

Mark 2:23–3:6 — Jesus Is Lord Of The Sabbath.

January 6, 2018

Take out your Bible and open it to Mark 2. If you are using an electronic Bible, that is OK.

We just completed our Christmas series in the book of Ephesians and are returning to our study on the life of Jesus in the Gospel of Mark. This is a great study because it gives us a chance to live with Jesus and his disciples so we can experience what they experienced. There is something about this Gospel that leaves us feeling like we were with Jesus. Why does it have that eyewitness feeling? This Gospel was written by John Mark, but he was not a close companion of Jesus.

The apostle Peter was a close disciple of Jesus. Peter and John Mark were close friends in the early church. This Gospel is John Mark writing down Peter's first-hand eyewitness testimony of life with Jesus. That is why we can almost hear Peter's words in this book.

Mark's purpose was not to simply tell us about Jesus. He wants us to know the truth about Jesus. He wanted us to know Jesus' true identity. He was not afraid to tell it to us. He revealed Jesus' identity in the first words of his Gospel. In Mark 1:1, he opened by saying Jesus is the Son of God. Only a few paragraphs into his Gospel, at Jesus' baptism, Mark told us that God the Father's voice from heaven spoke and said that Jesus is his beloved Son, in whom he is well-pleased. Even the demons reveal Jesus' identity and call him the Holy One of God. In only two chapters we are told many times that Jesus is not just a man but he is also the very Son of God.

Mark didn't just tell us Jesus' identity. He also told us about the amazing authority Jesus possesses. In the first two chapters of Mark, we see Jesus has power over temptation, Satan, disease, and even power to forgive sin. Jesus has all the power necessary to push back the effects of the curse of sin in this world.

This morning, as we return to the Gospel of Mark, we pick up at Mark 2:23 where we see another thing Jesus has authority over, which is the Sabbath.

Jesus is Lord of the Sabbath.

To modern Americans, that doesn't sound like a significant title. In Jesus' time, when it came to his relationship with the religious leaders of his day, that title was a declaration of war.

What made Jesus' claim to be Lord of the Sabbath so hard for the Jews to swallow? The Jews were very aware that God created the Sabbath in Genesis 2 after creating everything in six days. On the seventh day God rested. The same God that created the world is the one who created the Sabbath. For Jesus to call himself Lord of the Sabbath is to equate himself with the God who created the universe. The Jews were also aware that God called his people out of Egypt. At Mt. Sinai, God gave his people his law. One of the Ten Commandments he gave his people was that they should keep the Sabbath. When Jesus claimed to be Lord of the Sabbath, he was claiming to be equal with the God of fire and smoke who gave the Ten Commandments to Moses on Mt. Sinai.

Jesus' claim to be Lord of the Sabbath meant Jesus either was the creator God and the one who redeemed God's people out of Egypt, which would blow

their minds, or he was a nut case that should be taken out with the evening trash. There was no middle ground. That is what is at stake with Jesus' claim.

This morning, we are going to look at two small stories where Jesus makes his claim to be Lord of the Sabbath in the Gospel of Mark. These stories are not just found in the Gospel of Mark, but they are also found in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. In Matthew and Luke, these stories are also side-by-side, just like in Mark. Since every Gospel keeps them together, we are going to study them together. Both of these stories make the same claim: Jesus is Lord of the Sabbath.

One 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?" 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: 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?" 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." Again he entered the synagogue, and a man was there with a withered hand. And they watched Jesus, to see whether he would heal him on the Sabbath, so that they might accuse him. 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. The Pharisees went out and immediately held counsel with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him. Mark 2:23–3:6 (ESV)

The Sabbath was created to be a gift, not a burden.

If we are going to understand what is happening in these stories, we need to know a little of how fanatical the Jews of Jesus' day had become about observing the Sabbath. In Genesis 2, when God defined the original Sabbath, it simply says God ceased from his work of creation and rested. The Sabbath in the

Old Testament is simply a day when people ceased their regular work for physical and spiritual refreshment. While the Old Testament has some Sabbath regulations, it doesn't give a lengthy list of things you cannot do on the Sabbath. It simply tells you the day is a gift from God for your physical rest and for refreshment in your relationship with him.

The Pharisees and Scribes of Jesus day didn't like the flexibility God gave his people so they developed long lists of things they said you were not allowed to do on the Sabbath. As a result, they turned the Sabbath from the best day of the week to the worst day of the week as they bound people with countless rules and regulations that held them like chains in a prison cell.

There is a book by Alfred Edersheim called The Life and Times of Jesus. In his book, he explains what the Jews taught about the Sabbath from the Talmud. The Jews didn't write the Talmud until after Jesus' time. What the Talmud says about the Sabbath is a written summary of what was orally taught about the Sabbath in Jesus' time. The Talmud gives us a good sampling of the Sabbath rules the Pharisees had bolted onto the side of their Bibles and how absurd they had become.

For example, you could travel no more than 1,999 steps from your home on the Sabbath. That is, from sundown on Friday until sundown on Saturday, you needed to count your steps when you left your home. I don't know how that could possibly be restful and refreshing. As is often the case with bizarre laws, people find and equally bizarre ways around them. The Pharisees said that if you put food on your path before the Sabbath, which was located less than 1,999 steps

from your home, and you stopped to eat that food, that constituted another home so you could walk another 1,999 steps. In the city, if you laid a rope or a piece of wood between homes that theoretically extended your home so you didn't need to count yours steps when you traveled between houses.

There are thousands of little bizarre, manmade laws like this in the Talmud that shackled the people. In the Talmud, there are 24 chapters of Sabbath laws. One ancient rabbi spent 2 1/2 years studying just one chapter of these Sabbath laws to discern all the minute details of what you could and couldn't do on the Sabbath.

Let me give you some more examples. On the Sabbath, the Pharisees said you could not lift anything more than the weight of a dried fig, or you were violating the Sabbath. If you threw something in the air and caught it with your opposite hand, that constituted work. If you caught it with the same hand, that didn't constitute work and was allowed. If you were reaching for food the moment the Sabbath began, you needed to drop the food on the floor and leave it until after the Sabbath for clean up.

On the Sabbath, they said you were not allowed to have anything on your person associated with your profession. If you were a tailor, you couldn't carry a needle or that was considered work. Nothing could be bought or sold on the Sabbath. No matter how cold it was, you couldn't light a fire to keep warm because lighting a fire was considered work. If a candle was lit, you couldn't blow it out on the Sabbath because that was considered work. Chairs couldn't be used

on dirt floors because dragging a chair in the dirt left a furrow which was akin to plowing and was a form of work.

Women were not allowed to look in a mirror on the Sabbath for fear they would see a gray hair and be tempted to pluck it, which was considered work. Women couldn't wear jewelry on the Sabbath because jewelry weighed more than a dried fig.

You were not allowed to write more than two letters on the Sabbath. When I first read that, I was encouraged. At least they allowed you to catch up on your correspondence. Then I realized they didn't mean two handwritten letters but they meant two alphabetic characters. You couldn't write more than an "A" and a "B" or you were involved in work and violating the Sabbath. Tying a knot on the Sabbath was also forbidden. You left your shoes untied all day on the Sabbath or you went to sleep with your shoes on your feet. Those were your only options.

Understand that none of these rules are found in Scripture. All of them are oppressive. That is just a small sampling of the brutal rules the Pharisees made up to add to what the Bible says about the Sabbath. Those rules sucked the life right out of people. Instead of the Sabbath giving life to people, it destroyed their lives. Do you see why the Sabbath had become the most dreaded day of the week? Now that we understand the background of the Sabbath in the time of Jesus, let's look at our story.

One Sabbath he was going through the grainfields, and as they made their way, his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. Mark 2:23 (ESV)

Remember this is taking place on a Sabbath. This is the day everyone was supposed to do absolutely nothing. Jesus completely ignored all of the

Pharisees' manmade, oppressive rules. He walked right through a grain field with his disciples on the Sabbath. I am sure he took more than 1,999 steps. He didn't even care how many steps he was over.

The Pharisees were dogging Jesus. They were watching to see if they could catch him violating their Sabbath rules. They saw the disciples picking a few heads of grain, which they considered a severe violation of their Sabbath laws. Most likely the disciples were picking a few heads of wheat or barley, which ripened between April and August in this part of the world. The fields in those days were laid out in strips with paths between them. There were few major highways between small towns so when you traveled from one small town to another you used the walking paths in the fields.

You might think the Pharisees were upset because the disciples stole someone else's grain. That is not what annoyed the Pharisees. In Deuteronomy, God made a wonderful provision for travelers.

If you go into your neighbor's standing grain, you may pluck the ears with your hand, but you shall not put a sickle to your neighbor's standing grain.
Deuteronomy 23:25 (ESV)

They did not have a Casey's or a Kum-&-Go in Israel. If you were in the middle of nowhere, because you were traveling through the fields, and you were hungry, you could take some of the grain and eat it. That was God's gift to the weary traveler. It didn't matter what day of the week you were traveling, you were always allowed to do this.

While God gave this grace to hungry travelers, the Pharisees in Jesus' day took it away. They claimed that taking a little grain in your hand on the Sabbath was harvesting. Rolling the grain in your hand to take off the hard outer layer

was sifting. Blowing away the broken outer shell in your hand was winnowing. These were forms of work which violated the Sabbath.

Remember the Bible doesn't say there is anything wrong with eating field grain on any day of the week. The Pharisees made up laws that said this was wrong.

This story is also told in Matthew 12. In Matthew, we learn the reason the disciples were taking a little grain from the field. It says they were hungry. They were tired and worn out. They took a little grain so their Sabbath would be a day of refreshment, not a day of starvation. The Pharisees would have rather have the disciples weak and hungry on the Sabbath than to be refreshed with food on the Sabbath.

This reveals the core problem. The Pharisees thought manmade rules and regulations were more important than people, while Jesus claims acts of mercy and kindness to people are more important than manmade rules and regulations. When rituals, rules, and regulations come in conflict with mercy, kindness, and compassion to people in need, Jesus says acts of mercy and compassion to people should win out every time. Jesus shows this to us as we continue the story.

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: 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?" Mark 2:25–26 (ESV)

Jesus said to them, "Have you never read?" By the way, that is a dig. The Pharisees memorized most of the Old Testament. Saying they hadn't read something was insulting because they were supposed to have memorized

everything. Jesus reminded them of a story of where David and his companions were hungry in Old Testament times. That story is found in 1 Samuel 21. We won't have time to read it. Let me summarize it.

David was fleeing from Saul. Saul wanted to kill David simply because he was jealous of David. As David and his companions fled for their lives, they came to a place called Nob, which is about a mile north of Jerusalem. David and his companions left in haste. They didn't have any food. They were hungry. There, David met the priest of Nob, named Ahimelech. David asked him for some food. The priest was bummed because he didn't have anything to give him. Then the priest had an idea.

In 1 Samuel 21:4, the priest remembered that while he didn't have common bread, he had holy bread. If the young men with David had kept themselves from women, they could have the holy bread. What is holy bread or Bread of the Presence? Every Sabbath, hot bread was brought into the tabernacle and placed on a golden table. Twelve loaves of hot bread were placed on the golden table inside the tabernacle in the presence of the God. They symbolized the need for the 12 tribes to have fellowship with God and to eat with God. Just as having a meal with someone helps you create a relationship with him or her, so God's people needed to spend time fellowshiping with God to strengthen their relationship with him.

Unfortunately, hot bread doesn't stay fresh for long. Each Sabbath, new loaves of hot bread were placed in the tabernacle. The week-old bread was given to the priests to eat. This priest was a wise man. Even though the week-old

bread was intended for the priests, in front of him were David and his men. They were famished. The choice in front of the priest was to save a ceremony and lose some people, or save some people and break the ceremony. This wise priest knew the right choice was always to show compassion and mercy to someone in need and sacrifice the ceremony.

Ceremony, rituals and traditions are not more important than showing kindness, mercy, and love to people in need. The Pharisees thought their rituals were more important than people. Jesus thought people were more important than rituals. The Pharisee thought you pleased by God keeping a long list of things you didn't do. Jesus said you please God by caring for people in need.

If David was allowed to violate a God-given tradition to help his men when they were hungry, certainly Jesus and the disciples were allowed to violate an illegitimate manmade tradition to help his disciples when they were hungry.

And he said to them, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath."
Mark 2:27 (ESV)

Jesus summarized his point by telling the Pharisees they had it backward. God gave us the Sabbath to be a blessing for us. The Sabbath was given to bless us. We don't exist to serve the Sabbath.

The Sabbath was not given by God to be a burden. It was given by God to be a blessing. It was created to be our gift.

Now comes the bombshell.

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

Jesus said, "Guys, I am the sovereign ruler over the Sabbath." Jesus said, "I created the Sabbath." Jesus gets to define what we can and cannot do on the

Sabbath, not the Pharisees. This is audacious. Jesus claimed to be the one who created the Sabbath in Genesis and the one who gave the Sabbath in the Ten Commandments. He is the one who defines it. He is the one who is in control it. Jesus is God.

I am sure the Pharisees passed out when they heard Jesus make this claim. Is it true that Jesus is the one who created the Sabbath? Does he control the definition of the Sabbath? Let's put our finger in the biblical text and find out. One of the places we find an answer is in John 1, where we learned about the Word of God.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. John 1:1–3 (ESV)

He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. John 1:10 (ESV)

Jesus is the Word of God who created the universe in six days. Jesus is the one who rested from the work of creation on the seventh day. Jesus is the creator of the Sabbath and the controller of the Sabbath. Jesus sets the standards for what is acceptable on the Sabbath. We don't.

Incidentally, many of you know the Christian church does not worship on the Sabbath, the last day of the week. We worship on Sunday, the first day of the week. Many people accuse the church of abandoning the Sabbath and living in clear violation of the creation story Sabbath and the Ten Commandments Sabbath. Is that true or did something happened that changed the day of worship from the last day of the week to the first day of the week?

The reason the church worships on Sunday is because Jesus rose from the dead on the first day of the week. Jesus then appeared to his disciples twice, and both of those appearances were on the first day of the week. Every account of the early church meeting in the New Testament is recorded on Sunday, the first day of the week. Jesus sent his Holy Spirit at Pentecost, which fell on a Sunday, the first day of the week. The apostle John was given the book of Revelation, it says, on the Lord's Day, which is the first day of the week.

Before the resurrection of Jesus, the day of significance for God's people was always the Sabbath, the last day of the week. Beginning with the resurrection of Jesus on the first day of the week, everything of significance in the rest of the Bible occurred on Sunday. The Saturday Sabbath was never mentioned again after the resurrection of Jesus.

What happened? Jesus, who created the Sabbath, who defines and controls the Sabbath, changed the day of the Sabbath from Saturday to Sunday with his resurrection. He changed the focus of the Sabbath from anticipating rest from God, to enjoying rest from God. A rest that is found in him. Only Jesus, as Lord of the Sabbath, has the authority to make those changes.

Let's move to the next Sabbath story, which takes place about a week later.

The Sabbath is the right time to help those in need.

**Again he entered the synagogue, and a man was there with a withered hand.
Mark 3:1 (ESV)**

Jesus was teaching in a synagogue. This is about a week later. There was a man with a withered hand. When Luke told this same account, he said it was

the man's right hand. Since most people are right-handed, this would have been a very debilitating injury. We don't know anything else about this injury other than the Greek term withered used to describe his hand is the same term used to describe a dead plant at the end of the growing season. If you picture dry withered flowers after a good frost before the snow falls, you have a good picture of this man's withered hand. It was shriveled. It was rotten. It was curled under like a rotten claw. I am sure this man's hand was painful. This was not a life-threatening need, but it was a severe need. He was not at the brink of death. Jesus could have told him it was the Sabbath and he needed to make an appointment for a Jesus healing during business hours, but Jesus didn't say that.

Jesus had no interest in postponing a healing to accommodate the life-draining Pharisaical rules about what people couldn't do on the Sabbath.

And they watched Jesus, to see whether he would heal him on the Sabbath, so that they might accuse him. Mark 3:2 (ESV)

The Pharisees were watching Jesus. This is described not as casual observation. This is intense scrutiny. They were watching Jesus to see if he would slip up and heal on the Sabbath so they could skewer him on their rules.

Incidentally, there is nothing in the Old Testament that says you can't help people on the Sabbath. All it says is don't do your normal work. Take a break. You can still prepare food for your family, visit relatives and do whatever you want.

As we saw earlier, the Pharisees developed a system of rules, which restricted what you could do on the Sabbath. Their Sabbath medical rules said that if someone was injured on the Sabbath, doctors could only provide enough

medical care to stave off death. They could not provide medical care to improve a person's situation and encourage healing. That means when someone had a gaping wound on the Sabbath, you could only cover it and apply pressure until the Sabbath was over. You couldn't stitch the wound because that would improve someone's medical condition and be considered work.

When Jesus healed people, what work did he perform? All he did was say a word or touch someone and they were instantly healed. It was hard for the Pharisees to pin down the work Jesus did when he healed on the Sabbath but they knew he improved someone's medical condition on the Sabbath day, and by their definition, that was considered work.

In Luke 6:8, where this same account is told by Luke, it says Jesus knew what they were thinking. Jesus knew the Pharisees had no concern for this man. He was just a pawn they wanted to use to catch Jesus. As men of God, they had no genuine care and compassion for people in pain.

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. Mark 3:3–4 (ESV)

Notice the man hadn't said anything. He didn't ask for healing. Jesus just called him out of the crowd. "Hey, you back there with the withered hand. Come forward."

When Matthew told this same story in Matthew 12, he added a little more information about what Jesus said.

And a man was there with a withered hand. And they asked him, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?"—so that they might accuse him. He said to them, "Which one of you who has a sheep, if it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will not take hold

of it and lift it out? Of how much more value is a man than a sheep! So it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath.” Matthew 12:10–12 (ESV)

Jesus said, “If you had a sheep that fell in a pit, you would save it on the Sabbath, even though you would consider that work. How much more valuable is a man than a sheep? We eat sheep. Human life is much more valuable than an animal life. If you would save an animal on the Sabbath, isn’t it logical that it is right to save and help people on the Sabbath?”

Pleasing God is not defined by what you don't do. It is defined by going out of your way to help other people in need.

At this point, Jesus had them. They knew that if they said it was lawful to save a life, they couldn't be angry at Jesus for healing on the Sabbath. Since they were trapped, all they could do was say nothing, and that is what they did.

Look how Jesus responded.

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. Mark 3:5 (ESV)

When they refused to answer, Jesus looked at them. Jesus was angry. This is the only explicit mention of Jesus being angry in the New Testament. Was he angry at other times? Sure. He cleansed the temple at the beginning and end of his ministry. He was angry at those times, but this is the only time the Bible explicitly says Jesus was angry.

Why was Jesus angry? He was angry because they were more concerned with Jesus violating their rules and rituals than they were about showing compassion to a cripple.

Jesus was not just angry at them. He was grieved at the hardness of their hearts. The Greek word for hard was used to describe the hardness of marble. Their hearts were hard, compassionless, brutal, and proud.

You can picture Jesus turning from them in this moment and turning to the man with the crippled hand and simply saying, “Stretch out your hand.” Instantly, his hand was restored. Remember, his hand was withered. It looked like a dead plant. It was shriveled and rotten. Instantly, it was completely restored to health. Flesh regrew and was filled with warmth and softness. Bones that were brittle were restored to full strength. Muscles were instantly and fully restored, and this man stared in wonder at the palm of his hand, slowly opening and closing his fist in amazement. This was a miniature supernatural work on the order of the resurrection. Jesus brought a dead hand to life by only speaking words.

If don't know about you, but if it was me that just saw Jesus speak new life into a dead and withered hand, I would be reconsidering all my objections to Jesus. Maybe I have my Sabbath critiques wrong. Now is the time to reconsider after seeing a healing of this kind of miraculous nature. That isn't what happened. As Luke told this story in Luke 6:11, he told us how the Pharisees responded to Jesus' miraculous healing of the man's hand.

But they were filled with fury and discussed with one another what they might do to Jesus. Luke 6:11 (ESV)

They were filled with fury. This means they were filled with rage. “How dare he?” The Greek word for fury means they were literally out of their minds with madness. They were in a psychotic rage because Jesus healed on the Sabbath right in front of them.

Immediately, they began discussing what they might do in order to get rid of Jesus.

The Pharisees went out and immediately held counsel with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him. Mark 3:6 (ESV)

This sounds like a casual aside, but it isn't. The Herodians were not a religious group, like the Pharisees or Sadducees. They were a secular group. Think of them as a political party. Herod the Great was the Idumean king who ruled over Israel at the direction of the Romans. Jews that had no interest in God and were pro-Rome attached themselves to the Herodian cause. The Herodians were committed to the secularization of Israel and having the Greek culture and Greek lifestyle dominate Israel. They were the ultra-liberals of their day. The Pharisees were the ultra-conservatives of their day.

What brought together the most liberal non-religious group and the most conservative Jewish group? The common desire to get rid of Jesus. The Herodians wanted to get rid of Jesus because too many people were turning away from Greek and Roman culture and turning to the Lord. The Pharisees wanted to get rid of Jesus because he claimed to be in charge of the Sabbath and refused to obey their thousands of life-destroying rules about the Sabbath.

We are only in chapter 3 of Mark's Gospel and we already see the Pharisees committed to work with the most liberal secularists of the day to get rid of Jesus. This will all come to a head on a hill called Golgotha at the end of the book.

Application

Jesus has all authority. He even has authority over the Sabbath because he created it. In our previous studies in Mark, we saw Jesus had authority over demons. He had authority over disease. Jesus had authority to forgive sin. Here we see Jesus has authority over the Sabbath. The Sabbath has its origin in creation. Jesus is the one who created the world and the one who created the Sabbath. Since Jesus created the Sabbath, he has the authority to define and even redefine it.

We live our faith by displaying compassion toward those in need, not flawless observation of religious practices. In the story of the hungry disciples in the grain fields and the man with the withered hand, Jesus took the religious leaders of his day to task because they cared more about their religious rules than they did about people in need. Compassion and care for people always trump obeying religious rules and traditions.

God gave us the Sabbath as a blessing to be enjoyed, not a burden to be dreaded. When we think of taking a Sabbath rest, it is easy to think of it as restrictive, when God intended for it to be a gift and a blessing.

Jesus is our Sabbath. As we prepare to take communion, we remember that Jesus is our Sabbath. We no longer need to work to save ourselves from sin but all we do is rest in what Jesus has done to save us from our sin. We rest from lists and rules where we try to earn the favor of God. With Jesus, we have God's favor. All we do is rest in him. That is the gospel message. Since we don't have to earn favor from God, we are free to focus on works of compassion and mercy to those in need.



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