

SERMON TITLE: "Jesus 101: Jesus & the Law"  
SERMON TEXT: Mark 2:23 – 3:6  
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James  
OCCASION: August 4, 2024, at First United Methodist Church

## **INTRODUCTION**

You've probably been watching the Olympics and hearing a lot of the same news that I have. With Simone Biles and Katie Ledecky and so many more wonderful athletes, the demonstrations of human ability and tenacity are truly amazing. So, it's no wonder there was great excitement here in Utah when it was officially announced that our state would host the 2034 Winter Olympics.

Of course, that great excitement was quickly dampened by the news that the International Olympic Committee and the World Anti-Doping Agency are putting significant pressure on Utah officials to persuade our own American anti-doping police to back off and ease up. Apparently American laws against doping are stricter than the international rules, and officials in charge of the worldwide games and countries like China don't like Americans imposing our standards and laws on everyone else. Meanwhile, Utahns have gotten caught in the middle of a very complex debate about what is and isn't legal.

Rules, standards, and laws are essential for a society to function. And yet, laws are notoriously controversial and constantly under scrutiny for relevance and equity. And that's where we find Jesus in today's Bible stories. For several weeks we've been reviewing the basics of Jesus in the Gospel of Mark. So far, we've covered Jesus & the Gospel, Jesus & Vocation, and Jesus & Healing. In this "Jesus 101" series, we've been asking what was important for Jesus' ministry and what that means for our Christian faith today. So, let's look at today's stories from Mark 2 & 3 to see what we can learn about Jesus & the law.

## **1—BIBLICAL SITUATION**

Mark chapters two and three are full of considerations of Jesus and the law. Almost as soon as Jesus started preaching his gospel of good news, he also started healing the sick. And, almost as soon as he started healing the sick, Jesus began bumping up against expectations, rules, and laws. The scribes and Pharisees, who were the teachers of the Jewish law and the enforcers of the status quo, didn't like that Jesus and his disciples did things differently than the norms of their religion and society.

In chapter two, when Jesus healed the paralyzed man by saying that his sins were forgiven, the scribes accused Jesus of blasphemy. In other words, they said he was breaking the Jewish laws about God. Later, the scribes and Pharisees thought Jesus was doing something wrong when he ate dinner with some tax collectors and sinners. Then they complained that Jesus' disciples weren't fasting, like other religious people did. And, in the verses Peggy read for us today, we heard the Pharisees' complaints that Jesus and his disciples were breaking the Sabbath law against doing any work on that holy day.

In all those cases, Jesus had a response about why he thought it was OK to break those various norms, rules, and laws. But before we get to Jesus' reasons why it was OK to vary from the custom, let's remember that Jesus also cared about the law. In Mark 1:15, when Jesus began his preaching ministry, he said, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe the gospel." Yes, Jesus offered the good news of forgiveness and inclusion. But Jesus began his message with a call to repentance. And the only time anyone has a reason to repent is if they have been doing something wrong. So, Jesus must have assumed that there was some kind of standard. There had to be a norm, a rule, and a law that was worthy of obedience. In Jesus' understanding, there was an important expectation of how the people of God would behave.

And, in Mark 3, where we read the story of Jesus healing the man with the withered hand, we should note, first of all, that Jesus was *at the synagogue*, for the purpose of worshiping God. If Jesus had cared nothing about the law, he could have been somewhere else on that Sabbath day. In fact, he and his disciples could have been out on their boat fishing. But, as Mark tells us later, in chapter 12, Jesus knew very well that the most important law was to “love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength,” and Jesus was definitely giving priority to worshiping God on this Sabbath day, as he always did.

## **2—JESUS OFFERED TRUE WORSHIP**

Now, with that established—that Jesus knew about, cared about, and taught his disciples to obey the laws of God—we can move on to why Jesus *also* did things that caused some conflict. In every case where Jesus was criticized for breaking God’s rules or allowing his disciples to do so, Jesus always claimed compassion as a higher law. It wasn’t that he meant any offense or disrespect to God. Quite the opposite! Jesus believed that the true way to worship and honor God was to care for the people whom God had created. In Mark 12, after Jesus named the greatest commandment as loving God with our whole being, Jesus named the second greatest commandment as loving our neighbor as ourselves. And Jesus meant that as a close second, that was needed to fulfill the first.

When Jesus pushed beyond the norm in assuming divine authority, it was because he believed that God would work through his forgiveness to bring healing to another human being. When Jesus crossed the line of tradition by associating with people considered to be sinful, he believed that God could work through his relationships to offer salvation to their spirits. When Jesus allowed his disciples to pluck grain and eat instead of fasting on the Sabbath, he believed God wanted to relieve their hunger. When Jesus healed a man’s withered hand at the synagogue, and thus broke the law against working on the Sabbath, Jesus believed the highest worship is to

share God's restoration and wholeness with others. For Jesus, expressing compassion wasn't optional, and it certainly wasn't a violation of God's laws. If obeying a more-important law requires breaking another less-important law, then so be it—if the result is that God's greater will is done in human life.

Obedience to God wasn't required for God's sake. God doesn't need our worship. Rather, God gave laws in order to help people survive and thrive. Worship of God is healthy for us. Concentrated attention on God trains us to focus, encourages our gratitude, lifts our spirits, decreases our anxieties, gives us hope, and empowers us for good like nothing else can do. We all need Sabbath times when we can set aside the cares of the world and allow God to fill up our spiritual gas tanks. But there is no such thing as true worship of God that ignores human needs. Care, kindness, mercy, welcome, forgiveness, and inclusion of our brothers and sisters and ourselves are essential. Compassionate actions are a necessary complement to our worship rather than a conflict against it.

In Jesus' day, I suppose the religious leaders thought that, instead of plucking some heads of grain on the Sabbath, Jesus' disciples could have suffered through and waited until the next day to eat. However, fasting like that's a lot easier for well-fed people than for those who are truly hungry. As Jesus and the disciples walked around the Palestinian countryside doing their ministry, they probably never knew for sure where their next meal would come from. The synagogue leaders also thought Jesus surely could have waited until the next day to heal the man with the withered hand. However, that's a lot easier to say if your hands are just fine than if you've spent years, or maybe even your whole life, trying to work and feed yourself, and maybe a family, with a hand that didn't function.

I think Jesus recognized that this man had waited long enough. "*Basta ya!*" as they say in Spanish. Enough already! It was time. Like Jesus said in his opening message, "The time [was]

fulfilled, and the kingdom of God [had] come near,” so there was no reason to wait even one more day. Tomorrow, Jesus would be down the road somewhere else, preaching about the good news of the kingdom of God and offering compassion and healing to another set of people. But, today, Jesus was right there, in that synagogue, and it was high time to give that disabled man some relief. God’s law wasn’t designed to kill life. God’s law was designed to save life. If the religious authorities wanted to call Jesus’ actions “lawbreaking,” so be it. But through his understanding and compassionate actions, Jesus believed he was fulfilling God’s purpose and obeying the spirit of God’s law.

### **CONCLUSION**

Mark doesn’t tell us all that Jesus was thinking or why he was so motivated. But I suspect Jesus might have been operating out of a familiarity with Isaiah 58. In that chapter, the Old Testament prophet talked about what his people should do on holy days. Fasting, bowing down, lying in scratchy sackcloth, and wallowing in ashes wasn’t what honored God. The kind of worship that God desires, said Isaiah, is to “loose the bonds of injustice,” to “share your bread with the hungry,” to “cover the naked,” to provide shelter for the homeless, and to free the oppressed. If you do these things, wrote Isaiah, then “the Lord will guide you continually and satisfy your needs” (vv. 6-11).

When Jesus acted in ways that broke with traditional religious norms, it may have seemed to the scribes and Pharisees that Jesus was diverting attention away from the holiness of God. But as Jesus offered health, wholeness, salvation, and life to persons in need, he was, in fact, glorifying God and inviting others to do the same. And that, it seems to me, is how we should understand Jesus and the law.