

# Small Group Guide: True Religion

Based on Mark 2:23-3:6

## Opening Prayer

Begin your time together asking God to soften hearts, open minds, and help your group see the difference between religious performance and authentic relationship with Him.

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## Icebreaker Question

Share a time when following "the rules" felt more important than showing kindness or mercy to someone. How did that situation make you feel?

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## Key Takeaways from the Sermon

### 1. King Jesus has the authority to reveal the heart behind the command.

- Jesus isn't abolishing religious practices at this point; He's restoring them to their intended purpose
- The question isn't whether commands matter, but what matters most in each moment

### 2. God's commands were designed to be a blessing, not a burden.

- Sabbath was made for human flourishing, not human restriction
- Religious practices should restore our dignity and dependence on God

### 3. Religious zeal that forgets godly mercy has missed the plot.

- Pure religion includes looking after the vulnerable and showing compassion
- Rules should never matter more than mercy

### 4. Hard hearts have a way of hiding behind holy hype.

- Rituals are easier than surrender because they're measurable and controllable

- We can become so focused on protecting our religious system that we miss God's heart entirely
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## Discussion Questions

### Understanding the Text

1. **Read Mark 2:23-28.** Why do you think Jesus brought up the story of David eating the bread of presence? What point was He making to the Pharisees?
2. **Read Mark 3:1-6.** What emotions did Jesus experience in the synagogue? Why do you think He felt both anger and grief?
3. The sermon mentioned that the Pharisees created 39 "fences" around the Sabbath command to protect people from breaking it. What are some modern "fences" we create around biblical commands? Are they helpful or harmful?

### Personal Reflection

4. **The sermon stated: "When it comes to any religious observance, if your question is 'where's the line and how close can I get?'—you're going the wrong way."** Have you ever found yourself asking that question? In what areas of your faith?
5. Think about your own spiritual practices (prayer, Bible reading, church attendance, etc.). Are they life-giving blessings or burdensome obligations? What's the difference?
6. **The man with the shriveled hand had to choose between obeying Jesus and staying safe within his religious system.** Have you ever had to make a similar choice? What happened?

### Going Deeper

7. The Pharisees were so concerned about Sabbath-keeping that they missed an opportunity to celebrate healing and restoration. **When have you seen religious correctness get in the way of showing mercy or compassion?** (Be careful not to gossip—focus on patterns, not people.)
8. **Read Exodus 34:6 and James 1:27.** How do these verses help us understand what God truly values? How should this shape our religious practices?
9. The sermon mentioned that "hard hearts rarely look irreligious—they often are the most devoted, the most serious, the most principled." **How can we guard against becoming hard-hearted while still taking our faith seriously?**

### Application

10. **Is there an area of your faith that feels "shriveled"—not working the way it's supposed to?** What would it look like to "open your hand" and let Jesus restore it?

11. **Where might you be valuing ritual over relationship with God?** What's one specific change you could make this week?
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## Practical Applications

### This Week's Challenge:

Choose ONE of the following to practice this week:

#### Option 1: The Mercy Check

- Before making a decision based on a religious rule or principle, pause and ask: "What does mercy look like in this situation?"
- Journal about one instance where this changed your perspective

#### Option 2: Sabbath Restoration

- Intentionally practice Sabbath rest this week—not as a burden, but as a blessing
- Eliminate one productivity-focused activity and replace it with something that helps you delight in God's finished work

#### Option 3: The Fence Audit

- Identify one "fence" you've built around a biblical command (something you do to avoid breaking a rule)
- Ask yourself: Is this fence helping me love God and others better, or is it becoming a burden?
- Pray about whether God wants you to adjust your approach

#### Option 4: Compassion Over Correctness

- Look for one opportunity this week to choose showing mercy over being "right"
  - Share your experience with the group next time
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## Prayer Focus

### Pray for one another in these areas:

- **Softened hearts** - that we wouldn't become hard-hearted in our religious practices

- **Freedom from burden** - for anyone feeling crushed under religious obligation rather than experiencing the blessing of relationship with God
- **Courage to open up** - for those who need to "stretch out their hand" and trust Jesus to restore what feels shriveled in their faith
- **Discernment** - to know when our religious practices are pointing us toward God's heart and when they're getting in the way

## Closing Prayer

*"Father, thank You that Your commands were designed as blessings, not burdens. Help us to see where our religion has become about performance rather than relationship. Give us the courage to open our hands and let You restore what's been shriveled. Show us what true religion looks like—one that values mercy, compassion, and the heart behind Your commands. We trust You to lead us. In Jesus' name, Amen."*

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## For Next Week

- Read Mark 3:7-35 in preparation for next week's discussion
  - Reflect on this question: *What does it mean to be part of Jesus' family?*
  - Come prepared to share how this week's challenge impacted you
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## Additional Resources

### For Further Study:

- Exodus 20:8-11 (The Sabbath command)
- Deuteronomy 5:12-15 (Sabbath as freedom from slavery)
- Matthew 12:1-14 (Parallel account)
- Hosea 6:6 ("I desire mercy, not sacrifice")
- Colossians 2:16-17 (Freedom in Christ regarding religious observances)