

AUTHORITY OVER THE SABBATH
Mark 2:23-3:6

The late preacher G. Campbell Morgan once interviewed a man who had been on the mission field in Africa for 23 years. And in his interview he asked him, “What impresses you about London now that you’ve been away for so long?” And the answer probably wasn’t what the preacher was expecting because what surprised the missionary wasn’t how much the city grew, or how many old businesses had been replaced by new ones, or the newest trends. The missionary said what surprised him was the people who go to church in London and don’t smile! They don’t have any joy! They follow rules and do religious things but something’s wrong with their heart. What that missionary was describing was people caught up in religious legalism, where people follow religious rules and regulations and traditions but have hard hearts towards God. They are more performance-based rather than grace-based. And that’s exactly how the Pharisees of Jesus’s day operated. The Sabbath Day should have been the best day of the week but because of their legalism and with all of the restrictions they’d place on the Sabbath that went way beyond Scripture ever said, these joy-killers had turned it into the worst day of the week. And in our text today Jesus confronts them to take back the Sabbath and free people from their burdensome system.

Let’s pick it up in Mark 2:23-3:6

“And it happened that He was passing through the grainfields on the Sabbath, and His disciples began to make their way along while picking the heads of grain [The gospel of Luke adds they were rubbing them between their hands and eating the grain (Luke 6:1)]. The Pharisees were saying to Him, “Look, why are they doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath?” And He said to them, “Have you never read what David did when he was in need and he and his companions became hungry; how he entered the house of God in the time of Abiathar the high priest, and ate the consecrated bread, which is not lawful for anyone to eat except the priests, and he also gave it to those who were with him?” Jesus said to them, “The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath.”

He entered again into a synagogue; and a man was there whose hand was withered. They were watching Him to see if He would heal him on the Sabbath, so that they might accuse Him. He said to the man with the withered hand, “Get up and come forward!” And He said to them, “Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save a life or to kill?” But they kept silent. After looking around at them with anger, grieved at their hardness of heart, He said to the man, “Stretch out your hand.” And he stretched it out, and his hand was restored. The Pharisees went out and immediately began conspiring with the Herodians against Him, as to how they might destroy Him.”

So we just keep moving from scene to scene in this action-packed gospel of Mark and we’re in this portion the Pharisees are interrogating Jesus again and because Jesus didn’t abide by their rules, they question Jesus here as they’re walking through the grainfield.

I. THE REASON FOR THE PHARISEES’S INTERROGATION. (2:23)

Back in the book of Deuteronomy in 23:25, God gave Moses and all of Israel a command that if someone happened to be traveling and needed something to eat and or had fallen on hard times and really just needed to get something in their stomach, they could enter a vineyard or grainfield and with their hands, respectfully take some of the produce. This is what it says: “When you enter your neighbor’s vineyard, then you may eat grapes until you are fully satisfied, but you shall not put any in your basket. When you enter your neighbor’s standing grain, then you may pluck the heads with your hand, but you shall not wield a sickle in your neighbor’s standing grain.” So you couldn’t take

a whole lot – you couldn't use a basket or you any harvest equipment – but you could take what you needed to satisfy hunger.

And since I used to be a farmer and this is something that I can't help but do every year anyway when the wheat gets ripe, I wanted to show you what this looks like. What you would do to get some grain like this is you would pluck some wheat heads and rub them between your hands, separating the chaff from the grain, blow away the chaff and then eat the grain. And on average, each head is only going to have a couple or three dozen kernels in it so it's actually a lot of work to eat this way. It would take quite a bit of work just to even get just a cup of kernels this way so it really wasn't a problem for the farmer to have someone do this. I think it's a neat law because the farmer's not going to miss a handful of wheat and God will make sure he's taken of if he's generous. Besides that, in Israel when farmers harvested, they were to leave the very edges of the field or any gleanings that dropped on the ground for the poor and the foreigner (Lev. 23:22).

So snacking on some grain like this is perfectly legal but when Jesus and His disciples do this same thing, the Pharisees just blow up over it because they did it on the Sabbath and according to their little man-made religious system and Sabbath day restrictions, Jesus and the disciples had just broken four rules in one mouthful. God said don't work on the Sabbath, but these guys took it much further. By taking the wheat off the stalk, they were guilty of *reaping*. By rubbing the wheat in their hands to separate it from the chaff, they were guilty of *threshing*. By blowing away the chaff, they were guilty of *winnowing*. And, get this, by eating the wheat they were guilty of *storing* it. Again, it was legal, should have been totally normal, and a huge blessing to weary travelers or those who having a tough go at it or maybe can't work for whatever reason.

But if you remember from last week, these guys had constructed an entire fence of manmade rules and drifted far off from what God said in His Word. **This fence eventually became known as the Mishnah.** Their intentions were good, thinking we'll just come up with some restrictive rules that act like a fence to keep people from breaking the Law's fence and *they thought that when the Messiah came, He would fill in even more holes in their fence and strengthen it even more* but Jesus said last week that they missed the boat entirely on that. They were no longer even practicing biblical, God-ordained Judaism but were practicing an apostate form of Pharisaical Judaism – a man-made religion that was incredibly burdensome and wearisome to the people in that day. And Jesus told them **He's not going to add more to their restrictions and even more so, He's going to reject their entire system altogether.** Ultimately, it's His refusal to submit to their Mishnaic system that leads to the crucifixion.

The highlight of their system though, where their legalism really shined was on the Sabbath day. This day was supposed to be the best day of the week – a day to rest and recuperate and restore – but these guys had turned it into the worst day of the week! When God rested on the 7th day of creation, He did it as an example for His creation. The human body needs a day of rest and a day to enjoy God's creation like God did. His creating for six days and resting on the seventh gives us a pattern to live by. And God knows we need a rest day so much to recharge physically and spiritually that it was actually a command in the Law to Israel and called the Sabbath.

❖ **Sabbath (shabat) is a Hebrew word meaning “to cease”**

God told them “Remember the Sabbath day and keep it **holy**” and that just means **make it distinct/set it apart/let it be different.** In six days get all your work done and on the seventh, rest. It was to be a day of rest and holy convocation – rest and worship (Lev. 23:1-3). It was to be a great

day of resting, feasting, singing, fellowship, trust in the Lord to provide while they take a break and enjoying what God provides. It would really elevate the quality of human life. Actually, during the French Revolution the government attempted to change the 7-day week to a 10-day week but it was an utter failure and had to go back to seven.ⁱ It's just how we were designed – to operate according to God's creative order. But these Pharisees in their toxic religious concoction, had turned the fourth commandment for Israel into a sort of straight-jacket day where people were afraid to do anything!

When you really study it, God rules or commands concerning the Sabbath were fairly vague. He basically said don't work. But the Pharisees came along with their **pilpulistic logic** which said, *"Given a specific statement or commandment, how many new regulations could be logically derived from that original statement or commandment?"*ⁱⁱⁱ and overlaid the vague command of God with incredibly detailed commands. In their minds they said, *"Well, God says don't work so how many different things can we come up with that would be considered working?"* And in so doing, they added **1,500 restrictive rules and regulations**. In the Talmud, there was **24 chapters** just on the Sabbath alone and one rabbi said he spent 2 ½ years just studying one chapter it was so complex... for one simple command! There were **39 categories that they considered working**: sowing, plowing, reaping, binding sheaves, threshing, winnowing, selecting food, grinding, sifting, kneading, baking, shearing wool, washing wool, beating wool, dying wool, spinning, weaving, making two loops, weaving two threads, separating two threads, tying, untying, sewing two stitches, tearing in order to sew two stitches, trapping (a deer), slaughtering, flaying, salting, curing a hide, scraping a hide and cutting it up, writing two letters (alphabetic letters), erasing two letters, building, tearing down, extinguishing a fire, kindling a fire, hammering, and transporting an object from one domain to the other.ⁱⁱⁱⁱ

They said things like, "Things like you could lift something up and put something down, but only from certain places to certain places... No burden could be carried that weighed more than a dried fig, or half a fig carried two times. If – if you put an olive in your mouth and rejected it because it was bad, you couldn't put a whole one in the next time because the palate had tasted the flavor of a whole olive. If you threw an object in the air and caught it with the other hand, it was a sin. If you caught it in the same hand, it wasn't... A tailor couldn't carry his needle. The scribe couldn't carry his pen. A pupil couldn't carry his books... Cold water could be poured on warm, but warm couldn't be poured on cold. An egg could not be boiled even if all you did was put it in the [hot] sand... You could not bathe for fear when the water fell off of you it might wash the floor [washing]... Chairs couldn't be moved because they might make a rut [plowing]... A radish couldn't be left in salt because it would make it a pickle and that's work."^{iv} A woman couldn't look in a mirror object for fear that she might find a gray hair and pluck it out. And if you were traveling (under 2,000 cubits/steps btw) and there were two possible routes to take, one with grass and one without grass, a good Pharisee would take the route without grass in case a wild wheat was in the grass and by walking on it or brushing up against it, they might reap and winnow it and should a bird or rodent eat it, they'd be guilty of storing it. If one route had pebbles and one didn't, they would take the route without pebbles, lest by stepping on some pebbles they dent the ground by stepping on them and it be considered plowing. I mean, this is how ludicrous this system had become! You basically had to tiptoe around in a straight-jacket!

And so when you study the verse where Jesus said, "Come to Me all who are weary and heavy laden and I will give you rest," in its context like this, it makes sense. These people were being heavy laden with ridiculous, scrupulous, unbiblical demands. And we laugh at some of these but

churches today are known for coming up with all sorts of ridiculous religious rules as well that have no connection to Scripture and push people away as well: some churches still teach we're under the Law and do the same thing like you can't eat bacon; or things like you can't dance, can't play cards, can't watch movies, can't wear jeans, can't read any Bible other than the King James, can't wear wire rimmed glasses, men can't have their hair touch their ears.

So what's Jesus's response to this kind of stuff? For one, you'll notice **Sabbath legalism makes Him angry** in Mark 3:5.

II. **JESUS'S RESPONSE TO THE CRITICS. (2:24-28)**

A. **He takes them to the Scriptures. (vv. 24-26)**

The first thing Jesus does is He takes them to the Scriptures to prove from Scripture that they're overstepping His Word. And that's the problem with religious systems today – they're more about their keeping their traditions and man-made rules than they are about studying and knowing God's Word. And this had to frustrate them to no end but he would often say to these guys, "Have you never read?"... and in this case, "Have you never read what David did when he was in need... and hungry?" He goes back specifically to the account of David and his men who ate the consecrated bread in **the tabernacle**, which used to be their main place of worship before the Temple and while Israel was in the wilderness. And in this tabernacle was a gold table and on it there was always supposed to be 12 loaves of bread called **the bread of the Presence**. It was **symbolic bread representing God's presence** and that He is the one who is able to provide for all the 12 tribes at the same time. Ultimately it **represents Jesus** who is the Bread of Life and who comes down from the Father in heaven so that those who believe in Him will never hunger spiritually (Jn. 6:32-35).

But David, though he was the rightful king during that time, he was running for his life from king Saul. And they desperately needed something to eat! So he goes up to the priest, Ahimelech, and asks for "five loaves or whatever can be found" on hand. Well, the priest didn't have any bread except for the holy bread of the Presence and as long as these men were god-fearing, holy men, the priest said David could have it and it was replaced with new bread (as it was replaced weekly anyway). Well, this bread as Jesus said was normally only legal for the priests to eat but on this occasion, but when men are starving and hungry like they were, of course they can eat it because **what's more important? A human life or a religious ritual?** Life, right? To do good. **Works of necessity and works of mercy were allowed on the Sabbath and overruled**, and this would be considered a **work of necessity**. Saving a life is more important than saving a symbolic ceremony.

❖ **The Sabbath laws cannot apply to every situation.**

And they should've known that because even they had to make certain allowances for priests to work on the Sabbath, for babies to be born on the Sabbath, and they couldn't stop people from dying on the Sabbath and doing burial preparation, or a baby who had to be circumcised on the 8th day if it fell on a Sabbath. They had plenty of proof that they had gone way beyond what was required.

And this principle for us about the symbolic showbread couldn't have come up at a better time as we finally resume Communion today. I love communion and am excited personally for us to take communion again, but look, saving lives is more important than saving the symbolism of the tradition. Communion is symbolic of Christ's death for our sins. It's a time of self-examination and realigning ourselves with God's will, but you don't have to take the elements to do that. If with the current situation going on, you aren't comfortable taking it or because of your job are required not to have much contact and things, don't take it and that's perfectly fine. It's all at your discretion.

The second thing He does is that He corrects their false idea of the purpose of the Law in verse 27.

B. He corrects their misconstrued idea about the purpose of the Sabbath. (v. 27)

The rabbis literally taught that Israel was made for the Sabbath. If you asked a rabbi why God made Israel, he would say to honor the Sabbath. But Jesus says it's the exact opposite. He says, "The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath." God wanted them to honor it, yes, but it was for their good, not the good of the Sabbath. Today, a lot of churches have made it into something it shouldn't be either. Whole denominations have been founded based on their keeping of the Sabbath, which really isn't a genuine Sabbath anyway. The Sabbath is **always** and **only** from Friday at sundown to Saturday at sundown. It will never be any other time – not even Sunday. Sunday is not the Sabbath or the "new" Sabbath, though it functions as a type of Sabbath for us in that we rest according to God's design. Out of the ten commandments, the only one not repeated in some way is the command to keep the Sabbath and it is still not mandatory. NT believers are not under Law. We are however, instructed to meet regularly but the day itself is optional. We worship on Sunday to celebrate the day Jesus rose from the grave. The early church in the Bible also met on the first day of the week – Sunday (Acts 20:7; 1 Cor. 16:2).

C. He reminds them the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath. (v. 28)

Jesus is God and being God, He decides who can do what on His Sabbath and not these Pharisees. He decides what is allowed and not allowed – not them. This day was given by Him and for Him. So from Mark we've seen He has authority over demons, disease, forgiveness of sins, and now, authority over the Sabbath and He demonstrates that in verses 1-5 of chapter 3.

III. JESUS'S DEMONSTRATION OF HIS AUTHORITY OVER THE SABBATH. (3:1-6)

Mark connects this grainfield account with the next incident which takes place in a synagogue where a man is sitting there whose hand is withered. And it seems by the various ways the Pharisees have elsewhere tried to entrap Jesus and the way Mark points out they were watching closely "so that they might accuse Him," this man was planted there, maybe even paid by the Pharisees to be there that day.

But here this man is sitting in the crowd and Jesus knows why he is there and He doesn't ignore it or wait until after the service or wait until after the Sabbath to address the issue. And that's important to point out because He could've waited. This man's crippling disease of having a withered hand wasn't a life or death situation and it could've waited. Kind of like the man at the pool of Bethesda. John 5:5 says the man had been paralyzed for 38 years but Jesus sought him out on the Sabbath to heal him. They're both miracles that could've waited until after the Sabbath but Jesus didn't wait, why? Because you don't build bridges with legalists, and you don't cave in to their system. We learned that in Galatians – a little leaven will leaven the whole lump. Paul said, "We did not yield in subjection to them for even an hour, so that the truth of the gospel would remain with you." That's how Jesus saw it. You don't yield to systems that put people in religious bondage. Those systems anger God (3:5) and Jesus confronts it publicly.

He calls the man to get up and come forward so everyone can see what's about to happen. And He asks this question: "Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save a life or to kill?" The answer's obvious but the Pharisees kept silent, why? Because to them, doing good by healing this man is harming the Sabbath but it would be okay for them to kill Jesus on the Sabbath. They would rather kill Jesus on the Sabbath than see this man healed. These hypocrites would save an

animal's life if it was in danger on the Sabbath but they won't accept healing a man on the Sabbath? Actually, to them, any health care was debated on the Sabbath. If a person was seriously injured, you could only give them enough care to keep them alive. Healing and saving life was debated. The reality should have been that there's no better day to heal this man than on the Sabbath and give him rest from this infirmity that he has been dealing with for so long. It would make it an even more blessed day and a day for rejoicing. Instead, joy was replaced with anger and grieving over their hard hearts. Legalists are joy-killers! Like some today, they act like not smiling makes them more spiritual. Surely the Pharisees were in that bunch.

Once He heals the man and they're left defeated once again by Jesus's authority and can't match His wisdom, so they go away and conspire with this Jewish group called the Herodians. And the Herodians were a Jewish political group who favored Rome and appeased Rome – I mean, they were just the opposite of the Pharisees in regards to Rome. But in this case, they bunk together because neither one of them wants to see Jesus as King of Israel. They both want to protect their positions and do away with this Jesus whom the whole world is going after. And Mark includes this just to prove how incredibly hypocritical they had become.

CONCLUSION:

Now in conclusion, I think there's several principles we could glean from this passage. First, Jesus faced a lot of opposition in ministry and had to set His face like flint at times and press on through it and deal with it. That's the nature of ministry at times. Legalists come along now and then and try to press their rules on you and you don't build bridges with legalists or try to appease them because it'll leaven the whole lump. We learned that in Galatians as well so I don't need to harp on it much. But in regard to Sabbath keeping and the Church today, there's a lot of legalists out there who think Sunday is the new Sabbath and to do anything fun on the Sabbath like fishing or riding your bike or playing sports or grilling would be a violation of the Sabbath.

One commentator said that he had been raised in a strict Sabbatarian home and had a bunch of Sabbath Day rules that his parents got from their parents. And He said one time his mother was at his home one Sunday afternoon and was watching his boys play. They were running around and playing and his mother said, "If your grandmother could see what you let your boys do on the Sabbath she would roll over in her grave" And for one, Sunday is not the Sabbath but two, he said that if grandma really knew Jesus and she's in heaven with Him now, she has a real grasp of grace.^v

I share that because, as one of the things my ministry friends has noted over decades of years in the counseling field is that legalists totally miss out on creation – they just don't see it's beauty or enjoy it. Creation is full of blessings for us but legalists don't see blessings very well. So my challenge to you is that you get out and enjoy God's creation somehow and someday today. God rested and enjoyed His creation on the 7th day and we should too. It's important to a life of worship.

ⁱ Thomas Purifoy Jr., *Is Genesis History?* (Nashville: Compass Classroom, 2019), 38.

ⁱⁱ Arnold Fruchtenbaum, *Yeshua: The Life of the Messiah from a Messianic Jewish Perspective, Vol. 2* (San Antonio, TX: Ariel Ministries, 2017), 201.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, 222. Y. Shabbat 7:2.

^{iv} John MacArthur, *Jesus is Lord of the Sabbath, Part 1*, accessed 4 June 2020, www.gty.org/library/sermons-library/41-11/jesus-is-lord-of-the-sabbath-part-1

^v David Thompson, *Mark 2:23-3:6 sermon notes*, accessed 6 June 2020, www.texascornersbiblechurch.org