

Have any of you ever worked in a fast-food restaurant? I'm sure you all know that many high school and college students in America start out working in fast food. My wife, Kari, in fact, was one of those. While Kari was in nursing school, she worked at a local McDonald's restaurant for about a year.

At that time, I was always interested to hear the stories she told about her work. One day, she explained to me how to make a Big Mac. As you can guess, there is no guesswork involved in making a Big Mac. If you buy a Big Mac in New York City or in Yokohama, or I suppose, even in Africa, it'll taste exactly the same. That's because there's a *very certain* way to do it. Every time you make a Big Mac, anywhere around the world, you do exactly the same things—you put two sesame seed buns in the toaster oven, heat them for 11 seconds, take them out and lay them face-up, side by side in the special “Big Mac box.” You squirt on exactly one tablespoon of sauce on each bun, you sprinkle on 1/3 cup of iceberg lettuce, and then you put on 2 dill pickle slices. You sprinkle on exactly 1 teaspoon of minced onion. You put one standard slice of American cheese on one of the buns, then put on two perfectly round hamburger patties (exactly 3 ounces each)—one on each bun. Then you set a piece of circular, “divider” bread on one of the patties, fold the sandwich together, close the box, and it's done. The process takes around 45 seconds. It's the same every time. That process happens 1.5 million times *every day* around the world.

This is what I would call a very *mechanical* process. Just imagine making Big Macs for a second. Once you've made about 50 Big Macs, you probably don't have to think about it anymore—you could probably make a Big Mac *instinctively*. Maybe you could even do it with your eyes closed! Maybe you could be daydreaming about a vacation in the Hawaii, and making Big Macs at the same time. Maybe you could be planning a violent overthrow of the government, all the while making Big Macs. Maybe you could be thinking of nothing at all—your mind could be totally blank while you're making Big Macs. That might be possible, right? What strange sort of work, I think! I think it would be hard for me to do a job like that for a long time...

Well, in today's passage, we read a story, not about a *mechanical job*, but about *mechanical religion*. Let's spend some time thinking about this story for a moment.

In today's reading from Matthew's gospel, Jesus and his followers are traveling around the Galilean countryside and it's Saturday—the Jewish Sabbath. Jesus' disciples are hungry, so they pick some grain and eat it as they're going along. There would have been nothing awkward about this in first century Galilee. Remember that one of the laws in the Old Testament (recorded in Deuteronomy 23:25) proscribed that people should *share* the fruits of the land. It reads, “If anyone goes into the grape vineyard of his neighbor, he may eat his fill, but he may not fill his basket. If anyone goes into the grain field of his neighbor, he may take and eat some grain with his hands, but he must not lay a sickle to the field.”

Obviously, this law arose out of the understanding that “the earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof” (Psalm 24:1). This is a little different than the thinking of most people today. We modern people tend to think of land we own as “ours,” and that whatever we make is “our” property. But this was not the Old Testament presumption. In the Old Testament world-view, the land is *God’s* and we humans are stewards of it—we’ve been given responsibility to use it justly, and in accordance with God’s purposes.

One of the key principles in the Jewish law was that homeless or hungry people should be taken care of—so if you had crops growing in “your” field, and a hungry person walked by, he or she was given the right to eat from it, but not to carry any extra away. It was really *God’s* field, after all. This was part of the ancient Jewish social welfare system.

Now remember something in Matthew’s gospel that Jesus was to have said just a little while earlier. In chapter 8:20, we learn that Jesus had become an *itinerant* prophet. He says to a would-be follower, “Foxes have holes and birds have nests, but the son of man has nowhere to lay his head.” Remember that at this time, Jesus had called a number of disciples *from* their normal lives and places of living, to follow him. He and his disciples were wandering around Galilee, preaching—they were *homeless*. They were the kinds of people for whom the law in Deuteronomy 23 had been written. In today’s scripture, we read about these *homeless and hungry* people picking and eating grain from a certain field, just as the law said they could.

But there was a problem—it was the Sabbath day--“The day of rest.” So we read that, when the Pharisees see Jesus & his disciples picking grain, they said, “Look! Your disciples are doing what is forbidden on the Sabbath day!” The Pharisees are upset that Jesus and his disciples are doing *work*—plucking grain—on the Sabbath day.

Now this is quite ironic. To understand the full irony of this, we need to set this episode in the context of ancient Palestine. Sometimes we forget the *social* background of the New Testament, and when we do that, we often lose a sense of the text’s deeper meaning. Remember that this society was a “peasant society” and had been a “peasant society” for at least 500 years. Recent research by social anthropologists has shown that, in first century Palestine, there were three fairly clear social classes. First, there was a small group of landholding “city elites”; second, there were country-dwelling “peasants” who were mostly tenant farmers—people who did not own their land, but rented it from the city elites, and third, there were “untouchables”—lepers or prostitutes or other ritually unclean people. Modern scholars, who compare ancient Jewish societies with other neighboring agrarian cultures, suggest that between 85 to 90 percent of the Jewish population at the time of Christ were rural peasants and less than 10 percent were landholding elites. Another 5 percent of the population were “untouchables”.

Now this class system was never supposed to have developed. Remember that a famous law called the “Law of Jubilee” is recorded in the book of Leviticus. According to this law, property is supposed to

stay in the hands of the original owners, and if it happens to be sold because of some family misfortune, then at the end of 50 years, the original family was to receive the property back. This was a part of the ancient Jewish social welfare system which insured that children would not have to pay for the bad choices of their parents. They, too, would be able to start fresh with their own plot of “family land.”

But over the course of hundreds and hundreds of years, Jews had ignored this law and more and more land had ended up in the same, few hands. This is one of the main reasons prophets like Isaiah, Micah and Amos accused the leaders of their time of *oppression*. Even back then, religious and political leaders were ignoring Jubilee so that the urban elites could gain control of more and more land.

In the New Testament we often read stories about debtors and day-laborers. Why is that so? Because very few peasants owned their own land. Why are so many people fisherman? Because they didn't have *land*. Why were there so many Jewish synagogues scattered throughout the non-Jewish territories in Asia Minor and Egypt? Because Jews *without land* had left Palestine in what is called the “Jewish Diaspora.” This is a basic “puzzle piece” to understanding the New Testament.

The “urban elites” stayed wealthy by charging land rent. If the land rents in Judea were similar to rents charged in neighboring societies at that time, Jewish tenant farmers probably had to turn over about 1/3 of their grain to the landowners in the cities each year. In addition, they had to “pay” 10% in tithes to the temple elites (the scribes and Sadducees). Remember the story when Jesus accuses the scribes of “devouring widow's houses” (Mark 12:40)? He was referring to this tithe, required of people who were *already* poor. In addition, Jews of Jesus day were expected to pay a “second tithe.” They were required by custom to spend 10% of their yearly profit in Jerusalem. Well, who got the benefit of that? The elites living and doing business in Jerusalem, of course. On top of that, the Romans levied taxes on all Jews. That standard tax was 12.5%, though it could have been higher depending on the greed of the local tax collector. Remember how often we read stories about tax collectors in the gospels.

In a recent book, New Testament scholar Marcus Borg writes that, everything taken into account, it was likely that, in Jesus day, most rural people growing crops had to live on only 1/3 of what they produced—the rest was taken in rents, tithes and taxes. The rents went to the landholders, the tithes to the Sadducees and scribes, and the taxes to the Romans.

Now where did the Pharisees fit into this social structure? Although certainly there were some Pharisees who had trades, a number of modern scholars believe that most Pharisees were probably *professionals*—they had no other job besides being a “rabbi.” Certainly, most Pharisees lived in the cities, and not in the countryside. So where did they get their money? Most current scholars believe that most of them, or their families, *were* landholders. They were probably not in complete alliance with the pro-Roman urban elites at the temple, or in Jerusalem, but they *were* part of the exploitative system. In addition to this, many Pharisees tended to stress details of the Mosaic law without

understanding how larger structures of injustice affected people's lives. This is why Jesus says to some Pharisees, "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. It is these you ought to have practiced without neglecting the others. You blind guides! You strain out a gnat, but swallow a camel!" (Matt. 23:23-24).

So now let's think again about this story. Jesus and his homeless companions are traveling around Galilee—a land full of economic exploitation of rural peasants by rich landholders, and they take some food from a field. The Pharisees, who are complicit in this corrupt social system, see them and complain, "Wait—you hungry people can't eat that on a Saturday!"

Just imagine how angry Jesus would have been! What hypocrisy! For someone whose belly was full—someone who didn't need to work—to tell someone who's hungry and homeless that it's not "right" for them to eat!

But this is a perfect example of *mechanical religion*. Now before I say more, I want to make one caution. The Pharisees are often painted as the New Testament's penultimate "bad guys" when sermons are given about them, and I don't want to fall into that trap. I don't think the Pharisees were necessarily "bad guys." Certainly some Pharisees were better than others. And in all fairness, I think most of them were fairly *good* guys who were caught in a very old, very *mechanical* system. They had let their system of rules and regulations blind them to the fact that something much bigger than "eating on the Sabbath" was wrong with the Palestine of their day.

But Jesus doesn't allow their criticism to confuse him. Instead he offers this reply in vs. 3-7. {READ}.

In our vs. 3-4, Jesus recalls a very interesting story from I Samuel 21 in which David and his men eat "holy bread"—bread which was, by law, only to be eaten by the priests. Then in vs. 5, he refers to Numbers 28:9—a section of the law which commands priests to *work* on the Sabbath—they were to *offer certain kinds of sacrifices* to God on the Sabbath.

Jesus' argument is: If the great king David could break the law to feed the hungry, and if the priests themselves were commanded to break the Sabbath in order to please God, why shouldn't he and his disciples be allowed to eat on the Sabbath?

In fact, he makes a bold statement in vs. 7—"Surely I tell you, one greater than the temple is here." By saying this, Jesus is *condemning* the temple—remember that the Jerusalem elite, along with all the Sadducees and scribes at the Jerusalem temple were all complicit in turning Palestine into the unjust society it had become. The Jerusalem temple had been desecrated by unrighteousness, and Jesus was

determined to undo it. *He would become the new temple.* This is a profound theme that runs all through the Gospels and ends when the veil in the temple is torn in two at the time of Jesus' death.

But what is maybe most interesting to me is found in verse 7. Jesus quotes a verse of the prophets Hosea and Micah to the Pharisees. He says, "If you would have known what this meant—'I desire mercy and not sacrifice,' you wouldn't have condemned the innocent." Wow. Here is where he turns the tables. He claims that it is *not his disciples* who are the sinners, but the *Pharisees* who are in the wrong. For them to ask poor people not to eat, when they themselves were enjoying comfortable lifestyles, *funded by the poor*, was a sad irony.

So Jesus calls them back to the fundamental questions: "What is the law for?" "What is God trying to accomplish through the legal system?" The Pharisees couldn't answer these questions. The Pharisees only knew how to "follow the rules." They had lost the ability to step outside the small box that was their world, to see the whole for what it really was.

*The world was more complicated than their rules.* God's desires for us are not that we simply follow rules to become good—but that by means of the rules, we might be encouraged to have *pure hearts*. Hearts of love for God and for one another. Without pure hearts—hearts of care for our fellow man and hearts of forgiveness, hearts which yearn for justice and peace—without these pure hearts, all of our rules are worth very little.

The Pharisees had invented a religion of doing the right things and believing the right things. They wanted pure *action* and pure *doctrine*. But, according to Jesus, this misses the point. The law was not intended to turn humans into little "good-doing" robots. It was not intended to produce people with carbon-copy belief structures. *The law was intended to encourage the cultivation of a pure heart.* While the Pharisees religion was about right doing and right thinking, Jesus' religion was about right *being*.

This is why Jesus had said earlier in the famous Sermon on the Mount, "If your righteousness does not exceed that of the scribes and the Pharisees you will certainly not enter the Kingdom of Heaven." By this, did this mean that we needed to follow all the rules of Moses' law more closely than the Pharisees did? No—that's not what he meant. The Pharisees were already fairly "good" people by that measure. But they had a *mechanical* religion. Their religion was based on a very simple set of beliefs: "God is righteous. God will bless those who obey the law. God will punish those who disobey the law. So obey the law." That was it.

Most of the Pharisees hadn't understood a religion of right *being*—the religion that believes, "Every good tree bears good fruit, and every bad tree bears bad fruit." Jesus' religion was not a religion of following certain rules to get a certain result—it was a religion of finding a new heart which

naturally—organically—makes us new people. This kind of faith is not mechanical at all—it's organic.

But I'm afraid that people often fall into the trap of "mechanical religion." It seems like we humans tend to be drawn toward mechanical ways of thinking and acting.

One very dangerous trend in American evangelical churches in the last 50 years has been the "mechanization" of Christianity. More and more of our churches are being infected, I think, with a very mechanical way of understanding Christian faith.

For example, something that has increased in popularity in the U.S. since the late 1960s has been the use of the phrase "The Plan of Salvation." If you type that into an internet search engine, it returns about 1.2 million hits! But there is something strange about this phrase—"The plan of salvation."

The "Plan of Salvation" is often explained something like this:

In order to be saved, you must:

1. Acknowledge that God is real and is just and that God requires payment for sin.
2. You must acknowledge that you are a sinner.
3. You must acknowledge that your sins separate you from the just God and require a payment—death in hell.
4. You must believe that Jesus carried your sins, died in your place, and resurrected from the dead.
5. You must accept God's forgiveness by saying a prayer something like this:

*"Father, I know that I have broken your laws and my sins have separated me from you. I am truly sorry, and now I want to turn away from my past sinful life toward you. Please forgive me. I believe that your son, Jesus Christ died for my sins, was resurrected from the dead. I invite Jesus to become the Lord of my life.*

*In Jesus' name I pray, Amen."*

Now if a person goes through that regimen, according to this way of interpreting the Bible, they're "saved." That's it. They're no longer going to hell. Now they just have to follow the rules for becoming a better Christian. It can turn into a very neat and tidy program.

But this smacks a little of "Mc-Religion" to me. There's something about this way of thinking that is *suspect*—almost too much like building a fast-food hamburger. That's because this process is very *mechanical*—the regimen is based on the idea that "if you believe this and that, and if you do this, this good result will ensue." The whole process takes might only take. . . 45 seconds or so. And you're done!

I wonder, if this was all it took to become a Christian, why didn't Jesus ever tell us about "the plan of salvation?" Why didn't Paul? Why didn't Paul write it all down in one, convenient little letter, step by step, so nobody could mess it up? Why did it take 1900 years of Christian history to pass before

somebody discovered the idea of the “Roman’s Road?”

If simple assent to these propositions is all it takes to become a Christian, then why did Jesus, over and over, say difficult things like, “If you want to be perfect, go and sell all you have and give it to the poor. Then come follow me,” or “If anyone wants to be my disciple let him forget himself, and take up his cross, and follow me.”

Now I don’t want to offend any of you who have been led to Christianity by means of this “plan of salvation.” *I myself was.* I, myself, said the “sinner’s prayer” when I was 6 years old. But I have grown up enough in my faith to come to understand that *praying a prayer didn’t save me.* God saved me and God *is still* saving me. My prayer was beside the point. What God wanted from me—what God *still* wants from me—is my heart. And sometimes I offer it to God—sometimes, even today, as a 38 year old man, I don’t.

Have you noticed the language Jesus used? Was it ever mechanical language? No—as a matter of fact, he often spoke in parables. And when he called his first disciples, the only thing he said to them was —“Come, follow me.”

Becoming a Christian is not a mechanical event. It’s not like completing some “program” or adhering to some new set of rules. You can’t “make a Christian” in the same way you can “make a Big Mac”. *Christians are made when people commit to following Christ.* Now certainly there is a time in all of our lives when we need to decide which life path we’re going to take—if it’s going to be “the narrow way” or “the broad way.” There are moments of decision in our lives. And these moments of decision are very important. Sometimes we have to decide which way we’re going to choose *over and over again* in our lives. But those decisions, whenever they’re made, don’t just include our minds and our actions. They don’t just have to do with our beliefs and our works. They have to do with our *hearts*. This was the Pharisees’ big mistake 2000 years ago, and it’s still often our mistake today.

Becoming a Christian is doing something very *un-mechanical*. It’s realizing that most of the world is run by people simply trying to follow the rules. These rules might be good rules, but abiding by them doesn’t make people good. People are only good when their *hearts* have been transformed by the gracious power of God as they’ve committed to follow Jesus. When the very center of their beings have been *remade* into something new by God’s Holy Spirit—they *become good trees* that don’t have to “work” to bear good fruit. This transformation occurs when we give ourselves over to Christ, freely and completely. It is a resignation of our will to God’s will through our allegiance to Christ.

This kind of renewal is not mechanical—it’s organic. It feels like being completely born again! Receiving new eyes and new ears—it’s a “new creation,” Paul says—receiving a whole new way of understanding the world! We begin to see our place in the whole. We begin to live beyond our past.

We begin to see through the rules to the purposes God intends to enact by means of those rules. We begin to envision God's longed for kingdom. And then we begin to understand what Jesus really meant when he said, "A greater than the temple is here." Jesus Christ—*he* is greater; *his way* is greater than the mechanical religions of the past.

May God free us from mechanical religion—any religion that allows us to continue on blindly, day by day, without see ourselves as God sees us!

God free us from mechanical religion—any religion which steals our joy for the sake of fulfilling our "obligations"; any religion which dampens our holy creativity!

God free us from mechanical religion—any religion which attempts to replace genuine, spirit-transforming regeneration with pallid reassurances that all is well!

God give us ears to hear the life-giving story of Christ. There is deep *emancipation* in this good news. And if you are here today, tired of a mechanical faith that feels like a burden to you, I invite you to throw it down. Leave it here. Don't take it with you. Don't live a life controlled by dead law. Start living like Jesus' disciple.

May we open ourselves today to being fully indwelt by God's Holy Spirit, and may we recommit ourselves, with all of our power, to walking in the footsteps of the Lord of the Sabbath, in whom is hidden the deepest mysteries of God.

Let us pray,

Lord God,

Give us the grace to follow *you* this day—

Not some religion which we have created,

Not some religion we have simply received,

But to follow *you*.

For we want to know what it means—

"To value mercy more than sacrifice,"

To know what it means—

To feast richly at your table, and to be filled with holy bread.

We pray in Jesus' name,

Amen