

Second Sunday after Pentecost; June 2, 2024

+ Mark 2:23-3:6 +

“Jesus is the Sabbath Blessing”

Once on a Sabbath Day, Jesus was passing through the grain fields, and his disciples began to pick heads of grain as they were walking along. The Pharisees said to him, “Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath day?”

He replied to them, “Have you never read what David did when he was in need and hungry (he and his companions)? He entered the house of God in the time of Abiathar the high priest and ate the Bread of the Presence, which is not lawful for anyone to eat, except the priests. He also gave some to his companions.”

Then Jesus said to them, “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is the Lord even of the Sabbath.

Jesus entered the synagogue again, and a man was there with a withered hand. They were watching Jesus closely to see if he would heal the man on the Sabbath day, so that they could accuse him. He said to them, “Is it lawful on the Sabbath day to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?” But they were silent. Then he looked around at them with anger, deeply grieved at the hardness of their hearts. He said to the man, “Stretch out your hand.” The man stretched it out, and his hand was restored. The Pharisees left and immediately began to conspire against Jesus with the Herodians, plotting how they might kill him.

There is a conflict rising between Jesus and the religious authorities. It is still early in Jesus’ public ministry, but already those against him are intensifying their hatred and antagonism toward him.

Mark tells us of Jesus’ disciples walking through the grainfields and plucking grain from their stalks. Immediately the Pharisees and scribes raise the question about Jesus and his disciples violating Sabbath law. In fact, there is no violation of any law that the Lord gave through Moses. But there is surely one violation of the rabbis’ additional law, and in all probability, two.

In addition to the laws governing the Sabbath day that God gave to the Israelites through Moses at Sinai, the rabbis later in Israel’s history devoted themselves to adding laws intended to make sure no one came near breaking the Lord’s actual law. These man-made laws were minutiae found nowhere in sacred Scripture, but the religious leaders forced these additional laws onto the consciences of the people, making them as binding as God’s own laws.

One of those prohibitions had to do with the so-called “Sabbath Journey.” Jewish people were not allowed to travel more than 1,999 paces, or roughly eight hundred meters. If you stepped 1,999 paces or fewer on Saturday, you were a godly person. If you took one more step, you were a Sabbath-breaker, and you had desecrated that holy day. Presumably, that rabbinic prohibition is in play here in this Gospel because when the disciples walk through the grainfields searching for something to eat, they likely go over the limit of 1,999 steps.

Another prohibition the rabbis had added was that since the Sabbath day prohibited any unnecessary labor—and certainly spoke against any commerce — any collection of food, no matter how small or how simple, is wrong according to the rabbis’ rules. So when the disciples walk down the rows of grain and pluck the heads from those stalks of grain, they are guilty of “harvesting” on the Sabbath day, a fatal infraction against the law.

How does Jesus respond? First, he directs the religious leaders to the Bible. Working like an attorney, Jesus cites precedent in order to justify the behavior of his clients, the disciples. He says, in a clear attempt to needle his needlers, **“Have you never read..”** You call yourselves experts, but it seems like you don’t even casually read the book.

“Have you never read what David did when he and those with him were hungry: how he went into the house of God in the days of Abiathar the high priest, and he ate the showbread? Do you experts remember that story from synagogue school?”

Do you remember it from Sunday School? Probably not, so here’s the Reader’s Digest version: When David was a fugitive from Saul, David gathered his band of brothers who went with him throughout the land. They were without shelter or food, and David was concerned about their health. There was no food available anywhere, so David thought: “There is food within reach in the tabernacle at the table of showbread. There are loaves of bread there, enough that I can give the necessary nourishment to my men who are about to faint.” So, David went into the sanctuary, took the showbread, and fed his men.

Jesus uses this bit of Old Testament history because he knows that to everyone in Israel, the great hero of the golden age of Israel is David. He was the ideal king. Jesus had even come preaching about the breaking through of a new kingdom that fulfilled the kingship of David. It is a genius move, which should not surprise us, I suppose. But it gets even better.

The real crux of the matter comes in Jesus’ next statement, when he says to them, **“The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.”** The rabbis had turned to the Sabbath, which God intended to bless his people with physical and spiritual rest, into a boulder around the people’s necks. What God had designed to be freeing and delightful, they turned into a burden and bummer. This is no lie: they had a rule against tying knots on the Sabbath. God didn’t, but they did.

This is also no lie, and it becomes important in the second half of this Gospel: If a building caved in, and people were buried underneath the rubble, you could remove the stones to see if there were any survivors, and if there were any whose lives were threatened, they could be treated with first aid. Others dragged from the building who could wait until the next day had to wait! On and on it went, and each generation of rabbis added more restrictions to the law of God than the previous generation.

We still see similar things all the time within the Christian community. All kinds of laws are communicated to Christians that have nothing whatsoever to do with the law of God.

My friend took a position as a professor at a Christian college. I won’t tell which denomination, but you’ll be able to tell in minute. One day, he went to a picnic before school started by the campus lake, and there were some students playing cards. He said, “What are you playing?” They said, “Rook.” He said: “Rook? I haven’t played that since I was eight years old.” They said, “Well, don’t you know that’s the Christian card game? We’re not allowed to play any other game of cards except Rook because other cards have the Joker, and that’s the symbol of the devil. So, we’re not allowed to play other card games.” (If I had been the one talking to them, I would have informed them that blackjack and Texas Hold ‘Em don’t use jokers, either...But I digress.)

He thought: “What am I going to do?” He was the new Bible teacher, and he was in big trouble.” He was in an environment of no lipstick, no dancing—all that sort of thing. How in the world do these rules and regulations come to be tests of Christianity when they’re nowhere in the Word of God? And, in the interest

of being denominationally honest, Lutherans certainly have their own struggles treating traditions and made-up rules as divine. It is a pan-Christian issue to this day.

Like the Pharisees, Christians often create rules that we can keep instead of obeying the ones that God's Word actually gives us, which are in reality much harder to keep. Anyone can avoid a joker. But try to avoid gossip or greed or grudges. Try to avoid lust and hating your enemy. That's the real law. Read the Sermon on the Mount sometime. That's the law of God for his New Testament people. It's not about counting steps or picking heads of grain. It's walking every step and making every motion according to the commands God actually has given you.

And then Jesus drops the bombshell, the bombshell that, for those who believe he is the Lord God, is beautiful and saving: **"So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath."**

One of the ongoing debates in theology with respect to the Sabbath day—and there are many debates with respect to the Sabbath even to this day—is about when the Sabbath was instituted. Some Bible scholars say, "The Sabbath wasn't instituted until God gave the Ten Commandments at Sinai, so it was delivered by Moses." But others say: "No, the Sabbath was instituted long before Sinai, long before Moses. It was instituted in creation, where God Himself followed the pattern of working for six days and then resting on the seventh day." Not only did He rest on the Sabbath day, friends, but what else did he do? He hallowed it. That means he consecrated it. He made it a holy day, a holiday, all the way back at creation. The Sabbath was instituted at creation, long before Moses climbed Sinai, or even floated down the Nile in a basket.

So what does that mean for Jesus' statement that he is Lord of the Sabbath? He is saying: "I made the Sabbath. It's my gift. I am sovereign over the Sabbath. I am the Lord of the Sabbath, because I am the Creator God who made it and called it holy in the beginning." No wonder his enemies now cannot wait to get their heads together and get their hands on Jesus to kill him. They hear him loud and clear when he calls himself God.

Because his is God, Jesus does what he pleases with the Sabbath. And what pleases him most is to fulfill it. Jesus is the eternal rest for our souls. All those wearied and burdened by their sins come to him and find rest for their souls, and rest for eternity in the heavenly kingdom. The Sabbath of the Old Testament was a physical picture of what the Son of God came to bring our souls: rest. And this why St. Paul tells New Testament Christians not to let themselves be judged by whether or not they keep the Old Testament Sabbath. We are now free to rest our bodies when we want to, and to worship when we want to. God still has laws for us in the New Testament, and they include gathering for worship, and growing in our knowledge of his Word. But the Sabbath itself is fulfilled in Christ.

After Jesus says he is the Lord of the Sabbath, he proves it. The Son of God knows all things, including that talk is cheap. So he shows the truth of his words. **Jesus entered the synagogue again, and a man was there with a withered hand. They were watching closely to see if he would heal the man on the Sabbath day, so that they could accuse him.** They think: Let's watch what he does. Let's see if he breaks the law again. They're still building their own case against him.

According to the rabbis, Jesus should have called the man forward and said, "Sorry, son, but your condition is not life-threatening, so it will have to wait for tomorrow." But he is the Lord of the Sabbath; he created and meant it to bless. He fulfills it to bless us for eternity. So he will use it to heal the man's hand: **He said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." The man stretched out it out, and his hand was restored.**

At first, Jesus is asking the man to take a risk when he says, **“Step forward!”** Probably the second-to-last thing the man wanted was to be used as Exhibit A in a courtroom trial against Jesus. But the only thing he wanted even less than that was not to be healed by Jesus, not to be blessed on the Sabbath by the Lord of Sabbath.

Once again, Jesus puts a question to his enemies here: **“Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good?”** It’s why I made the Sabbath, for your good. It’s why I came to fulfill the Sabbath, for your good. How could there be a rule against doing good on this day? Their response is to plot his death, the highest form of evil on a day meant for good. And all of their crazy, ironic thinking and behavior starts and ends in one place: they do not believe that Jesus is God, the Lord of the Sabbath. So the plot to kill him hatches. And here is the beautiful irony for us, who do believe Jesus is Lord: it is through their evil, unbelieving actions that Jesus will fulfill the Sabbath. It is through their murder that Jesus will die to remove the burden of our sins and give us rest for our souls. It is through their unbelieving actions that all who do believe find their eternal Sabbath rest in Jesus.

There is one more sentence in this Gospel that I passed over but do not want to quit without calling to your attention. It is Jesus’ emotional response to the religious authorities. Mark communicates two of Jesus’ emotions here. The first one is anger, and the word used here is the Koine Greek work for fury. At this point, Jesus—blessed Jesus, usually meek and mild—is outraged by the religious experts who care more about their burdensome law than the health of a man in need. Jesus’ words are fire. But that emotion is also mixed with deep pain and grief.

Mark tells us that Jesus is grieved and angry because their hearts are hard. I will assume yours is not, or you would not be here. But everybody has some degree of callus on his heart, some degree of stiffness in her neck. That is the way we are, friends, even as believers in Jesus — it is the sinful nature that sticks to us. So, let’s not hear a story like this, in which we see our Lord angry and grief-stricken by unbelief, and say, “Those bad Pharisees.” When we do that, we are just like them. My prayer as a Christian is: “O God, give me faith in Jesus as the Lord who made the Sabbath. Let me thank him for giving it as a blessing of rest, and fulfilling it to give me rest for my soul, rest with you forever. And dear God, make me like Jesus, healing whatever I can, on whatever day I can, to be a blessing to others. Amen.”