

Lord of the Sabbath: Mark 2:23-3:6
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Jesus is Lord of the Sabbath. This is the point of the verses that we're going to study this morning in the Gospel of Mark. These two sections, 2:23-28 and 3:1-7, each deal with an incident that happened on the Sabbath. The first has to do with Jesus' disciples plucking the heads of grain on the Sabbath, and in the second Jesus heals a man with a withered hand on the Sabbath.

There are four things I want to look at in these verses. First, we'll notice the increasing opposition to Jesus. Second, Jesus gives an Old Testament illustration. Third, Jesus makes an authoritative statement. And fourth, Jesus asks a piercing question. I'll conclude by asking, what does the Sabbath mean for us?

The Increasing Opposition

Beginning in 2:1 and going through 3:7 we find 5 conflicts between Jesus and the religious authorities. In 2:1-12 Jesus heals the paralytic, and in verses 6-8 we see the scribes questioning Jesus. In this case it's not even out loud, but Jesus knows their hearts. "Now some of the scribes were sitting there, questioning in their hearts, "Why does this man speak like that? He is blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?" And immediately Jesus, perceiving in his spirit that they thus questioned within themselves, said to them, "Why do you question these things in your hearts?" That's conflict #1.

Then in verses 13-17 Jesus calls Levi, and then goes to eat at Levi's house. And in verse 16 the scribes of the Pharisees ask, "Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?" That's conflict #2. Next is the question about fasting, in verses 18-22, which we studied last week. Verse 18, "Why do John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?" That's conflict #3. And now we're going to look at conflicts #4 and #5 in our verses for this morning.

As Jesus asserts His authority, He inevitably and intentionally is confronting the authority of these religious leaders. They think they know it all. They think they have everything figured out. And therefore as Jesus comes onto the scene with His divine power and authority, He enters into direct opposition with them. They were appalled at His claim to forgive sins. They were offended by His willingness to defile Himself by eating with people who were ceremonially unclean. And they held Him in suspicion because His disciples didn't fast regularly like them.

In our passage for this morning the opposition continues to increase, and it does so dramatically. First look at verses 23-24.

“One Sabbath [that’s the key; this is why these actions are so controversial, because it happened on the Sabbath] he was going through the grainfields, and as they made their way, his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. And the Pharisees were saying to him, “Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?” You have to understand that the Pharisees were absolutely obsessed with Sabbath regulations. The Old Testament gives instructions to the Israelites to rest on the Sabbath, on Saturday, the seventh day of the week. God rested on the seventh day (Genesis 2). And then in the Ten Commandments of Exodus 20, the fourth commandment reads, “Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, 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. For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy” (vv. 8-11).

Then in Exodus 31 we see that the Sabbath is a sign of the covenant. “And the Lord said to Moses, ‘You are to speak to the people of Israel and say, ‘Above all you shall keep my Sabbaths, for this is a *sign* between me and you throughout your generations, that you may know that I, the Lord, sanctify you. You shall keep the Sabbath, because it is holy for you’” (vv. 12-14). Then a few verses later God continues, “It is a *sign* forever between me and the people of Israel that in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day he rested and was refreshed” (v. 17). This is the significance of the Sabbath in the Old Testament. It was a day of rest, following God’s pattern in creation, and it served as a sign of God’s covenant with His people. It was a gracious gift of God to His people, to give them rest.

But the religious leaders, in their legalistic zeal, turned that rest into work. They took a beautiful and merciful gift, and twisted it into a means for religious merit. They tried to specify, in every imaginable situation, what would constitute work. And the insanity of their rules is seen in the fact that they objected to the disciples plucking heads of grain. As the disciples were making their way through the grainfield, they were simply pulling off some of the heads of grain, rubbing them around in their hands to separate the husk, and then eating it. And this was perfectly legitimate to do. Deuteronomy 23:25 makes provision for this. And the Pharisees weren’t taking issue with the fact that they were eating grain from this field. The issue for them is that this was being done on the Sabbath. You see, in their Sabbath fanaticism,

they viewed this as work. They categorized this as reaping and threshing.

As we observe this scene, we might ask, What were the Pharisees doing in the grainfields alongside Jesus and His disciples? And I think this is just another indication of how fiercely they opposed Jesus and how determined they were to discredit Him and accuse Him. They were on His trail. They were following Him around, looking for any bit of evidence to use against Him. The opposition is increasing. As Jesus asserts His authority and steps on the toes of the religious leaders, the more the religious leaders want to squelch His influence.

It continues in the beginning of chapter 3. Look at verses 1-2, “Again he entered the synagogue, and a man was there with a withered hand. And they [referring back to the Pharisees] watched Jesus, to see whether he would heal him on the Sabbath, so that they might accuse him.” Again we see their backward view of the Sabbath. Who would object to helping someone on the Sabbath? Who would object to healing someone on the Sabbath? Well, the Pharisees would! They had rules about this, too. It was permissible to help someone if it was a life-threatening emergency. But if it was something that could wait until the next day, then it would be a sin to exert that effort on the Sabbath. And this is the situation here. The man with the withered hand is not about to die. It is a serious disability, but not life-threatening. And the Pharisees, with bitterness and pride and hatred in their hearts, are watching to see what Jesus is going to do. It’s as if they are saying to Jesus, We dare you! If you heal this man, we’ll have further evidence against you.

Then look at what happens after Jesus does heal the man. The opposition intensifies to the point that they are making plans to kill Him. Verse 6, “The Pharisees went out and immediately held counsel with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him.” We don’t know much about the Herodians. They are mentioned again in 12:13. They would have been supporters of Herod—not a religious sect, but a political group. But they found a common cause with the Pharisees, because they also saw Jesus as a threat. They saw Him as a threat to the political stability of the region. So the Pharisees and the Herodians together began to plan how they could destroy Jesus.

This increasing opposition points forward to the end of Mark when Jesus *is* destroyed. But it’s not because His opponents win. Rather, by God’s design, and through Jesus’ humble submission to His Father’s will, Jesus gives Himself up to be crucified. What we ought to see in our passage for this morning is that Jesus always creates a stir. He is not making friends with everyone. He is not trying to form consensus. He is not

compromising in the least. He walks right into the most controversial situations and does the most controversial things. He is revealing His identity and confronting the false religion of the Pharisees. And that is a glorious thing to behold and also something that brings about fierce opposition.

Jesus Gives an Old Testament Illustration (2:25-26)

Well now let's go back and look at three ways that Jesus interacts with His opponents. He first responds to the Pharisees' question by giving an Old Testament illustration. Notice that He doesn't quibble with their particular Sabbath laws. He doesn't try to show that His disciples are, in fact, abiding by Sabbath rules. Instead, His point is going to be that He is Lord of the Sabbath. And so He cites an Old Testament incident in which David does something that is technically unlawful but also perfectly fitting.

Jesus responds to their question with a question, and He begins His question with the words, "Have you never read . . ." He uses this expression in several places in the Gospels, and I imagine it would have really offended the Pharisees. Of course they had read these passages in the Old Testament! They knew the Old Testament inside and out. But Jesus tries to emphasize again and again that they have missed the point. They've read it, but they haven't. They know the stories but have failed to grasp the significance.

"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?" This event is recorded in 1 Samuel 21. These were the days when David was fleeing from Saul, and in this instance he came to Nob and asked the priest for bread. The priest didn't have any common bread, though. He only had the holy bread, the bread of the Presence that was used in the temple, which was to be eaten only by the priests. But the priest allowed David to take the holy bread.

Jesus' point in citing this Old Testament story is to show that He stands in the line of King David. And just as David had an authority that transcended ceremonial rules, so does Jesus. In fact, as Jesus points out in Mark 12:35-37, the Messiah is not merely the son of David. He is David's Lord. Remember that passage, where Jesus asks, "How can the scribes say that the Christ is the son of David? David himself, in the Holy Spirit, declared, "The Lord said to my Lord, sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet." The point is, the Christ, the Messiah, is not only a descendant of David, but also David's Lord. He is far greater than

David. The great King David was merely a foreshadowing of the greatness of King Jesus.

And therefore at the end of Mark 2 Jesus doesn't quibble with the Pharisees about the insanity of their Sabbath laws. But instead He points back to David as an example of the kind of authority that the Messiah has.

Jesus Makes an Authoritative Statement (2:27-28)

“And he said to them, “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath.” Following the Old Testament illustration, Jesus now makes His point clearly and authoritatively. He first makes an obvious point that shows how mistaken the Pharisees were in their treatment of the Sabbath. He says, “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.” The Sabbath is a gift to mankind. It should be received as a gift. It should be received as a sign of God's goodness and grace to give His people rest. That's how it is intended, and that is how it should be received. The Sabbath was made for man. But the Pharisees had it exactly backwards. They were acting as though man was made for the Sabbath. The way they multiplied their rules and enforced their rules made it seem like they were the ones providing the gift and the Sabbath was the receiver of their gifts. Their religious legalism was such that the whole equation was turned around. It was as though they were placed on the earth for the purpose of rigidly maintaining a ridiculous list of Sabbath rules. So instead of resting and receiving a good gift from God, they took that gift and turned it into a work. They took a merciful provision and turned it into a way of feeding their pride.

Then in verse 28 Jesus makes the earth-shattering statement, “So the Son of Man [which is how Jesus likes to refer to Himself, like He did in 2:10] is lord even of the Sabbath.” This is a very bold claim. An authoritative claim. God is the One who instituted the Sabbath, and now Jesus is claiming to be Lord of the Sabbath. We have seen the authority of Jesus' teaching, His authority to heal diseases, His authority to cast out demons, His authority to forgive sins, and now He claims to be lord *even* of the Sabbath. This is the authority and the Lordship of our Savior.

It also shows how the Sabbath is a profound pointer to Jesus. The Sabbath is not ultimately about resting on the seventh day of the week. The Sabbath rest which God gave to His people was meant to be a pointer to the rest we find in Christ. Paul writes in Colossians 2:16-17, “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. These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ.” Paul is saying that the food laws

and the festivals and the Sabbaths of the Old Testament are all pointers to Christ. They are shadows, Christ is the substance.

Therefore to understand the Sabbath rightly is to understand that it is all about Christ. Christ is our Sabbath rest. The way the Pharisees treated the Sabbath was completely missing the point. The Sabbath points to Christ, and they were so fixated on the pointer that they missed what it was pointing to. Whenever someone visits us who hasn't been to Pittsburgh before, I love to take them up to Mt. Washington to give them a kind of aerial tour of the city. And I point to Heinz Field and PNC Park and Point Park and the rivers and Oakland off in the distance and the South Side. Just a few weeks ago we did this with Bruce and Jodi Ware. We wanted them to have the full Pittsburgh experience. But imagine if as I pointed to the various landmarks, they just looked at my hand. Imagine if when I pointed to Oakland, they just stared at my finger.

That's how the Pharisees were treating the Sabbath. The Sabbath is a pointer. It points to Christ. But they were obsessed with the Sabbath in and of itself. They saw it as an awesome way to feed their spiritual pride. Yes, I can do this. Rather than accepting this as a gracious gift from our Heavenly Father, we'll turn it into a list of rules that we can follow outwardly and inflict upon others. And then it can be a measure of how spiritual we are and how unspiritual everyone else is. That's how these religious leaders had twisted and manipulated the Sabbath.

Jesus Asks a Piercing Question (3:3-5)

Here we see further how the Pharisees had misunderstood the Sabbath and how Jesus confronts their misunderstanding and confronts their hard hearts. Look at 3:3-5. "And he said to the man with the withered hand, "Come here." And he said to them, "Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to kill?" But they were silent. And he looked around at them with anger, grieved at their hardness of heart, and said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He stretched it out, and his hand was restored."

Verse 4 contains the piercing question. The indicting question. The question that silences them. The question shows how the Pharisees had turned the Sabbath into something that was the exact opposite of what was intended. "Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to kill?" Remember what they are going to do immediately following this? Verse 6, they are going to begin their plans to destroy Jesus. It is Jesus' desire to do good, to save life. But they have murderous intent in their hearts. They want to do harm. They want to kill.

Jesus' piercing question silenced the Pharisees. At the end of verse 4 it says, "they were silent." This is yet another indication of Jesus' authority. They don't know what to say to Him. They know that He has backed them into a corner, and their only recourse is to destroy Him. They cannot escape the authority and the validity of what He is saying. But because of their hard hearts they are unwilling to change their ways. They are unwilling to relinquish their own authority, unwilling to give up their system of religion that is designed to feed their spiritual pride.

John MacArthur, in his study of this passage, makes a great observation about spiritual pride. He raises the question of why folks like this would be willing to keep all of these stringent rules and give up so many things in order to maintain these laws. And MacArthur says, it's because "spiritual pride is such a self-satisfying sin that it makes up for all that you have to forfeit."¹ In other words, the satisfaction that comes from spiritual pride is so great that it makes people willing to make tremendous sacrifices in other areas of their lives.

Isn't that a profound insight, and a scary one as we examine our own hearts? Spiritual pride is so self-satisfying, and it is so destructive. And we see in this encounter how spiritual pride puts these individuals directly at odds with Jesus. Let's war against spiritual pride, brothers and sisters. It's a reality in each of our hearts, but by God's grace we can fight to find our pleasure more and more in Jesus Himself rather than satisfying ourselves by having others compliment our spiritual zeal. Let's be very careful in our pursuit of Christ to be sure that Christ is really who we are pursuing. Let's examine our actions and our motives to be sure that we are not simply fulfilling a perceived spiritual obligation so that we feel good about ourselves and so that we can be congratulated by others.

I was talking to my neighbor the other day, and he was telling me about how he fulfills his obligation each week by going to Mass. And he seemed very happy with himself for doing so. I tried to explain to him that Christianity is not about formalities like fulfilling one's obligation. I hope none of you are here thinking that you're fulfilling an obligation which is somehow earning you favor with God or making you one of the spiritual elite. We are not to have an attitude like the Pharisees—feeling proud of our spirituality because of our great sacrifices and great efforts for God. That elevates us and belittles God. Instead, we ought to have the attitude of the man with the withered hand. We ought to be like Levi, the tax collector, or the paralytic, or the leper. We come as empty-handed sinners. We have nothing to offer, nothing to give, nothing we can do to help God out. And God changes us and

¹ <http://www.gty.org/Resources/Sermons/41-12>

blessees us and makes us His own. The more we understand this, the more we will be kept in our humble and lowly place, and God will be glorified. Rather than elevating ourselves and belittling God, we will be humbled and God will be exalted.

What Does the Sabbath Mean for Us?

I want to close by asking, what does the Sabbath mean for us? The Pharisees thought they were keeping the Sabbath by enforcing their many rules. Jesus shattered that paradigm by breaking their rules in order to show that the Sabbath is not about rules but about Him. The Sabbath rest is supposed to be a pointer to our rest in Christ. Augustine said in a prayer to God, “You have made us for Yourself, and our hearts are restless until they find rest in You.” That’s the point of the Sabbath, and that’s how we keep the Sabbath today—by trusting in Christ, resting in Him. Don’t work for God. Rest in Him.

And as we believe the Gospel and trust in God’s sovereignty over all things, we will become restful people, rather than restless. I have to clarify what is meant by this, because when we say *restful* we do not mean *lazy*. Some of you are lazy, and it would be easy to use this message to justify your laziness. To rest in Christ and be a restful person does not equate with idleness or laziness. Remember that the Bible also says, “if anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for members of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever” (1 Timothy 5:8). So don’t use this truth about resting in Christ as an excuse for slothfulness or irresponsibility.

My hunch, though, is that many of us are on the other end of the spectrum, and that can be equally dangerous. We’ve been programmed to lead busy lives and view busyness as a virtue. Hard work is a virtue. But to be over-committed and over-worked and over-tired is not a virtue. It’s a vice. We should have regular times of rest built into our schedules. We must remember that the world does not depend on our efforts. It’s not as though the world is going to come crashing down because we take a day off. When we are compulsive about our work, when it becomes almost impossible to take a break, when we are unable to focus on other important things, then we need to recognize that we have some serious spiritual issues that need to be addressed. Whether it’s spiritual pride that is causing us to do more and more religious work, or greed that is driving our efforts to make more money, or a hunger to make a name for ourselves, our unwillingness to rest reveals that something is wrong in our hearts.

We need to focus on the sufficiency of Christ’s work for us. “Jesus paid it all,” as we’re going to sing at the end of the service. It’s not that Jesus paid 95% and we have to labor to make up the

last 5%. No, Jesus paid it *all!* And therefore, we have nothing to pay. We have nothing to earn. We have no work to do as far as our salvation is concerned. And we also need to rest in God's sovereignty. God is in control, not me. God is working all things together for His glory and the good of His people, and therefore I don't need to stress out about the responsibilities or the circumstances of my life or anyone else's.

Three weeks ago we had a marriage conference here, as you know. And Stacy and I both did a lot of work preparing for the conference and preparing to host the Wares. And on top of that, Stacy had just returned from Portland that Monday, where she had been for her niece's funeral. So it was a pretty intense week in a lot of different ways. And the pressure of things caused some friction between Stacy and me. We found ourselves getting irritated with each other. And we joked a few times that this marriage conference was becoming a strain on our marriage.

I found a similar irony in my work this past week as I was thinking and preparing for this sermon on rest and at the same time realizing that my heart was not very restful. And Stacy lovingly helped to point out some things to me, and as I reflected on those things I saw the truth in it. I can begin to feel and act as though so many different things ultimately depend on my efforts. And when I succumb to that lie, I will inevitably feel over-burdened and it will take the joy out of the ministry. I want to be a good pastor. I want to help those in need. I want to see lives changed and see this city impacted by the power of the Gospel. But I have to remind myself that those things are not ultimately on my shoulders. I am certainly responsible to work diligently and faithfully, but if the fruit of the ministry depends on my efforts, or even our efforts collectively, then we might as well call it quits. The hope is that God is the One who works on our behalf. He is the One who will give the growth and the fruit. And we can rest in Him.

So as we look to the Lord of the Sabbath, our Savior Jesus Christ, don't try to keep the Sabbath by keeping a list of rules. Keep the Sabbath by looking to Jesus in faith, the One who paid it all for us, the One who did all the work necessary for our salvation, the One who is sovereign over all our circumstances. Forsake all hope in your own efforts. Repent of the restlessness that arises from various sins in your heart. And find rest in Jesus.

In the Gospel of Matthew these same events are recorded, one right after the other: Jesus as Lord of the Sabbath, and then the healing of the man with the withered hand. Those are found in Matthew 12:1-14. Just before that, at the very end of Matthew 11, we find the comforting words of Jesus that summarize what this is all about. "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. 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. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”