commandments, are a source of blessing and life. Honor the Lord. Do not commit idolatry. Do not take His name in vain. Keep the Sabbath. Honor your father and mother. Do not murder. Do not steal. Do not commit adultery. Do not lie. Do not covet. God instituted these laws for a purpose. The purpose is to help us live a blessed and holy life at peace with God and our fellow man.

The Pharisees do not provide a good example of how to keep the law. But Jesus does. Let us follow His example.

To Jesus be the glory, together with the Father and the Holy Spirit. Amen.