

Week 5: Jesus, Not Religion

Hook



Main Point: Christianity isn't following a religion; it's following the person of Jesus.

Q: If you could have dinner with three people, living or dead, celebrity or not, who would it be and why?

The Emily Post Institute carries on the tradition of its namesake, famed socialite Emily Post, providing etiquette tips. When crafting a dinner party guest list, the Institute suggests carefully curating the collection of invitees – a *great* group of people will make for a wonderful party. Hosts must always keep in mind the significance of social dynamics when making invitations.¹

Q: If the Pharisees of Jesus' day were creating a guest list, whom do you think they would invite and why?

Transition: In today's lesson, Jesus chooses to spend time with those who are on the fringes of society – and the religious leaders have thoughts about it.

Recap: In our first lesson, we learned about the author, audience, genre and occasion of the Gospel of Mark. Gospels are not just stories, biographies, or history books; they are proclamations of the Gospel, like sermons. Mark was written by a coworker of both Peter and Paul to encourage Roman Christians who were enduring persecution for their faith. Because many original disciples who knew Jesus personally were dying off, Mark wrote down the Gospel for the future generations. Mark's focus on Jesus' action more than His teaching propels us to consider how we will act in response.

In lesson 3, we looked at Jesus' preparation for ministry and how every part of it pointed to His kingship as the Messiah they had been waiting for but a different kind of kingdom than they expected – a spiritual kingdom which is upside down from the kingdoms of this world. In lesson 3, Jesus began proclaiming this kingdom to the world, showing His

authority as king, and calling people to follow Him. Then He showed His power even more, not only power to heal, cast out demons, and perform miracles but even to forgive sin, which makes Him equivalent to God.

In this lesson, we see Jesus behaving differently from the typical religious leaders of His day and flipping their social systems upside down. He wasn't just adding something new to the old ways of doing things, He was building a new thing. He wasn't rejecting God's original law but the *additions* the Pharisees had made to the law. Jesus' "new thing" actually fulfilled what God originally created in the beginning – a relationship between God and His people with no barriers or boundaries from sin.

Week 5: *Jesus, Not Religion*

Book

Main Point: Christianity isn't following a religion; it's following the person of Jesus.

Mark 2:13–17 [Read]

Talking Point 1: All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.

Q: Compare/contrast Levi to the disciples Jesus called in Mark 1.

Q: What surprised the scribes and Pharisees about Jesus' behavior? Why?

In chapter 1, Jesus called His first four disciples, who were all fishermen (1:16–20). Unlike typical rabbis, who called only the cream-of-the-crop students, Jesus called ordinary, uneducated men to be His disciples. This passage is the calling of the next disciple, which gives us more insight into the kind of people Jesus calls. Levi could not be more opposite of the fishermen. Jesus didn't call *only* blue-collar, uneducated guys who were a little rough around the edges. There isn't a single demographic for the disciples. Jesus wants anyone and everyone to follow Him.

The name Levi comes from one of the 12 sons of Jacob whose tribe became the Levites. The Levites were unique among the tribes. When God called the people out of Egypt, He set the Levites apart to serve Him in the tabernacle and in worship. Moses and Aaron were of the tribe of Levi: Moses was the prophet-leader and Aaron was high priest. The rest of the Levites were assistants, doing all the non-priestly work of the tabernacle – caring for the furnishings, singing, playing music, standing guard, etc. (Numbers 3:5–11; 1 Chronicles 9:17–34; 15:16). This would have been in the background of the readers' minds when they heard "Levi." Yet this Levi was not serving in the temple. He was quite the opposite – a tax collector.

In Jesus' time, tax collectors were considered traitors because, though they were Jews, they worked for the Romans collecting heavy taxes on their own people. On top of the tax, they added their own exorbitant fees and got rich by oppressing their own people, exactly what God commanded His leaders not to do (Exodus 34; Deuteronomy 17:18–20).² The location of his tax booth "by the sea" meant he was likely the very tax collector oppressing the fishermen Jesus had just called to be His disciples.³ Jesus was already creating a group where His disciples would be in community with their enemies and learn to love them.

Levi was very different from the fishermen, but the story of Jesus' calling him is much the same. It happened by the sea. As Jesus passed by, He saw Levi doing his everyday

job. He said, “Follow me,” and Levi got up, left his livelihood, and followed Jesus. No matter what your background is, the call is the same – to leave your old life and follow Jesus. Levi had more to lose financially, but he left immediately, just as the fishermen did. In Matthew’s Gospel, Levi is called Matthew, which means “gift of God.” Many scholars believe Jesus gave him a new name just as He did Peter.⁴ The change from Levi, who wasn’t a religious leader but a traitor who oppressed the Jewish people, to Matthew, “gift of God,” shows us just how much we are changed when we repent and follow Jesus. We experience a change in identity; we are a new creation in Christ.

Then Jesus went to Levi’s house for a large dinner party⁵ with His disciples and many other tax collectors and sinners.⁶ “Sinner” was an awful insult in Jewish circles; it referred to one who was morally flawed, not even seeking righteousness. The religious leaders had a big problem with that. Dinner parties weren’t just parties; they were a significant part of the honor/shame culture. Table fellowship was an intimate relation; you didn’t share it with those you considered shameful, particularly “sinners,” because eating with a sinner implied acceptance of their sin. Proverbs warns of the danger of spending time with sinners (Proverbs 1:10–16). In their culture, there was no concept of reaching out to sinners to try to bring them to the Lord. Religious people just stayed as far away from them as possible so they didn’t rub off on them.⁷

But Jesus called sinners to repent and come to the Lord. This was the whole point of His call – stop what you’re doing, leave your old life, and follow Jesus. Whether you were an ordinary fisherman who was a “good person” or a horrible “sinner” like a tax collector. To Jesus, they were the same. They were all sinners, including the scribes and Pharisees who saw themselves as righteous. Jesus’ answer was that He came to call sinners, because it’s the sick who need healing. But what the Pharisees didn’t understand was that they were sick, too. The religious world separated people into “righteous” and “sinners,” but we are all sinners in need of repentance. Jesus’ eating with sinners showed He didn’t care about their honor-system games. He values all people equally, and He knows that no human earns righteousness.

God pursues sinners. All people, including legalistically religious people, need repentance and God’s rescue. Jesus leveled the playing field. He called off the honor game. He invited *everyone* to come to Him for repentance and created a community of disciples from varying backgrounds. This, too, is our calling as church people – not to see ourselves as holier-than-thou but to reach out to the lost. All people are sinners in need of a Savior.

Q: How can you reach out to “sinners” around you the way Jesus would?

Q: Why might people feel the desire to categorize sins at different levels with some sins being worse than others?

Mark 2:18–22 [Read]

Talking Point 2: Jesus was doing something new – not rules but relationship.

Q: Why did Jesus say His disciples were not fasting while He was with them?

Q: What do the garment and wineskin metaphors teach us about Jesus' mission?

John's disciples and the Pharisees fasted because it was a regular spiritual discipline in Jewish culture. In the Sermon on the Mount, when Jesus talked about doing religious things with a pure heart of devotion to God, not just to be seen by people as righteous. He specifically addressed the three primary disciplines of the Jewish faith at the time – fasting, almsgiving and prayer (Matthew 6:1–18).

The theological purpose of fasting in the Old Testament was to humble yourself before God (Isaiah 58:3). The only time the law commanded fasting was once a year on *Yom Kippur*, the Day of Atonement, as a way to humble themselves before God and mourn their sin (Leviticus 16:29–30).⁸ All other holidays were times of feasting, not fasting; celebration, not mourning.

The other times God called His people to fast in the Old Testament were in response to specific situations. He would proclaim a day of fasting, weeping, wailing, sackcloth and ashes, and confession (Nehemiah 9:1; Jeremiah 36:8–10; Joel 1:14). Or the people may have chosen to fast in mourning or to confess their sins (Judges 20:26; 2 Samuel 1:12; Esther 4:3; et.al.). The only time we see a positive time of fasting was when Moses was on Mount Sinai receiving the law. He didn't eat for 40 days, not out of mourning but because, being in God's very presence, he was sustained by God.⁹ But when he came down and saw the people worshipping the golden calf, he immediately fasted for another 40 days to confess and mourn their sin (Deuteronomy 9:9, 18).¹⁰ Fasting was deeply connected to confession, repentance and humility.

The Pharisees fasted twice a week, on Mondays and Thursdays and the ritual was accompanied by outward signs of mourning and penitence such as wearing sackcloth and ashes and not anointing themselves with oil. Jesus criticized these outward displays of "piety" because they were done to look pious to others, not out of true devotion to the Lord. He told His disciples that when they fasted, they should wash and anoint with oil as they normally did so only God would know they were fasting (Matthew 6:16–18). In Isaiah, God criticized the people of Israel for their fasting because, though they did

the outward signs of humility, their actions didn't match; they exploited their workers and quarreled with each other. Their "humility" was empty religious action, not a true humbling of themselves before God (Isaiah 58:3).

All this background helps us understand Jesus' answer when the people asked why His disciples didn't fast as the Pharisees did. They weren't in a time of mourning; they were in a time of celebration. The "groom" imagery is deeply connected to the metaphor God used throughout Scripture of Himself as the faithful husband to Israel, the unfaithful wife. Jesus was equating Himself with God here, as the groom of His people. While He was with them, they would celebrate. They would mourn when He was taken away from them.

Fasting twice a week (like the Pharisees did) is fine if you're doing it for the right reasons, but it wasn't commanded in the Law; it was one of the many expectations that the Pharisees placed on top of the law. Jesus' next comments about the new garment and the new wineskins addressed this. The Pharisees had added to God's law with extra rules, and like adding a new patch to an old garment, it didn't work. But Jesus was doing a new thing. It wasn't about adding rules or changing the rules, it was about living in relationship with the groom Himself. Jesus didn't come to patch the Law with a new piece; He came to fulfill the Law (Matthew 5:17). The word for "tear" here is the same word used when the temple curtain was torn in two at Jesus' death (Mark 15:38). This curtain separated the people from the presence of God in the Holy of Holies. Jesus tore it open so we can enter the presence of God like Moses on Mount Sinai, when he didn't fast out of mourning but because he didn't need to eat. Jesus didn't come just to give us different rules; He came to remove the barriers that kept God's people from fellowship with Him.

Q: What are some examples of legalistic, rules-focused religion in our culture? What impact does it have on the people in those churches? On the community around them?

Q: How can you see the difference in a life focused on relationship, not religion?

Q: What are ways we can make our LifeGroup more relational as we study God's Word together?

Mark 2:23–3:6 [Read]

Talking Point 3: God's law is given to us for our good, not just to give us rules to follow.

Q: What is consistent about the Pharisees' reaction here and in the last section?

Q: How does Jesus' example of David show us the purpose of the Sabbath?

This next story piggybacks on what we learned in the last section, that the ministry of Jesus was about bringing people into a relationship of fellowship with God, not just following rules. Jesus again did something that looked like law-breaking to the Pharisees, and again they criticized Him for it. The disciples picked grain to eat as they were going through the fields on the Sabbath. But this wasn't against the actual Old Testament law. It was against the extra rules the Pharisees had created to add to the law.

God's law about the Sabbath is pretty general – keep it holy, which means to set apart as sacred or different (Exodus 20:8) and not do any work but rest instead (Exodus 16:23; 35:2). That's all it says. But the Pharisees wanted to define exactly what constituted work, so they added a bunch of extra rules to define that, including how far you were allowed to walk, the types of knots that couldn't be tied, what could be carried or moved, etc. – 24 chapters in the *Mishnah* with more than 600 regulations.

Jesus' disciples' picking grain and eating it (without cooking) does not break God's Sabbath law, but it did break the Pharisee's extra laws. He could have just said that, but Jesus also referred to the story of David and his men eating the bread of the presence in the tabernacle. The bread of the presence was set on the table before the Lord every Sabbath and was supposed to be eaten only by the priests as their portion (Leviticus 24:5–9). But the priest Ahimelech said David's men could have it. As the priest, he had the authority to interpret and apply *Torah* guidelines to individual situations. *Torah* laws could be set aside if a higher consideration warranted it, especially the preservation of life. Though it officially broke a rule of the *Torah*, it was consistent with the principles of the *Torah* to give David the means to sustain life.¹¹ The *ESV Study Bible* says, "Jesus endorsed Ahimelech's judgment in putting mercy before ceremonial law."¹²

But Jesus wasn't just defending His actions, He was also reframing the purpose of the Sabbath for the Pharisees. He said God's law was created for our good, not for the sake of following rules. The purpose of God's law is to bring life, joy and well-being (Psalm 119). The purpose of the Sabbath is to bring us rest, not heap the burden of a bunch of rules upon us. This is what Jesus promises us and how He contrasted Himself with the Pharisees. The Pharisees' rules put a heavy yoke on the people (Matthew 23:1–4), but Jesus' yoke is easy, and His burden is light (Matthew 11:28–30). Over and over, in all His interactions with the Pharisees, Jesus showed us that religion brings burden, but relationship brings rest (Psalm 23).

It's important to remember that Jesus' disciples did *not* break God's law here. Jesus *never* broke God's law. Jesus wasn't saying that following God's ways doesn't matter, that we can live however we want because we're forgiven by grace. Paul rejected that argument strongly (Romans 6:1–2).

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus didn't reject God's commandments, such as murder or adultery; if anything, He made them harder by saying even a heart of anger or lust breaks the law. It's not a rejection of God's law but an understanding of the heart behind the law. Living by God's ways brings us life, joy, love and purpose. There is a huge difference between following a set of rules and following the person of Jesus. The Pharisees' focus on the letter of the law completely missed the spirit of the law, and instead of bringing life and joy, it brought burden and ultimately death. But following Jesus in relationship brings the Fruit of the Spirit – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Seeing that difference can draw people in our culture to Jesus instead of pushing them away.

Q: How have you experienced religion to be burdensome in your life?

Q: How can following Jesus show people that a relationship with Him brings life, joy, peace, etc.? How can this change our culture's perception of Christianity?

Q: What does "following the rules" without focusing on developing a strong relationship lead to?

Week 5: *Jesus, Not Religion*

Took

Main Point: Christianity isn't following a religion; it's following the person of Jesus.

How often does the makeup of your social circles change? Perhaps you'd like to share the hope of Jesus with strangers, even those who are more vulnerable positions than you are, but you're just not certain where to start. Consider the myriad of places that you, and your LifeGroup, could connect with new friends; including:

- Bonton Farms: <https://bontonfarms.org>
- BridgeBuilders: <https://bridgebuilders.org>
- Grace Bridge: <https://www.gracebridge.us>

CHALLENGES

THINK: Reflect on the differences you see between people who treat Christianity as a religion of rules to follow and those who see it as a relationship. What is the difference between following a set of rules and following the person of Jesus? How have you seen legalistic religion hurt people and cause burden and brokenness? How have you seen people set free from the burden of religion by entering a relationship with Jesus? How can this lifestyle show the world what Christianity is really about? How can it draw them to Jesus instead of push them away?

PRAY for the world to understand who Jesus really is and why He came. Pray for the churches who focus on a legalistic following of the rules to be radically transformed by the Holy Spirit. Pray for those of us who live out a true relationship with Jesus to be a light to the world of what it really means to be a Christian and follow Jesus. Pray for yourself to release the burden of rule-following and focus on following Jesus with all your heart.

ACT: Share the person of Jesus. This week talk to someone about Jesus as a person you love and want to follow. Share about Jesus – who He is and the difference He has made in your life to walk in relationship with Him, specifically focusing on the freedom, joy, peace and rest H brings.

¹ <https://emilypost.com/advice/party-etiquette-tips-for-hosts-and-guests>

² Craig Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1993).

³ *ESV Study Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008).

⁴ Craig Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1993).

There are some scholars who say Levi was his Hebrew name and Matthew his Greek name, but they don't mean the same thing. *The ESV Bible* says that his name was either "Matthew Levi" from birth or that he took on the name Matthew, added to Levi, after he started following Jesus.

⁵ Reclining was the typical way they sat at dinner parties.

⁶ It would have been a great honor for Jesus to call Levi; throwing a party would have been a typical honor response. It also would have been typical for Levi to invite his colleagues and friends to the party.

⁷ Craig Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1993).

⁸ Note: the word fasting is not explicitly used in this passage, but it is implied in the "humble yourselves" command that literally means "you shall afflict your souls"; secondary sources about fasting tell us that the only fast required by Jewish law was on *Yom Kippur*. All other holidays were times of feasting, not fasting; celebration, not mourning.

Johann Gamberoni, "Fasting," *Encyclopedia of Biblical Theology: The Complete Sacramentum Verbi* (New York: Crossroad, 1981).

⁹ Eugene H. Merrill, *Deuteronomy, New American Commentary 4* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1994).

¹⁰ Some people also fasted when they were praying for someone who was sick (Psalm 35:13) or something they were deeply upset about (1 Samuel 1:7–11) or if they were seeking God's advice in battle (2 Chronicles 20:3).

¹¹ Robert D. Bergen, *1–2 Samuel, The New American Commentary* (Nashville: B & H Academic, 1996).

¹² *ESV Study Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008).