



Speaker:
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Jesus, Lord of Sabbaths

Series: The Gospel of Mark • 9 of 9

7/1/2020 (WED) | Bible: Mark 2:23-3:6

This morning, we shall be examining the last section in Mark's second chapter and the first few verses in the third chapter. Verses 23 to 28 of the second chapter concern the episode of the disciples plucking grain on the Sabbath day in order to eat. And verses 1 to 6 of chapter 3 is an event similar in many ways to the first one.

My plan this morning is to give an overview of the two events and then focus on Jesus Christ as the Lord of Sabbaths. The first account tells us about how Jesus and his disciples were walking through some fields containing crops. It was probably wheat. And if you took the grain heads and rubbed them, you could separate the wheat from the chaff and the wheat could be eaten as it was.

You might like to think of this as you read your Bibles. We don't merely *read* the scriptures, unthinkingly. Like with that wheat we can, through study and meditation on God's word, get to the very heart of the meaning. And we take it in and digest it and are blessed.

Back to the story. It will come as no surprise to you that the Pharisees were present—likely not following the disciples but observing them from the edge of the field. And I've no doubt that they were hoping to catch the disciples plucking the grain. They **WANTED** the disciples to do the very thing that they were to use in evidence against them! This is the way of the religious hypocrite. True children of God have the *heart* of God. They love others. It grieves them when others sin. If the Pharisees were true children of God, they would've been hoping the disciples would not, in their eyes, sin. But the attitude of this bunch was, *Yes! We've got them!*

The Pharisees ask Jesus the accusing question: *Why are your disciples breaking God's law? Look at them, working on the Sabbath day!* This is a classic example of how men can take rules too far. These people zoom in so much on a rule that they lose proper perspective. They can no longer see the *spirit* of the law. The Pharisees' accusation was at least based on an element of God's law. The Jews were told to observe a seven-day Sabbath. They were told that on the last day of the week they should do no work. The disciples of Jesus, in the eyes of the Pharisees, were working. In removing the heads of grain, they were reaping. In rubbing the crop to get to the edible part, they were threshing!

There are still Jews around today who continue in the curious habits of the Pharisees. Neglecting the spirit of God's law, they follow tradition. And so in Judaism today we see a great deal of absurdity and superstition.

Let me say at this point that the disciples were perfectly entitled to eat this grain. The law of God allows people to enter the fields of others and pick small amounts of grain for personal use. It was a provision for the poor. A primitive type of welfare if you like. You can read in Deuteronomy 23:25, “When thou comest into the standing corn of thy neighbour, then **thou mayest pluck the ears with thine hand**; but thou shalt not move a sickle unto thy neighbour's standing corn.” To be clear then, the Pharisees’ complaint was that this legitimate act was taking place **on the Sabbath**.

In answering them, Jesus relates an episode from the scriptures themselves. It concerns none other than David. We can read about this in the first book of Samuel. 1 Samuel 21:3 says, “Now therefore what is under thine hand? Give me five loaves of bread in mine hand, or what there is present.” And verse 6, “So the priest gave him hallowed bread: for there was no bread there but the shewbread..”

If you are familiar with the layout of the tabernacle, you’ll no doubt remember that there was a table in the holy place. On it was placed what was called the “showbread”. It was part of the whole ritual setup of the tabernacle. It had to be continually replaced, of course, with fresh bread. The slightly stale bread that was removed was to be eaten by the Levites only. You might want to take a moment to notice the connection with our very own Lord’s Table. Our bread, no longer restricted to a priestly class, is instead eaten by God's adopted children who are all, in a way, priests.

I thought it was quite amusing the way Jesus phrased this question. He mocked them saying, *Haven't you read this?* He knew quite well that the Pharisees will have read that account on numerous occasions. So his intention is to show them up because they didn't read the scriptures properly.

Let's be clear here: strictly speaking, David should not have eaten the showbread. The priest exercised judgement. On the one hand, the priests were supposed to eat it themselves. On the other hand, this priest had in front of him a brother in need. And the fact that Jesus used this example indicates that the priest made the right decision in Jesus' eyes.

So what was Jesus' point? **It was that the Pharisees’ moral compass was messed up.** They failed to see in their own scriptures the grand theme of **mercy**. And even when Jesus comes into the world and states these principles clearly, they still don't understand. You can't get any clearer than Jesus' two commandments: love God and love others. Everything in the entire body of the Mosaic Law was to revolve around those two principles.

We can read between the lines of what Jesus said here. Consider that the rules that the disciples had broken were merely man-made ones. The rule that was bent in the David incident was from God. So if the Pharisees here had understanding, they would get Jesus' point. **If the ancient priest was prepared, albeit reluctantly, to lay aside an original, God given principle for the sake of compassion, how much more should the Pharisees now, for compassion's sake, lay aside rules that were man-made?**

Jesus tells them that the Sabbath was made for man's benefit. So they needed to understand the spirit in which it was given. And then he tells them that he, the Son of Man,

is the very Lord of the Sabbath! **The Lord of the Sabbath.** In other words, *You religionists: what I say goes!*

Let's have a look now at the beginning of the third chapter. This incident took place in a synagogue. If you think back a few weeks, you'll remember that Jesus exorcised a demon that he came across in the synagogue. This time, there's someone else with a specific need. It says there was a man there with a withered hand. I don't know what this disease was, but it seems to involve a wasting away of the flesh and muscle in the hand and possibly in the whole arm.

I'm trying to get inside the heads of the Pharisees. They're watching Jesus closely. They again wanted something to accuse him of. Can you imagine the hardness of heart that would cause people to think *Right, here we go. We're sure he's going to heal someone and then we'll have him!* They fully expected Jesus to do good. And they intended to use that act of compassion in evidence against him. You think they'd rejoice. It's the best day of the week. What better way to cap it all off but with a miracle of healing! These men were interested in neither the merciful intentions of Jesus, nor the life-changing healing of the man, nor even the clear evidence that it was a miracle.

Jesus Christ, in his incarnation, retained the ability to see a person's very thoughts. His divine eye peered inside the souls of the Pharisees, and all he saw was self-righteousness. He saw an utter lack of compassion—**and it made him angry.** This visitation to the world by the son of God was not that he might destroy it. In that he preached the way of salvation, he came to *save*. But he will return, and it will be in the form of avenger.

The Pharisees didn't limit their opposition to inward thoughts. By now they'd become emboldened. We learn from other sources that the Pharisees addressed Jesus directly. And Jesus came back at them with a question. He asked them what the most law-abiding action would be to take. Is it more lawful, he asks, to do good and save lives, or to do evil and kill people? The answer is obvious to all but the hard hearted. If these Pharisees had an ounce of understanding, they'd see the distinction. It was a Sabbath day. And while one man wanted to do good and heal people, others were thinking only of evil and plotting to kill.

This is what we read, isn't it? Jesus heals the man of his withered hand. And immediately, it says, the **Pharisees went out to conspire with others to MURDER Jesus Christ.** When we consider the depths of their hardness, it's no surprise that Jesus was filled with anger. Had he not giving them a chance, by highlighting the two extremes of behaviour on the Sabbath? A suitable response from the Pharisees would be to break down in tears, consumed with grief for their sinfulness. *Forgive me, Lord, for polluting your Sabbath with my presence! Forgive my hatred! Forgive me for being an enemy of mercy!* Sadly, repentance was the last thing on their mind.

In the time we have, I'd like to take this description of Jesus Christ he uses for himself. That is, I want to make four points in order **to show how Jesus is Lord of Sabbaths.**

Firstly, **Jesus Christ is Lord of Sabbaths because the first one was his alone.** We learn in the first chapter of John's Gospel that Jesus Christ was the one who created the world. Over the

span of six days, he brought everything into existence. But on the seventh day he ceased from his work. This announcement was to symbolise the sabbaths that the Lord was to give to men.

Jesus's seventh-day rest was representative. Yes, his work of direct creation from nothing had come to an end. But Christ is also the *sustainer* of this world, and it was necessary that he managed his creation on the seventh day just as much as he has on every other day throughout time. So we shouldn't think his sabbath was a period of inactivity. And there shouldn't be anyone who thinks that God had become weary in his creative acts and therefore needed to rest!

Secondly, **Jesus Christ is Lord of Sabbaths because he gave them to men.** He formed different types of sabbaths. He gave them to **certain people at certain times.** Now man existed long before a sabbath was ever instituted by God. It may surprise you to know that there is no mention of sabbath-keeping for a full **two-and-a-half thousand years after creation.** It appears in an episode during the wilderness wanderings of the Hebrews. The people were given extra food by God on the sixth day so that they could rest on the seventh. It was, amongst other things, a test of their obedience. And of course we read later on in the book of Exodus that God gave laws to the Hebrews, including the direction that they should keep a seventh day sabbath. Having said this, it is of course possible that men kept a day of rest voluntarily during those long ages. We simply don't know. But if God wanted to communicate to us that a sabbath had been kept throughout that period, he would have told us.

I don't want to go into too much detail about the giving of the law, particularly concerning its sabbaths. So I'll give you two significant reasons for the institution of the weekly sabbath. Deuteronomy 5:14 says "But the seventh day is the sabbath of the LORD thy God: in it thou shalt not do any work, thou, nor thy son, nor thy daughter, nor thy manservant, nor thy maidservant...that thy manservant and thy maidservant may rest as well as thou." **So this shows us that the Sabbath was given for the benefit of men.** It ensured at least one day off in the week. You could view this as a primitive form of workers' rights. The workaholic men and women couldn't drive themselves into the ground, and neither could cruel bosses do the same to their employees. What did Jesus say in our passage? **MAN WAS NOT CREATED TO OBSERVE ANY SABBATH.** It's the other way round! **THE SABBATH WAS MADE TO HELP MAN.** The weekly Sabbath was never meant to be observed in such a way to make men miserable. And neither was it designed to obstruct works of kindness of the type Jesus performed.

I said I'd give you another reason for the giving of the Sabbath. You can find this in in Ezekiel 20:12. "Moreover also I gave them my sabbaths, **to be a sign between me and them,** that they might know that I am the LORD that sanctifies them." So this time we see that sabbath keeping, like most of the Mosaic Law, was meant to become a characteristic of the Hebrew nation. The sometimes-unusual requirements regarding diet and clothing, for example, were to mark out the Hebrews as unique. They were to be the recipients of God's many blessings. And we know that, through their persistent rejection of God, the privileges were to be stripped from the Jews and distributed to the heathen nations.

Here's my third point. Jesus Christ is Lord of Sabbaths because he puts a right interpretation on them. If we want to know

- What the sabbaths were about, or
- Who should keep them, or
- When they should be kept, or
- The exact manner in which they should be kept...

...we can't rely on Jewish interpretations. But we even have to exercise caution when listening to the views of Bible commentators, no matter how good they may be. **Instead, we rely on Jesus Christ himself.** We take as our starting point those things stated most clearly by the Lord of Sabbaths himself.

We read in another gospel that Jesus introduced his ox-in-a-ditch example in this confrontation with the Pharisees. You see, the Pharisees wouldn't object to a gang of people hauling a heavy farm animal out of a ditch that it'd fallen into. Now that example describes a partial breaking of God's law, if understood in its strictest sense. So Jesus here has given two examples where the principle of rest on the Sabbath was broken. Does this mean that Jesus had a low view of the Law? No. Simply put, **he understood that there were occasions when there existed competing principles.**

The Lord knows when people are in these dilemmas. And he expects us to exercise judgement. We need to understand that the principles, guidelines or laws that God gives are not all of equal importance. Turn to Hosea 6:6. It says, "For I desired mercy, and not sacrifice; and the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings." And during his ministry, Jesus quoted this phrase from the scriptures. SACRIFICE WAS DEMANDED BY GOD, BUT MERCY FAR MORE SO! The Israelites so neglected the weightier matters of compassion and justice that their burnt offerings had become like a foul stench to God.

You'd be mistaken if you thought this type of sin was limited to the Hebrews, or even the Pharisees in Jesus' time. Every age has its hardened, religious, self-righteous hypocrites. Look close to home brethren. Has the church in modern ages not had its fair share of these people? Not even the members of the evangelical Protestant set are immune from these things. We have never had a shortage of men and women who put their theological interpretations before the greater requirement of love for the brethren. There's no shortage of heresy hunters. And what's tragic is that they honestly believe they're doing God a service.

So in our passage today, Jesus correctly interprets the law of God and gives examples of how to handle these moral dilemmas. And if a Levitical priest compromised the rules for the sake of mercy, how much less can we question the decisions of the very Lord of Sabbaths himself?

You know, brethren, of the different views held by the church today regarding the seventh day Sabbath. You will know that I don't consciously keep any sort of sabbath day. But in our differences, let's keep the higher principles in view. Listen to what Paul says in Romans 14:6. "He that regardeth the day, regardeth it unto the Lord; and he that regardeth not the day,

to the Lord he doth not regard it..." Paul goes on to encourage the believers to not allow anyone to judge them in the matter of sabbath-keeping. So let's keep that spirit of wisdom at the forefront of our minds when we disagree.

Here's my final point. **Jesus Christ is the Lord of Sabbaths because he is the Sabbath rest!** When we enter into a right relationship with Jesus Christ, *we enter into God's rest*. If you keep your Bibles open at Hebrews and chapter 4, and we'll read verse 9. "There remaineth therefore a rest to the people of God." The risen Saviour may have ascended back to his Father's right hand in heavenly places, yet he also *remains with us*. He remains as a rest to all those weary ones trying to please God through their own efforts.

Hebrews 4:10 says, "For he [Jesus] that is entered into his rest, he also hath ceased from his own works, as God did from his." The Godhead was said to have rested on the seventh day of creation week. Jesus too, in ascending to heaven, rested from his ministry of teaching and self-sacrifice. **AND IF A MAN, WOMAN, OR CHILD HAS DISCOVERED THE POINTLESSNESS OF TRYING TO PLEASE GOD THROUGH THEIR OWN EFFORTS, THERE REMAINS IN JESUS CHRIST A GREAT REST.** Their repentant souls abandon all hope of deserving God's favour. They confess their worthlessness. They plead with God to be credited with the merits of another, Jesus Christ, the Lord of Rest. And by this God-given awakening, they are ushered into the place of peace with God.

It continues in Hebrews in verse 12 to say, "Let us labour therefore to enter into that rest, lest any man fall after the same example of unbelief." What labour is this? This is just one more example of how our experience of God can be in different degrees. We have the Spirit of God, but not all in the same measure. We have the joy of God, but each of us experience it differently. The closer we are to God, the greater will be our experience of all his graces. And so it is with God's rest. If you are in Christ, you have entered into his rest. **But just as we are told to strive in prayer so that we might enjoy God's benefits even more, so we are to strive for a greater experience of God's rest.**

Let the word of God encourage you to be earnest. Strive with God in prayer. Familiarise yourself with his written revelation. Attend to the ordinances he has given. Resist temptation. Be urgent in your witness for Christ. Pay attention to sermons! For the enjoyment of rest is not to be found by feeble efforts. It takes hard work.

As you daily draw on God for strength for your labours, you will see more and more that Jesus Christ is our Sabbath rest. **You will see him as Lord of Sabbaths.** You will find, in him, a rest that no holy day could ever give. And from him you will receive that ultimate reward of a resurrection to eternal life.

Amen.