

Jesus Messiah: Seeing Christ In The Gospel Of Mark

*“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.”
(Mark 1:15 ESV)*

*And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. And when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said,
“Truly this man was the Son of God!”
(Mark 15:38–39 ESV)*

Lord Even Of The Sabbath

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Mark 2:23-28

Rev. Paul Carter

Introduction:

Good morning. I want to invite you to open your Bibles to Mark 2:23; that’s on page 838 in your pew Bibles. This is the fourth of five consecutive conflict stories in Mark’s Gospel. In these 5 stories the reader is confronted with the unique identity and authority of Jesus Christ. These stories come at you like a sharp sword and they intend to force you to declare. They intend to destroy the option of neutrality. You have to decide at the end of all this whether or not you believe that Jesus is the Son of God. Once again that is Mark’s main point but along the way he says something very interesting about the nature and reality of Sabbath and so we’ll take a look at that as well. Hear now the Word of the Lord, beginning at verse 23.

One Sabbath he was going through the grainfields, and as they made their way, his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. 24 And the Pharisees were saying to him, “Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?” 25 And he said to them, “Have you never read what David did, when he was in need and was hungry, he and those who were with him: 26 how he entered the house of God, in the time of Abiathar the high priest, and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and also gave it to those who were with him?” 27 And he said to them, “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. 28 So the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath.” (Mark 2:23–28 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord – thanks be to God.

As I mentioned the first question we should always be asking when we read these conflict stories in Mark’s Gospel is this:

What Does This Story Say About The Identity And Authority Of Jesus?

I think there is really just one additional point that Mark is making here, but it's a big one. I think what he is saying is that:

1. **Jesus has the authority to interpret and adjust the law**

Now we're not guessing here; that is the conclusion that Jesus provides to this entire narrative. At the end of the story Jesus gives us the appropriate conclusion:

So the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath. (Mark 2:28 ESV)

That's a remarkable claim! Jesus says in this story, "I've got the authority to interpret the law and I've got the authority even to alter the law" and then to prove that he puts his hands on the biggest commandment of them all. The 4th commandment is the longest of the 10 commandments and it was arguably the most central of the commandments to Jewish life and identity.

James Edwards remarks that:

Two observances above all defined Jews and set them apart from the nations: circumcision and the Sabbath¹

To be a Jew in Jesus' day was to be circumcised – if you were a male – and it was to observe the Sabbath and Jesus was always messing with these sacred identity markers – the Sabbath in particular. He was always touching things and rearranging things as if the whole house belonged to him because I think that is exactly what he's saying. I'm the Lord of the House – I'm the giver of the law – I am God himself. That seems to be what Jesus is saying here and the Jews don't miss it.

Now it wasn't that Jesus didn't agree with the Sabbath – if we are understanding what Jesus is saying here he is saying that the Jews have misunderstood what the Sabbath was supposed to be about.

¹James R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, Pillar New Testament Commentary. Accordance electronic ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 93.

In Jesus' day Jewish Sabbath observance had become all about what people must not do. The Pharisees had made a list of 39 things people couldn't do, it was a long list and it was very specific. It said:

The generative categories of acts of labour prohibited on the Sabbath are forty less one: he who sows, ploughs, reaps, binds sheaves, threshes, winnows, selects (fit from unfit produce or crops), grinds, sifts, kneads, bakes, he who shears wool, washes it, beats it, dyes it, spins, weaves, makes two loops, weaves two threads, separates two threads, ties, unties, sews two stitches, tears in order to sew two stitches, he who traps a deer, slaughters it, flays it, salts it, cures its hide, scrapes it, and cuts it up, he who writes two letters, erases two letters in order to write two letters, he who builds, tears down, he who puts out a fire, kindles a fire, he who hits with a hammer, he who transports an object from one domain to another – lo these are the forty generative acts of labour less one. (Shabbat 7:2)

I love what R.T. France says about this. He says:

“When the negative element overwhelms the positive, as it has done repeatedly in the observance of the Christian Sunday as well as of the Jewish Sabbath, something important has been lost”.²

Isn't that good? The Pharisees had lost the Sabbath in their zeal for protecting the Sabbath. They had made the Sabbath all about what you cannot do whereas in the Bible the emphasis is actually more on what you ought to do. The full text of the 4th commandment reads as follows:

“Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. 9 Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, 10 but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates. 11 For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.” (Exodus 20:8–11 ESV)

The key elements in this command seem to be first of all, ‘to remember’ – that’s a positive thing. The second thing we are supposed to do is “keep it holy” or perhaps better “set it apart”. Reserve the day – mark it out. Keep it separate. And on that day do no work – that’s a minor note but they made it the major note. In the actual commandment there is a 2-1 ratio of positive to negative – so where do you get your list of 39 things you cannot do?

You don't – that's not what it's about and therefore Jesus refuses to play their little game. He's not going to debate their 39 points, in fact, he flips the whole conversation on its ear and he says:

² R.T. France, *The Gospel Of Mark*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2002), 147.

“The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. (Mark 2:27 ESV)

Wow! That’s a game changing observation. Jesus says that the Sabbath is not a religious duty it is a Divine gift.

You see it turns out the Pharisees weren’t keeping the Sabbath they were changing the Sabbath; they were ruining the Sabbath. So Jesus wasn’t breaking the Sabbath he was RESCUING the Sabbath from their misunderstanding of Holy Scripture. Jesus sees right to the heart of the matter. Jesus understands the divine intention of the law. The law was FOR HUMAN flourishing. The Pharisees should have remember that because it is in the Bible.

You shall therefore keep my statutes and my rules; if a person does them, he shall live by them: I am the Lord. (Leviticus 18:5 ESV)

So the law is rooted in the character of God – that’s why he says at the end: I am the Lord! The law is rooted in who I am and what I want for human beings. And I want is for people to live. The law is an expression of my desire for human flourishing. Jesus understood that and he says that DAVID understood that.

He tells a story about David and how David understood that the ritual laws could be overturned in cases of human need. David ate the bread that was normally reserved for the priests and he gave some to his companions. Therefore Jesus is saying that there is Scriptural precedent for what he has done in allowing his disciples to pluck the heads of grain on the Sabbath. Just like David he is on an urgent mission and just like David his companions were very hungry. Therefore just like David Jesus has given them permission to break the ceremonial law.

Now if Jesus had ended there this story probably wouldn’t be in the Bible. Up until this point all this story proves is that Jesus is an inspired and insightful Biblical teacher. But it doesn’t end here – Jesus doesn’t leave it here. He goes one GIANT STEP FURTHER. He says in verse 28:

So the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath. (Mark 2:28 ESV)

That is the line that set the Pharisees on fire. Its one thing to say: “There is Scriptural warrant for what I’m doing”, its another to say “And even if there wasn’t I could write myself some new

Scripture”. Okay, woah! That’s a whole new thing and that, actually is what got Jesus killed.

This is what drove the religious leaders in Jesus day over the edge. John brings that out even more explicitly. In John 5 John says:

this was why the Jews were persecuting Jesus, because he was doing these things on the Sabbath. 17 But Jesus answered them, “My Father is working until now, and I am working.”
18 This was why the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him, because not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God. (John 5:16–18 ESV)

The Jews were very perceptive here, they understood that Jesus was saying: “I know what was in the mind of God when this law was spoken into being and I have the authority to adjust this law and to apply it as I see fit to human life and activity.” There is only one person who could say something like that and the Jews understood very well who that was. One commentator put it this way, he said:

Once again Jesus puts himself squarely in the place of God.³

How do I know the things I know? Why do I claim to have the authority I have? Jesus asks. Because I am God. I’m God. I wrote the commandments and I know what they mean and I know how they should be applied.

That’s what Jesus is saying in this story and it is intended to be controversial. It is intended to force you to decide.

Now that’s the main point in the story. That’s the main point in all of these stories. Mark is proving his thesis that Jesus is the Son of God. He was with God in the beginning and he WAS GOD in the beginning and he has come to earth to rule wisely and savingly over the world of men. That’s the main point but along the way Jesus says something very interesting about the nature and the origin of the Sabbath. He says that the Sabbath is FOR MAN. That it is a gift. That it is not a religious duty we perform to please God – rather it is something God gave to help us! Now that’s a game changing revelation. That’s a truth we lost that Jesus brings back so we want to be careful not to miss it. The Sabbath is good for human beings! Sacred rest contributes to

³James R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, Pillar New Testament Commentary. Accordance electronic ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 97.

human flourishing – let’s spend a minute or two at least thinking about how that works. How is the Sabbath helpful?

How Does The Sabbath Contribute To The Goal Of Human Flourishing?

Well first of all and perhaps most obviously:

1. The Sabbath reminds us that work is not ultimate

Human beings were created to work. Work precedes the fall in the Biblical narrative so work is good but its not ultimate. Our relationship with God is more important than our work – that is what the Sabbath reminds us of most forcefully – and we need that reminder. Human beings incline towards idolatry. Idolatry is when we make a good thing a God thing. Idolatry is when we find our identity and worth in something other than God. Therefore Sabbath is an idol check.

The Sabbath asks you to put your work to the side so you can put God in the centre – and if you can’t do that then you’ve got an idol problem.

The Bible has a very interesting view on work. Its not a simple “good” or “bad” – its nuanced. The Bible says that people ought to work, in fact the Bible says:

If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat. (2 Thessalonians 3:10 ESV)

The Bible does not have a lot of room for lazy people – so work is good, but its not ultimate. Jesus said that again and again. In John 6 he said:

Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you. (John 6:27 ESV)

Right? Don’t forget that there is life after death and your work cannot help you out with that. For that you need to be in right relationship with me. So leave room for that in your busy schedule. That’s the Big Rock right there and Sabbath reminds us of that. It reminds us of ultimate things.

The second way I think Sabbath is very helpful is that it reminds us – it forces us really to trust in

God.

2. The Sabbath reminds us to trust in God

Human beings like to think of ourselves as self made individuals. We like to think that we have what we have because we are smarter or harder working or more deserving than other people. Sabbath reminds us that we have what we have because God made us who we are. We are fundamentally receivers – not workers. The Bible says that again and again and again:

You shall remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth (Deuteronomy 8:18 ESV)

That's pretty straightforward isn't it? The Bible says, 'who do you think you are? Do you think you made you smart? Or handy? Or wise? Or energetic? Or charismatic? Or creative? I made you that way because I had particular work in mind for you. The Apostle Paul says this too. He says:

For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life. (Ephesians 2:10 NRSV)

Do you see that? God made us who we are so that we could do what we do. So chill out. God knew that you would need a day off. Your personal enterprise isn't going to fall apart if you shut it down 1 day in 7. Your kids aren't going to starve if you close the store or shut down the business for a day of rest and worship – God factored that in. He had your worked planned out before you even knew your own name. He's the CEO of your business. He's in charge. And he's telling you to take a day off and obeying God is never bad for business.

There are so many people in our church who can testify to that very thing. People who have closed their business on Sunday or Real Estate agents who don't show houses on Sunday – and who still go on to win award after award after award and who set sales records that head offices cannot understand. I'm not saying that will happen, that you will be the top grossing store or the top selling agent - I'm just saying that God is no man's debtor and he has been proved as faithful and reliable and generous by many people in our congregation.

Now this applies obviously, only to people who control their own schedule. The working poor don't get to give themselves a day off – they get told when to take a day off. But the Sabbath is a

gift to these people as well – and to a culture as a whole if they maintain a Sabbath principle. That’s another way the Sabbath can be a blessing -

3. The Sabbath reminds us of our common humanity

Let me take you back to the original wording of the 4th commandment:

“Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy.... On it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, **your male servant, or your female servant** (Exodus 20:8–10 ESV)

So the Sabbath intends to remind us of our common humanity. Everybody gets a rest on the Sabbath day. Rich people and poor people. The Bible explicitly says: “Don’t give yourself a Sabbath at the expense of the working poor!”

Now, obviously the full benefit of this can only be extended when Christians have critical mass in a culture. In the Old Testament the covenant community existed within the nation of Israel whereas now in the New Testament the covenant community exists within countries and cultures all over the world but where the covenant community has achieved critical mass they have generally instituted some sort of common pause day and that has undeniably contributed to the social welfare of the poor. We began to lose that in our culture back in the 1980’s but I think there is still a way for us to extend and experience this benefit in a reduced way even today.

For one thing Christian business owners can close their doors on Sunday and give their employees the option of resting and worship with their families. The absence of a common pause day is a burden and hardship on the families of the working poor. Christian business owners can position themselves as faith and family friendly employers. That would be a good thing. It would also be a good thing if we did our best to avoid going en masse to Swiss Chalet right after church. Because that adds to the burden of the working poor single mother who can’t go to church on Sunday because she has to stay back and make your sandwich. Now is that going to change things? Is that the solution? No, but at least then we won’t be part of the problem and when you are a minority in a culture sometimes, that’s as good as it gets.

Now, let me say one more thing about this point before we move on. Let’s make sure that there

are no social or economic divisions within the church. I love that in our church there are several bosses and employees sitting side by side – that is weird! That doesn't happen in other places but it happens here and it should happen here. The Sabbath should be the one day of the week when all of those distinctions disappear under the power of the Gospel. They'll still be there on Monday but they remind us that they won't be there in eternity and that's a good thing. The Sabbath reminds us of our common humanity.

Then fourthly and lastly I think the Sabbath is helpful because it reminds us of the goodness of God.

3. The Sabbath reminds us of the goodness of God

This is my favourite. Let's go back to what Moses said in his sermon on the law. He said:

You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. **Therefore** the Lord your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day. (Deuteronomy 5:15 ESV)

So Moses says the focus of your sacred rest is remembering the God of your salvation. Isn't that neat? Now Moses is remember the redemption of God's people from physical slavery in Egypt – transposing that into a New Testament key we would understand that the focus of our Sabbath ought to be reflection upon the redemption that we have in Christ! That should be the centre piece of our Sunday experience! We should remember who we were apart from the grace of God and we should remember what God did in Christ to secure our salvation. We should hear about that and we should see that. That should be the focus of the preaching and that should be the focus of the sacraments. Jesus says in the words of institution for the Lord's Supper:

"This is my body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." 25 In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." (1 Corinthians 11:24–25 ESV)

You see? That's what Sunday is about – that's the focus of our sacred rest. In our preaching, in our singing, in our sacraments we REMEMBER the person and the work of our Lord. When you see HIS WORK it changes how we do your work. When you see his life it changes how you live

your life. That's why SACRED REST MATTERS – because the life and death of Jesus, changes the world.

Challenge:

Now I want to leave you with a bit of a challenge. I want to challenge us to improve how we “do the Sabbath”. The Sabbath is a gift but I think its potential is under realized in our current culture. I will go one further and say that the principle of Sabbath – of sacred rest – will be more important in the next generation than perhaps in any generation in living memory. Our culture is fast becoming an unthinking, devolving, inhumane culture. The people in our culture WORK and DISTRACT – they do not rest. They have no category and no capacity for what we are talking about. They work, work, work – work is a god in our culture. It is a source of identity, security and worth – and then they shut it down and they seek distraction. They watch TV. They go on Facebook – that is NOT REST. That is mindless distraction. That is why there is so little thought in our culture – that is why there is so little humanity in our culture. Thought, empathy, mercy and humanity require REST AND REFLECTION so sacred rest might very well be a witness and a beacon to the lost and dying people of our world. I think SABBATH is going to be MORE IMPORTANT not less important in the generation to come, so I want to do it better and towards that end I want to offer this brief little challenge to you by way of close. Just three little things.

1. Set apart the whole day

Don't turn the principle of Sabbath into 2 hours for corporate worship. Sabbath is more than church. Church is the catalyst for your Sabbath not the sum total of it. Reserve the whole day.

2. Prioritize corporate worship

Sabbath is more than church but it is not less than church. Prioritize being here. Sabbath is relational and it has a content component. It gives you things to think about for the rest of the day. It gives you people to talk to for the rest of the day. Corporate worship should launch you into the rest of your Sabbath – therefore don't neglect it.

3. Reduce distractions and mind numbing activities

Now you will notice that I am using the 2-1 positive to negative formula that I see in the wording of the 4th commandment. I've given you two positive things to do and just one negative thing to stop doing but this one negative thing – if we stop or reduce how much of it we do – can make a big difference. So here is my challenge. I'm not saying you can't have a nap or fall asleep with the baseball game on in the background – there can be some sleep and some rest – but after your 90 minute nap – wake up and turn off those mind numbing distractions. Take a 12 hour Netflix fast and a 12 hour social media fast on the Lord's Day. I think that could literally change the game. That will open brain space for thought, for reflection, for conversation and for growth in our common humanity. This is where the change will happen. In your sacred rest – in your worship, reflection and repentance. This will be the place where your humanity will be restored, replenished and renewed.

The Sabbath is a gift. We need it. I know it because this is the Word of the Lord.