

Mark 2:23 – 3:6

Tonight we will be looking at the reliability of Scripture, the meaning of the Sabbath, and the authority of Jesus in relation to the Law. I will try to explain all of the various issues with this passage, but will not become so bogged down in the details that we miss the clear point of the passage, that Jesus Christ is the Lord of the Sabbath.

While it has not been a point of emphasis, we notice that the religious leaders have begun to lose patience with Jesus. In Mark 2:6-7 they internally question Jesus' statement to the paralytic, "*Your sins are forgiven*" Then in the next section, they question Jesus eating with the "sinners." And following this, Mark tells of how the Pharisees questioned why Jesus did not fast.

We notice though that the question of the Sabbath receives two sections. This is because the Sabbath is an important part of the identity of the Jewish nation. While they certainly had a number of distinctives, the two most important aspects of Jewish identity were Sabbath observance and circumcision. During the time of the Jewish revolution in around 100 BC the Jews were willing to die rather than desecrate the Sabbath. And after the Jews were able to overthrow their oppressors, they were intent on executing anyone that violated its observance.

And Exodus 31:14 reads, "*You shall keep the Sabbath, because it is holy for you. Everyone who profanes it shall be put to death. Whoever does any work on it, that soul shall be cut off from among his people. Six days shall work be done, but the seventh day is Sabbath of solemn rest, holy to the Lord. Whoever does any work on the Sabbath day shall be put to death.*" Because of this strict observance of the Sabbath, the

religious leaders made a point to find out what they could and could not do.

The Sabbath is therefore incredibly important to Israel, and this is exactly why the actions of the disciples are questioned. Our presuppositions in coming to this text assume that the Pharisees are wrong and Jesus is right, but in order to appreciate WHY Jesus is right, understanding how the Pharisees were wrong can show how we can be like them, and ways that we can avoid succumbing to their attitudes.

Place yourself in the fields in Capernaum. You are resting on the Sabbath like all your friends and family. Then all of a sudden you see these men walking through the fields, picking heads of grain. You would recognize that Deuteronomy 23:25 allows them, *“to pluck the ears with your hand, but not put a sickle to your neighbors standing grain”*

But then you would think of the long list of Rabbinic rules which indicated what you could and could not do (and how much you could do it). And you would think that Jesus was breaking the Law.

But Jesus appeals to a time when the Pharisees rules did not rigidly apply. For Jesus replies, *“Have you never read what David did, when he was in need and was hungry, he and those who were with him: 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?”*

In order to properly understand Jesus response, we need to deal with some of the apparently blatant problems in the text. So we will be looking at the reign of Abiathar, and whether or not Jesus is teaching a

type of situation ethics, where your moral situation can override the Law.

The account that Jesus describes can be found in 1 Samuel 21:1-6. In it, we read that David came to Ahimelech, and Ahimelech trembles at David coming to him alone. David reassures Ahimelech that he has been sent on a message by the king but cannot say why he has been sent there, but that his men are hungry and need food. And the only bread that was available to the priests was the consecrated bread; Ahimelech gave David and his men the bread of the Presence so that they could eat. But this act is prohibited in the Law in Leviticus 24:4-9 & Exodus 25:30.

But if you have noticed, Ahimelech is the one that gives David the bread, NOT Abiathar. Now, Abiathar was Ahimelech's son and was the high priest after Ahimelech, but he was not the high priest when David's men came to Nob to receive bread. There is every indication that he was present based on the events that follow in Samuel 22, but is there a contradiction?

Upon closer look, this contradiction is not as difficult as one may think. Mark is writing, "In the time that Abiathar was alive, who was the high priest, these things happened." This reading is not unnatural or forced, and it would make fine sense of what Mark is saying. It is similar to saying that King David killed Goliath. David was not King at the time he killed Goliath, but it is still appropriate to say that King David killed Goliath because he was a King after this incident.

But what does Jesus response mean? Is Jesus advocating that he is simply allowed to break rules? Wouldn't this lead to antinomianism, or an attitude against the use of the law, which would be inconsistent with

Jesus' statement that he did not come to destroy the Law but to fulfill it?

Both Jesus and David appear to violate what God had prescribed in Scripture. But the Pharisees recognize that as the Anointed One of God, David possessed certain privileges and rights. David was allowed to eat of the bread because he helped bring the kingdom of God to Israel. Saul was pursuing David, and in order for David to flee, he needed food. The bread of the Presence was used to nourish the Levites, those people serving the worship of God. Likewise, David was the servant of God and it was natural that he was able to eat the food to be strengthened to do God's work. So for the good of Israel, David is allowed to partake of the bread of Presence on the Sabbath.

And this is the way that Jesus argues that it is permissible for him and his disciples to eat as they walked on the Sabbath. While David was coming to establish his Kingdom, Christ was coming to restore the kingdom of David and fulfill the Old Testament prophecies. And as Hebrews tells us, Jesus was more holy or righteous than the priests, which qualified him and his followers to pluck grain as they walked on the Sabbath. The one greater than David has come, as a result, it is appropriate for those coming with the King to pluck grain on the Sabbath.

Jesus concludes then, *"The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath."*

Jesus argument continues, for the way that the Pharisees viewed the Sabbath, it was a burden. Jesus suggested that they viewed the Sabbath as something that man was created for. But Jesus argues that this was never the intent of the Sabbath. The Sabbath was created to

be a blessing to man. While it was instituted by God to honor him, it was also for the enjoyment of man.

And at this point in the dialogue, the Pharisees would have known exactly the kind of accusation that Jesus was making against them.

1 Samuel 21:7(the same section that Jesus is quoting from) tells us that there was a man named Doeg the Edomite who witnessed Ahimelech giving the bread to David. And instead of recognizing the redemptive significance of the Son of God being placed on the throne, Doeg tells Saul about Ahimelech's actions. Saul responds by having Doeg slaughter all of Ahimelech's family, 85 in all.

Abiathar is able to escape however and returns to David to serve as his priest, and eventually becomes high priest for Israel. But Jesus was identifying the Pharisees with Saul and Doeg the Edomite. They had missed the fact that God was working to bless his people, and in their selfishness they rejected David's actions. In the same way, if the Pharisees did not recognize Jesus as the one from God, they would be turning their backs on God like Saul and Doeg.

In light of verses 23-26 Jesus declares to be Lord of the Sabbath, vindicating his disciples and showing that his ministry and mission were above David's, and rejection of Jesus' claim as the Son of God was equal to the rebellion of Saul and Doeg. Therefore, the Sabbath is good and Holy but in order to truly observe it, Christ must be recognized as Lord of the Sabbath.

It is not clear how the sequence unfolded, but sometime shortly after this exchange, Jesus and his disciples go to the synagogue again. And the religious leaders were licking their chops at the opportunity to

make Jesus out to be a law breaker. And sure enough, an opportunity arises. As they enter the synagogue, a man was there who had a withered hand.

Concerning healing on the Sabbath, the Jews were allowed to do medical work but only if the persons life was in immediate danger. If the work could be put off till Sunday, then you had to wait to heal.

So the Pharisees sense a golden opportunity to catch Jesus. Jesus, understanding the situation, and seeing an opportunity for ministry, calls the man to stand forth or literally in the Greek, to come to the middle of the assembly. Jesus is trying to draw attention to his ministry and his authority as the son of man, and demonstrate the folly of the religious establishment.

After calling the man Jesus says, *“Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to kill?”*

When you are asked a question like this, there is really no good answer. For obviously the Jews believed that it was permissible to do good on the Sabbath and to do harm or evil on any given day would be a bad thing. But the one thing that the Pharisees would have objected to was that this specific issue was not a matter of life or death. Post-poning it until Sunday would have made more sense given the common interpretation of the Sabbath.

But Jesus point is that if the Sabbath is a day to do good, then why would you not help your neighbor on that day? What this verse establishes is that there are very few actions that can be ruled out altogether. Certainly, it leaves no scope for the rabbinic custom of building a fence around the Sabbath (France 150).

The primary rule that Jesus has instituted is one of service to men and God on the Sabbath. It should not be seen as a time to avoid all work whatsoever. The Sabbath is not instituted to be followed rigidly with what you can and cannot do. Rather, because Christ is Lord of the Sabbath, a better principle rules the Sabbath.

The Sabbath should be a time of rest. It should be a day of meeting with our brother's sisters, for we see that Jesus goes to the synagogue to fellowship with the people. But this does not mean that we are so focused on observing the Law that we miss the point for which the Law was given.

The Sabbath was instituted for the people of God to rest from their everyday work and use the Sabbath in service and devotion to God. The Pharisees, in their zeal to fulfill the Law, actually perverted the actual intent however and did not focus on how to serve God. They were too intent on fulfilling the letter of the Law and not concerned with fulfilling the Spirit as well.

And because of this blindness to what the Sabbath was actually about, we see that Jesus is angry with their disbelief in his authority. Jesus is righteously upset at how deceived these men and women are. And he was grieved at how hard their hearts were. Seeking righteousness based in their own law keeping, these people had missed the liberating effect of the Gospel. And the tragic part is, in their self-righteous attitudes, they did not even understand how to keep the Sabbath or what it meant.

When we see others blindness and stubbornness to the Gospel, it is natural to be angry. But this anger is always accompanied by a heartfelt heart-ache that someone is blinded to the Gospel.

And we see tenderness in Jesus righteous anger by healing the injured man despite the Pharisees stubborn disbelief. He tells the man to stretch out his hand, and on Jesus word, the man is healed. Just like the previous miracle accounts, Jesus sees this man in need and heals him.

Jesus is doing good and giving life in this account. But Mark recounts, *“The Pharisees went out and immediately held counsel with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him.”*

It should be noticed that while Jesus is healing a man on the Sabbath, the religious leaders are plotting on murder, which completely contradicts what Jesus said the Sabbath was for in verse 5.

It is not completely clear who the Herodians were, but there is a good chance that they were a religious group that who used to have the approval of the Roman government. They would not have had as much authority at the Pharisees at this point, but they still exerted some political and religious influence. Regardless of their identity, it is clear that the religious leaders wanted Jesus out of the picture. For Jesus had assaulted the meaning of the Sabbath, which was the core of Jewish identity. He was a religious rebel that had to be put down for the good of Israel. If this man led Israel astray, they would not enter into the Promised Land, but if they silenced him, they would be protecting the kingdom of Israel.

But as we've seen throughout the past few sections of Mark, every time the Pharisees attempt to bring the kingdom in on their own effort, Jesus confronts them and shows them that the only way that the Kingdom will come is through Christ. But when the religious leaders are

focused on how they justify themselves, the Gospel becomes incredibly offensive, even to the point where they are willing to kill him.

So if the way the Pharisees kept the Sabbath was against the Gospel; How, Why and When should the Sabbath be observed?

First, as Christians, we celebrate the Sabbath on the first day of the week (Sunday) as the Church has done from the time of the Apostles. Worship on the Lord's Day reflects the fact that this day in part reflects the celebration of the new creation.

Being God's Covenant people, the Ten Commandments still apply to us, and we should keep the Fourth Commandment. There is no indication that it has been done away with, and it would go against Scripture and creation if it was.

But if we celebrate the Sabbath on Sunday now, how should we observe the day? Is Sunday just like every other day?

The answer to that question is, No! Sunday is a day of rest, it is the Christian Sabbath and it is a time for the worship and service of God. But with this being said, we should not become so rigid with restrictions and prohibitions that we miss the point that the Sabbath is for our benefit!

On the Sabbath you should seek to serve your neighbors and brothers and sisters. You should take a rest from your work. You should stop busying yourself with all of the other "important" things going on and spend time worshipping God.

In a convenient effort to avoid being legalistic, you may be tempted to say that you can do whatever you want! You may believe this is what Jesus is saying the Sabbath is for, whatever you desire to do.

But this is not Jesus message at all. Instead, we should view the Sabbath in light of the Gospel. The Gospel frees us to live unto Christ. Through the power of Christ in us we can observe the Sabbath knowing that Jesus is the Lord of the Sabbath.

We no longer are concerned specifically about what actions we can or cannot do on the Sabbath, but we seek to minister the Gospel to our families and communities. It is a message of self-sacrifice and God given relaxation. We stop working so that we can reflect on the glories of God, and work to do good on the Sabbath.

Help those under your authority to rest and worship God. If you are a business owner, do not force your employees to work on Sunday. If you are a parent, do not save Sunday as the day to do all the work around the house. This is not an excuse for laziness (as it is always so tempting to use), but it underscores the point of the Sabbath. Give the rest of God to others and dwell on the blessings that you have in God.

Therefore, believe in the Gospel and do not trust in your own attempts to justify yourself before God. View the Sabbath as a beautiful picture of our justification before God. God grants us rest as His children. We do not earn our rest, but God graciously gives it to us. Therefore, rest in Christ's sacrifice and recognize that it is in Him that we will enter into the rest of God.