

Lord of the Sabbath

Mark 2:23-3:6

© February 5th, 2023 by Rev. Rick Goettsche SERIES: Mark

Human beings are big fans of rules. Rules let us know what we should and shouldn't do. They guide our decisions, and they help us to know what is good and bad. We have rules in business, rules for driving, rules for school, rules for our families, and rules for our games. Rules help ensure order and consistency.

The question is who gets to make the rules? Early on, it is important for parents to establish that they make the rules in the household. It is important for teachers to establish (and often remind) their students that the teacher is the rule-maker, not the students. And in sports, there are governing bodies that make the rules and referees or umpires whose job is to ensure the rules are followed and applied fairly.

Our passage this morning records two different clashes between Jesus and the religious leaders of His day. The primary disagreement was over who gets to make the rules. The religious leaders believed it was their sacred duty to make rules governing the Sabbath day—Jesus reminded them that was not the case at all. As we unpack this week's text, we will examine our own tendency to try to be the rule-makers and look at what God's plan for the Sabbath is, and how we ought to follow it.

Picking Grain

The first encounter we'll examine today occurs on a Sabbath day when Jesus and His followers were walking through a field of grain and apparently were hungry. Here is how Mark records the story,

²³ One Sabbath day as Jesus was walking through some grainfields, his disciples began breaking off heads of grain to eat. ²⁴ But the Pharisees said to Jesus, "Look, why are they breaking the law by harvesting grain on the Sabbath?"

²⁵ Jesus said to them, "Haven't you ever read in the Scriptures what David did when he and his companions were hungry? ²⁶ He went into the house of God (during the days when Abiathar was high priest) and broke the law by eating the sacred loaves of bread that only the priests are allowed to eat. He also gave some to his companions." ²⁷ Then Jesus said to them, "The Sabbath was made to meet the needs of people, and not people to meet the requirements of the Sabbath. ²⁸ So the Son of Man is Lord, even over the Sabbath!" (Mark 2:13-28, NLT)

As Jesus and the disciples were walking through a field, the disciples were breaking off heads of grain and eating them. This was perfectly permissible under Jewish law under normal circumstances. But this day was the Sabbath, and that's what prompted the clash with the Pharisees.

The Sabbath principle comes from creation. God created the world in six days and rested from His work on the seventh day. He told us that we were to follow the same

pattern of setting aside one day each week to rest from our work. In Jewish culture, this was a very important commandment (after all, it was one of 10 rules literally written in stone!) Not only did the Jews want to obey the Lord, but they also understood that by following this principle of Sabbath rest, they set themselves apart from the nations around them. Observing the Sabbath was a way of demonstrating their trust and worship of God. So from sundown on Friday until sundown on Saturday, all good Jews rested from their work and made it a day of rest and worship.

So, what was the issue with the disciples breaking off heads of grain to eat on the Sabbath? The religious leaders had tried to define what constituted work so people knew what they could and couldn't do on the Sabbath. One of the rules said that you weren't allowed to harvest grain on the Sabbath. This made sense, since for a farmer harvesting grain would be part of his normal work. But by the Pharisees' rules the disciples breaking off heads of grain to eat was also considered harvesting, and therefore work, and thus, they were violating God's command to remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy.

This is what is behind the confrontation that we see between the Pharisees and Jesus. By the Pharisees' judgment, Jesus was allowing His followers to violate one of God's ten commandments, and this should not happen. But Jesus sought to correct their understanding, showing them that their rules were not in line with what God intended the Sabbath to be.

Jesus references the story of David when he was on the run from Saul. He and his men were starving, so they came to see Ahimelech the priest (who was Abiathar's father). Under the law, each week the priests were to make twelve loaves of bread (representing the twelve tribes of Israel) and set them in the tabernacle. They would remain there as a testimony and an offering to the Lord until they were replaced with new loaves the following week. After the old loaves were removed, they were to be eaten only by the priests and their families. But the priest allowed David and his soldiers to take some of the bread because they were starving. Technically speaking, this was a violation of God's law. And that was exactly Jesus' point.

Jesus was telling the Pharisees that God was far less concerned with the rigid requirements of the law, and more concerned with the wellbeing of His people. In other words, even though God's law said that only the priests were to eat the bread of the presence, neither the priest nor David did anything wrong in this situation, because God would not have been honored by allowing these men to die of hunger simply to fulfill the ritual demands of the law. It was better to care for these men than to hide behind ritual.

Jesus then clearly states His thesis: "The Sabbath was made to meet the needs of people, and not people to meet the requirements of the Sabbath." In other words, God didn't create the law to keep the Sabbath simply to create a law—He created the law because it benefits people to have a day of rest! We aren't designed to run non-stop—we function better when we take time to rest and recharge. The Sabbath is God's way of helping us function as He intended!

No one could argue that the disciples were really doing any work. They were hungry and were grabbing a snack. They were not violating God's Sabbath command. But even if they were, Jesus' point was that their wellbeing was actually the goal of the Sabbath from the beginning. The goal was not to keep a list of rules.

It is at this point that Jesus really upset the Pharisees, because He said that, "The Son of Man is Lord, even over the Sabbath!" Jesus was claiming to have the authority to determine what was right and wrong to do on Sabbath. This was a direct affront to the religious leaders, who seemed to believe that they were the lords of the Sabbath, as they had created an enormous list of laws that defined what people could and could not do. The disciples were not violating any of God's laws, they were only violating the laws these men had created. But the Pharisees had come to view their laws as having equal weight with God's, even though they likely would have told you they were just trying to clarify what God's law meant.

We must guard against the tendency to do the same. Religious people have a funny way of creating our own list of rules that we believe everyone else should follow. We have rules about what you can wear, watch, listen to, eat, drink, do, etc. Where God has given clear commands we must not compromise, but we must also be careful not to allow our own preferences or convictions to become rules we insist others must follow. While it is perfectly acceptable to have convictions that you hold as a way of honoring the Lord, we must recognize that our convictions (or preferences) are not binding on others. When we begin to look down on others because they do things we would not (even though they are not forbidden by the Lord), we are committing the same error the Pharisees did. We must be careful not to go beyond what God has said, even as we try to flesh out how to apply it in our time and in our lives.

Healing a Hand

The second scene of the story occurs on a separate Sabbath day (Luke's gospel tells us this). Jesus and the disciples were in the synagogue (as was their normal custom) when Jesus and the Pharisees clashed once more.

Jesus went into the synagogue again and noticed a man with a deformed hand.

² Since it was the Sabbath, Jesus' enemies watched him closely. If he healed the man's hand, they planned to accuse him of working on the Sabbath. ³ Jesus said to the man with the deformed hand, "Come and stand in front of everyone."

⁴ Then he turned to his critics and asked, "Does the law permit good deeds on the Sabbath, or is it a day for doing evil? Is this a day to save life or to destroy it?" But they wouldn't answer him. ⁵ He looked around at them angrily and was deeply saddened by their hard hearts. Then he said to the man, "Hold out your hand." So the man held out his hand, and it was restored! ⁶ At once the Pharisees went away and met with the supporters of Herod to plot how to kill Jesus. (Mark 3:1-6, NLT)

While they were worshiping in the synagogue, we are told there was a man who had a deformed hand. Some scholars have said that the language makes clear that it was the

man's right (or dominant) hand. As such, this man would have been unable to work due to his infirmity.

Mark then tells us that because it was the Sabbath, Jesus' enemies (interesting that this is how Mark describes the religious leaders) were watching Him closely, trying to find something for which they could attack Him. It is noteworthy that instead of worshiping the Lord, they were trying to find ammunition to attack and discredit Jesus.

Jesus surely knew what was going on but decided to proceed anyway. He called to the man with the deformed hand and asked him to stand in front of everyone. Putting together Matthew and Mark's account, it seems like the Pharisees actually began the encounter by asking Jesus if it was lawful to heal on the Sabbath. Jesus points out that their own laws permitted a person to rescue a sheep that had fallen into a well on the Sabbath, then He asks two rhetorical questions of the Pharisees: Does the law permit doing good on the Sabbath or is it a day for doing evil? Secondly, He asked if the Sabbath was a day to save life or destroy it?

Jesus was cutting right to the heart of the matter, cutting through all the pretense that might otherwise have clouded the issue. The Pharisees, seeing they could not refute what Jesus was saying, simply remained silent.

Mark tells us that Jesus looked at them angrily and was saddened by their hard hearts. I suspect Jesus was angry because the Pharisees were making life hard on this man and had no compassion. And Jesus saw that their hearts had become so prideful and hardened that they were unwilling to hear anything that might challenge their preconceived notions. This reality saddened Jesus, because He saw in Israel's religious leaders people who were far from God and didn't even know it. And nothing could change their minds.

After this confrontation with the Pharisees (and in my mind, a very long and awkward pause while Jesus waited for a response), Jesus decided to heal the man's hand. He didn't do anything except tell the man to hold out his hand. When he did, it was healed! There is no way that anything Jesus did in this instance could have been considered work—He simply spoke, and the man's hand was healed.

Nonetheless, under the Pharisees' way of thinking, Jesus had violated the Sabbath laws by healing a man. The law permitted healing someone if it was life-threatening, but this was clearly not a life-threatening issue. Jesus could have waited until the next day to heal the man, but He did not. To the Pharisees, Jesus was showing utter contempt for the law. And so, while Jesus healed a man and gave him back his life, they retreated and plotted a way to kill Jesus, conspiring with Herod's followers (who were not good people) for how to do it. This shows the hard-heartedness and spiritual blindness of the Pharisees.

So why did Jesus heal the man there in the synagogue? Why not just wait until morning, or at least wait until He didn't have an audience? Was He showing contempt for the

Sabbath? Not at all. He saw this as an opportunity to instruct the people once more and to correct their understanding about what it really meant to honor the Lord by observing the Sabbath. It isn't about following a strict set of rules, it's about trying to be obedient to the Lord. Doing good on the Sabbath would never be a violation of what God had commanded. To those who were willing to hear, Jesus' made His point clearly.

Applications

So with these two brief stories about Jesus' clashes with the Pharisees about the Sabbath, what are we supposed to learn? I see two major lessons to learn.

First, we learn the danger of making ourselves the arbiters of right and wrong.

While most of us would like to believe that we are not like the Pharisees, we have similar attitudes more often than we'd like to admit. Sadly, Christians are notorious for Pharisaical attitudes. Here are some examples,

- We may look down on the person who comes to church in shabby clothes, imagining we are more spiritual than them, when the clothes we wear have little, if anything, to do with our devotion to God.
- We may look down on a person who claims to be a Christian but has a beer, or a glass of wine, or dances, or any number of other things that we may choose to forgo personally, but the Bible leaves open to conscience.
- We may choose to look down on someone who is absent from church, or Sunday School, or some other event when we are there. But until we know someone's story, we are foolish to make assumptions about their reasons for being gone.
- We may look down on a person who consumes certain media (movies, TV shows, or music) that we would choose not to. But we would be wise to remember that God doesn't give us a list of approved media to use.
- We may look down on someone whose political ideologies differ from ours, but we would do well to remember that God does not have a political affiliation.
- We may look down on those whose lives are not as "polished" as ours are in some areas, instead of recognizing that God works on different things in different people's lives at different times and rates. Just because you've completed a lesson someone else hasn't doesn't make them less spiritual, nor does it make you more spiritual. There are likely lessons they have learned that you haven't.

In short, we must be humble and gracious in our dealings with others. We can share and discuss our personal convictions with one another, but we must be very careful to distinguish between the laws of God and the "laws" we create. We must grant grace in the areas where God leaves room for conscience.

Second, we must obey the Sabbath ourselves. The message of these accounts is not that keeping the Sabbath day is unimportant. Jesus was not telling us that God's commands regarding the Sabbath are no longer relevant, He was reminding us to be careful not to get so enmeshed in following rules that we miss the greater principle.

So how do we follow the Sabbath today? I don't want to give you a list of rules like the Pharisees did, but as I've wrestled with this idea, there are some principles I think we should consider carefully.

- 1. Make plans to rest from your work.** We are not designed to run nonstop. If we do not take time to rest and recharge, we will quickly find ourselves run down and ineffective. Believe it or not, we will likely be more productive taking a day of rest each week than we would if we just worked nonstop. It's like how the lumberjack who takes the time to sharpen his axe will be more effective than the one who keeps working with a dull axe because he doesn't have time to stop. By resting, we sharpen our abilities and can be far more productive than if we allow ourselves to become dulled. I realize there are some instances where completely stepping away from work is impractical (if you have livestock, they still need to be fed), but we should be intentional about taking a step away for a day each week.
- 2. Make time to worship.** Remember that part of the Sabbath commandment is to keep the day holy. We must make time to worship regularly. The scriptures are clear that meeting together is of vital importance to believers (Hebrews 10:25 speaks to this specifically), so our day of rest should be more than just "Sunday Funday", it should be a time that causes us to draw close to the Lord, as He is the source of our strength and refreshment.
- 3. Guard that time carefully.** Our world does not function by the Sabbath principle. It tells us that we must constantly work to get ahead, and if we take any time off, we'll be missing out. One commentator shared this, "Our daily struggles may produce economic triumphs but can make our lives a spiritual wasteland. Lily Tomlin said the trouble with the rat race is that even if you win, you are still a rat."¹ Lots of things will compete for our time and attention—it's not just our jobs. Many things will demand that we forgo our day of rest and worship in order to get ahead or even to survive. Many of these are not even necessarily bad things! But we must have enough sense to see what is most important. If we aren't intentional about guarding our Sabbath, we will see that time slowly chipped away—and we will be worse off for it. Sometimes it's better to say no to something good so we can do something even better.
- 4. Make time to do good.** We often struggle to find time to serve other people. That is one of the purposes of the Sabbath. By setting aside some time each week that is dedicated to resting and connecting with God, we create the space we need to be able to serve others. Recognize that one of the ways you can serve the Lord on the Sabbath is by caring for the people around you. Use the time you have to do good for others—it will be good for you too!

Jesus shows us the importance of the Sabbath, while also reminding us that we must learn to see the difference between our convictions and God's commands. If we learn that God is the One who makes the rules, and that He makes the rules for our benefit, then we'll be apt to follow them. And in so doing, we testify of His goodness to the world around us.

© February 5th, 2023 by Rev. Rick Goettsche SERIES: Mark

¹ Garland, David E. *Mark*. The NIV Application Commentary. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1996.