

FOR HOLINESS OR HEALING?

Mark 2:23-3:6

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Two Sabbath Controversies.

You have to wonder, “What were they doing there in the first place?” Seems sort of silly that Pharisees would organize themselves into groups to spend their Sabbath in Galilee in grain fields in the hope of catching someone transgressing. I’m not sure how, but I am sure that they did. The Pharisees caught the disciples of Jesus plucking grain as they sauntered through a field.

Now the law permitted anyone, especially the needy, to pluck ears in a neighbor’s field of standing grain, as long as you didn’t use a sickle (Deuteronomy 23:25). Nonetheless, the Pharisees would have classified even this hand-harvesting as a violation of Sabbath (M.Sabb.7:2). And when the pupils misstep, the master, the teacher, has to deal with the matter. So the Pharisees direct their challenge not to the students but to the teacher, the rabbi.

Look at Mark 2:24

Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?

Apparently the motivation for the harvesting was hunger. So Jesus recalls a Davidic precedent. In other words, “If David did it, so can I.”

David ate the bread of the Presence, the most holy portion of the offering, that was to be eaten only by the priest in the Holy Place (Leviticus 24:5-9). Scripture does not condemn David, nor his men, for their hunger. You remember these loaves called the bread of the Presence (Exodus 25:30). Twelve loaves were placed on a table in the sanctuary of the Tabernacle and Temple every Sabbath as an offering to God. Hence, the New Testament term “loaves of Presentation.” The old loaves were rotated weekly, removed – that is, given to the priests to eat.

Why doesn’t scripture criticize David for eating the holy bread? Because David is no ordinary hungry man. He was to become the king of Israel, the ancestor of the Messiah, a type of the king-Messiah. His authority legitimated his actions. If the bread of the Presence could be set aside for David, as he fled for his life, how much more can holy regulations be set aside for Jesus, who Mark presents as David’s Lord. Mark will later, in chapter 12, make clear that the Messiah is David’s Lord, not his servant. David himself said (Mark 12:36), “The Lord said to my Lord, ‘Sit at My right hand, until I put your enemies beneath your feet.’” David himself calls this one “Lord.”

In David’s lineage he may be, but David’s Lord so is He.

In the second part of the argument, Jesus wants us to know that God created the idea of Sabbath for the well-being of humans. Sabbath was to be a gracious gift from daily toil. So when you make the Sabbath a burden, you reveal your ignorance of God's own purposes.

What do we learn from these Sabbath stories?

Remember, in Mark 2 – and really the entire gospel – Mark is establishing the fact that Jesus is the Messiah, the Lord. In the early part of chapter 2, four faithful friends let down a paralytic through the roof while Jesus was teaching and talking. Jesus said to the man, “Your sins are forgiven.”

The scribes didn't like it a bit. “He's blaspheming. Only one can say ‘Your sins are forgiven.’ Only God has that authority.” And Jesus says, “Okay, I'll say ‘Arise and walk,’ just so you'll know, by the way, I do have the authority on earth to forgive sins.” The man arises, showing both his healing and his forgiveness.

Thus, Jesus can pardon like God, and now Mark shows us that Jesus is even Lord over the Sabbath.

The first thing I want you to see in this passage is

I. Jesus has superiority over the Sabbath.

Look at Mark 2:28.

God himself had established the sacredness of the Sabbath. Therefore, only God could modify Sabbath observance. At the core of ancient Israel's commandments, we read, “For six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day; therefore, the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy” (Exodus 20:11).

Claiming to have the authority to redefine the status of the Sabbath was tantamount to claiming equality with God. “Like God forgives, I can forgive. Like God set up the Sabbath, I can redefine the Sabbath.”

This statement boldly affirms that as Lord, the Son of Man decrees what is lawful and unlawful, permissible and impermissible. And any customs or traditions ordained by the Pharisees are thereby rendered null and void.

There is a second thing I want you to see. It comes from the second story. In chapter 3, in the first six verses, Jesus goes into the synagogue on the Sabbath, and there is a man there with a withered hand, an image of paralysis. But the same guys who hang around Galilean corn fields to make sure no rabbis are reaping on the Sabbath are also watching Jesus to see if He would, indeed, heal on the holy day.

Odd, there seems to be no question that He can heal; therefore, they had already conceded His ability to heal. And now they only worry, “Will He do it on the Sabbath?” How blind can they be?

Look at Mark 3:2-5

And they were watching Him to see if He would heal on the Sabbath, so that they might accuse Him. He said to the man with the withered hand [He knew they were watching], “Rise and come forward.” And He said to them, “Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save a life or to kill?” But they kept silent. And after looking around at them with anger, grieved at their hardness of heart, He said to the man, “Stretch out your hand.” And he stretched it out, and his hand was restored.

The second thing I want you to see is

II. What makes you angry reveals something about who you are.

The Pharisees are ready to kill Jesus because he heals a man with a withered hand on the Sabbath. And Jesus is angry at them (v. 5) because of their hard hearts.

So, what makes you angry?

The Pharisees were actually bothered that Jesus was doing good on the Sabbath. Jesus asked them the question, “Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save a life or to kill?” Saving life overrules the Sabbath. This discussion emerges from the fact that if illnesses were life-threatening, they could be treated on the Sabbath. If they were not, one would have to wait until the next day. Or sometimes there were even pious Jews who refused to defend themselves, and they were slaughtered by the Syrians because they refused to pick up a sword on the Sabbath.

Jesus asked them, “What do you do on the Sabbath? Good or harm? Save life or kill?” But notice, they are silent (v. 4).

By silencing His opponents, Jesus has publicly humiliated them, as He will do later in Mark (11:33).

But the question remains. Where is the origin of your anger? Are you mad at injustice? At unrighteousness? Is yours a righteous indignation or a selfish anger from a slight or a jealousy?

Look at the source of your anger. It will tell you something about who you are.

There is a third thing I want you to see.

III. The withered hand of the man is nothing compared to the withered souls of these self-appointed examiners.

Doing good is never limited to certain days. Even on the Sabbath, one must make the right choice. Suffering should be alleviated at any and all times. It’s ridiculous that these self-appointed guardians of the Sabbath are arguing with the Lord of the Sabbath.

There is a fourth thing I want to say.

IV. Be careful about seeing the sin of others, about being blind to your own.

You remember how this story ends? Look at verse 6. “The Pharisees went out and immediately began conspiring with the Herodians against Him, as to how they might destroy Him.”

The Herodians were the supporters of Herod Antipas who had, himself, arrested John and had him beheaded. So the Herodians, wanting to keep the status quo, would have a common enemy in Jesus. So here are the holy men, the Pharisees, colluding with the Herodians, the unholy, just to do Jesus in.

And unlike Jesus, who is working out in the open, they are plotting in secret. They form a pact to actually destroy Him. They are worried about Jesus breaking a minor Sabbath tradition – not even scripture – while they themselves are plotting murder.

It is so easy to see the faults of others before we see our own. We are kind of like the man who was having trouble communicating with his wife. He concluded that his poor old wife was losing her hearing. On a mission to prove his point, he conducted a personal hearing check on the sly, in secret. While she sat on the other side of the room, with her back to him, he quietly asked, “Can you hear me?” There was no response. Then he moved a little closer and repeated his question, “Can you hear me?” Again, no response. This self-appointed audiologist got even closer and asked the same question again, with no reply. He finally took his test all the way to the very back of her chair and asked, “Can you hear me now?” To his total surprise, she responded, with a twinge of irritation, “For the fourth time, yes.”

It is so easy to see the faults of others while we fail to focus on our own flaws.

Forbes magazine did a story years ago about IRS employees who were receiving bonuses and other perks despite the fact that they, themselves, have refused to pay their taxes? How could someone work for the IRS, audit others, while he himself fails to pay his own due?

Forbes magazine reported more than 1,100 IRS employees with substantiated tax compliance problems – translation: they aren’t paying their fair share of taxes – received more than \$1 million in cash awards, more than 10,000 hours in time off awards, and 69 raises within a year after the IRS substantiated their tax compliance problem. (www.forbes.com)

Translation: They made you pay your taxes but refused to pay their own, and then gave themselves a raise with your money.

It is so easy to see your faults. So hard to see mine. Perhaps the IRS would do well to begin with the returns of their own employees and then, and only then, look to others. Perhaps you and I would do well to examine our own hearts before we examine the hearts of others.

There is another thing I want you to see about this story.

V. Be careful about identifying yourself by what you are against rather than what you are for.

The Pharisees, like all pietists, are something like an ill-taught piano student who plays all the right notes but still can't make any music. An actor in a low-level movie who woodenly recites perfectly memorized script but doesn't carry any conviction. Like a dancer who carefully counts the steps, but never cuts loose to dance.

The Pharisees had a fondness for negatives, a long check list of "do nots" – particularly for other people. Such a religion is so burdensome that it never sings or exults, and religious duties become an obstacle to closeness to God.

The Sabbath was supposed to be a way to honor the holiness of God. It was to mark the joyful entry into a sacred time – the time beginning before human work. The Sabbath was sanctuary in time. It even showed the salvation of Israel among the nations. It kept God's people from entering the pagan culture. It needs to do that today as well. Our Sabbath – for us Sunday – shouldn't be treated like any other day, like the pagans. And for the Jews living out among the nations, keeping the Sabbath was a profession of faith. You will be asked to do something on Sunday, to which you say no because weekly worship professes your faith.

But, the Pharisees had gone so far that they had made up little rules and do nots in such a way that the Sabbath was identified not for what it was but for what it was not a time to do.

Now, there are certainly some things I'm against. We won't start the list – it would be a long list. But the question is this: Do people know you mostly for what you are for, or do they know you for that which you are against? Do people know First Baptist Church mostly because of what we're for or because of what we're against?

It's a good question. It's a scary question. It's scary because, in regard to ourselves or our community, we might not like the answer. Do people see FBC for what we promote or what we prohibit?

Pascal said "Men never do evil so completely and cheerfully as when they do it from religious conviction."

There is another thing I want to say.

VI. The clash with authority is not over the rules but over who rules.

Jesus consistently carries out the law when it confirms God's intentions. These two stories, following right after Jesus saying, "Like God, I have the power to forgive sins," are intended to affirm that the rules aren't nearly as important as who rules. Jesus is Lord of the law, and He can and will expose the sinister wickedness of His Pharisaical opponents.

There is a final thing I want to say.

VII. Don't misunderstand what Jesus is saying.

He is saying the Sabbath is to be used for healing, for doing good. The doing good does not violate the holiness of God's day. He does not say, "Oh, forget the Sabbath; it's no big deal."

But advertisers are going to tell you that weekends are made for sports events. Not just advertisers – your own club sports are going to tell you that. Or a time to catch up on your work. A time to catch up on your sleep. A time to get yourself organized.

But historical Christianity tells you that our Sabbath, Sunday, began as a day of worship because we celebrated the historical event of the death and resurrection of Jesus. And there is nothing more important than that. And that's why you're here today.

We all have a lot of other things we could be doing, just like the ones who are out doing other things. Their time is no more scarce than ours. Their priorities no more precious. But we're not doing those things, because we are doing the thing that matters. We are saying, "Jesus is Lord, even of the Sabbath. He died and rose again."

I think it was the great theologian, Lily Tomlin, who said, "The trouble with the rat race is that even if you win, you're still a rat." And we must not heed the calls to bow down to the gods of sports, materialism, or recreational toys. We must set aside a holy day to worship our Lord.

The whole point of the story is simple. Jesus is God. He is Lord of all, including the Sabbath. Is He your Lord, too?