

## *Jesus Reimagines the Sabbath*

Mark 2:23-3:6

Sunday, June 2, 2024

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How many of you remember the good old days – you know, when stores weren't open on Sunday? When a person couldn't buy beer on Sunday? When everyone got up, went to church, and then came home and had Sunday dinner together? Those were the good old days, right?

In our reading from Mark, Jesus is in a squabble with the Pharisees over the good old days of first-century Judaism, and of the sabbath in particular. Just a reminder: the Jewish sabbath was on Saturday. Or to be more precise, it went from sundown on Friday to sundown on Saturday. As Christians, our sabbath is on Sunday because that's the day Jesus rose from the dead. For both Jews and Christians, there's a commandment behind our observance: *Remember the sabbath day and keep it holy*. The thinking is: God created the world in six days, and on the seventh day God rested. If God's needs rest, then we do too.

So, where has our day of rest gone? It seems to have gotten swallowed up in a flurry of to-do lists, an avalanche of texts and emails, a calendar that's filled to overflowing, and let's not forget baseball, football, golf, and kids' sports.

The sabbath is meant to be life-giving. We can't work seven days a week. We shouldn't even try. Over the years, Israel was sometimes good at keeping the sabbath and sometimes not. They were often more committed during the tough times such as sixth century exile in Babylon when they were far away from home; and now, during the events depicted in Mark, when they were under the iron grip of Rome. Focusing on the sabbath was a mark of their identity as God's chosen people. It was a reminder of God's ongoing care, and of their responsibility to that God.

So, what did that responsibility look like in the first century when keeping the sabbath? Rules were set up: How far could a person walk on the sabbath? Were you allowed to care for animals? What if you were hungry – could you fix yourself something to eat? The sages in Israel added one proscription on top of another. They ended up with 39 categories of labor that was forbidden. The categories covered everything from sewing to starting a fire. Helpful as those categories may have been, some wondered: How much is enough?

Those questions could have been a part of the job description for the Pharisees. It's easy to portray the Pharisees as nattering naysayers – and sometimes they were – but their intentions were generally good. In a changing world, when it's easy to lose track of who you are, the Pharisees were trying to steer people in the right direction.

Some refer to their efforts as “putting a hedge around the Torah.” They spelled things out as clearly as possible so that people would not violate the law. I can imagine them being a little like parents who've given their teenager a curfew. But instead of going to bed and occasionally glancing at the clock, those parents are sitting in the living room, with the lights on, counting down the minutes. And if you're that teenager, you better not be late!

Today's reading has two controversies between the Pharisees and Jesus. The Pharisees didn't necessarily start out to antagonize Jesus. They were on the same team, after all, trying to guide people toward God. But as you well know, legal issues can get messy. A complicating factor was that Jesus was highly popular. And even though Jesus was an observant Jew, he didn't necessarily follow the letter of the law, at least not to the degree that the Pharisees did.

In the first controversy, Jesus and his disciples are on the move. It's the sabbath. They're hungry and there isn't a Golden Arches to be found. In ancient Israel, travelers were allowed to walk through the fields and pick heads of grain. It wasn't considered stealing. It was a way for Israelites to show their neighborliness, and also to care for sojourners who were on longer trips.

So, does picking a few heads of grain constitute “work”? The Pharisees think so. Jesus and his disciples have broken the sabbath. They should have brought food along with them. The Pharisees confront Jesus: “Why are your disciples doing what is not lawful on the sabbath?”

Jesus tries to smooth over the dispute. Like the sages of old, he cites precedent. He brings up a time when King David was on the move. David didn't go into a grain field, but he did enter the house of God. The priest gave him the Bread of Presence to eat. That was holy bread. Only the priests were supposed to eat it. When Jesus mentions David, I can picture the Pharisees gritting their teeth. *King David – just who does this guy think he is?*

Jesus makes a couple of statements in response. The first one is fairly tepid: “The sabbath was made for humans, not humans for the sabbath.” Nothing

too radical here. Exceptions in sabbath conduct happen from time to time. Life gets in the way. The second statement, though, has an edge to it. Jesus makes a startling claim: “So the Son of man is Lord even of the sabbath.” What Jesus is really saying to the Pharisees is this: “I am more than an ordinary rabbi. You better get used to it!”

Do you see what’s happening here? Like King David, Jesus approaches tradition, even sabbath tradition, with a claim to authority. He offers a legal opinion that differs from the Pharisees. “Sometimes,” he contends, “certain demands of the law rightly could be set aside in order to meet greater needs.”

When I was growing up, my dad used to talk about keeping the sabbath. As you might imagine: my dad, the preacher, often had an opinion about other people’s behavior. One Monday he commented that so-and-so hadn’t been in church on Sunday; he was putting up hay instead. Those were the sorts of comments that preacher’s kids occasionally heard from their dad when no one else was around. My dad seemed troubled, but then he sighed and said, “We did have a big storm last night. Maybe he needed to get the hay into the barn before the storm.” Sometimes, it seems, certain demands of the law need to be set aside in pursuit of a greater good.

The second sabbath controversy follows soon after. Jesus visits a synagogue. The Pharisees are there. Their hostility is mounting. Unlike the crowds, the Pharisees aren’t swayed by Jesus’ authority. They’re keeping a close eye on whether he will heal the man with the withered hand...*on the sabbath*. They’ve already made up their minds: If Jesus does this, he will be willfully disregarding the law of God. Again, they believe the law is good, giving order to life. But unlike Jesus, they’re more inclined to follow the letter of the law, rather than the spirit of it.

Jesus can see the Pharisees glaring at him. So he presses them, “Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath?” By orchestrating the man’s healing, Jesus is not disparaging the law. Rather, he’s honoring the deeper purpose of the sabbath, and of the law in general, which is meant to save and preserve life. Indeed, what better day is there than the sabbath to promote God’s commitment to humanity’s well-being?

Granted, Jesus could have waited till sundown – this was not a matter of life and death. When you think about it, though, this might have been the first time in a long while that the healed man could contemplate going to work and

supporting his family. Jesus does more than fix a problem. He restores the man to dignity and wholeness. In the process, he demonstrates the urgency of his own work.

Clearly the Pharisees don't approve. They immediately conspire with the Herodians on how to destroy this increasingly popular and dangerous rabbi. Jesus and the Pharisees are at a standoff. It's hard to get to the bottom of legal issues such as these. In many ways, the rest of Mark's Gospel will be one controversy after another. The stories are intended to help us make sense of the events leading up to the cross, which is where this gospel is ultimately heading.

Keep in mind, Mark wrote his gospel some 40 years after these events took place. I have a feeling that 40 years from now some of the legal issues we're facing will make a lot more sense than they do right now. Hopefully we'll be able to see then what we cannot see now.

Don Juel puts it like this: "For us – as for Mark – the cross ought to be a sober reminder of how easily the most noble motives can be perverted. The cross points out how quickly an institution like the sabbath can become an end in itself. The cross illustrates how frequently insidious forces can transform the best-intentioned among us into insensitive leaders, desperately out of touch with what is right and good." Don Juel was talking about the Pharisees, but as I see it, his words could apply to almost anyone in power.

Friends, we're not living in the good old days. I wonder what Jesus would say and feel if he were among us today. In his synagogue encounter, Jesus was moved to grief when he witnessed the hard-heartedness of the Pharisees, stubbornly refusing to admit any wrongdoing whatsoever, and unwilling to celebrate the man's relief from suffering.

Still, in the midst of swirling conflict, Mark has some good news to announce. The inbreaking of the reign of God has come near. Jesus, like the God who instituted the sabbath, is committed to preserving life. His ministry will expose hypocrisy wherever it resides. And finally, through the cross, Jesus will deliver us.

Lord Jesus, may it be so! Amen.