

The Purpose of the Sabbath

The Gospel of Mark: Mighty and Mild / Mark 2:23-3:6

Introduction:

Today's passage holds the final two confrontations, in a series of confrontations Mark has been walking us through since verse 1 of chapter 2, that help us see the unique person and authority of Jesus. These two confrontations center on the Sabbath, a significant command for the Jewish people. As James Edward notes, the Sabbath was one of two observances that "above all defined Jews and set them apart from the nations." (James R. Edwards, *The Gospel according to Mark, The Pillar New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: Eerdmans; Apollos, 2002), 93.) Keeping the Sabbath is also one of the Ten Commandments, which can make it difficult for us to know how to approach it today. So, we will dive right in and give space for considering what the Sabbath means for us at the end. These two stories are short and sweet, and their design is to reveal important things about both the Sabbath and Jesus Christ. The first story, in Mark 2:23-28, helps us understand how

THE SABBATH WAS FOR THE GOOD OF GOD'S PEOPLE

Look at what Mark reveals about the nature of this confrontation in verses 23-24, "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?'" The Sabbath was a day set aside by the Lord for His people to rest and remember His sovereignty over creation. When God gave the commandment, He specifically linked it to His rest on the seventh day after creating the world. The commandment, which we heard read earlier, prohibited any work being done by God's people, their livestock, and even sojourners who resided with them. And it specifically called for God's people to keep it holy or set apart and honoring to the Lord. Our story focuses on that command and Jesus' disciples grabbing a bite to eat while walking through grainfields on the Sabbath. Notice the details left out of Mark's account. We aren't told why they were walking through the grainfields, and we're not told they needed food. Mark moves us quickly to focus on the Pharisees questioning Jesus. Note the rebuke in their question, "Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?" They are essentially saying, "Jesus, look at how your disciples are breaking Sabbath rules. How can you allow this?" Now, we need to understand the exhaustive and, in many cases, quite ridiculous regulations the religious leaders had put in place to ensure no one came close to breaking the Sabbath. I won't share them all but, while there were things related to work like plowing and harvesting, there were other strange things classified as work and forbidden like carrying a child, sewing beyond one stitch, tying knots, and pulling an animal out of a ditch. The general rule was only do what was absolutely necessary, which became only do something if it was necessary to save a life. Jesus and His disciples were actually breaking two Sabbath rules. They were traveling, which was walking more than 1,999 paces, and "harvesting," which is how they classified plucking heads of grain. And church, breaking the Sabbath was a significant offense. Listen to Exodus 31:15, "Six days shall work be done, but the seventh day is a Sabbath of solemn rest, holy to the Lord. Whoever does any work on the Sabbath day shall be put to death." In one way you can see why the Pharisees are so concerned, right? It was serious to break the Sabbath. However, the problem with their reasoning is that their rules were based on the traditions of men and not true to the Word of God. In Deuteronomy 23:25, the law of Moses laid out a provision for what Jesus' disciples were doing, saying, "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." Yet, a later rabbinic ruling declared this was not permitted on the Sabbath. So, according to their traditions, the disciples of Jesus were in fact breaking the Sabbath. The issue, we discover, was how the religious leaders had taken the command of God beyond what was intended. They set up these fences so far away from the intent of the command to keep people from even coming close to breaking it. I think we might be tempted to commend this and be guilty of doing the same at times.

This passage moves us to see this is wrong to do, because doing so can take what God has established to provide blessing and make it a burden. Pay attention to the way Jesus responds in verses 25-26, “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?” Jesus points to a particular story in scripture to make some significant points. He recounts the story from 1 Samuel 21:1-6 where David requested and received the bread of the Presence for food, when he and the men with him were hungry. Take note of a few things in this response. First, we see Jesus says “in the time of Abiathar the high priest,” when we read Ahimelech was the priest at the time. Is Jesus wrong? Is Mark wrong? Is the Bible in error? No. The likely reason it says, “in the time of Abiathar,” is because Abiathar was more easily recognized than Ahimelech in connection to this story, as the one who escaped Saul’s vengeance in response to Ahimelech helping David. So, what we see is a common technique of pointing to the most well-known character to ensure the connection is made. Second, though it was unlawful for anyone but the priest to eat this bread, the Pharisees would know that neither David, nor Ahimelech, were ever punished or condemned in scripture for this act. Third, Jesus is subtly, but clearly, connecting Himself to David. As David was concerned for His men, Jesus is concerned for the disciples. As David’s men were hungry, Jesus’ disciples were hungry. This story gives precedence for His disciples’ actions and makes two points clear. The first is that just as God was most concerned with the good of David and his men, He is most concerned with the good of His people in commanding the Sabbath. Look at verse 27, “And he said to them, ‘The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.’” The Sabbath was designed and intended for the good of mankind. The religious leaders’ laws had turned what was meant for good into a heavy weight and burden. They thought the intent in the Sabbath commandment was to earn God’s favor by keeping it, and failed to see the truth that the command was given by God to provide good for His people. To give them rest from their labor and strife. To teach them to trust and delight in Him. And church, this is the truth in all of God’s commands. We need to understand that His commands are for our good, not burdensome. 1 John 5:3 says, “For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome.” In Matthew 11:30, after saying come to me, Jesus says, “my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” There is a guiding yoke. We are called to be obedient to His way, but the burden to follow Him is easy and light when we understand His commands are wrapped up in His love and designed for our good. The second point Jesus makes is in connecting Himself to David. In this connection, Jesus alludes to Him as the promised messianic king who is greater than David. As King David determined what was right in 1 Samuel 21, the greater King Jesus determines what is right to do on the Sabbath. A point that becomes clear in verse 28, which says, “So the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath.” The original Greek places “Lord” at the beginning to make it emphatic. Jesus, as the Son of Man, is the Lord of the Sabbath. He determines the true intent of it because He is the God who created it and rules over it. This helps us see again that the good and righteous purposes of God, in things like the Sabbath, can only be rightly fulfilled in Jesus Christ. The Sabbath was for the good of God’s people and, Jesus, as the Lord of the Sabbath, determines and supplies that good. Which brings us to the second story, that helps us understand that

THE LORD ALWAYS DOES AND DESIRES GOOD FOR HIS PEOPLE

Notice how Mark links this to the previous story, while introducing the problem in verses 1-2, “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.” We understand “they,” in verse 2, to be the Pharisees because they are the antagonists in the previous verses. We also see connections to the Sabbath, and the Pharisees persistence in watching Jesus and His disciples. It’s likely this story didn’t happen on the same day, but Mark wants us to connect them to each other. So, we should remember the Pharisees disdain for Jesus’ disciples plucking heads of grain, Jesus’ pronouncement that the Sabbath was for man, and Him as Lord of the Sabbath. The stage is set.

A man with a stiff and deformed hand has entered the synagogue on the Sabbath and the Pharisees are watching and waiting to accuse Jesus for healing him. This healing was specifically forbidden in the Mishna, saying one “may not straighten a deformed body or set a broken limb [on the Sabbath]” (m. Shab. 22:6). So, if Jesus healed, He was clearly breaking a Sabbath “law,” which would call for His death. Look at what happens next in verses 3-4, “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.” This is the climax of this story. Jesus, knowing their intentions, calls this man to rise and come to the middle of everyone. Feel the tension of this moment. It’s the Sabbath, and everyone has gathered for worship. A man with a withered hand walks in. The Pharisees notice him and begin to whisper and watch Jesus closely. Then, Jesus looks at the man and calls him forward. The room goes silent. You could hear a pin drop. And Jesus says, “What is lawful on the Sabbath, to do good or harm, save life or kill?” Note how Jesus equates doing good with saving life and doing harm with killing. The obvious answer is to do good and save life, right? Yet we see, “they were silent.” Their pride and lack of compassion stopped their tongues. Oh, may that never be what holds us back from doing good to others. Now, don’t miss what Mark records in verse 5, “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.” Whenever we read of our Lord’s feelings, we should take ample note of them, because they aren’t recorded often. These are two strong emotions by Jesus, He was both angry and distressed by their hardness of heart. Consider how these mix together. Jesus is rightly and righteously angered at their hardness of heart, while simultaneously being grieved and distressed by it. This is the sign of righteous anger; it is mingled with grief over the depths of sin. Do you want to know if the anger you experience over something is righteous? Ask yourself if you are also grieved at sin and its presence in the situation. If you aren’t, chances are it’s not righteous anger. Then, Jesus provides the answer to His question by healing the man. The man simply stretched his hand out and it was healed. What a beautiful display of compassion, mercy, and power by our Lord. By drawing attention to the man, and healing him, Jesus, as the Lord of the Sabbath, calls us to understand that The Lord always does and desires good for His people. Oh, do you believe that church? Even when you can’t see it. Do you know that God is working all things for the good of those who love Him and are called according to His purposes? Sometimes that good is deeper and different than we think. Sometimes the trial you remain under is for your good because it is producing steadfast faith, as James 1 tells us. Sometimes the good God intends is you being conformed more into the image of His Son through suffering, as Romans 8 reveals. Suffering that Philippians 3 reveals helps us gain Christ by sharing in His sufferings. Sometimes that good is healing like we see here. Whatever His will may be, our Lord always does and desires good for His people. Oh, how I long to know that truth more and more fully. Oh, how I hope God will help us all deeply know that truth. Yet, we see the Pharisees missed that truth entirely. Look at their response in verse 6, “The Pharisees went out and immediately held counsel with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him.” This is a sad representation of the deception of sin. Instead of seeing, hearing, and understanding Jesus, the Pharisees link up with a group they would have despised, to begin plotting to kill Jesus. We actually don’t know much about the Herodians from scripture and ancient Greek writing. It doesn’t appear like they were a political party but influential supporters of the Herods. This means they were strong supporters of Roman rule and influence, which the Pharisees despised. The Pharisees sin had such a grip on their hearts that they were willing to join with those they despised to deny the convicting work of Jesus. See in this moment the deception of sin and the havoc it wreaks on the human heart. For the Pharisees, this is a moment of condemnation, but for believers, it is a moment of surprising joy, because it points to the death Christ would suffer on the cross for sin. A death that secured the pardon and forgiveness of sin for all who trust in Him. A death that received the wrath of God for all our sin, past, present, and future. A death that brings joy to our hearts because we know it wasn’t the final word, but only the beginning of Christ’s victory over Satan, sin, and death, because He is risen and reigning. See His love. See His compassion. See Him doing and desiring good for His people.

But see Him most of all giving His life as a ransom for many and trust in Him for your salvation and your greatest good. These are the things we need to see in these stories. Now, I want to consider a question this passage brings up.

SHOULD WE STILL KEEP THE SABBATH?

Look at verse 27 again, “The Sabbath was made for man.” If the Sabbath was made for the good of God’s people, and is one of the Ten Commandments, does that mean we should still keep the Sabbath today? We won’t do a deep dive into this but let me share what I see from scripture. First, it is quite significant that the early church often met for worship on Sundays, the “first day of the week,” or first day from the Sabbath. We see this often throughout the book of Acts and church history shows how this became the permanent practice of the church. This was a significant change in worship for the Jewish followers of Christ. Secondly, when considering what commands from the Old Testament are still binding for believers, we should ask whether the commands are overturned, adapted, or carried on in the New Testament. Of all the Ten Commandments, keeping the Sabbath is the only one not specifically repeated in the New Testament. The Sabbath is spoken about through the gospels and the book of Acts primarily as a reference to time. As we have seen, Jesus corrects misconceptions about the Sabbath, but there are only three places in the rest of the New Testament where the term Sabbath is used. One is in 1 Corinthians 16:1 as reference to the church meeting on the first day from the Sabbath, or first day of the week. Another is in Hebrews 4:9 speaking of an eternal Sabbath rest to come. And the third is in Colossians 2:16 that says, “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.” Romans 14:5 is also likely connected to the Sabbath, where Paul says, “One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind.” These things cause me to believe keeping the Sabbath is no longer binding on believers, but a matter of personal conscience. Yet, I believe the call of God in the Sabbath to rest and remember is helpful concept to incorporate in your life. And I would encourage you to set aside specific time to rest and remember, seeking to spend as much time on that day as you can honoring the Lord. I believe Sundays are specifically helpful days to embrace God’s design in the Sabbath. When we gather together for worship, we gather to rest from our labor and strife during the week. We gather to set our minds and hearts on the Lord and His Sovereign goodness working for us. We gather to speak to our hearts that Christ’s work on our behalf is fully sufficient. And we remind our hearts of the future Sabbath rest that awaits us for all eternity. So, in many ways, we gather to experience Sabbath rest. So, as you are thinking about what this might look like for you, let me encourage you to prioritize gathering together for worship on Sundays as much as possible.

Conclusion:

As the worship team is coming to lead us in responding to these truths, think on what we have seen in this passage and consider what God calling you to believe, desire, or do. Is God calling you to believe that He does and desires good for you in whatever circumstance you are currently facing? Do you need to desire His will and His ways more as the greatest good for your life? Is He calling you to prioritize gathering with God’s people every Sunday for rest and reminding your heart of His grace at work? Do you need to evaluate whether you have any time to truly rest in Christ? Or is your schedule so full that you can’t rest in Him? Oh church, receive God’s grace for you today in this time of response. Press into that grace by coming and kneeling before the Lord to cry out for your every need. Sit and reflect as long as you need, and then sing with gusto when you are ready to, for your heart and those around you. If you need prayer for anything you are facing, for healing, faith, or a burden on your heart, we have a team of people ready to pray for you and with you. You will find them on the corners of front row of pews or at the bottom of the stairs in back worshipping with lanyards on. They would love to pray with you.

Let’s pray as we seek God’s grace in this time.