

# LORD OF THE SABBATH

MARK 2:23-3:6

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Up to this point in Mark's account, Jesus has already been accused of blasphemy (2:7), associating with sinners (2:16), and not conforming to the traditional religious customs (2:18). Now, the religious establishment seeks to accuse him of being a law-breaker – especially as it pertains to the fourth commandment of observing the Sabbath (2:24). Jesus has been exemplifying and establishing his authority as the Son of God, and in doing so he has begun to intrude upon the conventional religious traditions and customs of the religious establishment around him.

For the Jewish people, circumcision and the observance of the Sabbath were the two big identifying markers that set them apart from the rest of the world around them. However, the original and organic intent of these two institutions had been lost underneath the pile of religious requirements and regulations that had been added and adjusted to give a more identifiable man-made definition of what Sabbath observance should look like.

The two narratives here concerning the Sabbath are joined together by the common thread that reveals how the gospel of Jesus is unique and can't be defined by religious regulations. In explaining the Sabbath, Jesus says, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath." Therefore, the original intent of the Sabbath was to bless mankind and aid in his overall well-being. We see this at work in the two narratives:

- Jesus in the grain field – Replenishing someone from hunger falls in line with the Sabbath's intended purpose.
- Jesus in the synagogue – Restoring or repairing someone's health falls in line with the Sabbath's intended purpose.

And then adding to his explanation of what the Sabbath was intended for in the first place, Jesus utters another shocking and scandalous declaration of his own authority by referring to himself as the Lord of the Sabbath.

Timothy Keller points out that essentially in these two narratives, Jesus is basically saying, "I'm not here to reform your religion, I'm here to fulfill it by replacing it with myself."<sup>1</sup>

This is perhaps what Jesus is alluding to in his retelling of an ancient story about King David. Jesus doesn't mention David in order to provide an excuse for his own actions but rather to once again announce and affirm his ultimate authority as someone who is greater than King David. It is like he's saying, "Remember when Israel's greatest king acted contrary to the religious custom in order to take care of his men? Well, I'm here to tell you that a King greater than David is here among you now."<sup>2</sup>

Comparing himself to King David was no small matter in Jewish circles. Jesus is prodding at the messianic expectations held by the religious leaders. Jesus is revealing that he is the righteous 'Branch of David' prophesied by Jeremiah in the Jewish Scriptures.<sup>3</sup>

Jesus is the greater King who was promised to come. Jesus is the Son of God. And therefore, if the Sabbath was instituted to serve man, and man was created to serve God then Jesus has every right to appropriately declare himself as the Lord of the Sabbath.

Now, a common theme throughout Mark's account is the way in which Jesus uses his authority as the Son of God to serve others instead of serving himself. In the second narrative concerning the Sabbath here in this passage, Jesus enters the synagogue and immediately encounters a man with a withered hand. Both, Jesus and the religious leaders, see this encounter as an opportunity. The great irony is found in the fact that the religious leaders seek to harm Jesus on the Sabbath by refusing him the right to help and heal someone else on the Sabbath.

How lost in your own self-righteousness do you have to be to sit and wait on a miraculous healing in order to condemn the miraculous healer?

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<sup>1</sup> Tim Keller, *King's Cross*, (Redeemer CityNet, 2011), 38

<sup>2</sup> see Mark 12:35-37

<sup>3</sup> see Jeremiah 23:5

Jesus calls the disabled man over to himself, and the scene in the synagogue is a familiar one. The religious insiders are standing and observing, and it is the humble outsider that has taken a step of faith in approaching Jesus. Then Jesus proposes a simple question to the religious leaders, "Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to kill?" The answer seems so simple, but the religious leaders stay silent and choose not to answer that question.

Admitting that good should be done and a life should be restored would not violate the true intent of the fourth commandment, but it would contradict the religious traditions and man-made additions that had come to define what Sabbath observance looked like.

You see, according to various Pharisaic traditions, it was acceptable to offer a person aid on the Sabbath if their condition was life-threatening. It was permissible to prevent an urgent condition from getting worse, but any efforts to cure someone of their condition was regarded as work and therefore was to be put off until the following day. It was not permissible to set a dislocated joint, to bury a dead body or even to do such things as repairing a hole in your roof.

So this simple question proposed by Jesus proved to be a dilemma for the religious leaders – "Do we denounce our moralistic traditions or do we denounce Jesus?" And their silence declares their decision.

How many of us in the church today are so caught up in our efforts to *be good* that we overlook the opportunities around us to *do good*?

After staring into their eyes with righteous anger, Jesus exhales in grief and orders the humble man to hold up his hand. Again, the insiders are watching, and the outsider is acting.

James Edwards writes,

"The thing the man with the bad hand most fears is before him. A choice must be made. He may refuse and spare himself humiliation... Or he may take the risk of faith, and act on the

command of Jesus... In exposing himself to Jesus he is healed... Faith is not a private wager but a public risk that Jesus is worthy of trust when no other hope can be trusted."<sup>4</sup>

True faith is being convinced that entrusting yourself to Jesus is worth the risk of whatever it may cost you.

The healing of this man in the synagogue offers a miraculous example of the repair, replenishment and restoration that the Sabbath has always been intended to bring. However, this healing also sparks an unlikely union that gives even more testimony to the uniqueness of the person and work of Jesus.

Two opposing sides of the cultural spectrum, the Pharisees and the Herodians, end up coming together in an effort to discredit and destroy Jesus.

The Herodians were the liberal supporters of Herod and promoted the immoral values of progressive Greek culture and the definitions of Greek philosophical truth. The Pharisees were the conservative traditionalists who held to the absolute truth found in the Hebrew Scriptures and looked to protect themselves from being contaminated by the culture around them. These two groups were in direct and constant opposition to one another on many political, social and economic issues, but now they've found a common threat in Jesus.

The truth of the matter is that the true gospel of Christ is unsettling and offensive to both the conservative moralists and to the progressive 'free-thinkers'.

Timothy Keller writes:

"The 'traditional values' approach to life is moral conformity – the approach taken by the Pharisees. It is that you must lead a very, very good life. The progressive approach, embodied in the Herodians, is self-discovery – you have to decide what is right or wrong for you. And according to the Bible, both of these are ways of being your own savior and lord."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> James R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 101

<sup>5</sup> Keller, 46

The conservatives are likely to say to themselves, "We're good but they're bad so we're right." The progressives are likely to say to themselves, "We're tolerant but they're judgmental so we're right." And the Bible would say that both parties are paths leading to self-righteousness. It is the uniqueness of the gospel of Jesus that says, "We're no better than anyone else, and we all need Jesus to be made right."

These two narratives concerning the Sabbath confirm the fact that Jesus hasn't come to abolish or reform religious observances, but rather he has come to fulfill them by replacing them with himself. Jesus affirms the principle of the Sabbath and its necessity, but he dismantles the religious legalism that has hijacked its intended purpose.

We first read about the institution of the Sabbath in Exodus where it says:

"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... For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy." (Exodus 20:8-11)

Why did God rest on the seventh day? God wasn't tired. God didn't need a day off. He rested because he was satisfied. God was satisfied with his finished work and rested in its finality and accomplishment.

The Sabbath was given in order to offer man a restful shadow of the true Source of rest and satisfaction – the finished work of redemption accomplished by Jesus. Today we are to uphold the Sabbath by resting from our work and rejoicing in the finished work of Jesus.

Jesus is the greater Sabbath. He is the ultimate Source of the repair, replenishing and restoration that we so desperately need. In Jesus, we find rest from the anxious work of moralistic self-justification. In Jesus, we find peace and rest from trying to prove to ourselves, others, and God that we are good people with value and worth. Instead, we can rest. We don't have to rigorously adhere to religious regulations or rebelliously abandon religion all together. Instead, the gospel reveals that we can find rest and ultimate satisfaction in the finished work of Jesus – the Lord of the Sabbath.