

Lord of the Sabbath **Mark 2:23-3:12**

Last week we looked at 3 of 5 controversies between Jesus and the religious leaders. Today we will look at the final 2, both of which focus on the Sabbath.

At the conclusion of these conflicts, a group of people wants to kill Jesus (3:6).

If we were to liken Jesus' ministry to an activity, the picture of a **nice quite stroll on the beach** wouldn't be an appropriate analogy; his ministry was more like a **hockey match, like boxing, like a war....**

Jesus' whole life was filled with drama because light was clashing with darkness.

Think about his life:

- Controversy before he was born – re his virgin birth (Matt 2:18ff)
- Controversy at his birth– Herod wants to kill him (Matt 2:13ff)
- Controversy after his birth - Simeon predicts that his birth means the rise and fall of many in Israel (Lk 2:34ff)
- Now, as we follow him to the cross (the culmination of conflict), we find controversy in his ministry...

Mark 2:23-3:6

At first glance, you may be tempted to think two things about these stories:

(1) That these passages are irrelevant for modern man.

We have a story about some guys walking through a field, plucking grain, and then a man with a withered hand in a synagogue. Maybe you're thinking, **"I came on the wrong Sunday."** Or, **"This is so boring and unimportant. I could care less about grain in a field, or about a man's hand."**

(2) That these Pharisees really overacted!

Jesus heals a guy's hand and you want to kill him? That seems a bit much. "Hey what did you do today?" "I healed a guy." "Let's kill him."

I can see why you would think these things, but you need to realize a few things....

(1) What's at stake here is actually a matter of eternal importance.

The larger issue here is really about how one may be right before a holy God.

- **In the previous three disputes, Jesus reveals himself as the Savior who authoritatively and graciously forgives sinners. That's how we're made right with God. It's not by obeying religious traditions.**
- **The gospel is: I am accepted by repentance and faith in Christ, therefore I obey. It's not, "If I obey the religious rules, then God will accept me."**
- **Versions of this kind of belief appear in all sorts of religions.**
- **Outside of Christianity, what you have are religions centering on human achievement, but the gospel is a religion of divine accomplishment.**
- **On what basis can one be right before God? I can hardly think of a more important question.**
 - **All around the world people are trying to merit God's favor by doing religious deeds – from India to Indiana.**
 - **Philippians 3 – "Pharisees of Pharisees" – all rubbish; "found in him, not having a righteousness of my own..."**

(2) Understand the importance about the Sabbath, and the Pharisees religious tradition for practicing it.

- 1. The Sabbath extended from sunset on Friday until sunset on Saturday.**
- 2. Jews abstained from labor since God himself had rested on the seventh day of creation (Ex 20:8–11; Deut 5).**
- 3. The Sabbath was one of the distinguishing marks of Judaism (along with circumcision).**
- 4. The Pharisees made a bunch of rules on how to practice it.**
- 5. While not dishonoring the Sabbath, Jesus refuses to submit to their rules and that enrages the crowd.**
- 6. They view him as a law-breaker.**

7. To violate the Sabbath or to blaspheme (previous charge) meant death.
8. (Ex 31:14)

How Should Christians Understand the Sabbath?

This is a big subject, and I can't get into the whole argument (for a good book read *Perspectives: Four Views on the Sabbath* edited by Christopher Donato, I really like Blomberg's chapter). **Let me briefly summarize my view.**

I asked a theologian this week, **"What is your view on the Sabbath, and he said, "I'm for it."** Amen. Me too. Especially the eternal Sabbath!

My own position: I don't call Sunday is the "Christian Sabbath" as some call it (see Westminster Confession).

- It wasn't until the 8th century that you see someone identifying Sunday as such (Blomberg, 312). Not in the church fathers.
- Christians worshiped on Sunday, yes, as a time to celebrate Jesus' resurrection and the dawning of a new creation, but **they didn't perceive this to be a new Sabbath.**
- It was something different.
- There's a difference in a day involving assembling to worship the Risen Messiah, and a day focused on ceasing from labor (the original Sabbath command wasn't about worship).

Some people are slavish about Sunday, and I think that's unwarranted.

- I part ways with a lot of Presbyterian and Reformed brothers, on this point.
- **The Sabbath is fulfilled in Christ (like Circumcision).**
 - **The Jews were distinguished by Sabbath keeping and circumcision, we're distinguished by faith in Christ and a becoming a new creation (Gal 6:15)**
 - **We have something better than a day; we have rest in Christ – everyday.**
- **In Christ, we have come to our final resting place, and as we continue to rest in him, in this life, we will one-day experience the ultimate rest to come – a rest that the book of Hebrews speaks much about.**
- In **Colossians 2:16-17 and Gal 4:10-11**, Paul seems to lay aside all the Sabbath ceremonies, as shadows of the substance.

¹⁶ Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. ¹⁷ These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ. (Col 2:16-17)

- **In Him, we have spiritual rest.**
- **And we are awaiting an eternal Sabbath, which will be given to those who have trusted in Christ.** “So then, there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God” (Heb 4:9)

Having said that, I do believe in the **principle of rest**, which is woven into the fabric of creation.

- **But there's no law for us insisting that we rest on Saturday or Sunday.**
- **You may choose to rest on another day of the week (this was also Luther's view).**
- Today, **you may choose to rest and worship on the same day.** That's fine.
- But of us don't consider Sunday a day of rest; it's a day of work!!!
- **Come see me on Monday, and you will see if Sunday is a day of rest!**
- I considered **just putting my whole self in the coffee roaster at back alley last Monday!** So I must find another day to rest.
- The staff elders turn off Voxer on Friday evening to Sat evening...

So you follow me?

- Rest is biblical and wise! Don't forsake it! **If you do, you will take an involuntary Sabbath!**
- Worshipping with the church is biblical! Don't neglect it.
- But **Sunday is not the Sabbath Day in a strict sense.**
- **You are more than welcome to do both on Sunday – rest and worship.**
- **But be careful putting down laws on others!**
- To Sabbath means to rest – but there's freedom on **when and how** you rest (some types of rest for some people might look like work to others).
- What you **don't** have freedom to do is to neglect worshiping with God's people.

For the Pharisees, the issue had to do with how they were practicing the Sabbath.

- They had put a bunch of rules around it.

- They missed **the intent of the Sabbath** (as a time of renewal and refreshment), and **made it a day of slavish fear, instead of rest.**
- Jesus didn't abide by their oral tradition.
- He not only taught them a thing or two about the Sabbath, but laid the foundation for systemic change in their understanding of it, that is, that the Sabbath was pointing to Himself.

So here's what I want to do. Let's consider the contrast between life in Christ (that is, the life of a genuine follower of Jesus), and the life of a legalist (that is, the dead religion of the Pharisees).

4 Lessons

#1: Don't equate religious rules/tradition with God's Word (2:23-26)

The Pharisees are like the religious referees looking to **throw a flag on Jesus...**

But upon further review, they will need to pick the flag up.

A. The Problem (23-24)

The problem is that **work** wasn't defined specific enough.

- Mishnah – collection of tradition of Rabbis... **listed 39 types of work that profane the Sabbath (m. Shab. 7:2).**
- Edwards notes, **"The rabbis endeavored to offer a rule, or at least a precedent, for every conceivable Sabbath question."** More rules surrounded the Sabbath than any other commandment.
- Cooper explains the inner conflict of the Pharisees: **"If I do not go to work on the Sabbath, is that enough? But what about working around the house? Okay, no house work. No preparing meals because, as any cook can tell you, preparing a meal is work. Untying a sash is not work because it is relaxing something. Tying something, however, is work and is forbidden. What about walking? That can certainly involve work. So do I not walk at all? Or when does walking become work? How far can I travel and have it not be considered work? The Sabbath laws, and the purity laws, encompassed every moment of life. If you were a good Pharisee, there was not a moment of your life that you did not question whether what you were doing was violating either the Sabbath or the laws of purity."**
- **What an dreadful way to live!**

- As a result, many were missing the forest for the trees.
- The Pharisees deemed the disciples guilty for picking a bit of grain (reaping). **Deut 23:25** said that it was okay to take a bit of standing grain, but you couldn't use a sickle to it.
- **But this is the Sabbath, and the Pharisees considered this working on the Sabbath, and as a result the disciples were in hot water.**
- Again, what's the point of the Sabbath? – rest, renewal.
- **Should they starve in the name of the oral tradition?!**
- Keep the heart of the law in mind in the next story when Jesus restores a man's hand on the Sabbath.

John MacArthur summarizes the real problem:

“Actually the Pharisees' charge was itself sinful since they were holding their tradition on a par with God's Word.” (MacArthur)

Revelation 21:18-19 – A good rule of thumb (though it's written about the book of Revelation specifically, it's a good reminder for believers about issue of faith and practice). Paraphrase: “Don't add to or take away from the Bible.” The Pharisees did this. And as a result they enslaved people.

If you add to the Bible, you enslave people.

B. Jesus' Response: Haven't you guys read the Bible? (25-26)

The first thing Jesus does is provide **a rabbinic answer**, appealing to Scripture, rather than his more common custom, appealing to his identity and mission (which he will do in a bit)

I love how he starts, **“Haven't you read?”**

The Story is found in **1 Sam 21**.

David was anointed king, but not the king yet. Saul is chasing him. David and his men come to Nob. In hunger and desperation, David enters “the house of God” (i.e., the tabernacle) in search of food.

- He asks, **“Do you have anything to eat?”**

- Answer: “No.” (**Typical guy – I think I’ve got some cold pizza, jerky...**).
“All I have is holy bread (12 loaves baked and placed in the tabernacle each Sabbath).”
- Leviticus 24:5-9 says the priest has to change it out and only the priest could eat it. But David and his men eat it. And the Bible never condemns David. It was a good thing.
- Not starving was more important than the ritual.

Jesus refers to the story as a **precedent**.

- It was an exceptional case that the Pharisees weren’t considering.
- Jesus implies that what they **did was justified** because of this extreme case.
- Jesus is saying that **human need takes precedent over religious ritual**.
- The Pharisees may have objected that Jesus’ disciples weren’t starving, but the point remains, the Sabbath shouldn’t be restricted to legalistic requirements.

Further, there’s more here than the comparison between the stories of hunger.

- Jesus is also inviting a **comparison with himself and David**.
- Jesus is saying I am greater than David.
- David was Israel’s greatest king and the precursor of the Messiah (2 Sam 7:11–14; Ps 110:1). This is the first of several references to David in Mark’s gospel.

Further still, In Matthew’s account, Jesus tells the story and then says, **“Something greater than the Temple is here.”** He’s greater than David, the Temple, and is the fulfillment of the Sabbath.

C. Textual Question

Bart Ehrman – I hate to keep mentioning him (but I should share this anecdote, I’m really burdened for him), in his university days at Princeton – “The floodgates opened” (*Misquoting Jesus*, page 9) after he wrote a paper on this passage...

- Mark says that “Abiathar” is the high priest, but it’s actually “Ahimelech.”

- Ehrman, a conservative Christian at the time, tried to defend the Mark, but his prof wrote back, “Maybe Mark just made a mistake.” This led Ehrman to question many other things, until he eventually became an agnostic.
- There are actually several good, simple explanations of it...
- Here’s one: “In the time of Abiathar” (ESV) – gets at the idea probably; that is, Abiathar, not Abimalech was more significant and was the high priest during many of David’s years.
- “The Age of Lincoln” – 1855-1896 – popular memory
(It may also be a reference to where you would actually find the story in the Scroll – one long text, not divided in paragraphs...)

D. Application for Us

Don’t elevate your personal rules to the level of biblical principles for everyone else to follow.

- Your rules may be wise actions for you – but be careful that you don’t require your applications for everyone else.
- It’s understandable that a person would be enthusiastic about a practice that is working for them, but be careful about insisting on this same practice for others.
- There’s a difference between **timeless principle and personal practices**.
- **Sundays** – Principle: Usually the day Christians **gather** with God’s people.
 - Enjoy some rest if you can, but don’t make your practice a law for everyone.
 - Can you play sports? Yes. **Don’t let it keep you from worship regularly.** But it’s perfectly fine to enjoy activities...
 - **Begg, Walking/Golfing...**
- **Dress** – Principle: **Modesty**, but don’t be ridiculous...
 - “Women can’t wear pants”
 - “Men can’t shave”
 - “You have to wear a tie?” – you ain’t got no verses!
- **Disciple kids** – Principle: **Train them** in the instruction of the Lord
 - Be wise and choose your practice...
 - Don’t insist on a particular form of school.
 - It may be good and wise for you, but don’t confuse principles with methods.

- **Marriage** – Principle: **Ephesians 5** – there's no debate to it
 - What does that look like in your home? What does that look like in different cultures?
- **Food/drink** – Principles: **Self-control, enjoy God's gifts, don't abuse them.**
 - Problem **with ice cream**, make some rules, just don't insist on them for others.
 - The same with **drink**. If you have a problem with alcohol, it may be fine and good to build a fence of rules around yourself, but don't insist on those rules for everyone else.
- **The Pharisees had so many arbitrary and unbearable rules that they were crushing people.**
- **They were missing the whole spirit of the law,**
- **And they were missing the very one that could give them rest for their weary, rule-keeping souls.**

#2: Don't trade God's grace for religious slavery (2:27)

A. Man was NOT made for Sabbath *rules*.

- The Sabbath was meant to be a time of **blessing...**
- They had made the Sabbath **a burdensome yoke.**
- Avoid this!

B. In Christ, you should enjoy the grace of God in times of physical rest and in times of corporate worship.

- Such times are for your **benefit and blessing.**
- **If you neglect corporate worship, you are a walking disaster zone.**
- **If you neglect times of rest, you are a walking disaster zone.**
- Enjoy grace.
- Allow God to replenish you physically and spiritually. (Ps 103:5)
- He's a good God.
- **De Young:** The question on Sundays (time of worship) shouldn't be **"What *can't* we do today?"** but **"How does God want to give me grace today?"**

- God in his grace blesses us with a days of rest and worship. Allow him to bless you in such times.

C. Learn to Rest in the Lord's Grace

- You need **physical rest**
- You need **Seasonal rests** after prolonged seasons of burden/labor...
 - Some of you need to learn to rest.
 - The world can go on without you!
- You need spiritual rest in Christ
 - **If you are in a religion of works, you will die trying to earn God's favor.**
 - **The gospel isn't about earning; it's about receiving.**
- Look forward to our eternal Rest in Christ.

D. Only when we have a good rhythm of work and rest, will we really flourish, and experience vitality.

- **The call to rest isn't a call to be lazy.**
- **No, work hard, and rest hard.**
- **And everyday – in the mist of your work – rest in Christ.**

#3: Don't misidentify Jesus (2:28)

- This statement is a game changer!
- He's not only the Son of Man, but he adds now that he is the Lord of the Sabbath.
- This is another claim of deity –
- Jesus is greater than the Sabbath, and is thus God.
- He created it...
- He is the focus of it...
- “Once again, Jesus puts himself squarely in the place of God”

If you're not a Christian, this is what you need to do: Submit your life to the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

- This one who has authority to forgive sins.

- This one who gives us rest.

Two important reasons for unbelievers to read the Gospel of Mark (Hughes)

(1) To see a real picture of who He is. He is your final resting place.

(2) He is radically winsome. You will find him irresistible if you see him rightly.

Many are rejecting religion, not actually rejecting Jesus.

See him in these pages, and embrace Him as your Lord.

#4: Don't miss opportunities to do good to others (3:1-6)

A. The Pharisees Withered Hearts (3:1-2)

- They're looking to accuse Jesus of something.
- They prefer to be stickler to the religious details than to display mercy
- "I desire mercy, not sacrifice" (Matt 12:7)
- Later, Jesus says to the Pharisees:

²³ "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others. ²⁴ You blind guides, straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel!

(Matt 23:23-24)

- What are the weightier matters? **Essentially, loving God and neighbor.**
- In their attempt to be "religious" they actually missed the whole point.
- They focused on gnat, and missed the camel!

B. The Miracle (3-5)

- Paralysis, injury, arthritis?
- Jesus is more interested **in doing good, in giving life**, than having Pharisees like him.

- It's more interested in loving God and neighbor, than adhering to man-made rules.
- In Luke 14, there's a similar story. Jesus heals someone on the Sabbath, and then asks, "If you had a son or an ox that fell into a well on the Sabbath, would you not immediately help him? Of course you would."
- **Get someone out of the ditch? "I can't; it's Sunday."**
- They missed the forest for the trees

C. The Malice (3:6)

- 3:6 – they plot how to kill him
- The religious and political leaders align...
- The cross is now certain

Application

- The Pharisees had made the day a renewal, a day of fearful, slavish, obedience....
- They had one goal: **"Not to do stuff"**
- Jesus focused the whole day on grace

Jesus pointed out **the gift** of the Sabbath,
and focused on **doing good** on the Sabbath.

- 1. Receive the gift of rest; receive the gift of worship; and be thankful.**
- 2. Look for ways to bless others.**
 - Look for ways do demonstrate the love of Jesus
 - Look for ways to advocate for life and health and peace
- 3. We should be distinguished by doing good**

Transitional Section (3:7-12)

While the religious leaders and political leaders (Herodians: supporters of Herod's cause and the Herodian dynasty) wanted to kill him, but the crowds love him!

The people came from all directions – a mix of Jew and Gentiles. A picture of the kingdom of God.

- Galilee, Judea (Jerusalem)
- Idumea – South
- Beyond the Jordan (to the East)
- Tyre and Sydon (North)

This is a summary of what we have seen and leads us into the next section of Mark

- Healing the sick (v. 10)
- Casting out demons (v. 11). He didn't want demons to be the ones describing his identity for there was already great misunderstanding; he wanted to reveal himself in his own time and way.
- Many were simply drawn to his miracles...
- His main purpose was to proclaim the kingdom of God.

In the following section, Jesus will clarify who His people really are (Mark 2:13-35).

Conclusion

In Mark 2:23-3:6, Jesus reveals Himself as:

- The Forgiver of Sinners – He has the authority to forgive sins.
- The Friend of Sinners – He eats with sinners and tax collectors, that they may repent of sin and find salvation in him.
- The Bridegroom for a Sinful Bride – He was torn away, but will return for the bride.
- The Lord of the Sabbath – He is the rest that our souls have longed for! Stop trying to earn salvation, and receive the rest that is ours in Christ.

²⁸ Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰ For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” (Matt 10:28-30).

Why would ten of our people be living in India right now?

- It is the land of religion
- There are millions of religious people there.

- They have rules.
- They have sacred places.
- They fast.
- They have traditions.

**Yes, they have religious rules,
but they don't have spiritual rest.**

How can you be right with God? **By earning or by resting?**

- There is only one way that it can be “well with your soul” – by resting in the finished work of Jesus Christ.
- If you rest in Him, you can then anticipate the perfect rest that is to come, as we dwell in the new heavens and earth with Jesus, the Lord of the Sabbath.

**Because He said, “it is finished,” we can rest.
Forever.**

*Weary, working, burdened one,
Wherefore toil you so?
Cease your doing; all was done
Long, long ago.*

*Cast your deadly “doing” down—
Down at Jesus' feet;
Stand in Him, in Him alone,
Gloriously complete.*

- Ira Sankey

