

“Lord of the Sabbath”

Mark 2:23-28

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.”* (ESV)

Today is the last day that I will be preaching from Mark. I’m doing an experiment this year. I’m trying to follow the church calendar. The church calendar starts at Advent (when Jesus is born) and continues as He starts His ministry. It tracks all the way through to His passion, death, and resurrection on Easter. In fact, today is the culmination of a major portion in Mark. The Gospel of Mark starts with Jesus appearing on the scene, preaching the kingdom, healing those who are sick, and casting out demons. Almost immediately after that He enters into five different conflicts with the Pharisees, the religious leaders of His day.

The first conflict had to do with His authority to forgive sins. Remember the four buddies who lowered their friend, the paralytic, through the roof? Jesus, instead of just healing the man, looked at him and said, “My son, your sins are forgiven.” The Pharisees basically said, “Who do You think You are? Only God can forgive sins.” Jesus said (I’m sure that is what it says in the Greek), “Bingo. You got it.”

The next issue goes straight with the authority to forgive sins – there was a conflict over Jesus’ audacity to hang out with sinners. He calls Levi who would have been hated by both Gentiles and Jews, Pharisees and fishermen. A tax collector would have been odious in the eyes of anyone. Jesus not only calls Levi (or Matthew), but He then throws a party or feast at Matthew’s house with the guests of honor being tax collectors and sinners. The Pharisees were upset by that. They said, “Why do you eat with tax collectors and sinners?”

The third conflict had to do with fasting. We talked about that last week. Apparently John the Baptist’s disciples fasted, the Pharisees fasted, but the disciples of Jesus didn’t. So the people came to Him again and said, “Why do Your disciples not fast?” He said, “How can they fast when the bridegroom is with them?” In other words it was sort of a stupid, rhetorical question. Of course you don’t fast during a party. And yet the issue was His claim that, “I am the bridegroom.”

Today we’re going to look at the last two conflicts. Actually we’re going to look at the fourth conflict this morning and the fifth conflict tonight. Usually I preach a different sermon from the same text on Sunday evening. If you ever watch “Monk” (the Detective TV series) the obsessive compulsive—I’m like that—I had to finish. So tonight will be conflict number five. It will be a different text altogether.

The conflicts we’re going to look at revolve around the Sabbath. What’s the purpose of the Sabbath and what’s going on with the Pharisees? They culminate with the Pharisees and the Herodians (the religious people) and the politicians deciding they’re going to kill Jesus. This is right at the outset of Jesus’ ministry. People are already plotting how they might destroy Him.

We’re going to look at three things. When we consider the Sabbath we’re going to consider the letter of the law first of all. The second thing we’re going to consider is the spirit or the intention of the law. The third thing we’re going to look at is the lord of the law. So let’s look first at the letter of the law.

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?”*

The question is, “What are they doing that might be considered unlawful?” It’s interesting when you consider the Pharisees. The first phrase that comes to my mind when I read passages like this and look at the Pharisees is, “Get a

life!” These guys were obviously following Jesus around. They were stalking Him. They are always trying to catch Him doing something wrong. Notice the Pharisees never catch Jesus doing anything wrong. You know why? Because He doesn’t do anything wrong. When they make an accusation it always has to do with His disciples. “Why aren’t Your disciples not fasting? Why are Your disciples breaking the Sabbath?” The question is, “Are the disciples breaking the law?” On one hand, “No.” On the other hand, “Yeah, maybe.” Technically speaking they were. What do I mean by that? You might think, “Were they stealing? What were they doing? What was the accusation against them? What was the letter of the law?” If it had been on any other day but the Sabbath what they were doing was completely legal. Let me read to you Deuteronomy 23:24-25.

²⁴ “If you go into your neighbor's vineyard, you may eat your fill of grapes, as many as you wish, but you shall not put any in your bag.” ²⁵ “If you go into your neighbor's standing grain, you may pluck the ears with your hand, but you shall not put a sickle to your neighbor's standing grain.” (ESV)

When I read this this week, I was a little bit upset actually. I was a produce clerk when I was in high school. I used to hate when I’d get my grape display set up and people would come by and eat them right there with their shopping cart. I didn’t realize it was biblical!

So, on any other day, walking through someone’s grain field, you were allowed to pluck ears of grain and eat them. You just couldn’t harvest them. You couldn’t put them in your bag and take them. There was a law, a provision for that. Yet, this wasn’t any other day, was it? Notice the first two words in this. It says, “One Sabbath” as they were walking through the fields. They were picking grain, and the Pharisees come to Jesus and say, “Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?” They don’t say, “Why are they doing what is not lawful?” Because what they are doing is lawful unless it’s the Sabbath—maybe. What was the accusation against the disciples? The letter of the law, according to the Pharisees, would have been that they were breaking at least four different laws, maybe five. Let’s just cover the first one. On a Sabbath you could only walk a thousand steps. So, we’re going to assume they’re breaking some law of traveling. But, the Pharisees would have also said they were breaking the law that had to do with reaping. When they plucked the heads of grain they were reaping. Notice in Luke’s account of this it says they took the heads of grain and rubbed them between their palms to separate the wheat from the chaff. That would have been considered threshing if you were a Pharisee. And then when they open their hands to blow the chaff away that would have been considered winnowing. All of those items combined would have made them guilty of preparing a meal on the Sabbath.

So, were they guilty of violating the Sabbath? The answer is, “Yes.” They were guilty of violating the letter of the law. What the Pharisees did when they came to Jesus was they make an appeal to the law. The problem with picking a fight with Jesus is that you always lose. The problem with being a judge and putting Jesus in the dock is that as soon as you open your mouth Jesus switches places with you and you are in the dock and He is now the judge. What they did here, according to the rabbinic literature, was “Halakah.” It’s an appeal to the law. They go to Jesus and make an appeal to the law expecting a rabbinical debate. They make an appeal to the law, Halakah, and they expect from Jesus Halakah back. That’s how rabbis would have discussed things. They would have appealed to the law. Jesus could have appealed to the law. That’s what they expected. The problem is if Jesus would have appealed to the law and said, “Yeah, but when you walk through the field you can pluck your neighbor’s grapes or you can do this,” they would have had him in a corner because technically speaking the disciples were doing something on a Sabbath that technically wasn’t allowed.

So what does Jesus do? Jesus moves from the letter of the law to the spirit of the law, or the intention of the law. What is the intention of the law? They came to Jesus with Halakah, an appeal to the law. Jesus would have shocked them because He responded to them with “Haggadah.” What’s Haggadah? Haggadah is an appeal to history. On one hand they were saying, “We’re appealing to the law. Why are Your disciples breaking the law?” Jesus appeals to history. That’s called Haggadah.

You have to see here that Jesus is not just answering them, but He’s constantly picking a fight with the Pharisees. It’s sort of if they want to do the law-thing, let's look to the law. “You want to tangle? Let’s tangle.” He picks a fight. Did you notice the first thing He said to them? “Have you never read about David?” That’s like asking a math professor, “Have you never learned your times tables?” These guys would have memorized the Old Testament. So

Jesus says, "Have you never read about David?" Of course they'd read about him. Really what's behind what He is saying is, "Do you understand about David?" Notice what He says when He explains to them the spirit of the law.

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?"* (ESV)

Jesus has just escalated this discussion to a level that the Pharisees probably won't be able to handle. Why? Because He doesn't just say, "Historically we've let people eat grain on the Sabbath if they're hungry." What He does is first appeal to the story about David. It's from I Samuel 21. David is fleeing from Saul with his band of men. They're starving. So he goes to the temple or the tabernacle at Nob and tells Ahimelech the priest "We're starving. We need something to eat." Ahimelech says, "The only thing we have left is the Bread of the Presence." The Bread of the Presence was twelve loaves that would have been placed in the tabernacle, one for each of the twelve tribes of Israel. It would have been made fresh every day. The priests ate that at the end of each day. It was lawful only for priests to eat. Ahimelech takes the Bread of the Presence and gives it to David and he and his men eat it. In other words, it's not a bunch of lowly disciples, it's not a bunch of fishermen who are walking through a grain field and they're picking heads of wheat and rubbing their hands together. Who Jesus has invoked here is Israel's greatest king. "Have you not read about David? Don't you remember when Israel's greatest king was hungry? He and those who were with him ate the Bread of the Presence from the tabernacle which was not lawful for them to do." Was Jesus saying here that the law doesn't matter? Of course not. But what matters is the spirit of the law, not the letter of the law.

What's the spirit of the law? What is Jesus getting at here? You have to understand the intention, and the intention is that human need always trumps ceremony. Human need trumps ceremonial law. Is the Sabbath important? It is. But is human need more important? It is. What the Pharisees had done is taken something God had given humanity as a gift. He gave us the Sabbath in order to rest. He gave us the Sabbath in order to be restored and to worship. He gave us the Sabbath in order to do acts of mercy. We'll talk more about that tonight. But the Pharisees had taken what God had made as a good gift and something that was intended for our rest and restoration, and they turned it into this incredible burden that no one could bear, not even them. If all you care about is the letter of the law, you never get around to the intention. If all you care about is the letter of the law, you actually begin to use the letter of the law to break the real law.

Remember before I mentioned about walking on the Sabbath? The Pharisees had this law, this rule, or this tradition that you could only walk a thousand steps on a Sabbath day. So how did the Pharisees get around that? They had all sorts of ways to get around it. Two of the most creative (I thought) were that you could put a piece of rope at the end of your street which would technically speaking (in their mind) increase your property or your home, so your thousand-step Sabbath didn't start until you actually get to that rope. As long as you're thoughtful the night before and knew where to put your rope you were good to go. The other thing was they could just carry food with them. They would stop and put out a little picnic basket and have something to eat when they got to 999 steps, and having eaten something they would have said that technically would have made that place their home. Since they were at home they had a thousand more steps they could go. Pretty ridiculous, isn't it? Did they obey the intent or the spirit of God's law, or did they only obey the letter? All they cared about was the letter of the law. All they cared about was being seen to be doing the right thing, not necessarily doing the right thing. Think about what kind of life it would be to have to count every one of your steps. You're walking with your buddy and say, "Bob, was that 998 or 999? I forget. We better eat something just in case." We laugh at the Pharisees, but the fact is that for most people in church, that's how we live our lives. You walk around counting your steps and watching everything you do and living by the letter of the law, never having any joy. You never have joy when you're only living by the letter of the law. There's a lot of talk about people's houses being under water. If you're a person that lives by the letter of the law, let me tell you something. You're always under water. You can never be good enough. You can never be a big enough legalist. Because of that you probably have no joy at all. The only way to do that is to know the lord of the law. The spirit of the law is that human need trumps ceremony. Jesus tells them, "The intention of the law is that the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So, all of you Pharisees: be quiet. All of you Pharisees: give it up." The last thing Jesus says where He asserts Himself as Lord of the law is one of the most amazing things to me. What Jesus is doing is taking away from the Pharisees one of their most precious possessions.

I was driving to church this morning and I was thinking through this as I often do, and I thought of an illustration or an analogy, and then I thought, “I shouldn’t say that.” And then I had the voice of my old preaching professor, Steve Brown, come to mind. He said, “When in doubt go ahead and say it.” So I’ll say it. The last thing that Jesus says is, “Even so the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath.” What does He mean by that? I loved being in the Army. We would go out in the field for a week or two weeks or a month at a time, and we would always come back at about noon on Friday and would go to our barracks and sit around and clean our weapons from about noon until five or six at night. It wasn’t so much the weapon cleaning that was the fun part, but it was listening to everyone telling stories about each other. Everyone would be critical of each other. We’d sit around cleaning weapons and people would say, “Man, you hear Allen? He was screaming like a girl when the M60 was shooting at him.” Those kinds of things. There would be constant back and forth and constant criticizing and making fun of each other. When you just wanted to end the discussion, if you were tired of it all, one of the ways was to invoke the other guy’s mother. Right? You’d say something about his mom. He could criticize you, criticize you, and criticize you—all in good fun. But all you had to say was, “Ramos, your mom is so dumb, she thinks Taco Bell is a Mexican phone company.” Immediately – whoosh – up from your chair. Why did people respond that way? It’s because you’ve just challenged that which is very precious to them.

That’s what Jesus is doing to the Pharisees here. When He says, “The Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath” He’s not really talking deep theology here. What He is saying is, “I’m the man and you’re not.” The Pharisees saw it as their jobs to be the lord or the master of the Sabbath. That’s what the lord means, it means master. The Pharisees saw themselves as the ones who interpreted the law. They were the ones who told the people what was right, what was wrong, what was appropriate, what was inappropriate. What Jesus says in one fell swoop is, “The Son of Man is the Lord of the Sabbath, not you. I’m the one who decides what’s appropriate and what’s inappropriate, not you.” The question you’ve got to ask yourself is, “What do you do with Jesus in that place?”

It brings the Pharisees to a decision and it brings us to a place of decision as well. Do you walk around saying, “I’m going to be lord of my life. I’m the one who decides what is right. I’m the one who decides what is wrong. I decide what rules I’m going to follow. I decide what rules I’m not going to follow.” Or do you say, “Jesus, You’re the lord of the Sabbath. Not only are You Lord of the Sabbath, You’re the lord of my life. You’re the One Who decides what I should do.” The Pharisees had the same decision to make that we have to make on a daily basis. Are they going to give themselves over to Jesus or are we not? Are they going to give themselves over to the One who actually kept the law? That’s the irony of the whole thing. They’re walking around trying to catch Jesus in some kind of breach of the law when Jesus is the only One who ever kept it. Not only was He the only One who ever kept it, but He offers to give that obedience to you and to even the Pharisees. “Do you guys want joy? Do you want hope? Do you want happiness? Then, don’t trust in your own righteousness. Don’t trust in your own ability to follow the law, but trust in the fact that I’ve followed the law for you. I’m not just the Lord of the Sabbath, I am the Sabbath.” Jesus said, “All you who are weary and heavy laden, come unto Me and I will give you” what? “A bunch of more stuff to do?” “Come unto me and I will give you more laws to follow, more rules to follow, more things to follow, more reasons to feel guilty, more Bible studies, more church services. I’ll give you so much stuff that you’ll just want to get it and throw it all away. That’s what I’ll give you. Come unto me.” Isn’t that attractive? What does He really say? Jesus says, “All you who are weary and heavy laden come unto Me and I will give you rest.” Rest. Who wants rest out here? Who wants rest from their labors? Who wants rest from all the things that are happening around us? Do you want rest? Jesus says, “Come unto Me and I will give it to you.” The question is, “Will you?” If you’re not a Christian have you ever had rest? Have you ever thought about the fact that Jesus might give it to you? If you are a Christian, “Why don’t you have rest?” If supposedly you have Jesus, the thing is you have to go back and tell Jesus, “Jesus, I repent of my lack of repentance. I repent of not trusting You to give me rest.” Think about that.