

"HOW DO YOU REALLY PLEASE GOD?" That's a good question isn't it? Because we all want to please God, otherwise I take it we wouldn't be here, tonight. We all want to make a good impression with our Creator. We all want to impress him. So how do you really please God?

Do you please Him by coming to Church? By giving some money when the plate goes around (or at least the blue plastic bucket?) Do you impress Him by praying to Him, by fasting, by reading the Bible? By being a nice person? By keeping your family together? How do you please God?

Now the religious people of Jesus times thought that you pleased God by following the rules, God's rules. He had given them the ten commandments. He had given them two books worth of laws in Leviticus and in Exodus. God had revealed a whole set of do's and don'ts or thou shalt and thou shalt not's that obviously were an important thing for God. So obedience. Law-abiding. Compliance. That is how you please God. That is how you make a good impression with your Creator.

And so because you please God by following his laws they placed a big emphasis on things like the Sabbath, what you could do and what you couldn't do on the Lord's Day. On tithing, giving 10% of your income to God. On fasting, not just once a year but twice a week.

And so when Jesus comes and preaches amongst these sorts of people, he begins to clash with them. Because Jesus emphasis is not the law but the law giver. Not rules, but relationships. Not what you do, but who you do it for. And so he begins to disagree with the religious of the day, firstly over fasting.

1. Fasting or Fastening? For John the Baptist's disciples fasted and so did the Pharisees, because the Law said it was good to fast. God's law said that on one special day, the Day of Atonement, that all people should fast. The Day of Atonement was a special day, a holy day, where people could be reminded of their sin, and their need for a Saviour. So on that day, you would not eat any food or drink and you would spend the day reaching out to God, turning from your sin, realising that God would need to do something special, amazing, sacrificial in order for my sins to be forgiven.

That's what the Law prescribed, but the Pharisees thought, why only do that on one day a year? We should be reaching out toward God all the time, we should be sorry for our sins constantly. We should desire a Saviour 24/7. So they made a new law, that those who wanted to impress God shouldn't fast one day a year, but twice every week, every Monday and Thursday. Boy that will show God how obedient,

how law abiding, how good we are.

And they became so fixated about fasting that when God actually reached out to them and sent his son, Jesus; when God actually sent Jesus to save his people from their sins (because that is what the name Jesus means); when God actually did do something amazing, tremendous, sacrificial amongst them, they were so wrapped up in the fasting that they forget to fasten themselves to their Saviour. They concentrated on the law and not the law giver. They only had eyes for the rules not the relationship with the ruler.

So Jesus says the bridegroom is now here, you shouldn't be fasting but feasting! Not sorry for your sins but thankful that God is doing something about your sins. For God isn't primarily interested in actions, in appearances, in rules but in your relationship with Him. So fasting is a good idea, but only if it leads you closer to God. Going to Church is a good thing but only if you have a spiritual encounter when you get there. Reading the Bible is a good thing, but don't just do it so that you can tick that box and think that God is impressed with the fact that you have just spent 30 minutes with your Bible's open. Fasten yourself God. Draw near to Him. Reach out to Him. That's the important thing.

Billy Graham once said, "I've spent my life preaching the gospel...watched thousands, literally millions of people walk down the aisle to accept Christ. Until I die, I'll never know how few of them really meant it." Do you see what he is saying? Actions are good things but we can't see into the heart to see if they are matched by faith. Only God can do that. So we should be slow to condemn others for their actions or lack of actions. And make sure that we don't just go through the spiritual motions ourselves, but we use these things to draw us closer to our God.

2. Wine or Wineskins? So fasting or fastening and then Jesus talks about wine or wineskins, verses 21 and 22. For what is more important the wine or the wineskins, the beer or the tin can, the scotch or the bottle? Surely it is the liquid inside not the packaging outside. So its not the bottle, the wineskins we need to protect at all costs, it's the wine. And its not the patch that's really important, it's the garment that you want to put the patch onto.

So if you have a favourite old pair of jeans and they have a hole them and you don't want to be trendy, then you have to be careful about just putting a patch of new material on it, because if you wash it and it shrinks, it will tear the hole even bigger. Or putting new wine into old wineskins. The new wine ferments & the old skin's got no give in it. So the whole thing explodes. For the old and the new don't mix. And that's what Jesus is saying in v21&22.

He's saying that the message of Jesus is new, because it tells us what

God is doing right now amongst us. And so if it is new, then we have to be careful with that we don't hang onto the old structures, the old ways of doing something, the old laws. For they were fine for the old wine. But the old wine, the law, has been corrupted, it's been abused and twisted and distorted by people like the Pharisees so much so that it is beyond repair. It needs to be replaced. And Jesus is doing that by bringing in the new wine of the Kingdom.

For you can't sew the New Covenant onto the old. Law and grace cannot co-exist. This is a common mistake that people make to this day. We come to Jesus to forgive our sins but then we set about trying to earn God's favour by how good we can be

Think of it as changing computer operating systems. Going from DOS to Windows – you can't just take the old way of typing commands in DOS, it won't work in Windows because it is a "point and click" system. The law was obedience to a set of rules and sacrifices when those rules were broken. The new system is faith in the Person who obeyed perfectly and was sacrificed for our disobedience.

And friends we can make the same mistakes today. We try and fit the message of Jesus into the old structures, the old ways of doing things, into Church buildings and ministers with gowns and clerical collars and old hymns and rules and regulations. When what we need is new wineskins, new approaches, new possibilities, new attempts to communicate the good news of Jesus.

So we need to take the best of the old and keep it with the new. Take the principles behind the old and apply them to the new. But we can't afford to put the wineskins before the wine. To see that the structures, the denominations, the rules and regulations of the past as unchangeable and more important than the message. No the wine is more important than the wineskins, fastening yourself to God is more important than fasting

3. And thirdly the **special person is more important than the special day**. Because this clash with the Pharisees has more than a few more rounds to play and the next round occurs on the Sabbath, on the special day that the Jews put aside to worship God. You see Jesus and his disciples are out walking in the field, walking in someone else's fields and they are hungry and so a couple of them pick some of the heads of grain, roll it in their hands and eat the food. But the problem is they do it on the Sabbath.

So the Talmud, the book of Jewish traditions has 24 chapters listing various Sabbath laws. On the Sabbath, you could not travel more than 3,000 feet from your house. You couldn't carry a needle for fear you might sew something. Taking a bath was forbidden. Water might splash on the floor and wash it. Women were not to look in a mirror; they might pull a grey hair. Not that any of you ladies would need to

worry about that. And the Talmud also says you shouldn't reap your crops on the Sabbath.

For the Pharisees, keeping the Sabbath has gone WAY beyond what God intended for it. Their rule book was FULL of things you couldn't do. Trying to PROTECT the Sabbath from people breaking it. It reminds me of a story about a beautiful golf course. The members pride themselves on how healthy the grass is. How SMOOTH they've made the greens. The beautiful fairways. And they're so proud, it becomes SO IMPORTANT to them, they introduce a law. Before the ball can be hit, you have to move it from the fairway into the long grass on the side in the rough. Because the grass was too perfect on the fairway to ruin by trying to hit golf balls. But what they'd forgotten, was that the purpose of a golf course, is for THE ENJOYMENT OF THE GOLFERS. It's NOT there to be protected. And the purpose of the Sabbath is for the enjoyment of man.

And so when the Pharisees point out to Jesus helpfully, hey your disciples are breaking the Sabbath! Jesus reminds them that the Sabbath is not an end in itself, it's a means to an end. That the Sabbath was not made for man, man was made for the Sabbath. That the special people that God has placed all around us are more important than the special days that come our way.

What Jesus says in Verse 27 tells me that God gave us the Sabbath as a gift, not as a burden. And so if you put rules before relationships, law before the lawgiver, special days before special people, yes it may seem that you are doing what God wants you to do, but your legalism might actually be driving people away from God and others rather than closer to God and others.

Now let me point out how this works by reminding you of one of the great acts of Sabbath keeping that you and I would know about and that is Eric Liddell. Remember he was in the film *Chariots of Fire*. It was the Olympic games and the final of his pet event, the event that he was favourite to win was going to fall on a Sunday, on the Christian Sabbath.

So Liddell refuses to run. This is a day of rest, of worship, and although he loved running and he believed that God had given him the ability to run fast, he wanted to spend that day in rest and worship. So he gave up a possible gold medal to put God first. Liddell saw that the principal of the Sabbath, of drawing closer to God was more important than fame for himself and country.

And yet Liddell was no legalist. He knew that the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath and so later on in life he became a missionary in China. And so he would bring together a community, a Christian community to worship on a Sunday. But the kids there were restless. They couldn't just sit down and sing and read their Bibles

and pray all day. So what did Liddell do? He organised games, running races, enjoyment for the children. So that the parents could rest and worship on the Sabbath and the kids could enjoy their time as part of God's community. Liddell was someone who kept the Sabbath, but who also saw that the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.

4. The healing or the harming? Because the Sabbath is about healing not harming. Its about saving life not killing. Its about doing good not evil. Because that is what God is like. He has given us a day off so that our lives can be restored. So that we can be refreshed and invigorated and full of praise and thanks. So that we can draw closer to God and be more like God.

So when Jesus goes to the synagogue one Sabbath and sees a man there with a shrivelled hand, it's a bit of a no brainer. Sure he could meet him the next day. Sure he could allow pain and disability to stay in this man's body. But you have to ask why is the Sabbath there? Why are the rules there? What is God's law all about?

So he asks, "Which is **LAWFUL ON THE SABBATH... TO DO GOOD OR TO DO EVIL, TO SAVE LIFE OR TO KILL?**" But they don't say a word. There's just **SILENCE**. So Jesus answers his own question through his words and his actions. Its about the healing not the harming. Its about the special man not the special day. Its about the wine not the wineskins, it's the lawgiver not the law. Yes laws are important and God's laws are especially important. But if those laws get in the way of the law giver. If they make us put rules before relationships. If they help us to think that we are good enough for God based on our own obedience rather than showing us that we can never be good enough for God, then we need to lay aside the law and embrace the lawgiver.

Its good to do good on the Sabbath. We have to put people before ceremonies and days because people are incredibly important to God. We need help rather than harm. We need to fast and fasten ourselves closer to our God. But its not just black and white. So we have to use our brains to work out what God would want us to do and why God wants us to do those things.

So we have to careful about what we do & why we do it. We have to be careful not just to do the right thing, but o also give others the right impression. Because we want our acts to reflect God's laws and our heart to reflect God's character. But when we put those two things together, they become a powerful message to all who see us.

Let me end with a story its about a little girl who, on her way home from church, turned to her mother and said, "Mummy, the preacher's sermon this morning confused me." The mother said, "Oh! Why is that?"

The girl replied, “Well, he said that God is bigger than we are. Is that true?” “Yes, it is true,” the mother replied. “He also said the God lives within us. Is that true, too?”

Again the mother replied, “Yes.” “Well,” said the girl, “if God is bigger than us and He lives in us, wouldn’t He show through?”

That’s the key isn’t it. Following God’s way and doing it God’s way so that God’s nature and character show through.

