

THE HEART OF THE LAW: COMPASSION

Pastor Lucas Almeida—Central Baptist Church—August 21st, 2022

TEXT

Mark 2:23-3:6

(ESV)

[23] One Sabbath he was going through the grainfields, and as they made their way, his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. [24] And the Pharisees were saying to him, “Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?” [25] 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: [26] 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?” [27] And he said to them, “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. [28] So the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath.”

[1] Again he entered the synagogue, and a man was there with a withered hand. [2] And they watched Jesus, to see whether he would heal him on the Sabbath, so that they might accuse him. [3] And he said to the man with the withered hand, “Come here.” [4] 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. [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. [6] The Pharisees went out and immediately held counsel with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him.

INTRODUCTION

Do you usually get enough rest? Do you sleep enough hours at night? Does your employer give you enough vacation days? Do you feel like you don't need another day off during the week? Can you say of yourself, “I live a pretty restful life?”

I'm in this stage of life that rest is so elusive. At the end of most days my energy tank is pretty depleted, and the interrupted night of a parent with young children never seems to fill it back up adequately. As a matter of fact, I wrote these thoughts on my phone, at 4AM, as I was holding my three-month-old daughter who decided to have a party without our consent.

Rest is so important, isn't it? As a matter of fact, we'd die first from sleep deprivation than from starvation. But is rest merely about getting 7-8 hours of sleep a night? Is rest about having two days off a week? Is rest about having the right amount of vacation days? And the answer is: no. Rest is not merely a physical need; rest is primarily a spiritual need. And this need can only be supplied by the Lord himself.

Psalm 127:2

It is in vain that you rise up early
and go late to rest,
eating the bread of anxious toil;
for he gives to his beloved sleep.

Perhaps you've walked into this building today, you are not really a Christian, but you're saying, "I'm exhausted. I have tried to find rest everywhere but everything has failed me. My hope is that today you will understand that only God can give you the rest you need.

Perhaps you are a Christian, even a member of this church, you know Christ is your rest, but you just don't feel rested in your soul. You don't know what else to do. My hope is that today you'll see that rest does not come through what we do or even what we do not do. Rest...the rest that Christ provides comes by faith. The more we trust Christ, the more we rest in him.

Today in our text we're going to consider four points: (1) What is the Sabbath, (2) What the Sabbath is not, (3) Who the Sabbath is about, (4) What the Sabbath is for.

1) WHAT IS THE SABBATH?

In 1793 French revolutionaries attempted to change their week pattern from six days of work and one of rest to nine days of work and one of rest. Needless to say, that didn't last long.

God is wise in all he does, he knows our frame, so he built into creation his own pattern of wisdom, his pattern of work and rest. God created the heavens and the earth in six days and on the seventh day he rested.

The word Sabbath comes from the Hebrew to stop or to rest. The Sabbath is a creation principle and also the sign of the covenant God made with Israel. Sabbath observance was required of Israel under the fourth commandment, which is the longest commandment of them all.

The sabbath was given so Israel would remember the Lord. Remember the Lord's provision as God provided a double portion of manna for them on the sixth day so they could eat on the Sabbath.

The sabbath was given so Israel would remember the Lord's protection. When pharaoh lorded over Israel, God's people had no rest, but as soon as God led Israel out of Egypt, God gave rest, God gave his people Sabbath.

But over time Israel forgot the real purpose of the Sabbath, and scribes and Pharisees through their teaching and influence turned the Sabbath into what the Sabbath was never meant to be—a burden.

2) WHAT THE SABBATH IS NOT

In verse 23 we find Jesus and his disciples going through a grainfield, and since his disciples were hungry, they picked some heads of grain to eat. There was nothing wrong with what Jesus' disciples did. The Law of Moses allowed for such practice.

Leviticus 23:22—*“And when you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap your field right up to its edge, nor shall you gather the gleanings after your harvest. You shall leave them for the poor and for the sojourner: I am the LORD your God.”*

The Law revealed God's merciful heart towards the needy.

But the Pharisees didn't share God's sentiments. They opposed the disciples of Jesus, not because they plucked heads of grain to eat, but because they were doing it on the Sabbath. In verse 24 they ask, “Why are they doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath?” They added laws to God's Law, and this is the heart of legalism. Demanding of others that which God does not demand of them. Being a greater law giver than God himself.

The Sabbath was such a good gift from God, but it was misused in so many ways. Some would misuse it by ignoring it. Not trusting the Lord for his protection and provision, but instead out of fear and anxiety work when the Lord says rest.

This was not the most common temptation for the Pharisees, though. Instead, the Sabbath became a day for them to display their righteousness. In a sense, the Sabbath was lord over them for they lived their entire week for that day, but in reality, they believe themselves lord over the Sabbath; God created that day to serve them.

The Lord required one thing in the Sabbath—rest. And yet, the Pharisees created an entire system of legal requirements around this rest. Many of these rules are honestly laughable. Things like:

- You are allowed to write on the Sabbath, as long as you don't exceed one letter.
- You are allowed to sew clothes on the Sabbath, but you can only do one stitch.
- You are allowed to walk on the Sabbath...but not more than 1,999 paces.
- If a house caves in, you are allowed to remove enough debris to see if anyone is left alive; if you find a survivor you can help him, but if someone is dead you need to leave him there.
- If you have a dislocated foot...can't fix it. You have to wait until the next day.

And the list goes on and on. The Pharisees had appointed themselves as the guardians of the Sabbath, and the more zealous they would become the more legalistic they would become. The more legalistic they would become, the more they would forget the purpose of God's law—compassion.

“...legalism divorces the letter of the law from the spirit of the law.” –R.C. Sproul

Legalism leads to death because it deceives the week and keeps them from relying on grace. But legalism has a great enemy—Jesus.

WHO THE SABBATH IS ABOUT

Notice what happens in verse 25. The pharisees criticize Jesus' disciple, but it is Jesus who defends them! Jesus is always on the side of the persecuted believer! He defends our cause.

When the enemy tells us we are not righteous enough, when our past comes to haunt us, when our frail will yields into temptation and sin, Jesus defends us!

When Paul, in Acts 9 is breathing murderous thoughts against the church, Jesus stops him and says, "Why are you persecuting me?" To oppose Jesus' disciples is to oppose Jesus! And the fact that Christ is for us should be our sole source of confidence in life.

Jesus here in verse 25 appeals to the authority of Scripture. He says, "Have you not read?" Surely, they've read. These are people who specialize on the Law. But Jesus really means, "Have you not understood what you've read?" And Jesus is not questioning their intellectual capacity, he's indicting them for not understanding Scriptures in a spiritual way.

It is possible, friends, to be thoroughly familiarized with Scriptures and still not have a spiritual understanding of it. A spiritual understanding of Scripture, that is, an understanding of Scripture that is from the Holy Spirit, must lead us to love the Lord and to have compassionate hearts towards others.

So, Jesus takes them back to a story about King David and his men during the time of Abiathar, the High Priest. You can read the background of the story in 1 Samuel 21. But basically, David is running away from Saul. His men are starving, and he comes to the priest, Ahimelech and asks for bread. Ahimelech tells David there is no bread except the bread that was consecrated for the temple. This was considered holy bread and only the priests and their sons could eat this bread according to the Law. But Ahimelech gives the bread to David, and David and his men eat the bread.

The spirit of the Law won over the letter of the Law. The Law fulfilled its purpose, it showed compassion to the needy.

So, what is Jesus teaching us by bringing up this story from David?

As he says in verse 27, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath." God instituted the Sabbath in order to meet the needs of men and not the other way around.

Love and compassion guide us to a proper application of the Law. I am not saying that through love we can break the Law, no, I'm saying the exact opposite; **it is only through love that we are genuinely able to keep the Law of God.**

Romans 13:8—*Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.*

But I also think Jesus is doing something else here. It is not by chance that he chose a story about David here. David was the king of Israel par excellence, but **Jesus is presenting himself as a new and better David.** Jesus is the long-awaited King! He is the one that was to come like the Son of Man, the term we see used in Daniel 7 referring to a divine messianic figure. David protected and provided well for God's people, but the provision Jesus would make to his people, no other human king could ever make. The relationship between Jesus and King David are going to keep coming up as we work through the Gospel of Mark.

But I think most pertinent to this immediate text, Jesus wanted to highlight that **He is Lord over the Sabbath.** Perhaps for our modern western ears it may be difficult for us to fully appreciate how shocking this concept is.

But look briefly back at Genesis 2:3,

Genesis 2:3—*So God blessed the seventh day and made it holy...*

The Sabbath is the Sabbath because God established it. God is Lord over the Sabbath. And because the Sabbath is the day God created to enjoy all of HIS creation, if he is Lord of the Sabbath, he is Lord of all Creation!

Do you see? **When Jesus says he is Lord over the Sabbath he is declaring himself to be equal with God!**

The Pharisees wanted to Lord over Jesus and his observance of the Sabbath, but Jesus' response is astonishing! "I created the Sabbath! I made it what it is."

God gave Israel the Sabbath so they would remember him, and every time Israel would observe the Sabbath Israel was being reminded of the eternal rest that was yet to come. Every time Israel ceases from work, Israel was reminded that one day they would find perennial rest in the coming of the Lord of the Sabbath, in the coming of Jesus.

Jesus' relationship to the eternal law of God is not one of enforcement. Jesus is not merely a judge that makes sure the law is kept. Jesus is the source of God's law. It is because of him that the law was established.

Jesus is not merely a judge; he is the entire legal system. The law initiates, proceeds, emanates from him. He is Lord over all!

What is right, is right because Jesus says so; what is wrong, is wrong because Jesus says so! And oh, the pride that is not in just the Pharisees' heart, but that is so present in our hearts—to think that we can tell God how to run HIS world.

WHAT THE SABBATH IS FOR

The Sabbath was the perfect opportunity for the display of compassion towards the needy. In chapter 3 Jesus enters the synagogue and there he finds a man with a withered hand. The pharisees were there watching to see if Jesus would heal him on the Sabbath, and Jesus does exactly what the Pharisees thought he would do.

He calls the man to himself and asks the Pharisees, *“Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to kill?”* The Pharisees, in their hearts had already committed murder. But Jesus, he chooses good!

The word good abounds in the creation narrative. And this man had a creation related problem. God created our bodies to function well. He made all things Good. When he finishes creation, he looks at all that he had made and said, “It is very good!” But this man had a hand that wasn't good, it gave evidence of consequences of sin and rebellion upon the world.

The world we live in today was made good, but it's marred, broken, dysfunction because of sin. When our first father Adam sinned the world that was good became cursed. That's why our bodies are frail, sin is the reason why we have floods and droughts, hurricanes and earthquakes. Sin made this world a dangerous hostile place.

But after looking at the silent Pharisees, with a justified anger, Jesus tells that man, “Stretch out your hand.” And just like that, the brokenness of that man's body went away. That man's tired and ruined body was re-created by the author or creation himself.

2 Corinthians 5:17—*Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.*

Jesus here demonstrates that he has power re-create that which was broken by the fall, and he always uses his power for the good of those who come to him for rest.

Matthew 11:28—*Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.*