

“The Religion of The King”

Introduction: Go to your search engine of choice and type in the words “True Religion.” You’ll not find anything that talks about a relationship with God! Instead, you’ll get several dozen entries that talk about a brand of men’s and women’s designer clothing, ranging from jeans to jackets, and hoodies to hats. When asked how he came up with the name, True Religion, creator and owner Jeffrey Lubell explains: “There are many religions in the world, but there’s only one real religion—and that’s the people. And all the people in the world wear jeans.” Well I’ve been pondering that answer for a few days now and I’m still not sure I have a clue as to what he means. Given that he owns over 250 pairs of jeans, at the very least it sounds like idolatry rather than religion!

So how would you define true religion? We’ll see that question surface in the middle of a controversy between Jesus and the Pharisees over the meaning of, and how to keep, the Sabbath. The Pharisees viewed the Sabbath as a boundary to be maintained and fenced in with many rules and regulations. By way of contrast, Jesus views the Sabbath as a gift for the restoration and renewal of both body and soul. Throughout his life Jesus challenges every form of belief that reduces religion to the keeping of rules, and the Sabbath is no different. What is true religion, according to Jesus? How can the Sabbath help us to think about this? Let’s begin in the Grainfields.

I. True Religion in the Grainfields

A. In the opening weeks of his ministry we have seen Jesus teaching and healing, driving out demons and offering forgiveness, and calling men and women to follow him along the path of discipleship as he reveals the life that is truly life, life in the kingdom of God, as it is available through him. This morning we see him taking what appears to be a relaxing, Sabbath day walk with his followers through some fields of grain. But we’re not the only ones who are watching. A group of religious leaders, called the Pharisees, are tagging along, almost like spiritual paparazzi. They are not happy at all with what Jesus has been doing and saying, and they are trying to find ways to discredit him.

B. And it seems to them like they’ve got him this time for as they move through the fields, his disciples begin to pick off some of the heads of grain and eat them for a snack, much like you might pick a handful of blueberries when out on a hike. In general, there is no problem with this. The Mosaic law provides for those who are in need to pluck from a neighbor’s field as long as you didn’t pull out a sickle and cut huge swaths for yourself (Dt. 23:25). But the law, in the Ten Commandments, also called you to rest from your work one day out of seven, on the Sabbath day. This, too, seems like a good thing, but the religious leaders of the day, viewing the Sabbath largely as that which kept them distinct from the pagans around them, had become so concerned, obsessed really, with what defined work, that they had come up with 39 different definitions of work that would cause you to violate the Sabbath command.

Illustration: One of my favorites is that if you spit, it was ok if the spit landed on a rock. But if it landed on the ground, in the dirt, you would be making mud and since mud was mortar you were considered to be working, and hence, a Sabbath breaker. The Sabbath had become a list of rules, far from what God had intended the day to be about. This list included the reaping of grain, which is what the Pharisees accused the disciples of doing.

C. Because they assume Jesus is responsible for his disciples' behavior, they come after him: "Look, why are they doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath?" In his response, Jesus doesn't accuse the Pharisees of spreading false news! That is, he doesn't deny that his disciples could be violating the traditions that have arisen, but he wants his accusers to know that the Sabbath is a gift from God to meet human need, and that true religion is not about keeping rules. To show this he goes to the precedent of Scripture, with which the Pharisees would have been well-acquainted. Jesus takes them to the time when David and his men were on the run from the jealous and murderous intentions of King Saul (1 Sam. 21). David had been anointed king, but was not yet enthroned...and Saul didn't want him enthroned! David had taken shelter with a local priest and had asked if there was any food for his men. All that the priest had was bread that had been placed on the altar each week as a consecrated offering to God and was reserved for the priests when fresh bread was brought. But because of the special circumstances, because of David's need, he and his men were given that bread to eat. Jesus' point was that human need won the day and this, too, was God's intention for the Sabbath. It be used for human need for rest and renewal of both body and soul. "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath," Jesus declared. It is intended to be a gift.

D. And then Jesus does something even more amazing. He concludes, "So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath." Referring to himself, Jesus claims in stunning fashion that he is the Son of Man, the hoped-for, divine, messianic figure referred to in another OT passage, Daniel 7, who has been given authority over heaven and earth. Stack that on top of the reference to King David, whose ultimate ancestor, the "son of David" as Jesus came to be known, was anticipated by Jews to be coming to be their true king and deliverer, as well as the NT understanding that Jesus was involved in the creation of the world as its agent (cf. Col. 1:15-16; Heb. 1:2), and Jesus is claiming that he, the Messiah, the King, and even the Creator, has the authority to determine the proper use of the Sabbath. It is used properly, notice, when it meets human need for rest and renewal. True religion, according to Jesus, is not about the keeping of rules.

II. True Religion in the Synagogue

A. Well, the paparazzi seem to have slipped quietly away for a time, but we see that they are soon back on another Sabbath day when Jesus is now in a synagogue along with a man whose hand badly needs healing. Probably he had been having difficulty working or holding down a job. Had it been a life and death situation the law would have allowed for a healing to be done, but since it wasn't, since it could have waited until the next day, healing the man on the Sabbath would have been another one of those violations, on a list of work that was prohibited, according to the religious leaders. But when Jesus asks if it's ok to do something good on the Sabbath, and all he gets is silence and stubborn hearts, Jesus chooses deliberately, in an almost "in your face" kind of act, to heal the man right then and there. Jesus wants to make sure they know that he considers the Sabbath to be not only a gift for rest and renewal. The true religion of King Jesus sees it as a day for doing good.

B. Rather than celebrate with the man and his family, the Pharisees storm out and seek the company of the Herodians. This too, is a stunning conclusion for these guys were supporters of King Herod and therefore pagan, Roman rule. Like republicans and democrats in recent years, Jews and Herodians were arch enemies and not known to want to work together on anything! But getting rid of Jesus? Now there was a project on which they could agree! Why was this?

III. The Right Way to Be Religious

A. This conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees, with the Herodians thrown in for fun, actually reveals three ways of being religious, two of which won't cut it, according to Jesus.

1. First, the way of the Herodians, is the way of making up your own rules, everyone doing as he or she sees fit. True religion in this case is deciding what is right or wrong, what is true, for you. But the kingdom of God is not an anything goes kind of existence. The King, the Lord of the Sabbath, the Creator of the universe, does have rules, rules that he knows are best.

2. Second, the way of the Pharisees, is the way of following the rules. They are so concerned about keeping God's rules that they create more of them in order to make rules that help keep the rules. More significantly for this group, keeping the rules—being good—is the way one relates to God. There are lots of variations here but essentially there's a code of conduct. If you keep it, God will love you. True religion is about good performance.

In both of these two understandings of religion, the way of making up our own rules and the way of rule keeping, we become our own savior, either by determining what is right or by our own performance of what is right. Additionally, what adherents in both camps are most concerned is detail. You either want to understand what you can get away with, or what you really have to do. Because Jesus opposed both of these ways of thinking, he found himself opposed by both groups.

3. The way of Jesus, the true religion of the King, is altogether different. The law of God exists, and it is still present and binding, but because the good news is that due to what Jesus has done, God already loves you, before you've done a thing, the law then reveals how to love and serve God and others in response to how God has loved and served you. True religion, according to Jesus, is not found in making up the rules or in seeking to keep the rules but in receiving and responding to the grace and mercy of God.

Unfortunately, these Sabbath controversies might not tell us exactly how to spend our Sundays, the day Christians have adopted for the Sabbath because it was the day of resurrection. But Jesus does give us the principle that the Sabbath is a gift, a gift of time to be used for rest, renewal, and restoration, a time to honor Jesus as Lord of the Sabbath through worship, and a time to do good in response to the good God has done for us.

Lily Tomlin once remarked that the trouble with the rat race is that even if you win, you are still a rat! So the question might simply be this: How can we use the gift of the Sabbath to protect ourselves from becoming, or remaining, rats? How can we use it, not as a rule to keep, but as an opportunity to renew our own body and soul, as well as that of our neighbor?