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Jesus: Lord of the Sabbath - Mark 2:23 -3:6

I'm often asked why Christians do not worship on the Sabbath. Well, some do. Seventh Day Baptist and a few others do worship on Saturday. I suppose the main reason why the majority of Christians worship on Sunday is because the early church worshiped on Sunday in honor of the resurrection. Since then, the majority of Christians have met for worship on one day each week primarily on Sunday. However, there is no New Testament imperative that declares on which day Christians should worship.

This morning I want us to think about why Jesus challenged the way the religious leaders of His day practiced the Sabbath. His actions could not have been more deliberate and controversial. His claim to be the Lord of the Sabbath could not have been more over the top. What exactly is Jesus challenging? What are the old wineskins into which the new wine of the gospel cannot be poured? Certainly, Jesus is not against the moral law of God. Jesus was not against God's commandments. He quoted from them freely as applicable to our lives. Surely he is not against ritual or tradition; both are inevitable and good. And certainly Jesus was not against religion. His brother James spoke of true religion in the context of authentic Christianity. And more significant, for our day, there are those who use the wineskin proverb to suggest that Jesus is against what is *old* in contrast to what is *new*. Unfortunately, it has become popular to cast Jesus against practices He valued. That Jesus was against the law of God, tradition, ritual, religion, and that which is old distorts His teachings and has weakened, and in many cases discredited, the church's witness in the world.

I want to suggest to you that Jesus was challenging the religious leaders' interpretation of the law and how far their practice of the law departed from God's original intentions. As we saw last week, Jesus wasn't against fasting. However, when the motive for fasting is to advance a national agenda and personal ambition over God's purposes, the practice contradicts God's purposes for it. When the motive is to merit God's favor or to impress others while holding others with contempt, the new wine of the gospel will burst open this old and tired wineskin because the gospel is incompatible with these unworthy motives.

Similar distinctions apply to the practice of Sabbath keeping. Jesus was not against keeping the Sabbath *per se*. Yet, God's original purpose for giving the Sabbath got lost in the practice of keeping it. God commanded that Israel was to rest one day in seven. However, by the time of Christ, the religious leaders had saddled it with so many burdens and restrictions one could barely keep track. Two activities the Pharisee disallowed on the Sabbath had to do with harvesting and grinding. By eating grain on the Sabbath Jesus was challenging their *interpretation* of the Sabbath commandment. By being more concerned with the codes than God's intention for the code, the Pharisees' understanding became as shriveled up as the man's hand Jesus healed. They were missing the forest for the trees.

If you have had dealings with city code inspectors or DMV officials you may have experienced this sort of thing. Codes and license requirements are good things; they're designed to protect you from shoddy work and thieves. But there are times when those who enforce the codes can get so concerned about the particulars of the code that they lose sight of the reason the code was established. Once I attempted to get an Oregon license for a car we brought over from Washington. However, two of the

seventeen digits in my VIN number, which was under the plastic covering on the inside of the door, had faded away because of excessive exposure to rain. Now, all the other fifteen digits of the VIN number matched perfectly with the VIN numbers on the dashboard and were also in perfect sequence. So, the chances that I stole this car and rubbed out two middle digits to fool a DMV was ridiculously and exponentially beyond any reasonable probability. Yet, do you think the official who enforces the law codes would see it that way? Of course he did not. He denied us a license and we had to get an appointment with the State Police who then had to check it out to make sure we weren't driving a stolen car. It took us about six months to get that car licensed. Now the DMV officials, city building code officials, and the Pharisees are not ridiculous characters for enforcing the particulars of their codes. However, those who enforce codes and laws can easily fall into the temptation of missing the forest for the trees. And they did. However, with the Pharisees something more malicious was going on.

Why Jesus Challenged The Pharisees' Interpretation of the Sabbath

This morning I want us to consider why Jesus deliberately challenged—not the law of God, but the Pharisees' interpretation of it. I see three reasons He did so and each is connected to the stark contrast between God's purpose for the Sabbath and the intention in the heart of the Pharisees.

1. God's purposes in establishing the Sabbath were holy and righteous, not hypocritical.
2. God wanted the Sabbath to be a help to humanity and not regulated by a catalogue of excessive burdens.
3. God's purpose in establishing the Sabbath was to symbolize the rest He enjoys and that He offers us in Christ.

God's purposes for the Sabbath were Holy, Helpful, and Symbolic of His rest and the eternal rest He gives us through faith in Jesus Christ..

Sabbath: a Holy Day

First, God's intentions in giving a law are always holy and righteous. Exodus 20: 11, says, "*For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth...and He rested on the seventh day, therefore the LORD blessed the seventh day and made it holy.*" If your Sabbath or Sunday rest is marked with unrighteous designs and hypocrisy, this is a clue that you are at cross-purposes with God. Let me explain. The religious leaders of the day were giving the impression that they were concerned about resting and being righteous on the Sabbath. In reality, their minds were working overtime to destroy Jesus who was God's anointed. Their words seemed to be defending the value of rest when, in reality, they were busy as bees making unrighteous plans and conspiring to crush Jesus. Why would I make such a charge? [1] Well, Mark made their plan to destroy Jesus explicit in 6:3. Moreover, Jesus' reference to 1Sam.21 & 22 is even more revealing. Let's review the episode.

[1] Some claim that none of this is historically plausible. They say that there is no evidence that Pharisees were standing around in cornfields on the Sabbath waiting to see if they could catch someone breaking the law of harvesting nor would they be visiting synagogues to ready to punish those who healed or helped folks out on the Sabbath. Perhaps this is true, *for just anyone*. However, Jesus was not just anyone. He claimed to be the Son of God who had come to inaugurate the Kingdom of God. He claimed to be the One the prophets said, was God with us. By forgiving sin, Jesus was claiming that all sins are against Him, which is a divine prerogative. So, no Pharisees did not stand around cornfields

One Sabbath day Jesus was walking through some grain fields with his disciples and He picked some heads of grain. In Luke 6 we are told that He ate it, which meant that he rubbed the ears in His hands to separate the kernel from the husk. Therefore, according to Pharisaic codes, Jesus was guilty of reaping and grinding. When the Pharisees asked Jesus why He was doing unlawful acts, Jesus answered by reminding them of one of the most brutal, malicious, and murderous acts in the Old Testament. In 2:25, Jesus asked them about David, who after being anointed king by Samuel, ran away from Saul's insane murderous obsession. David and his men came to the priest at Nob. Starving, David asked the priest if he would give them some bread to eat. The priest told David that the only bread available was the showbread, which according to the law of Moses, was only to be eaten by the priests, after it had been replaced by new bread on the Sabbath. Yet, after learning that David's men had been righteous, the priest gave them the showbread to eat. By referring to the incident, Jesus established a precedent for laying aside a Sabbath rule to meet a human need. However, there was more to this story and everyone knew it. When David was at Nob, peeping around the corner was Doeg the Edomite who was spying on David. After he saw that the priest helped David, Doeg ran back to Saul. At an opportune moment he told Saul what the priest had done and in a jealous rage, Saul sent Doeg, the Edomite back to Nob, who then killed the priest and eighty-five members of his family. Then he went into the city and killed every man, woman, child, and every living thing in the city. It is important to remember that David had been anointed king, but he had yet to be installed as king. Full of envy and sin, Saul couldn't stand it. So, he did everything in his power to have David, God's anointed, murdered.

When the Pharisees questioned Jesus about His Sabbath practice, Jesus pointed to David whose hunger and the hunger of his men trumped a rule about eating tabernacle showbread. However, it was the story that surrounded the exception that is so telling. And that story was the story of Saul's unrighteous hatred, jealousy, and brutal murder. Jesus is not merely citing a legal precedent for exceptions to Sabbath work rules. **He's putting a choice before all of them. Who were they going to be like?** Were they going to be like David (the anointed king), his men who behaved righteously, and the high priest who did good on the Sabbath? Or, were they going to be like Doeg the sleazy spy or like Saul whose mind was working overtime with envy, jealousy, and madness?"

Jesus was claiming to be God's anointed King and David's heir who was anointed by Samuel but had yet to be installed as king. Like David, Jesus was also hated by jealous rivals. The religious leaders were playing the role of Saul who was mad and unrighteous. Their representatives were playing the role of Doeg the sleazy, spying Gentile. The new wine of the gospel will burst open the old wineskins of wickedness, jealousy, and sin no matter how religious, or how committed one is to keeping the disciplines of the faith. Although they were consistent to keep the Sabbath rule, their hearts were racing, working overtime to destroy Jesus. Jesus is not against the Sabbath. He's against the hypocrisy that was being modeled by the Pharisees and their practice of it. When we take a day of rest, are we resting from sin, envy, jealousy, malice, and unbelief? Does our day of rest represent a heart that is resting? Or are we busy and working overtime with unholy thoughts, unholy things and unbelief? Is it a holy day? If not, it can't be a day of rest.

Sabbath: A Help

waiting for someone to break their code. But, it's reasonable to conclude that they kept a close eye on Jesus to discover something that would discredit His claims.

A Second Reason Jesus challenged the Pharisaic interpretation of the Sabbath was that **God wanted the Sabbath to be a help to humanity and not defined by a catalogue of excessive burdens.** “Sabbath was made for man not man for the Sabbath.” What is so ironic here is that God intended the Sabbath to be a day where the drained were replenished, the broken repaired, and where the diminished was restored. God’s intention was to give rest to bodies and souls. Jesus’ actions in the grain field and healing the man with the withered hand, which brought refreshment and wholeness, were in perfect harmony with God’s purposes. However, the Pharisees seem almost hardened to all this goodness, refreshment, and restoration that is going on. The Sabbath was given so that humanity could rest, be replenished and restored.

Now, by this Jesus does not mean that anything you can think of that might serve your refreshment is appropriate on the day of rest or will even produce rest. It is still a day of worship and imitating God’s rest and you can’t imitate God’s rest if you don’t worship. I say more about this in a moment. But the Scriptures tell us that to worship is to offer sacrifices of praise and that implies that sacrifices will be made when we worship. To offer your bodies as living sacrifices which Paul says is our reasonable worship also implies sacrifice. So, a day of worship and rest is not free of any burden. To eliminate every burden for a day of worship and rest to be restful is a misapplication. This is so because the sacrifices connected with worship and rest are the kinds that actually bring about worship and rest. I hear people say how hard it is to get up, get ready, and come to worship. I used to have some sympathy for that. However, last year while I was away at school, I worked six and a half days each week and made it to worship on Sunday morning early service at my church. It took some sacrifice to get up early and to attend the service. However, I was struck by how enormously easy it is to get up and go to church compared to what I usually do as a minister. Although I occasionally had a small responsibility, all I had to do was roll out of bed, get dressed, get myself to the church building, sit, sing, read, listen, pray, pass the peace, greet and meet other believers and, if I didn’t have lunch with someone, go home. After a year of that I am totally unsympathetic to stories about how difficult it is to go to worship. Moreover, if we make no sacrifices we will not be able to worship nor rest because worship is defined by certain sacrifices.

Jesus’ point is not that we are to find a way to make life as easy as possible on the day of rest and worship. Commitments, sacrifices, and disciplines are necessary for us to be at rest because of who we are in Christ. We are to be living sacrifices unto the Lord who offer the sacrifices of praise. What Jesus is challenging is the Pharisaic practice of establishing so many rules for the Sabbath rest that the day is no longer a help, but a way to avoid helping others which can’t possibly produce rest.

Sabbath: A Symbol of Eternal and Divine Rest

Finally, the Sabbath was meant to symbolize the rest God enjoys and the rest He offers us in Christ. It is true that everyone needs physical and psychological renewal at least one day each week from the rigors of work. This is one of God’s purposes for establishing a Sabbath rest. However, there is a deeper rest we all need and that is rest for our souls. Augustine taught that we can never really rest until we find our rest in God. And our rest and peace with God is connected to Jesus’ claim to be Lord of the Sabbath. Jesus could not have made a more extravagant claim because only The Lord God could possibly be the Lord of the Sabbath. Jesus is claiming to be the One who regulates and has final authority over the Sabbath. He is clearly putting Himself in the place of the One who created the heavens and the earth and who rested on the seventh day after creation. So, there is a LORD of the

Sabbath just as there is a LORD of all Creation. This means that it is impossible to be at rest on the Sabbath if your life is not at peace with the Lord of the Sabbath. That's why worship is necessary for anyone to have a Sabbath rest.

Now, when God rested after working six days creating the universe, did God rest because He was tired? Of course, God was not tired. God does not get tired. What does it mean that God rested? God's Sabbath rest means that He was *satisfied* with His work. His work was done, finished, and it was good. Therefore, He could leave it be. He could walk away. You can only walk away satisfied and at rest with your work when you can say, "I'm satisfied with what I have done." But here's the problem. None of us can say, "I'm done or satisfied with the work that God has called me to do." None of us can say, "I'm satisfied, I've kept and completed God's commandments." This reality is in stark contrast to the Pharisees who thought that they had done just that.

Consider one commandment, "*Love your neighbor as yourself.*" Which one of us could possibly say, "I have loved my neighbor with the same amount of love, energy, sacrifice, dedication, devotion, consistency, and effort that I have loved myself and my family? And if you were deluded enough to claim that, for the neighbor next door, how about the neighbor down the block? And if you are still trying to justify yourself as one who has completed that commandment satisfactorily, how many square blocks have you included among your neighbors? And if you are still attempting to justify that you have kept that commandment in full, then you are thinking like a Pharisee. If you want rest with God then you need a way to say that you are satisfied with the work of keeping His commandments. And there is only one way to do that. And that is to receive, by faith, Christ's record of righteousness as a gift from God. The record of keeping God's commandments perfectly has been completed and achieved by one person and that is the Lord Jesus Christ. And here is the good news. Jesus offers the record of His righteousness to us as a gift to be received by faith. On the cross Jesus said, "It is finished." And the Father's satisfaction in Christ's perfect life and sacrifice was validated by the resurrection. Jesus is the LORD of the Sabbath and He is also the Sabbath Rest over which he is Lord! So, he says, "*Come unto me all who are weary and heavy burdened and I will give you rest for your souls, take my yoke upon you and learn from me for I am gentle and humble in heart and you shall find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.*" (Matt.11:28-30)

In ourselves and in light of our own record of doing God's work, we are never satisfied and never good enough. I saw a bumper sticker the other day that read, "I was born right the first time." Oh really? I suggest that to say I have loved God with all my heart, soul, and strength and my neighbor as myself is the ultimate delusion. In the gospel Jesus says this to us:

I have completed that work; I have lived the life you should have lived and I have died the death you should have died. If you rest in my work, which I have finished for you, then you can be satisfied. You can rest like God rested on that first Sabbath. You can know that God is satisfied with you and you can be satisfied with life.

You may take all the vacations in the world and sleep as long as you want, but if you don't have this deep rest of the soul, you will be weary. In the Lord Jesus, you can know that He loves you, know that your sins are forgiven and as a result, you can rest in His finished work.

In the early 1900's two British sprinters, Harold Abrams and Eric Liddell ran in the Olympic Games. Liddell became famous because he refused to run on Sunday. It was against his religious convictions. Both of these men were great athletes, however their attitudes about running could not have been more opposite. Harold Abrams thought, "I can't lose. To win is to justify my existence." Eric Liddell said to his sister, "God made me fast and when I run I feel His pleasure." He ran simply to feel God's pleasure, to enjoy the God who had already accepted him in Christ. Harold Abrams was weary even when he was rested. Eric Liddell was rested even when he was running. In fact when he ran, he couldn't help but throw his head back and put his face in the hands of God who loved him so much.

The work that makes you weary of soul is never over unless you rest in the gospel. At the end of creation God rested and was satisfied in His work. When we are called to rest, because God rested, this is not a call to physical rest. God does not grow weary and tired. It is a call to be satisfied with yourself and your work as God is satisfied with His work. On the Cross, at the end of redemption, the Lord Jesus said, "It is finished" that we could enjoy the deepest possible rest for our souls. And that we could be gathered up and folded into the rest that is between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

"So there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God.

For the one who has entered His rest has himself also rested from his works, as God did from His. Therefore let us be diligent to enter that rest." Heb.4:10-11

"Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need". He.4:16

Amen.