

# #Sabbath Outrage

*A sermon on Mark 2:23 - 3:6 by Nathan Nettleton, 3 June 2018*

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## Message

Jesus calls us to move beyond hostile identity politics, whether shaped by Sabbath keeping or #Outrage, and to welcome a new culture of love, forgiveness and welcome.

## Sermon

What do the #MeToo campaign, same-sex marriage, and the dispute between Jesus and the Pharisees over Sabbath-keeping have in common? The short answer is that they are all examples of identity politics that bring out the best and the worst in us, but it will probably take me the rest of this sermon to turn that short answer into something meaningful and helpful for us. Bear with me though. I think it is worth it.

Let's begin with Jesus, ... always a good place to start. The story, or two consecutive stories, that we heard tonight sound like a fairly trivial dispute to us. All the disciples do is pluck a few a few ears of grain and pop them into their mouths as they walk past a wheat field. Is that really working on the Sabbath? If you picked a blackberry off a bush beside the footpath as you walked past, would you think you had been working? Probably not. And all Jesus did to heal the man with the withered hand was tell him to stretch out his hand. Work? Hardly?

Well it may seem trivial to us, but at the end of these stories, the Pharisees and the Herodians have seen enough to conclude that they are going to have to get rid of Jesus. We are only at the start of the third chapter of Mark's gospel, and already Jesus is in enough trouble to have religious people plotting his death.

Why is it such a big deal? The answer again is identity politics. These people saw Jesus as undermining the basis of their national identity, and thus threatening the very unity that enabled them to survive.

This is no small issue, then or now. It is harder to imagine for those of us who are comfortably part of the dominant culture, but go and ask Uncle Den how important identity is when the dominant culture has tried to eliminate your culture and identity by outlawing your language, splitting up your families, forcing assimilation, and killing any resisters. Jewish identity had survived attempts at forced assimilation into the Assyrian empire and the Babylonian empire, and now in Jesus's day it was resisting forced assimilation into the Roman empire. Identity was that important.

Sabbath keeping mattered because it was one of the most powerful practices that helped the people maintain their Jewish identity. Jewish identity has proved itself to be the most resilient group identity on earth. No other culture has survived multiple destructions and exiles and then more than a thousand years without their own homeland and still maintained a distinctive visible presence as an identifiable community.

The Jewish people survived, and the two main identity markers that helped them to maintain their distinctive identity were Sabbath-keeping and Kosher food. Some people add circumcision to that list, but since it is a lot less visible and only includes half the population, I'd suggest that its third place is a long way back. But without being so careful about what

they do on the Sabbath and about what they eat, the Jewish community would have long since ceased to exist.

So when Jesus starts playing fast and loose with the accepted rules about what you can and can't do on the Sabbath and what you can and can't eat, the stakes could not have been higher. The very identity of the people of God was at stake.

Now there are several different ways I could go with this sermon from this point. The most obvious and easiest one would be to talk about what Jesus said in response – “The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath” – and discuss how Jesus sees that the purpose of the Sabbath laws is not to separate one group of people off from other people as the special ones, but to help set people free from oppressive powers that force them into overwork and a debilitating 24/7 culture.

I could do that, and there is nothing wrong with that, because it is certainly true and important. But in a way, it would be picking low hanging fruit, or should that be low hanging ears of grain, because I'm not preaching to a people who think rigid Sabbath-keeping is really important. We're on the comfortable side of that debate. But when we hear stories of Jesus challenging the thinking of the religious people, if we don't at some point identify ourselves with those religious people and their perspective and ask how Jesus's words might be challenging us, we are probably missing the most important point.

The question for us is what are we prone to participating in in our world that functions similarly to the Sabbath laws in Jesus's world. If Jesus were to shine the same light on our behaviours and social interactions, which things would come up looking much the same as the Sabbath keeping of the first century Pharisees? And how would we respond to his challenge?

Sabbath keeping and food laws worked to preserve group identity because they promoted conformity within the group to a set of standards that set them apart from others. We, who are the good people, can be identified by these good and God-given behaviours. They set us apart from those other people whose behaviours show them to be falling short of the God-given standards and expectations.

So the challenge being put to Jesus is “Why don't you do the same as us? These things we do are God-given expectations that create our cultural identity. If we all conform to these standards, we maintain our identity as God's people, as good people, as people who are safe from being dragged onto the downhill slide into sin and wickedness and degradation. Why don't you and your followers conform to our community standards?”

In our world today, the community pressure to conform to a set of expectations will not usually be expressed in religious terms. In the churches it may be, but in this country there is no community consensus around even the existence of God, let alone what God might expect of us, and so keeping God out of it is probably one of the community expectations in itself. But there are still very strong social pressures to regulate our behaviour and get us all to conform to particular views of right and wrong. And these standards are still policed in much the same way they were in Jesus's day, by the threat of ostracism and public shaming if you fail to measure up. We've added mass media and social media as the preferred tools, and we've removed the god-language, but otherwise it works much the same.

Perhaps another difference is that there is less of a national consensus about what the standards are, and so we tend to be broken up into factions with conflicting and competing visions of the expected standards. But the pressure to conform is much the same regardless of the political colour, and the tendency to use the threat of exclusion and shaming is prevalent across the spectrums. And the results can be just as suffocating and oppressive as the pharisaic holiness codes of Jesus's day.

I flagged a couple of examples at the outset, so let me now explain.

In the recent same-sex marriage debates, the pressure to conform to a party line was probably more noticeable to us when it took on an anti-gay conservative Christian form, but many of the examples among supporters of marriage equality were equally fierce and oppressive. I have a friend who has been a prominent gay activist since the 1970's, and who as recently as a few years ago was openly opposed to same-sex marriage on the grounds that gay identity rejected all marriage as a heteronormative construct and wanted no part of it. But I saw him more recently as the guest speaker launching a book supporting same-sex marriage, and when I said to him, "but you don't believe in this," he said, "I know. But nowadays if I say I don't believe in same-sex marriage I'm seen as anti-gay."

So what he was experiencing was an intense social pressure to conform to a standardised set of beliefs and behaviours, and if he refused to conform, he would be shunned as an outsider and an enemy. Now not only did that function oppressively on individuals like him, but it robbed the debate of its complexity, of its colour and nuance. The whole thing was increasingly reduced to two entrenched camps, each fiercely policing conformity within the group while hurling abuse at one another over a chasm of hatred and distance. "Why don't you conform to our agreed patterns? You are a threat to our group identity, and such a threat cannot be tolerated."

You can see similar tendencies in some of the current debates about Australian identity and the ever deepening divide between those who want to drape themselves in flags and erect new monuments to Captain Cook and deny that massacres of Aboriginal people ever occurred, and those who are working for proper treaties and constitutional recognitions and land rights. There is no doubt which side of that debate I'm on, but the biggest threat to a fruitful discussion and genuine progress on reconciliation will be if the supporters try to eliminate all diversity of thought and ideas and try to impose a single conformist take on that identity. Most of you probably know the fear that comes with feeling that there are certain questions you are not allowed to ask or doubts that you are not allowed to express, and you're never quite sure what they are, but if you get it wrong, you could be on the outer. It's terrifying and ultimately toxic.

You can see something of the same thing going on in some parts of the #MeToo movement as well. Something which can and should be a really healthy turning point for our society can veer off into frenzied mob behaviour where everything is collapsed into one big over-simplified category. The holiness police in Jesus's day had lost the capacity to tell the difference between casually picking a blackberry and driving your slaves into the ground without even a rest day. When the same mentality takes root in our day, we can end feeling just as outraged over one movie star's bumbled attempts at compliments as we are over a predatory mogul's hundreds of sexual assaults. We've become so anxious about protecting our identity as the good people that our outrage levels have only two settings, off or full-on.

By joining in with the outrage, we seek to reassure both ourselves and everyone else that we are on the right side, that we are part of the right group, that we are fully converted to the current orthodoxy. The group identity is strong, and we are on the right side of the line. But it is actually a lot easier to jump on the outrage bandwagon than it is to do the hard work of understanding ourselves and properly evaluating and reconfiguring the ways that we negotiate the complexities of human relationships.

Putting an end to the oppressive and predatory sexualisation that women have been subjected to in our world could not be more important, and I hope and pray that the #MeToo campaign does prove to be the tipping point, but if too many of us kid ourselves that we've done our bit by stampeding down the well worn path of outrage and identity politics, then instead of liberating one half of the population, it will run the risk of reducing the entire population to isolation and misery. Just like Sabbath-keeping in Jesus's day, what should have been a bold strike for liberation will have mutated into a loathed implement of lifeless conformity.

What does this have to do with the gospel of Jesus? Everything actually. Because as Jesus was pointing out, these systems of identity politics keep us all cowering in fear by generating endless victims, and we all know that we could be next. Being good can't always save us. Some of the victims are Harvey Weinsteins who thoroughly deserve it, but many of them are just like the man with the withered hand, innocent unfortunates who can be written off and left to their fate because preserving our group identity is more precious to us than the likes of them.

Jesus came precisely to save us from such a deathly culture, but in the process of shining the light on it and exposing it for what it was, he had to uncover and face what it will do to anyone who tries to love it back to life and health. No sooner did we see a little glimpse of life in a withered hand restored, but "the Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him."

They knew it was all or nothing. They knew he had seen through their culture of outrage and death. But Jesus didn't just come to trash their culture, but to invite them and us into a new culture, a culture in which our identity is framed by love and mercy and forgiveness and hope. A culture in which the Sabbath sets us all free from both compulsive overwork and involuntary lack of work. A culture in which #MeToo really does set women free from fear and men free from the toxic patterns of failed masculinity. A culture in which the differences between black and white, gay and straight, male and female, are all treated with dignity and respect and no longer turned into battle lines and tests of identity and loyalty.

Many of us have been wounded in one way or another in the identity wars and the outrage campaigns. But we are here tonight, hearing again that invitation to reclaim the truth and hope that lay behind those things and to carry them gently into the new culture of Jesus. We are here tonight, gathered around this table, where we will again hear Jesus invite us to stretch out our withered hands and our withered hearts and be fed with the bread and wine of new hope and life. Let's not cling to our fears and miss the invitation. Let's stretch out our hands and live free.