

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

(June 5, 2011)

Dave Smith

Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: BREATHLESS

(studies in the Gospel of Mark)

Outside the Box, with Jesus

(Mark 2:18--3:6)

Study #5

Introduction: FORM vs. FUNCTION...

American churches in 2011 often feature a dazzling array of programs, activities, ministries, and services. Here is a “church sampler.”

Sunday am worship	Youth Ministry
AWANA	Paid staff
Buildings	Sunday School
Praise Team/Choir	Care Groups
Prayer Meeting	Missions Committee
Etc...	

All of these varied offerings make church life full and interesting and busy - and sometimes just a little bit crazy.

What is fascinating - and I've been giving some thought to this recently - is that not one of the items listed above is mentioned in the Bible.

I'm not saying that any of these things are wrong-headed or bad ideas or sinful. It's just kinda funny that we are a church that believes and seeks to obey the Bible - and we have all of this “stuff” we do for which we could not, for the life of us, quote chapter and verse.

So, why do we do what we do?

It is because at some point in the past, we (or people we chose to imitate) decided that this or that activity would help us accomplish God's purposes, as laid out in the Bible.

The Bible is very specific about the outcomes that we are to pursue, but painfully silent about the forms we are to use to achieve them. There is a lot in the New Testament about function, but little about form; tons about purpose, and precious little about specific ministries.

This morning we see some people who allowed themselves to get confused about *form* and *function*. They exalted *form* to the level of “*thus saith the Lord*” and got themselves into all kinds of trouble.

This morning, as we catch up with Jesus, He is minding His own business when He receives a visit from representatives of two groups with a question for Him.

The Classroom: Change Theory (2:18-22)

To Fast or Not to Fast (vv. 18-20)

A question with an edge (v. 18)

John's disciples and Pharisees fast (v. 18a)

[18a] John's disciples and the Pharisees were fasting...

We know that John the Baptist has already been taken into custody by Herod. So he's not on the scene anymore. But there is still a gang of his followers who are hanging together as an identifiable group.¹

John's disciples regularly fasted. And so do the Pharisees, a very popular group of religious leaders in first century Israel.

¹ I have wondered if this group of John's disciples continued for some time, spreading his message. This could explain the existence of some people, hundreds of miles away in the city of Ephesus, who were acquainted with the baptism of John, but did not know anything about the Holy Spirit (or, likely, about Jesus).

Now fasting is a discipline that is practiced by people of many of the world's religions, even to this day. And fasting is a time-honored practice among Jews and Christians.

The Bible records quite a few stories of people and groups who engaged in periods of fastings. There was even a command from God in the Mosaic Law that the Jews were all to fast one day every year, on the most holy Day of Atonement. (Leviticus 16:29).

Over the centuries leading up to the time of Jesus, fasting had come to take on a more and more prominent role in the lives of some of the Jews.

If you read the book of Zechariah (chapter 8), you'll see four additional annual fasts mentioned that are nowhere required in the Law - and Esther 9:31 adds another. And by the time of Jesus, the Pharisees were fasting twice weekly, on Mondays and Thursday (see Luke 18:12).

So, Pharisaic religion had gone far beyond the Old Testament requirements with respect to fasting.

In no way did they violate Scripture by fasting more than was required. But their practice of super-fasting contrasted greatly with the practice of Jesus' disciples.

The troubling fastlessness of Jesus and company (v. 18b)

[18b]...and they came and said to Him, "Why do John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but Your disciples do not fast?"

The question is not meant to imply that Jesus' disciples disobeyed the Mosaic Law and did not fast on the Day of Atonement. The problem is that they didn't fast on Mondays and Thursdays.

They didn't do what was expected of serious, devout Jews. They didn't fast as much as the Pharisees did.

I wonder about the "spirit" of the question the delegation put to Him.

Was it asked accusingly? Did it seem that Jesus was being interrogated? Or was it a simple question, seeking nothing more than clarity? Were the askers sincerely confused about Jesus' behavior?²

We don't know. But at least they went to Jesus directly, rather than to His disciples, as they have done once already.³

And whatever the spirit of the question might have been, Jesus' answer was very patient.

A very patient answer (vv. 19-20)

Weddings, then and now (v. 19)

[19] And Jesus said to them, "While the bridegroom is with them, the attendants of the bridegroom cannot fast, can they? So long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast."

There are appropriate times for fasting.

Fasting makes a lot of sense during a time of mourning and sorrow. We fast when repenting, or when in a season of deep reflection, or when we are calling out to God for His intervention.

But there are times when fasting would be inappropriate.

Just imagine this scene at the next wedding you attend. It's been a beautiful ceremony. The groom and bride have kissed and walked out to great fanfare. The wedding party has left the Worship Center and the minister is left by himself to invite the congregation to the reception.

If he announces that it will be a "fasting" reception, you'd think, "Weird."

² R. T. France believes that we should read a note of challenge, as in, "Why not?"

³ In 1:12 the Pharisees complained (silently) about His claim to forgive the sins of the paralytic.

That might sound pretty good to some fathers-of-the-bride, but as sure as a wedding is a time of joy and delight, food and drink are integral parts of the celebration.

In this little parable, Jesus is saying that since He (the bridegroom) is present, this is a time of celebration and joy. Fasting just doesn't make much sense for His disciples.

But as He continues, He makes it clear that there will be a time when His disciples will definitely fast.

The disciples & fasting (v. 20)

[20] “But the days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast in that day.”

I'm certain that Jesus has the cross in mind here. He continues to use the imagery of the wedding feast, but He has Himself and His followers in mind. And when He is crucified, yes, that will be a time of sorrow. And, yes, His disciples will fast then.

In fact, for all kinds of great reasons, Christians have continued to fast, from time to time, even in this age, even though we live in light of Jesus' resurrection.

It is significant that Jesus said nothing about how or how often His followers will fast. He didn't dismiss the importance of fasting at all. In fact, He Himself fasted!

But, His fasting was not according to the rules of fasting followed by the first century Pharisees. It wasn't a formalized thing. He didn't fast according to a set schedule.

Jesus was living outside the box of the expectations of the first century religious world. He was starting something new and fresh. And this new thing would not, it could not be contained within the rigid forms of Jewish tradition. As He goes on to say, a new thing requires a new form, a whole new structure.

As He continues, Jesus changes images, from the world of weddings to the domestic world.

New Thing? New Structure! (vv. 21-22)

New patches for new cloth (v. 21)

[21] “No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment; otherwise the patch pulls away from it, the new from the old, and a worse tear results.”

This is a self-explanatory illustration. It would be silly to try and sew an unshrunk piece of cloth on to an old, ripped garment. That's just asking for trouble.

And it would be just as silly to pour new wine into old, already stretched wineskins.

New skins for new wine (v. 22)

[22] “No one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise the wine will burst the skins, and the wine is lost and the skins as well; but one puts new wine into fresh wineskins.”⁴

Fermenting wine will stretch an unstretched wineskin. It will explode an already stretched wineskin!

This principle would be all too obvious to winemakers. But the slogan (“*new wineskins for new wine*”) is to emphasize to us (and to the Pharisees) that Jesus is bringing about something entirely new.

The Point: Better to start fresh...

To try to contain “The Jesus Way” in currently available forms would result in predictable rippings and explosions. Better to start fresh with new forms. What a provocative thought.

⁴ The first stage of fermentation was taken care of in a large vat, but then the wine would be placed in an animal skin and closed up.

It is certainly true that God might have brought about revival and renewal by infusing the old structures with freshness and life.

But, from what Jesus says here, it seems to have been more natural to leave the old structures - which were used in their day to fulfill God's purposes - and start a new thing with new structures.

The thing to notice here is that the form is not the thing. The thing is spiritual vitality and passion for God and truth.

As it was in Jesus' day, so it has been through the ages and so it is in our own day. When the fresh wind of revival blows, it will likely as not be accompanied by fresh ways of doing things.

That might be disruptive. It might be uncomfortable. But the forms can - must! - change from time to time to fulfill God's purposes.

Now, what we have seen thus far has felt a lot like a classroom lecture. Jesus has patiently explained that His way is not going to be like the old way. He has taken us through a brief course, "Change Theory 101."

Well, we are about to leave the classroom for the lab. Get ready for some life application in the new ways of Jesus.

Preview: First steps in "The Jesus Way"

What follows are two separate stories. But the stories are linked. They both deal with Jesus and the Sabbath.

Now all Jews agreed that the Sabbath was a special day. The Ten Commandments told them that the Sabbath day was holy to the Lord.

In various places, the Jews were told to observe the Sabbath as a day of rest because God rested on the seventh day of creation *and* because the people of Israel had had no rest when they were in Egypt.

The Sabbath was to be a day of rest. No work on the Sabbath. That was not a hard concept to understand in general terms. But there were problems when it came to applying the concept of rest to everyday life.

The primary challenge revolved around how the concept of "work" would be defined.

The Pharisees (and their predecessors) believed that such an important question could not be left to the masses to determine, so they did what any self-respecting legalist would do.

They made rules. They legislated what would define "work" for their fellow Jews.⁵

Nothing was left to chance by the Pharisees when it came to defining what was and what was not, work.

They were painfully specific and developed hundreds of prohibitions against all sorts of activities.

For instance, a walk further than (roughly) a kilometer was too far a walk to take on the Sabbath.

If you were a Jew in the first century, according to the Pharisees, stopping a fluid from leaking out of a container was "work."

You couldn't wash wool, transport an object publicly, use a tool (hammer, pencil), kindle or extinguish a fire, or cook on the Sabbath.

Life on the Sabbath was extremely regimented for the Jews of Jesus' day, courtesy of the Pharisees.

And with that as background, we watch as Jesus and His disciples take a meandering stroll on a Sabbath through a grain field together.

⁵ The Hebrew word for work (melachah) generally refers to the kind of work that is creative, or that exercises control or dominion over an environment. The Jews identified 39 different kinds of work that fit this description and which were, therefore, disallowed on the Sabbath.

The Lab: Sabbath (2:23-28; 3:1-6)

Harvesting on the Sabbath (vv. 23-28)

The offending behavior (v. 23)

[23] And it happened that He was passing through the grainfields on the Sabbath, and His disciples began to make their way along while picking the heads of grain.⁶

The setting

This incident probably took place in the area around Capernaum, where, not far from the Sea of Galilee, there was rich farmland.

There would have been heads of grain on the barley or the wheat in early summer. So, it is warm, if not hot as they walked through the field.

The activity

They weren't carrying harvesting equipment with them to reap grain. They weren't even "gleaning" the wheat that might have been left behind by harvesters who had gone before them.

They were simply picking the heads of grain off of the stalks of wheat, helping themselves to some extremely organic granola.

The problem

If it looks to be a harmless enough activity to you, I'm in agreement. But then, we aren't Pharisees.

Pharisees listed among the prohibited activities on the Sabbath picking the heads of grain. And the disciples were walking through this grain field on a Sabbath. To the pharisaic mind, this was nothing but harvesting, which was work, which was thus a violation of Exodus 20:10.

They took the fight right to Jesus.

The accusers (v. 24)

[24] The Pharisees were saying to Him, "Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?"

They assumed that the disciples' behavior had Jesus' approval and were upset with Him for allowing them to do such a thing.

The Pharisees have come to the very dangerous position of seeing their explanations and interpretations of God's Law as equal to God's Law.

They had a form in place for obeying the Sabbath Law and they had exalted that form to the level of *"thus saith the Lord."*

Jesus doesn't exactly argue with them. But He does respond. His response is devastating.

Jesus turns to... (vv. 25-28)

...Scripture (vv. 25-26)

[25] And He said to them, "Have you never read what David did when he was in need and he and his companions became hungry; [26] how he entered the house of God in the time of Abiathar the high priest, and ate the consecrated bread, which is not lawful for anyone to eat except the priests, and he also gave it to those who were with him?"⁷

Leaving aside the question with which Jesus began (*"Have you never read...?"*), which would have been quite a slap to someone who prided himself in an encyclopedic knowledge of Scripture, Jesus' reference to this story about David is very helpful.

David, on the run from King Saul, had a need for bread for himself and his men. So, he took the consecrated bread. Scripture records David's act with approval. His need superseded the law protecting the holy bread.

⁷ Check out the story - 1 Samuel 21:1-6

⁶ Mark doesn't say that Jesus Himself was eating the grains of wheat.

Evidently, David took the bread on a Sabbath day (we assume he did, since the bread that he took would have been put out fresh on the Sabbath). And then Jesus goes on to explain why it was OK for David to have taken the special bread on the Sabbath.

...Logic (v. 27)

[27] Jesus said to them, “The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath.

God made the Sabbath for man’s enjoyment and refreshment. Man is more important than the Sabbath.

But the Pharisees had made the Sabbath into a heartless beast that made life harder - which totally missed the point for God having given the Sabbath in the first place!

The Sabbath was supposed to serve mankind. But with the pharisaic rules, man was being forced to serve the Sabbath.

So, Jesus has appealed to Scripture and to logic to argue the OK-ness of His disciples’ actions. He finally argues authority.

...Authority (v. 28)

[28] “So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath.”

And the point is that if David could do what he did, then Jesus, the greater-than-David Messiah could certainly “OK” what the disciples had done.

He wasn’t at all saying that He had the right to violate the Sabbath.

But He was saying that He was qualified to cut to the heart of the matter and rightly interpret Sabbath law. And Jesus declares here that what His disciples were doing was perfectly all right.

Reflection point: Do you agree with the following?

Stop with me for just a minute of reflection about what we are seeing today in Jesus’ approach to the Sabbath vs. the Pharisees’ approach to the Sabbath.

I wonder if their contrasting perspectives reflect two very different ways of approaching life.

See if you agree with my assessment:

- The PHARISEES said, “*If a certain behavior is not explicitly allowed, then it is disallowed.*”
- JESUS said, “*If a certain behavior is not explicitly disallowed, then it is allowed.*”

Would you mull that thought?

One perspective (that of Jesus) champions freedom. The other (that of the Pharisees) is restrictive. It is shackling.

Consider what would be the ramifications for your life in 2011 if you were to live on the freeing assumption that whatever God has not explicitly prohibited is allowed.

As you mull that thought we’ll move on to the second of two stories that show Jesus “at work” on the Sabbath.

Doctoring on the Sabbath (vv. 1-6)

A tragic situation (v. 1)

[1] He entered again into a synagogue; and a man was there whose hand was withered.

The physical setting

We aren’t told into what synagogue Jesus entered, although it is probably not a bad guess to assume that it was, again, in the city of Capernaum.

We are told explicitly later, but I might as well state it now. He entered the synagogue on a Sabbath.

At least one commentator believes that He may have walked from the grain field straight to the synagogue and that the first confrontation took place on the same day as this confrontation.⁸

Assuming that this was, indeed, the Capernaum synagogue, think of what this worshipping community already knew of Jesus.

They have heard Him teach and they have seen Him cast out a demon.

The scenario

Mark does not begin, focused on Jesus. No, the focus is on a man who showed up for worship with a physical deformity.

A useless, withered hand is a terrible hardship in any case. At best, in a high-tech society, it can be a nuisance. But in an agrarian society (which Capernaum was) where one's livelihood depended on physical labor, a withered hand was a devastating condition.

This man had likely lived with this infirmity for some time. It is a chronic, not an acute problem. And every Pharisaic eye is on Jesus.

Jesus under scrutiny (v. 2)

[2] They were watching Him to see if He would heal him on the Sabbath, so that they might accuse Him.

The Pharisees are now critics

The Pharisees had been interested learners at one point, gathering in Simon's home to hear Jesus teach.

But His claim to forgive sin (even though He validated it by healing the paralytic), followed by His lax views of fasting and His grain-picking-on-the-Sabbath ways have now pushed them to see Jesus in a negative light.

They are now critics. They are lying in wait for Him. They are watching to see if He messes up, gets out of line. They want to trap Him.

And how do they think He might "mess up"? By healing.

We learn that just as the Pharisees had rules regulating Sabbath behavior about picking the heads of grain in a field, so they had severe regulations on the practice of medicine on the Sabbath.

The healing trap

Pharisaic law was clear that if it was a matter of life and death, doctoring was permitted. And mothers will be glad to know that it was OK to give assistance in childbirth on the Sabbath (thank you very much).

But wiping blood off of a minor wound was against the Pharisees' Sabbath rules. Some time later, Jesus will get in trouble for healing a blind man when He made mud out of dirt plus His own spittle and wiped them on the man's eyes because the act of combining spittle and dirt was considered the same thing as making mortar, which is, of course, work.

This man with the withered hand is not on the verge of death. There is every opportunity for Jesus to tell the man, "*Don't take two aspirin and see me in the morning. We'll take care of that hand.*"

But Jesus made no attempt to avoid the trap.

Jesus in motion (vv. 3-5)

A word to the man (v. 3)

[3] He said to the man with the withered hand, "Get up and come forward!"

⁸ This may explain Jesus' annoyance in the synagogue - it is cumulative, having already experienced the scorn of the Pharisees in the fields.

Whatever Jesus is about to do is going to be an “in your face” very public act.

Jesus and the man are at the front of the synagogue standing together. Jesus turns His attention from the man to **“them”** and asks a simple question.

A word to the critics (v. 4)

[4] And He said to them, “Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save a life or to kill?” But they kept silent.

Can you hear the edge in Jesus’ words? Do you hear Him struggling to comprehend the insensitivity of people who were so callused to human suffering as these Pharisees?

Of course, if the man wasn’t healed on this day, he likely wouldn’t have died. And it is hard to argue that NOT healing is the same as doing harm.

But Jesus’ point was that the Sabbath, of all days, was a day for doing good.

And to the question Jesus posed, the Pharisees gave no answer but a thoroughly incriminating silence.

You can see the wheels turning in their minds as Jesus speaks.

“We really don’t want to say much. All we really care about is obedience to God’s Word, but we’ll look like insensitive clods if we answer out loud. Let’s just not get drawn into a debate with Jesus.”

So, an angry Jesus took control of the situation.

An angry Healer (v. 5)

[5a] After looking around at them with anger, grieved at their hardness of heart...

That’s right. Jesus was angry.⁹ God made anger for a reason, and the Lord Jesus Christ was justly angry at callous insensitivity to human need. And He was grieved at the coldness of the Pharisees toward the man with the withered hand.

Jesus’ emotional life had richness and depth. He didn’t speak in a monotone and He didn’t have a one-dimensional personality. He was the perfect human being and He experienced the full range of all the emotions God created, perfectly!

Can you imagine what it would be like to always be appropriately sad, happy, angry, grieved, relieved? Wouldn’t that be awesome?

Well, that’s not our experience. But Jesus’ emotions were never tainted by sin.

The Pharisees were convinced that their rules about the Sabbath were the final word. Their form equaled God’s command.

They failed to see that freeing a man with a withered hand to a full life was more important than following their picky Sabbath laws. They are hardened, inflexible, set in their ways.

Jesus doesn’t like it when people (then or now!) are hardened, inflexible, set in their ways. And the Pharisees’ hardness of heart roused Jesus to anger and to what I’ll call “compassionate supernaturalism.”

[5] After looking around at them with anger, grieved at their hardness of heart, He said to the man, “Stretch out your hand.” And he stretched it out, and his hand was restored.

The instant the man stretched out his hand, the withered hand was restored to normal.

And the instant the healing was accomplished, Jesus became the target of an assassination plot.

⁹ One of the few times when Scripture records Jesus’ anger and is the only explicit reference to Jesus’ anger in the New Testament.

Jesus in the crosshairs of a plot (v. 6)

[6] The Pharisees went out and immediately began conspiring with the Herodians against Him, as to how they might destroy Him.

A common opponent can bring unity, and that is what has happened here. Opposition to Jesus has united a political group (the Herodians¹⁰) with super-religious Pharisees.

And the Pharisees, who had objected so violently to Jesus healing on the Sabbath, conspired together with the Herodians to kill Jesus - on the Sabbath.

Conclusion:

In so many arenas of life, form must follow function.

If old business models hinder productivity, change them. The genius of companies that stay on a winning track for decades is that they are nimble, flexible. They adapt to changing times. They never lose sight of the main thing and are willing to change minor things to continue to accomplish the main thing.

As I see it, this is where GM failed and it is where Apple has succeeded.

Jesus was the Master at “form follows function” thinking.

He fulfilled every command of God, but He wasn’t tied to old structures. He was committed to *God’s purposes*, NOT to *man’s forms*.

So, what does it mean to follow Jesus? Obviously it means that we pray, witness, give, and serve.

But the stories we’ve heard this morning and Jesus’ teaching about fasting and wineskins tells us that if we would follow Him fully there will be about us a certain flexibility. We will be absolutely committed to God’s purposes - and open to fresh new ways to accomplish those purposes.

We will be willing to sacrifice sacred cows to meet needs in Jesus’ Name. As a church, we will evaluate ministries on the basis of their effectiveness TODAY to serve God, not how effective they were a generation ago or five years ago.

When God brought about a new thing through Jesus, He broke centuries old paradigms and smashed old models. I wonder...

If God is going to do a new thing in you and in me and in us today, might He not likely do the same thing? Should we not always be on the lookout for new ways to better serve Jesus and the people He so desperately loves?

Together, let’s be the people who embrace God’s purposes and are indifferent to form.

¹⁰ Herodians controlled the appointment of the High Priests before A.D. 6 and after 37 B.C.